



MORE NIGHTS THAN DAYS

A SURVEY OF WRITINGS OF CHILD GENOCIDE SURVIVORS

Y u d i t K i s s

 CEU PRESS

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CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

BUDAPEST - VIENNA - NEW YORK

© Yudit Kiss, 2023

Published in 2023 by

CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Nádor utca 9, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000

E-mail: ceupress@press.ceu.edu

Website: www.ceupress.com



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On the cover: Ceija Stojka: Blutverschmiert, so verließen ich und Mama Bergen-Belsen. n.d. Acrylic on cardboard, 33 x 34 ccm.
Collection Kai Dikhas, Foundation Kai Dikhas, Berlin.

Cover design and layout by Sebastian Stachowski

ISBN 978-963-386-618-4 (hardback)

ISBN 978-963-386-619-1 (ebook)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Kiss, Judit, author.

Title: More nights than days : a survey of writings of child genocide survivors / Yudit Kiss.

Description: Budapest ; New York : Central European University Press, 2023.
| Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023024194 (print) | LCCN 2023024195 (ebook) | ISBN 9789633866184 (hardback) | ISBN 9789633866191 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Genocide survivors. | Children--Crimes against. | Holocaust survivors' writings. | Children's writings. | BISAC: POLITICAL SCIENCE / Genocide & War Crimes

Classification: LCC HV6322.7 .K57 2023 (print) | LCC HV6322.7 (ebook) | DDC 362.88083--dc23/eng/20230620

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023024194>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023024195>

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C H A P T E R

1

THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Birds' land

At the beginning everything is in its place. The world has its rules and you just have to figure them out to get along. You know how people will treat you, who is kind, who is hostile, and who it is better to avoid; you can easily learn which streets of the village never to venture into if you don't want the dogs unleashed on you. There is a clear geography of people and places; there are signs, words, and gestures that orient you.

Children are at the mercy of adults and adults are often nasty and stupid. They are always busy, they work, they worry, and they quarrel incessantly; they do many meaningless things, like praying a lot, prayers they don't even understand or believe in. They like putting on appearances and they think children don't see through them. The worst is that they prevent you from playing. They always want you to do boring things, like go to school, help around the house, and do all kinds of unpleasant tasks. They think you just have to obey and shouldn't always ask questions. But how can you understand anything without asking questions?

Fortunately, there are some adults who are different, like Elek, who is strong and clever and understands things. When he explains something, it becomes clear. When Elek goes to the synagogue, it becomes true. There is also Mr Dévai, the schoolteacher, for whom it's worthwhile to stay up all night to study.

If you are clever enough, you can learn to cope in the adults' world. You can easily understand how they function and find your way to escape them and do your things. Then you can play football, read in the attic, or play ball with the boys in the courtyard of the synagogue waiting for the end of the never-ending ceremony.

To be Jewish means that the others don't like you. Why they don't like you is a mystery. Jews are like everybody else. They work, eat, sleep, chatter, gossip, and quarrel exactly like the others. Maybe the old ones, like grandfather, read more and spend more time in the synagogue than other villagers, but many of the Catholics and Protestants also go to church a lot. God has three houses in the village and there is always someone in each one of them. People say that Jews are rich, but most families you know are poor. Grandfather has vineyards, but he works all the time and doesn't have more than other rich farmers in the village. They also say that Jews keep together and help each other. Complete nonsense. They argue all the time. They squabble in the synagogue, on the streets, in their homes. They can't agree with each other even in their own families. Mother's father would never talk to father's father.

The children's world is like that of the adults, but it's easier to deal with. You have to be strong to make your place and not let others smash you. If you are weak, you can make up for it by wit. In fact, to be clever is often more important than to be strong. You'd rather be fast as well, to fathom what's going on and defend yourself, with your fists or with words. Words have a power that even adults feel. If you confront them with their own contradictions, they become paralyzed—unfortunately only for the moment. Then they crack down on you, much angrier than before, because they are ashamed. The teacher of the yeshiva, for example—when he can't answer a question, he turns red and can't utter a word. Then he starts hitting you.

Life is a permanent struggle, where you have the weak cards. You can only count on yourself. Sometimes you find friends, but they often let you down, because they are too cowardly or too stupid. But life is also a lot of fun. You can play with everything. You can run and hide, you can play ball and build houses and collect things. The best, of course, is to play football. You can play with everything and almost with everybody, even your enemies—and with girls as well. They admire you if you are strong, but they also like you if you are nice and tell them interesting things. You can play with them in a different way than with boys, which is fun, but adults don't like that. Adults seem to have forgotten all this. They never play, they never experiment, they are not curious—as if they were never children.

When things get too rough at home, you can hide in the attic and read. When school becomes unbearably boring, you can always take off into your dreams. When you really have enough, you run away: you start walking through the vast meadows, under the enormous sky. The birds come to follow you and they take you into their world: far away, high up, majestic, and free.

* * *

Madárország (Bird-land) is the Hungarian title of János Nyíri's autobiographical novel that was published in English under the title *Battlefields and Playgrounds*. The Land of Birds, to where the book's young hero escapes one afternoon, is the domain of unrestricted freedom and imagination. Even though the little boy eventually returns to his unloving home, he will never forget the euphoria of the experience.

The novel follows Jóska Sodor, who is six years old at the beginning of the story. He is sent to the strictly religious household of his maternal grandparents in a small village in northeast Hungary, because his father left his mother who can't support two young children from her meagre earnings in Budapest. Jóska finds life in the village suffocating and is pleased that he can join his mother and brother when the war breaks out. Life in the capital proves to be tough and precarious; he constantly struggles to make his place at home, in the school, and in the playgrounds.

In the fall of 1944 mother and children are herded into guarded "Yellow Star buildings" before their transfer to the ghetto. As news about the "final solution" is increasingly confirmed, they obtain fake papers and escape. A hectic period of hiding follows. Some people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, help them; others, both Jewish and non-Jewish, including their own family members, let them down. After the several months-long siege of Budapest, the Red Army liberates the capital and they walk back to their home through the devastated city. They discover that most of their relatives and friends have been killed or disappeared. They return to the grandparents' village to find the family home empty and entirely looted. All their relatives and most of the village's 800 Jews were murdered.

The story unfolds between the late 1930s and the end of the war, following Hungary's steady descent into fascism; the road from racial prejudice to the annihilation of a large segment of the country's population. These are the circumstances in which Jóska, an intelligent, rebellious, and sensitive young boy, discovers the world. He observes his family, the people in the village, and the capital, and follows the events that take place around him. Through this forcedly accelerated process of growing up, he tries to comprehend the rules of the world and his own place in it. He keeps asking the key existential questions: Who are we? What is our place on earth? What is good and bad?

These and many other fundamental questions are addressed in the selection of books written by child Holocaust survivors explored in this work.

Yet another book about the Holocaust?!

Why should one write yet another book about the Holocaust? The bulk of the survivors who were able to relate their experiences have told their stories. A significant body of academic work has been written about the historical, social, philosophical, psychological, and literary aspects of the subject. The Holocaust has become a sacralized event, with ritual yearly commemorations, with the transformation of the killing sites into museums with attached commercial undertakings. A set of books figures on the obligatory reading lists of schools and are ceremonially cited in the speeches of public figures, their authors transformed into untouchable literary monuments, whom one would rarely consider as our contemporaries, yet who have something relevant to tell us.

The public seems to be saturated with the topic. It seems that everything has already been said. But not everything has been heard. One of the aims of this book is to rescue from oblivion the messages the Holocaust's child survivors hoped to transmit to us. It is not a historical study about these children or a literary criticism of their writings. Rather, it hopes to shed light on these—often completely unknown or forgotten—books and their authors, whose experience provides new elements for our understanding of the Holocaust and other modern genocides. Under the extreme circumstances of war and persecution, these children were pushed to perceive the transformation of their world, the changes in everyday life's patterns, and the mechanisms of exclusion, indoctrination, and oppression that can easily lead to mass murder. In their struggle for survival they were confronted with fundamental questions that usually emerge only at a much later stage of human development: the basics of social structures and mechanisms, human behavior and interactions, identity, God, man's place in the universe, and the meaning of life. They wrote their books to share with the public the fruits of their premature wisdom, hoping to prevent future genocides.

The message of Holocaust survivors was clearly not heard. The world did not learn the bitter lessons of this unprecedented destruction, did not understand that the loss of a decimated community is the loss of all humanity, one that poisons future development. Since the end of World War II other genocides have taken place in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. One glance at the news reveals that the next generation of child survivors is in the making. What will today's Kurdish, Yazidi, Rohingya, and Darfuri children tell us tomorrow? The second part of this book explores works written by child survivors of the Cambodian, Bosnian, and Rwandan genocides. Despite the

different background, context, and unfolding of events, what these authors relate shows chilling parallels with the experience of the children persecuted during the Holocaust. They describe similar mechanisms of racism, exclusion, and oppression that culminate in mass murder; they ask similar questions about injustice, manipulation, and personal responsibility and they find similar refuges and escape routes to endure and survive persecution, imprisonment, and massacres.

The context

The survey begins with the Holocaust, the largest genocide of the twentieth century, after which international institutions, governments, and public opinion seemingly agreed never to let such devastation take place again. The Armenian genocide, a sinister antecedent, failed to bring forth a "Never again" response in international law or public opinion. The 1948 Genocide Convention provided a legal framework to fight against this scourge. Still, as the exploration of later genocides demonstrates, this pledge was not fulfilled. History has disastrously repeated itself, with previous genocides providing the play-book for the perpetrators only.

The Nazi politics of the annihilation of Jews specifically targeted children; nearly 1.5 million died in concentration camps, ghettos, and raids during the Holocaust. Approximately 6–11% of Jewish children managed to survive the war, compared to roughly 33% of adults. The percentage of Roma-Sinti child victims is likely to be similarly high. The emblematic figure of a child in the Holocaust was Anne Frank; a young girl who could not escape her destiny and was imprisoned and later killed in a camp. Given the immense number of children who perished in the Shoah, it took time to nuance this dominant image and turn towards the largely unexplored domain of the experience of child survivors.

Holocaust studies initially focused primarily on official and public documents and adult testimonies. The use of survivors' written or oral testimonies was also rather cautious, as if the fact that they were directly concerned diminished the documentary value of these materials. Now that appropriate methodologies have been elaborated for investigating these sources, scholars make abundant use of them. The micro-historic approach that provides insight into large-scale historical movements through the details of individual histories "seen from below" has enriched further the research and documentation of this period.

Nevertheless, for a long while children were not considered “reliable” sources of information, as if it were tacitly assumed that they were passive “objects” of the adults’ actions and could not have understood what was going on or simply forgot what happened to them as they grew up. Immediately after the war there was a wave of publications by Holocaust survivors, including some children, followed by decades of relative silence. Most of these works were simply forgotten.

Many of the surviving children were hidden or lived under false identities in their occupied homelands. Like the children deported to concentration and extermination camps or imprisoned in ghettos, they suffered exclusion, privation, and persecution until the last stage of their ordeal. However, for a long time many were reticent about relating their experiences, deeming them less important than the fate of their imprisoned peers. In addition, while the deported children’s ethnic identity served as a “reason” for their condemnation, those who managed to avoid the camps and ghettos had to—temporarily—shed this identity, which made it more complicated for them to come forward later as representatives of their persecuted people.

The first major breakthrough came with Debórah Dwork’s *Children with a Star* (1991), a work which examined the Holocaust from the perspective of child survivors drawing on interviews, recorded oral histories, personal documents like diaries and letters, and archival sources. Painting a large, rich fresco of situations and reactions, both on the side of the persecuted children and the larger society, the book opened a whole new area of research. Another important early work in the field was George Eisen’s *Children and Play in the Holocaust* (1988). Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust* (1979), which relates the experience of the survivors’ children, gave another unexpected stimulation to this field. The book had a “retrospective” impact; having seen how the parents’ experience filtered through to their children, it seemed logical to look further into what happened to the children themselves during World War II.

Thanks to seminal works on child psychology, studying the impact of war experiences, trauma, and coping strategies, in some cases written by child survivors who became scholars, like Boris Cyrulnik, Paul Valent, or Robert Krell, and emerging new fields of research, like memory studies, pioneered by Marianne Hirsch, it gradually became accepted that children’s wartime memories were valuable sources of information and knowledge. Demographic factors have also played their role; by the turn of the century the bulk of adult survivors had died and many aging child survivors felt the need to make public

their experiences during the war years. Scholars were now able to work with considerable new resources.

Today there is a growing historical literature dealing with various aspects of the experience of children during World War II and the Holocaust. The scope of the studies has also widened and now comprises the experiences of those living in occupied or invaded countries, but not belonging to the persecuted minorities, and of those on the other side of the dividing line, including Nazi Germany. This more comprehensive approach provides a wider, fuller context that helps to understand better what happened to persecuted children during the war. The works deal with all aspects of this experience, including the role of families and communities; the activity of Jewish organizations; various rescue efforts; and the fate of children in different countries, locations, and circumstances.

There is a wide variety of approaches: from publishing diaries, like the books of Laurel Holliday and Alexandra Zapruder; following the fate of a specific group or community throughout—and sometimes before and after—the war, like Joanna Sliwa's book about children in Kraków; or exploring the trajectories of European Jewish families from the beginning of the war to recent times, as in Joanna Michlic's edited volume. Patricia Heberer's *Children during the Holocaust* provides a broad overview of the multiple trajectories of the children based on their own written and graphic works. Several books, for example Rebecca Clifford's *Survivors* or the volume edited by Simone Gigliotti and Monica Tempian, address the aftermaths of the war: exile, immigration, and the challenges of new beginnings in a new country in a different cultural-social context. There have also been efforts to work directly with survivors helping them to write their stories, like in *Flares of Memory* by Anita Brostoff and Sheila Chamovitz.

There are far fewer studies of the Porajmos, the persecution and annihilation of Europe's Roma population. The works of Donald Kenrick and the volume edited by Anton Weiss-Wendt are key studies, but much more work is needed to highlight this dimension as well. Some works present individual destinies of children or families, like the collection of studies on Jewish and Romani Families published by Adler and Čapková, but to my knowledge there is not yet a separate work dedicated to children.

Another similarly rich area of research deals with Holocaust-related literature, written both by survivors and by other authors. The pioneering study in this field was Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's *By Words Alone* (2008), which explores the different literary approaches seeking to grasp the Holocaust experience.

Numerous books followed addressing a wide range of issues, including the documentary relevance of these literary works; the distance between life experience and imagination; the contribution of literary works to the understanding of the Holocaust; and the various approaches used by authors in relating their stories.

There are excellent historical investigations of the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Bosnian genocides, for example H el ene Dumas's *The Genocide in the Village* (*Le G enocide au village*), Alexander Hinton's *Why Did They Kill*, and Norman Cigar's *Genocide in Bosnia*. These works provide a comprehensive, global analysis of the events and do not focus on the specific experience of the children. At present only a handful of volumes explore their situation, like H el ene Dumas's *No Sky, No Earth* (*Sans ciel ni terre*) and Dith Pran's recompilation, *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields*.

The repetition of genocides since World War II makes it possible to discern their key elements and make comparisons. The emerging research direction of comparative genocide studies has already produced some remarkable works like *Century of Genocide*, a collection of essays edited by Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons. Since these studies provide further insight into specific cases, it is likely that more is to follow. To my knowledge, there is no work that brings together the different genocide experiences from the perspective of the children who survived them and/or wrote literary works about them.

The findings and rich materials presented in these fields of research helped to create the theoretical framework for this book and constitute its background (see Bibliography). My primary aim, however, is not to offer another study about the experiences of children who survived genocide, but to give voice to the children themselves and reconstruct what they went through with the help of their own writings. They wrote works of fiction and literary memoirs that are not straightforward historical documents, but they do express and transmit the essence of the historical events and help us to understand them. Many of the authors are/were not writers, but they made an effort to turn their experience into a literary oeuvre that is accessible to a large public, because they felt a moral obligation to transmit what they understood in order to alert the world to the dangers of new genocides. The present book brings together key elements of their messages in the hope that this many times repeated and enriched lesson will finally arrive to today's readers.

The selection

The selection is subjective and far from exhaustive. I chose writings of authors, who were under eighteen when they were persecuted, went into hiding, locked up in ghettos, or were deported during World War II, because they were identified as Jews by the Nazis. The annihilation of Europe's Gypsies was an organic part of the Nazi genocidal agenda. Hundreds of thousands of Roma were deprived of their rights, locked up in camps, massacred in summary executions, and deported to forced labor and extermination camps. The writings of child survivors of the Porajmos, the Romani Holocaust, are also included in this book. (I use the words Gypsy and Roma interchangeably, because the authors whose works I quote refer to themselves as Gypsies. I indicate when they use more specific group distinctions within their community.)

The selected books are based on the first-hand experiences of their authors, which are recounted in literary form. I did not include diaries, documents, testimonies, or books in which other authors, often professional writers, tell the survivors' stories, except in a few cases where this "accompaniment" was necessary. In a few cases the texts are complemented with excerpts of interviews that highlight certain aspects of the works. I did not include poems or books written for young readers, because they represent a different universe.

The pre-war life of the authors was extremely varied. They came from diverse social, cultural, and family backgrounds; were born in different countries, from France to Lithuania, in urban households or remote rural areas, in rich or poor families. Some were single children, others had numerous siblings; some grew up in a nuclear family, others had large and tightly-knit families with plenty of cousins, aunts, and uncles. Some had strictly religious homes, while others never went to a synagogue. For some the family was a haven of peace and love, for others it was a permanent source of conflicts that exacerbated—or disappeared—during the hardships of the war. Some children grew up in households that were perfectly integrated into their environment, others, like the ones in rural Jewish or Gypsy communities, were more isolated and their links with the outside world were restricted.

The war-time experiences of the protagonists were also very different. Some managed to survive hiding or living under fake identities in their respective countries under Nazi rule; others were deported to ghettos or labor and extermination camps. Some were all alone; others were able to stay together with family members or friends. Depending on the country and their good luck, some spent years in hiding or imprisoned, while for others the experience was

considerably shorter. For the majority of Jews in Austria and Germany the open persecution began as soon as Hitler came to power; for Poland's Jewish population the ordeal started at the beginning of the war in 1939, while most Hungarian Jews felt themselves in relative safety until the German occupation and the Nazi takeover in 1944. Some of the French Jews escaped to the south of the country hoping that they would be protected by their government; many German and Austrian Jews fled to other European countries, like Holland or France, trusting they would not be occupied by Hitler and they would be able to wait out the end of the war there. Their immediate environment also made a considerable difference for the children. If they felt safe and protected in their schools and neighborhoods, they could benefit from a prolonged period of relative peace, even in occupied countries.

The age difference between the authors is considerable and is another source of the diversity in their stories. The youngest ones, Alona Frankel, Jona Oberski, Norman Manea, Hanna Krall, and Wilhelm Dichter, were between four and five when their story began. The oldest children were young adolescents; some celebrated their eighteenth birthday in a camp or a ghetto. The older children tend to give more background to their stories; they are often more reflective and reactive than the younger ones. However, as children were forced to grow up very rapidly during the war years, even the younger ones acquired an astonishing maturity, so the differences are less significant.

The diverse contexts before and during the war had a major impact on what the children went through and the way they narrated it later. Several authors were imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto or the Terezín (Theresienstadt) camp during the same period, but depending on their social and family position, their perspectives were rather different. Mary Berg and Janina Bauman came from better-off, assimilated middle-class families that were able to maintain some privileges even inside the Warsaw ghetto. Both give detailed descriptions of their everyday life, capturing the atmosphere and internal dynamics, but the ghetto's underworld, presented in Bogdan Wojdowski's book, appears only on the margins of their story. Several books take place in the Terezín camp; the reader recognizes the same environment and events, but the viewpoints of Inge Auerbach and Otto Dov Kulka, who were taken there with their mother, Jiří Robert Pick, who moved around in the camp's different subsystems, and Cordelia Edvardson, who was alone in the children's block, are radically different.

The rarely evoked Transnistria concentration camps are presented differently in the books of Norman Manea, Madeleine Kahn, and Edgar Hilsen-

rath. Madeleine Kahn, who grew up in France in an assimilated family and was trapped in Romania during the war, discovered the violence of anti-Jewish discrimination and deportation with a startled incredulity. She describes the events and her feelings with precision, as if to prove that what she went through was real. Norman Manea, a little boy deported with his family, creates a floating, impressionistic world in which images, sensations, and hazy thoughts reflect loss and vulnerability in the midst of an inscrutable and cruel universe. Edgar Hilsenrath, an older boy who was part of a relatively sheltered group, was able to have an overview of the camp and described its ruthless mechanisms of struggle for life with distressing precision.

Some authors wrote down their experiences soon after their liberation; others needed to wait decades before they felt ready to speak. Some returned to their country, others emigrated to faraway lands. A few survivors never returned to their birthplace. Some left their country right after the war, others years or decades later, when they realised that they were unable to reconstruct their life in their former homelands or when they were pushed out by the new powerholders. Some authors wrote in their mother tongue, others chose the language of their country of exile.

The literary formulation of the war-time experience is also very varied. The writings range from memoirs of high literary quality, like Aldo Zargani's *For Solo Violin*, through fictionalized autobiographical novels, like Magda Dénes's *Castles Burning*, to poetic fables, like *Stalemate* by Icchokas Meras. Some, like János Nyíri's *Battlefields and Playgrounds*, read like an adventure story, others like *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* by Otto Dov Kulka, are philosophical-historical meditations; some follow a chronological order, while others consist of impressionistic scenes and images. The length of the works also varies, from Jona Oberski's 119-page *Childhood* to the epic trilogy of Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life*, which comprises nearly 1100 pages.

The difference in formulation also depends on the genre in which the authors chose to tell their story. This becomes particularly manifest when the story is related in different literary forms. Johanna Reiss first published two books about her war-time experience for young readers. Decades later, in her memoir, she revisited the events in all their complexity. Uri Orlev had the opposite trajectory; he began writing books for adults, then switched to books for a young public. Mária Ember first told her story in a novel and later returned to it in literary memoirs and essays. Edith Bruck first wrote a literary memoir, *Who Loves You Like This*; decades later she published an autobiographical novel, *How Many Stars in the Sky* and, nearly sixty years after the first mem-

oir, she wrote another one, *Lost Bread*. Imre Kertész first wrote about his deportation in two novels, *Fateless*, followed thirteen years later by *Fiasco*, focusing on the aftermath. He continued exploring the subject in literary essays and in another novel, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. After another thirteen years, he closed the cycle with a final novel, *Liquidation*.

Some authors related their history in one or two books and returned to their professional activity as scholars, doctors, lawyers, scientists, artists, librarians, entrepreneurs, or housekeepers, while others kept returning to the experience, often in different forms, exploring its multiple dimensions. For some, like Edgar Hilsenrath, Miriam Akavia, and Grigory Kanovich, writing about their wartime experience became the starting point of a literary career. János Nyíri switched to writing after the international success of *Battlefields*; *Fateless* gave a completely new direction to Imre Kertész's writing. Hanna Krall, Arnošt Lustig, and Henryk Grynberg wrote books reflecting their personal experiences and continued exploring the subject in more indirect forms later. Others, like Elżbieta Ettinger, Louis Begley, and George Perec, told their own story in one or two books and continued their literary activity by writing about other themes with the insights of this specific knowledge.

Despite the great diversity of the authors' life experiences, backgrounds, personalities, and the literary forms they chose, these books have important common features and motifs. Their writers share an urge to transmit their experiences and the lessons they learned to the generations to come. They frequently pose similar questions and often find similar answers to them. They seem to have a profound connection, as if they were a group of kindred spirits with a shared destiny engaged in an ongoing internal dialogue throughout decades and continents. Highlighting the common elements and motifs that connect their books, I try to make this internal dialogue "audible."

Reception

The books themselves also had varied trajectories. A handful became bestsellers and parts of the Holocaust literary canon. Imre Kertész received the Nobel Prize for literature; Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace prize; these recognitions kept their works in the limelight. A few authors, like Aharon Appelfeld, Arnošt Lustig, and Norman Manea, are well-known in a relatively restricted circle of readers, even though their works are rarely quoted among the usual reference books about the Shoah. The books of Mary Berg, Ilona Karmel, Magda Dénes, and Jona Oberski were enthusiastically welcomed when they were pub-

lished, but are hardly ever mentioned today. Zdena Berger's *Tell Me Another Morning* was favorably received when it was first published in 1961, but was forgotten until Paris Press reissued it in 2007. Similarly, Nyíri's *Battlefields* enjoyed rave reviews in major literary magazines when it came out, but soon sank into oblivion. The original Hungarian version, published in 1990, went practically unnoticed; when Corvina re-published it in 2014, it was positively received. Other books, like the ones written by Bogdan Wojdowski, Cordelia Edvardson, and Jiří Robert Pick, have only reached a restricted circle of readers.

The fate of the books often didn't depend on their literary qualities. The historic period, the current political context, the critical reception and literary moods played a crucial role in their trajectory. Some had very limited impact because they were published by minor publishing houses or were written in not very accessible languages, like Hungarian, Lithuanian, or Yiddish, and were not translated into English, German, or French. It took decades to find a proper publisher and reach a wider, English-speaking public for Chava Rosenfarb's book written in Yiddish. Edgar Hilsenrath's early work, written in German in the US, was refused by many publishers and took a long time to be translated and acknowledged.

Beyond the inevitable saturation with books about the Holocaust and rapidly changing literary interests and fashions, this body of work also poses particular challenges for both readers and critics. Reading about this difficult subject is a perilous exercise and often appears as a task rather than a rewarding literary adventure. In addition, many of these writings have a specific edge, a sort of roughness; they often lack the elaboration, maturity, and eloquence of the works of the "Holocaust literary canon," written by adult, accomplished authors, like Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo, André Schwartz-Bart, Piotr Rawicz, Anna Langfus, Robert Antelme, and Jorge Semprun. The absence of mature distance, at the same time, gives the works of child survivors their peculiar intensity. Even though the bulk was written years or decades after the events by adults, the freshness and honesty of the children's viewpoint is very much present.

These works can be considered as "coming of age" stories taking place in a specific historical period. Their child or young adolescent protagonists are in a period of their life when they discover and question the world. They pose a markedly critical regard on their surroundings and themselves and their views are not tempered by the codes of politeness or deeper understanding adults often have when they formulate their judgements. Growing children examine and test adults, aiming to understand the laws of their world, which, at this

stage of their development, are the laws of the universe. In the extreme conditions of persecution and war that these books evoke, children see grown-ups in a particularly sharp light. They frequently perceive and name what adults cannot or do not want to see, often delivering unconventional and uncomfortable truths. They witness the collapse of the adults' world, their shattering self-assurance, their limitations and weaknesses. Sometimes they see that in order to survive, grown-ups, including their own relatives, behave in ways that before the war would have been unimaginable and occasionally unacceptable.

During the war the future authors were in a stage of their life when they tried to define their identity, which comprised a particularly earnest examination of their own family and community. They were not always pleased with what they found. On some occasions they discovered serious flaws, betrayal, and abuse, and they did not shy away from exposing them. It is unusual to highlight the shortcomings of the victims, to express resentment towards equally persecuted family and community members, nuances of the black and white schemes of evil perpetrators and innocent victims. The authors in fact often offer complex pictures of human character and behavior on both sides, highlighting that the key dividing line between people is not their ethnic or religious background, but their moral values and integrity.

The children also talk openly about their sensory impressions and bodily functions, their physical needs and desires. Adult writings rarely convey the utter physicality of the experiences so naturally and intensely. The children describe, often in minuscule details, their need to urinate, accidentally wetting their pants, their "formidable diarrhoeas" and their dire consequences; their more than human size hunger, the fear that makes knots in their stomach, the lack of air, the nauseating smells, and the anxiety that makes them throw up. They also relate, with the same intensity, the pleasure of biting into a raw potato, of having a clean shirt, or sitting idly in the first rays of a spring sun. With awe and astonishment, they describe their first periods or their first erections, their first discoveries of desire and pleasure.

The books

The books of child survivors differ from the ones written by adult authors. Children experienced events in their own way, remember them differently, and frequently tell them in a unique narrative style. A significant number of testimonies and academic works dealing with children's experiences during the Holocaust confirm that they underwent and processed events differently

from adults. Children were, on the one hand, more defenceless, more exposed to dangers than adults. On the other hand, they perceived events through the prism of their specific worldview and made use of a range of coping techniques the adults didn't possess.

Uri Orlev was nine when he had to move to the Warsaw ghetto with his mother and younger brother. After the murder of their mother, the two boys were smuggled out and lived in hiding until their aunt bought them fake passports and they were transported to a special section of the Bergen-Belsen camp, where they spent the next two years. Uri wrote several books based on this experience. In an interview he explains his approach:

The Holocaust is part of my childhood. It does not negate my childhood. On the contrary, childhood in wartime has intriguing, interesting and scary aspects, also repellent and revolting, all much and more forcefully than in an ordinary childhood. ... A child sees things, but does not interpret them. He accepts the world as it is. A child is a clean slate. This is the world you were born into. You accept it in order to survive, like someone who lives in a jungle and learns to beware of the tiger. (Orlev interview, 1998)

Otto Dov Kulka, a Czechoslovak boy who was imprisoned with his mother at the age of nine in Terezín and later in Auschwitz, also underlines the difference between the perspective of the deported children and adults: "As a youth I did not feel the acute, murderous, destructive discord and torment felt by every adult inmate who was uprooted and wrenched from his cultural world and its norms and hurled into a confrontation with norms of cruelty, of death. In my case ... this was the first world and the first order I had ever known: the order of selections, death as the sole certain perspective ruling the world. All this was almost self-evident" (Kulka, 23).

The bulk of the books written by child survivors, even if they were written years or decades after the war, aim to reconstruct, as faithfully as possible, the way they experienced events and reacted to them at the time. Maurice Cling, a French boy who was deported to Auschwitz at the age of fifteen and was the only survivor of his family, wrote his book decades after the war, using the notes and drawings that he put down on paper right after his return. As he explains in the preface, he did not alter these documents; he aimed to reconstruct the particular perspective of the young boy he was at the time of his deportation: "After all those years I forced myself to find again this regard, these feelings from the perspective of down below ... the psychology of the child

who retreats into himself—restricted space and time limited to the immediate present—in an ultimate gesture of self-defence.” (Cling, 15–16) (For the books that were not translated into English, the quotes are the author’s translations.)

The children’s narrative, their manner of looking at the world, their experience and interpretation of events are radically different from those of adults. The voice of the grown-up author and the perception of the child who went through the events, complement—and eventually contrast—each other. This specific double perspective makes these works particularly rich and multi-dimensional. The adults’ vocabulary and knowledge occasionally trickle through the narratives; nevertheless, these books provide an extremely vivid and authentic image of the children’s war-time experiences.

The trials of writing

Some authors, like Mary Berg and Nadine Heftler, wrote their books relatively soon after liberation. The majority, however, waited years or decades before they decided to put their experiences into words. They embarked on an extremely difficult and painful exercise. They had to extract and face memories that had been buried or utterly blocked in the depths of their being. Uri Orlev describes the perils of digging out war-time experiences:

The person I am today must walk cautiously with these memories because they may be extremely dangerous. It is as if I was walking on a frozen lake and I am very careful not to step too heavily. In other words, not to speak or think of what happened with the eyes of the adult I am today. It could be like jumping on thin ice. The ice may crack and I would sink into the abyss. (Orlev 2002, 55–56)

Madeleine Kahn carried the heavy burden of her memories for decades, until she began a therapy to clear up “a history that tears me into pieces” (Kahn, 11). The result was a painfully achieved internal peace, her memoir *Basilic*, and the beginning of a literary career. Judith Magyar Isaakson had to learn self-hypnosis to be able to recall the painful events she suppressed in her memory when she finally decided to write her book. Whole conversations emerged in her mind in her native Hungarian, a language she hadn’t used for decades (Isaakson, 186). Several other authors had to pursue therapy to be able to cope with the task, like Joseph Bialot, who started to speak about his deportation after fifty years of silence. Elisabeth Gille wrote about her expe-

rience after she was diagnosed with cancer; the book was published some weeks before her death.

Michał Głowiński was six years old when he was imprisoned with his parents in the Pruszków ghetto and later in the Warsaw ghetto. It took him several decades to decide to write about this period of his life: "In essence I was protecting myself from it, as if the act of transcription would summon those events back to life in all their horror. I confess that even now I take up the task with difficulty, I struggle against my resistance, yet I don't want this story to remain forever in my memory alone" (Głowiński, 59). Alona Frankel was two when Nazi Germany attacked Poland. The family fled from Krakow to Lvov, but the war caught up with them and they were imprisoned in the ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated, her parents sent Alona to a village; a year later she was sent back and the family spent the rest of the war in hiding. She wrote her memoir for her sons in the early 2000s, stating: "I don't like all this digging up of the past" (Frankel, 5). She reiterates later in the text: "I've decided to tell the story ... I'm trapped in this process that I don't enjoy for even a fraction of a second" (180).

Aldo Zargani was a five-year-old Italian boy when his family was first exposed to the consequences of anti-Semitic legislation, and was ten when they went into hiding. It took him nearly sixty years to evoke his childhood memories:

When I wrote my book I hoped that the scared and outraged child who lived in me would move to the written page. Instead, this lucid and alert kid remained in my brain, and what is worse, while at the beginning it was me, who kept interrogating him, now it's him who assaults me with questions. The most frequent is this one: "Dear little old man, during all these years when I let you live so that you can figure out what happened to me, did you finally come up with a solution? Can you tell me, why?" I was able to write this book, because this terrible child, despite everything, was a cheerful kid then and he remained cheerful, while in the other part of my self that survived, the grief keeps growing. (Zargani interview 2009)

Ceija Stojka, an Austrian Roma girl, was ten years old when she was deported with her mother and siblings. She describes the difficulties she had to confront when she decided to write about the war. First, she had to revive a period of intense suffering: "I revived Auschwitz again. Sometimes I lifted my head and said to myself, help, there is someone after me with his boots. I hope he can't see me!" (Stojka 2018, 176). In addition, her surviving family members

preferred to forget the past and did not support her project. Her community was reticent as well, because she was a woman and also because in her oral culture writing was not considered a usual form of expression, unlike painting, which she also practiced. Ceija, nevertheless, persevered because she felt that writing was the only way to win her combat against Auschwitz. She gradually became recognized as an author and became a spokesperson for her community.

During the period of persecution and war, many children instinctively created protective armour around themselves by blocking their senses and sensibilities. When, decades later, they tried to bring back the past's events and impressions, the experience often became devastating. Gerhard Durlacher, a German child, who was nine when his family fled to Holland, from where they were later deported, presents this process with great precision: "I hardly knew what was happening at the time. My perception was clouded, my emotions numbed. I recorded the terrible events without letting them into my head or heart. Now, after almost forty years, an occasional page from the archives falls from the mouldering safe of my memory" (Durlacher 1991, 11). After the war, "I learned to live like a human being among people again, found hospitality, sometimes even warmth, and bricked up the past in my memory. Why, after nearly forty years, the mortar is no longer holding is a question I leave to others" (100–101).

Hidden children had an additional difficulty when they chose to write down their experiences. They questioned their own legitimacy, as if what they went through had no importance compared with the experience of those who were interned in ghettos and camps. Magda Dénes was ten when she went into hiding with her family in occupied Budapest. After the war she and her surviving mother and aunt immigrated to the US. She first spoke about her own experience within the framework of her professional training as a therapist. Her colleagues encouraged her to write a book. She explains the complexities of the undertaking: "The hidden children are in a curious position. They were not deported and they were not killed. So they never felt entitled to talk about their own experiences" (Dénes quoted 1991).

János Nyíri raised similar doubts in an interview:

I myself never went to Auschwitz. What could I know about it? I was on the threshold for a long time and I saw many people walking through the door. Then I realized that time of waiting on the threshold was more agonizing and more important than anything else that happened to me since. I decided to write the book. (Nyíri interview n.d.)

Czech-born Saul Friedländer was ten years old when his parents placed him in a Catholic boarding school in France. He also evokes his feeling of “not being entitled”: “I had lived on the edges of catastrophe; a distance—impassable, perhaps—separated me from those who had been directly caught up in the tide of events, and despite all my efforts, I remained, in my own eyes, not so much a victim as—a spectator” (Friedländer, 155).

Sarah Kofman was eight years old, when her adored father, a rabbi, was arrested. Sarah, her mother, and her five siblings went into hiding and survived the war. Her father was deported and killed. His painful absence accompanied Sarah's life. She became a professor of philosophy and author of a large body of academic works. Fifty years after the war she wrote *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, her only personal book. The opening pages talk about the genesis of this work:

Of him all I have left is the fountain pen. ... It is a kind of pen no longer made, the kind you have to fill with ink. I used it all through school. It “failed” me before I could bring myself to give it up. I still have it, patched up with Scotch tape; it is right in front of me on my desk and makes me write, write. Maybe all my books have been the detours required to bring me to write about “that”.
(Kofman, 3)

“That” refers to Sarah's wartime experiences. Soon after finishing *Rue Ordener* she committed suicide. András Juda Garai and Bogdan Wojdowski also killed themselves sometime after writing their books. Magda Dénes died of a heart attack right after her manuscript was published.

Why did they write?

One might ask why the authors decided to write down and share their wartime experiences, if the exercise was so excruciating. Most of them underline that despite these strains, the undertaking was vitally important. It helped them to come to terms with the events that shaped their life ever after, the dimensions of which they were unable to fully comprehend when they took place. They strove to transmit the intensity of their quest, inviting the reader to accompany them, to feel and revive their story. In the process they also tried to draw constructive lessons from it—both for themselves and their public—in order to be able to move forward.

One of the key motivations they all shared was a strong feeling of duty to bear witness and to make the world understand the gravity of the ravage,

hoping to prevent its repetition by all possible means. They emphasize the universal nature of their message, stressing that the war and the Holocaust caused immense damage for all humanity, far beyond the losses of the persecuted minorities. It killed millions of human beings and destroyed a large part of the world's material and cultural patrimony, distorting its development potential for an unforeseeably long time. The authors also make a point of highlighting the methods and mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, and manipulation that can lead to mass murder, as if they wanted to teach their readers to recognize the first warning signs of a looming disaster in order to identify and avoid it.

Mary Berg wrote her book when the war still raged, eager to alert the world to the events taking place in the occupied countries. She was fifteen when the German army occupied her native Poland. Her family fled their hometown, but they were caught and imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto. Thanks to her mother's US passport, they were eventually allowed to leave and immigrated to the United States in 1944. Mary managed to save her ghetto diary that was published soon after their arrival. When the book came out, the bulk of the Hungarian Jews had not yet been deported and there were still other pockets of sizeable Jewish populations in Europe. Mary gave interviews, conferences, and public talks, hoping that the authorities would take action to stop the mass killings: "I shall do everything I can to save those who can still be saved ... I will tell everything, about our sufferings and our struggles and the slaughter of our dearest, and I will demand punishment for the (Germans)... who enjoyed the fruits of murder" (Berg article, 2018).

Despite the attention and acclaim the book received, her message—like those of Rudolf Vrba and Jan Karski—had no impact on the course of events.

The authors were also eager to share the lessons they learned through their ordeal as well. They spent time on the threshold of the "Metropolis of Death" to use Otto Dov Kulka's expression, and without wanting it, prematurely acquired a profound wisdom about fundamental existential questions: life and death, love, identity, faith, and the workings of human souls and societies. They also wanted to explain to readers the resources and means that helped them to survive and to remain human even in the deepest well of inhumanity. As if they wanted to pass on a "survival toolkit" to the future generations, they stress the vital importance of human relationships, solidarity, critical thinking, culture and nature, the power of words, and the importance of play and creativity.

The crucial importance of this message was seemingly recognized by older, well-known authors, who endorsed the writings of these child survivors. Pierre

Vidal-Naquet introduced Nadine Heftler's book, Bruno Bettelheim praised Inge Auerbacher's work, Primo Levi encouraged Edith Bruck to write down her experiences, Isaac Bashevis Singer paid homage to the books of Aranka Siegal and Jona Oberski, Stanisław Barańczak commended János Nyíri's book. Once they became world-famous, Elie Wiesel hailed the books of Miriam Akavia and Johanna Reiss, while György Konrád warmly endorsed András Juda Garai.

Tombs made of words

Another, equally powerful incentive that pushed the would-be authors to tell their stories was the imperative to commemorate the dead. They shared the feeling that the only place where their murdered loved ones survived was in their memory. If they did not build a tomb of words for them, the dead would completely vanish. As Maurice Cling formulates it: "The feeling that I have the duty to transmit this crucially important past, of which I am the only depository, is becoming stronger with the passing of years" (Cling, 13-14). He feels that he has to write to preserve the traces of the "murdered ones, who keep dying." As he states: "Their memory is in my hands and if they come to life again on these pages, I was not saved in vain" (141). Arnošt Lustig was motivated by a similar feeling: "I met so many very beautiful people during those years and most of them died; the only way to bring them back to life is to write about them. This is my responsibility" (quoted in Lustig obituary 2011).

Raymond Federman was fourteen when his parents and siblings were arrested and deported. When the Gestapo came to take his family away, on the spur of the moment, his mother pushed him into a closet, whispering "Shhh" to instruct him to stay quiet. Raymond stayed in the closet for a long time before he dared to venture out. He spent the war years in different hiding places. His whole family was killed in the camps. One of Raymond's several literary alter-egos talks about his duty to write: "My role, if I have a role to play as a survivor, here, there, wherever I go, in the cities, in the countries, the books I write or I'm going to write, is to give back a little bit of dignity to what was humiliated by the Unforgivable Enormity" (Federman 2009, 271).

Michał Głowiński makes great efforts to recall the names of each of his former classmates in the improvised clandestine school that he frequented in the Warsaw ghetto. Describing his teachers, he notices: "As I recall these women I think of something else: it's possible that I am the only one who remembers them, the only one who knows that they once lived, worked, taught—and perished—together with the world of which they were a part. And mine must

be the only memory in which remain my classmates, Panna Julia and Pani Bronisława's pupils. I don't know their surnames, and I only remember some of their first names" (Głowiński, 22–23). At the end of her memoir, *The Soul of Things*, Éva Fahidi makes a point of listing the names of the one thousand women with whom she was transported from Auschwitz to Allendorf on the August 13, 1944, many of whom did not survive the war.

Joseph Bialot, a French boy who went into hiding at the age of seventeen and was later deported to Auschwitz, also talks about the importance of recalling the murdered ones: "Yes, before time kills my gaze, I have to remember, I have to remain the living memory of the dead ones, the massacred tenderness of the corpses, their warmth, their gaze, the broken dreams of the little ones, these children with the glance of a hundred-year old, the trampled experience of the elders, the useless knowledge of the wise ones" (Bialot 2002, 140).

Ten-year-old Bogdan Wojdowski was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto with his family, before he was smuggled out and lived in hiding until the end of the war. In the preface of *Bread for the Departed*, he evokes his anxiety of forgetting people who helped him during the war years. He quotes a philosopher who compares people to moving sand and affirms that he writes to leave traces of those human lives whose "destiny is uncertainty" (Wojdowski 2014, 5–7). Using the same metaphor, Elżbieta Ettinger, a Krakow ghetto survivor, titles one of her autobiographical novels *Quicksand*. She also writes about her duty to evoke the people murdered during the war:

I try to forget, I try so hard, not to see their eyes anymore, not to hear their voices, not to smell their sweat, not to feel their anguish. I want to forget, forget, forget, their naked fear, our naked fear, but they keep coming back, they stare at me, they wait, they do not want to be forgotten, they know I promised, they will never let me forget, never. (Ettinger 1970, 2)

Many authors mention that their family members, friends, and even strangers asked them to keep their memory alive if they happened to survive. The need to be remembered is so strong that people sometimes implore unknown persons to retain their traces. Edith Bruck recounts that in Bergen-Belsen she and her sister were forced to carry the dead and dying prisoners to the "dead's tent." In a final effort some begged her: "Tell our story, no one will believe us, tell it please, if you survive, do it for us as well" (Bruck 2021, 71). Inge Auerbach recalls a prisoner in Terezín who, on his way to the train to Auschwitz, gave her a small box full of his personal objects: "Something to remember

me by!" (Auerbach, 60). It was an act of generosity and despair; the hope of leaving a trace in the fragile memory of an unknown child, who is also condemned to death.

Traces of a lost world

Through recalling their war-time memories, the authors also reconstruct their long-lost childhood world. The descriptions of these childhoods, particularly those from Eastern Europe, resemble archaeological journeys to lost worlds. In picturing the life of Hungarian Jews of the countryside, the bulk of whom were wiped out during the war, Aranka Siegal, János Nyíri, Mária Ember, József Gáli, Judith Magyar Isaakson and others recreate a vanished universe. The accounts of vibrant, multi-ethnic, multicultural urban centres, like Krakow, Lvov, Vilnius, and Budapest, where Jews once had a prominent place, provide rich historical frescoes in the background of personal histories.

Chava Rosenfarb dedicates the whole first volume of her epic *The Tree of Life* to the portrayal of the Łódź Jewish community's pre-war life. She presents a multi-coloured world, with diverse social and family situations, different political, religious, and philosophical worldviews, and multiple cultural and social activities and institutions. The Jews form an organic part of the society and have learned to live with various forms of anti-Semitism, everyday prejudice and racism, and official restrictions that complicate their life but do not threaten their existence. The situation changes immediately when the war breaks out and the German army invades the country. The fate of the Jews is sealed; there are massacres, confiscations of property, public beatings and humiliations, and in early February 1940 they have to move into the ghetto established in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city.

Miriam Akavia paints a similar fresco of pre-war Jewish life in Krakow in *My Own Vineyard*. Life in long vanished shtetls emerges vividly in the books of Grigory Kanovich that relate the history of Lithuanian Jewry from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II. He depicts the slow, "natural" erosion of the tight-knit Jewish community, due to emigration, education, and assimilation, followed by the sudden upset caused by the radical political changes that first destroy the traditional way of life and its institutions and later bring the annihilation of the whole community: "It was bitter to realize the truth that from now on it was the fate of the dead tribe to be born and live only in true and painful words and impartial memory" (Kanovich 2017, 521).

The workings of memory

Even though they contain much precious information, the books explored here are literary works and not historical documents. The authors' experiences were transformed through two filters: memory and literary creation.

The workings of memory are enigmatic, particularly when children's memories under extremely stressful conditions are concerned. Aharon Appelfeld was nine years old when the war reached his native Bukovina. His mother and grandmother were killed. He was imprisoned in a ghetto, managed to escape, and spent the rest of the war years in hiding. He writes at length about the mysterious mechanisms of memory: "Very like a dream, memory takes specific details out of the viscous flow of events—sometimes tiny, seemingly insignificant details—stores them deeply away, and at certain times brings them up to the surface. Like a dream, memory also tries to imbue events with some meaning" (Appelfeld 2004, v). He also underlines the specific ways children recall past events. "Someone who was an adult during the war took in and remembered places and individuals, and at the end of the war he could sit and recall them, or talk about them. ... With us children, however, it was not names that were sunk into memory, but something completely different" (91–92).

Saul Friedländer also meditates about the strange ways memory stores both crucially important and trivial elements. He recalls the day when his parents placed him in a Catholic convent in France: "The extraordinary mechanism of memory: the unbearable is effaced or, rather, sinks below the surface, while the banal comes to the fore. I have only one precise memory of this initial moment, when I passed from one world to another: the ugliness of the city, the dreary look of this industrial suburb" (Friedländer, 79).

Ana Novac was fifteen years old when her family was deported from Transylvania. Only she survived the war. After liberation she buried her memories and threw herself into a new life. Sixteen years later, when she accidentally found the notes she took in the camps, risking severe punishment if she were caught, she began to transcribe them, but was unable to decipher or understand several long sections. For the sake of survival, she had pushed them into the "tomb of memory" (Novac, 1997, 10; 15).

Marceline Loridan-Ivens was fifteen when she was arrested and deported to Auschwitz. She also writes about the dark holes in her memory, where she might have buried too painful events. One day, long after the war, one of her former camp inmates recalled the time when they were forced to dig holes for the corpses of Hungarian Jews who arrived at the camp in such great numbers

that the crematoriums were unable to cope with the load: "How could I forget such a thing! It was unbearable! ... Did I hide all this to be able to survive? It was terrible. I wanted to remember, I was unable to, and then, all of a sudden, I had these terrifying flashes that emerged from the depth of my memory" (Loridan-Ivens 2018, 218).

One of Edgar Hilsenrath's protagonists also talks about "a hole in my memory. A big black hole. And I write in order to cover it" (Hilsenrath 2009, 62–63). Contemplating the enigmas of remembering, Michał Głowiński mentions that some parts of his experiences are completely blocked, most likely by fear, while others, even if they are only segments or apparently insignificant details, remain crystal-clear. He is well aware that underneath his "extracted" memories there is still a massive amount of lost memories he is unable to access (Głowiński, 21).

Shlomo Breznitz describes "the fields of memory" that are like "a rich archaeological site, with layer upon layer of artefacts from different periods, which, through some geological upheaval, got mixed up" (Breznitz, 8). Otto Dov Kulka defines his book as a result of a "reflective memory": "Neither historical testimony nor autobiographical memoir, but the reflections of a person then in his late fifties and sixties, turning over in his mind those fragments of memory and imagination that have remained from the world of the wondering child of ten to eleven that I had once been" (Kulka, xi).

Conscious of the amorphous and elusive nature of memories, several authors complemented or confronted their recollections with those of their fellow survivors or cross-checked them by consulting documents. Krysha Chiger recounts how she completed her memories with the recollections of her family members and others who shared their ordeal and then finalized them with additional readings. Aldo Zargani and his brother also joined forces to reconstruct their wartime experiences: "In the multi-coloured and amorphous patchwork of memories of childhood and death my brother and I sew and re-sew and embroider with the thread of suffering, each of us is indebted to the other for fragments, which, put together, make a single double-person living" (Zargani, 296).

According to Ruth Klüger "remembering is a branch of witchcraft; its tool is incantation." Evoking the dark and clear patches of her memories, she also finds it impossible to separate her own experiences from the knowledge she gained since the war through her readings and encounters with other survivors. She places her primary, "gut-level" recollections in a more distant, interpretive frame of comments and elucidations; this is also her way of distancing herself from the emotions stirred up by her trips back to the past (Klüger, 68–69).

Wilhelm Dichter's book conveys a remarkable image of memory's workings. Wilhelm was four years old when the war broke out and the German army occupied his hometown in Western Ukraine. The invasion was immediately followed by a pogrom, mass arrests, and the creation of a ghetto. Wilhelm and his mother survived the war in hiding, but nearly all of their family members were murdered. Wilhelm started recollecting his childhood memories in his mid-fifties, in exile. He sharply remembered sensory details, visual impressions, and his own feelings, but needed a systematic exploration to put together these patches of memory and recreate the events of the past. He occasionally asked his mother to fill in the gaps (Dichter interview, n.d.).

He also needed to unravel what he unconsciously tried to conceal even from himself. Wilhelm's father had been suffering from tuberculosis and his health rapidly deteriorated during their period in hiding. One day, making use of a short absence of his wife and son, he committed suicide. Soon afterwards, a bomb destroyed the house where they sheltered and his body was found. The local militia set off to look for the "Jewish murderers who undoubtedly killed him to save their skin." Six-year-old Wilhelm almost automatically suppressed the news of the suicide and maintained that his father perished in the bombing. However, once in a while, the truth re-emerged in his thoughts, together with the sharp pain and guilt he felt when he first heard it. After the end of the war it took him several years to reconstruct and face the facts.

Memories engraved in the body

The traces of the past are also preserved in deep layers of the unconscious and/or in the body. Since sensory aspects and physicality are primordial in the way children experience the world, their war-time memories are often tied to smells, sounds, images, or gestures. Re-encountering these elements often triggers flashbacks. Imre Kertész writes about the smell of old leather that immediately transports him back to the camps. Whenever Ceija Stojka sees turnips, she can't escape the onslaught of her memories of deportation.

Memories engraved in the body are omnipresent in Aharon Appelfeld's writings: "The war was etched inside my body, but not in my memory. In my writing I wasn't imagining but drawing out, from the very depths of my being, the feelings and the impressions I had absorbed because of my lack of awareness" (Appelfeld 2004, 186). Writing helps him to catch some of these fleeting images and fix them on paper:

Sometimes images surface from the heavy mist: a dark figure, a hand that had been charred, a shoe of which nothing was left but shreds. These pictures, sometimes as fierce as the blast from a furnace, fade away quickly, as if refusing to reveal themselves, and again there's the same black tunnel that we call the war. This is the limit of conscious memory. But the palms of one's hands, the soles of one's feet, one's back, and one's knees remember more than memory. ...On some occasions I have been able to listen to my body, and then I would write a few chapters, but even they are just fragments of a pulsing darkness that will always be locked inside me. (8)

Alona Frankel also often relies on traces of sensory impressions buried in her body to reconstruct the war years. When she has doubts about her memories, these traces confirm their veracity: "What do I remember? What do I really remember? Maybe I only remember a story I was told? Or a story I made up? Or just dreamed? The smell I remember is real. You can't tell anyone a smell" (Frankel, 151).

In one of his short stories, József Gáli relates how an accidental sensory impulse awakens a chain of memories buried in the deepest layers of his self. One day, decades after the war, he overhears the creaky sound of a radio coming from outside. The sound unexpectedly takes him back to the war years, when as a small boy he was playing under the piano and heard the same crackling noise from next door where his father tried to catch the BBC to listen to the news. The aural memory pulls to the surface a cascade of painful recollections: his father's desperate outburst that they are condemned to die; a scene at the hairdresser's, when he gets into trouble due to his comments about the war; his mother accidentally burning herself in the shared kitchen of the ghetto; and, some months later, Mengele glancing at the wound and sending her to the line of the condemned (Gáli, 65–66).

Sometimes just a word or an intonation is enough to trigger the upsurge of suppressed memories. In a scene in Edith Bruck's autobiographical novel, *How Many Stars*, after a passionate embrace, her lover pushes away Anita, the author's alter-ego, shouting at her: "Go! Go away, away, away!" The young girl freezes. The words and the way they are pronounced bring back the moment of their arrival to Auschwitz, when her mother pushed her to join the line of the young and healthy: "From my cells, from my internal organs that seem to be the deposit of my recollections, my mother's last words began to echo: 'Go! Away, away, away!' mixed together with the shouts of the German soldier

‘Gehen! Los, los, los!’ when, at the selection after we arrived, he tried to tear me away from my mother’s body, her clothes” (Bruck 2018, 18).

Writing

After painfully extracting their wartime memories from the depths of their consciousness, the authors need to give this magma of amorphous, subjective, and very sensitive material a literary form. By choosing a fictionalized approach they gain a creative freedom and welcome distance that helps them to process and transfer their memories. It also allows turning their unique personal experience into a more universal story that is more accessible for the public. Through the course of writing, they indispensably transform their raw material, emphasizing certain elements and dismissing others, adding or leaving out people, details, and scenes, reorganizing events into a dramatic sequence, and condensing or slowing down time.

They use various methods. Some—like Tomáš Radil, Éva Fahidi, and Judith Magyar Isaakson—aim to recreate a chronological order of events, trying to recall and reconstruct the past as meticulously as possible. Others—like Hanna Krall, Anita Lobel, and József Gáli—evoke the events, people, impressions, and sensations that marked them most. Yet others—like Ilona Karmel, Zdena Berger, and Elżbieta Ettinger—relate their story in a more fictionalised form altering and sublimating their experiences. Otto Dov Kulka evokes the *Metropolis of Death* with a mixture of poetic images, philosophical meditations, and historical documents. The snapshots of a subjective, sensory universe and the calm, analytic reflections that accompany them create a feeling of being both inside and outside of an experience that is nearly impossible to describe and share.

German-born Edgar Hilsenrath was fifteen when he was deported with his family to the Mogilev-Podolsky ghetto in Transnistria. His book, *Night*, takes place in an imaginary ghetto, Prokov, created on the basis of this experience. In *The Tree of Life* Chava Rosenfarb transforms many real-life elements into literary material recreating the complex universe of the Łódź ghetto. Ichockas Meras was seven when the annihilation of Lithuania’s Jews began. He was imprisoned in the ghetto and later was saved from execution by a local peasant family that sheltered him during the rest of the war. He turned this experience into a poetic fable about the struggle between Good and Evil in *Stalemate*. Like in Chava Rosenfarb’s book, the elements of the story are factual; one recognizes the features of the Vilnius ghetto, the organization of everyday life,

the cultural and social events, the internal resistance organization, the cooperation with the partisans hiding in the surrounding forests, and the nearby killing field; even some key historical figures appear. These elements and the author's personal experience constitute the documentary foundation of the narrative built with interwoven stories of fictional characters.

Bogdan Wojdowski was ten years old when he was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto with his family. In *Bread for the Departed* he depicts this experience in a literary transposition, omitting, highlighting, and transforming certain elements. He talks in the third person and calls his hero Dawid—his own original Jewish name that he changed after his escape. In the novel he does not mention his sister, even though they lived and were smuggled out of the ghetto together. Otto Dov Kulka was nine when he was deported to Terezín, from where he was later transferred to Auschwitz. He does not go into details about his complicated family history that also includes a half-sister, because he concentrates on other dimensions of his experience. Many other authors used their real-life experiences as a basis for their literary creation, without the intention of documentary precision.

The children's war-time experiences had an impact on the choice of literary form to relate the events. Hidden children, who were placed with strangers, in an orphanage, or in a boarding school, like Hanna Krall, Saul Friedländer, and George Perec, chiefly had to adjust to the situation and endure passively whatever others decided for them. They experienced an overwhelming feeling of insecurity and anxiety, but at a different level and in other forms than those who had to actively struggle for survival in their occupied countries, like Magda Dénes, János Nyíri, and Jakov Lind. The latter were engaged in a constant, everyday fight, drawing on their creativity, and their physical and mental strength, which is mirrored in their books, which read like adventure stories; while those who were forced to a more passive position, usually recreated their experience in more abstract forms.

Saul Friedländer and Shlomo Breznitz took a philosophical perspective intending to interpret the rupture—the “manquake,” “a manmade earthquake,” as Shlomo puts it—which radically transformed their life. George Perec created an imaginary world nurtured by his nightmares, placing it side by side with a factual recollection of fragments of his devastated childhood. Jerzy Kosiński, who survived in the Polish countryside with his parents, gave free ride to the dark side of his imagination, personifying and pushing to the extreme his deepest anxieties. Ilse Aichinger, who was hiding in Vienna, turned her war-time experience into a feverish poetic vision, in which imagination and real-

ity incessantly mingle together and dreams are able to transform reality, until reality crashes both dreams and dreamers.

Life and literature

The transformation of a first-hand life experience into a literary creation results in books that are not easy to classify. The works explored here are often called “documentary fictions,” “literary memoirs,” “historical fictions,” “biographical novels,” or “literary autobiographies.” The authors are well aware that their memory is selective and highly personal; it preserved fragments of what was the most important for them when they were children during and after the war. They fully assume that there is a distance between the event and its recollection and that their memories often reflect their subjective truth. They also know that through their literary reconstructions they add a further layer of subjectivity to the narration. This distance gives them freedom and very much needed detachment from the events and is often the source of literary creativity that makes it possible to capture the essence of things without necessarily providing their factual description.

Aharon Appelfeld talks about the relationship between real life experience and its literary formulation in these terms: “Like all my books, this one is biographical to a certain degree and also not biographical—because fiction has its own laws, and the author needs fiction in his work. Usually, feelings I have experienced are what make me want to write, particularly if the feelings possess a universal character” (Appelfeld Haaretz interview 2015).

Louis Begley’s *Wartime Lies* is based on his experiences of hiding with his mother with fake identity papers in occupied Poland. They manage to survive and, reunited with his father soon after the war, they leave for the US. The book begins with the description of a mature man, who sits alone in a “country without history” and remembers a little boy called Maciek. The novel relates the wartime tribulations of an aunt and her nine-year-old nephew, Maciek. The geographical names are marked with simple initials. The narrator is introduced in the third person; Maciek’s story is told in the first person, but is regularly interrupted by the narrator’s comments. At the end of the book Maciek disappears and his story is related by the narrator once again.

When he was asked whether his book was autobiographical, Louis replied:

It is, in that I was born in Poland and I’m Jewish. I spent the war on “Aryan papers.” I lived in Warsaw during the uprising. But what is in the interstices is

fiction. ... I'd be doing the reader a disservice, if I tried to distinguish the grain of sand from what I hope is the pearl that formed around it. ... A child's memory is not like that of a man who keeps diaries.... If one wanted to recall precise events, one would be left with what would fit in the palm of a hand. If one wants to tell what really happened in an emotional sense, one has to imagine and invent the facts. (Begley *New York Times* interview 1991)

Aldo Zargani formulates a similar concept:

Memory is fragile, because it is dynamic, it changes with the passing of time and it imperceptibly moves away from the objective reality. I think that a genuine autobiography has to 'be constituted as a novel' to be able to evoke how the events that took place in a now distant period were seen and were reflected in the child's mind at the time. This forces me to tell what I read inside of myself in the form of a novel. (Zargani interview 2009)

Jacov Lind also underlines the importance of imagination in the process of reconstructing past events: "Fantasy can turn any real experience into the acceptance of its reality" (Lind, 171). Raymond Federman similarly confirms the importance of creative freedom, which, at the same time, has the potential to preserve the essence of things: "To remember is to play a mental cinema that falsifies the original event. Memories are fiction" (Federman 2010, 209). He also underlines that children remember and relate their experience in their own specific way. "When children tell a story they say anything that comes to their mind in any old way, and in so doing, they poeticize without realizing it. Well, that's how I want to tell my childhood" (96–97).

Hanna Krall also meditates about the elusive and arbitrary nature of war-time memories and the way they are remembered and recounted later. In *The Subtenant*, which recalls the period when as a little girl she was sheltered by several families in different parts of occupied Warsaw, she plays an ironic game with diverse versions of reconstructed past events. One can never be sure which one is the closest to reality. Talking about *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosiński affirms: "Expanded fact is not fiction; enriched memory is not simple invention. ... The Painted Bird is rather the result of the slow unfreezing of a mind long gripped by fear, of isolated facts that have become interwoven into a tapestry" (Kosiński, 1995b).

Creating distance

Recounting their personal experience in a fictionalized form helps the authors to change and add certain elements and make their experiences more “objective” and universal. The distance between experience and narration, between author and protagonist creates “the temperature” of the writing, its directness and intensity, providing a space for eventual identification for the reader.

The authors use several ways to dissociate themselves from their protagonists. Many choose fictional names and tell their story in the third person. The pseudonyms often have a personal reference; they recall the authors’ original name or the one they used in hiding, their places of origin, or the names of beloved persons. János Nyíri follows the episodes of his life relatively closely, but he changes the names of places and protagonists, merges and invents some characters, and adds some twists and turns to the story. In his short autobiographical stories, József Gáli often addresses himself in the second person, while Arnošt Lustig relates events in the third person. Cordelia Edvardson talks about herself in the third person and calls her protagonist “the girl.” In the stories about his childhood before the ghetto, András Mezei speaks in the first person; in the ones that relate to events during and immediately after the war, he switches into the third person and calls his protagonist Joske. In yet another step of creating a space between the narrator and his protagonist, he inserts short comments between the stories.

In a skilful game of mirrors, Hanna Krall tells her story in the first person, but the narrator is the daughter of a family that sheltered Hanna during the war years. The author looks at her 5-year-old-self from the external perspective of another, slightly older child. Once in a while, she briefly switches into her own character; occasionally she also includes witty comments about the very process of writing the story. Mária Ember relates her war-time experiences rather precisely, but turns her protagonist into a boy and refers to him as “the kid.” The narration is regularly interrupted by the insertion of documentary elements, such as newspaper articles, official documents, and trial notes, which give a background to the events. These additions break up the dramatic sequence of the story and give the reader an occasion to breathe. In *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood*, told in the first person, Raymond Federman keeps interrupting himself with ironic comments and questions. These interruptions change the rhythm of the narration and create a distance between the writer, who looks back at himself, and the little boy, who is the victim of atrocities.

Each of these “external regards” is a reminder of the triumph of survival. The child in the story is not aware yet whether she/he is going to make it, but the author—and the reader—knows it. This double perspective sheds a light of hope on these writings that relate dark events.

The regard of the children

The authors intend to recreate the universe of their child-self, to reconstruct the way they experienced the world during the war as faithfully as possible. The writing reflects the children's specific perspective: reality approached primarily through the senses and feelings, and often interpreted with the help of dreams, books, and fairy tales; a peculiar self-centeredness that highlights their unique interests and considerations and which can tune out external circumstances; pragmatism and sharp, matter-of-fact observations mingled together with a magical worldview; and a peculiar split consciousness that makes the children fathom what is happening around them, even without factually knowing or understanding it.

Through their eyes

Children tend to live in their own world; they frequently see and interpret things in a specific perspective, driven by their specific concerns. They also have a short time horizon that alters the dimensions of events taking place around them. Even in conditions of war and persecution, when their life is threatened, they often react to danger differently than adults, because they are unaware of it or because they give importance to other aspects of the situation. Their attention frequently focuses on objects, events, or people that others might find completely insignificant, if they perceive them at all.

On a rare occasion when Maciek, the eight-year-old protagonist of Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies*, and his aunt venture out onto the streets from their hiding place in occupied Warsaw, the little boy seems to be more concerned about his funky shoe-laces than about being caught by the Gestapo (Begley, 94). During the liquidation of the ghetto, when they have to leave their shelter and rush to the gutters, Krysha Chiger insists on putting on her pretty sandals to mark her first “outing” for months, despite the desperate protests of her parents (Chiger, 113). Locked in the Gestapo's headquarters in Lyon, fourteen-year-old Nadine Heftler keeps speculating about how she can recover the Lamartine book she had forgotten in their house in the chaos of their arrest (Heftler, 14).

When the Germans arrest him and his father in the Warsaw ghetto, eleven-year-old Alex, the protagonist of Uri Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street*, first of all thinks of Snow, his pet mouse, who might have difficulties finding food on his own (Orlev 1984, 18). When the war breaks out, Janina Bauman feels slightly relieved that she does not have to memorize the Latin poem she kept postponing to learn during the summer holiday (Bauman 1986, 15). Jóska, in *Battlefields*, roots for the Soviets' advance, though he is worried that if they arrive too fast, he can't escape his Latin test (Nyíri, 415). When a French policeman comes to arrest him in his primary school, Maurice Cling is relieved because he can skip a difficult written test. He is thrilled to sit in a comfortable car, an unknown luxury for him, driving in brilliant sunshine through the most elegant parts of the city he has never seen before. All this tastes like an adventure, not a disaster (Cling, 51–52).

The last time five-year-old Anita Lobel sees her grandmother, she has no idea what the old lady is talking about, because she is completely absorbed in examining a cold sore on her upper lip. Later on, when she and her brother smuggle themselves back into the ghetto (the only "safe" place where they can find temporary shelter), she notices a soldier, but her attention is seized by "an iron fountain from which water trickled out of the tongue of a grotesque, contorted face" and does not realize the danger. When the two children meet their mother, whom they haven't seen for months, she is captivated by the reflection of the light: "The sun, sparkling on the steel fitting of the handbag she was clutching, seemed noisy. But there were no sounds anywhere" (Lobel, 51).

Shlomo Breznitz is eight years old, when, after several months of hiding together in various places, his parents decide to place him and his sister in a Catholic orphanage. During a meeting with the prelate begging him to accept the children, all Shlomo can think about is the hair growing out of the old man's ear which he finds fascinating. After the parents' deportation, a decent man, named Zelnik, who sheltered the family earlier, occasionally visits the children in the orphanage. Shlomo is unable to remember him; he can only recall his impressive moustache (Breznitz, 68).

One day in Auschwitz, Ceija Stojka and her mother are standing in line in front of the crematorium, waiting for their turn. The little girl notices that the gasoline on the surface of a puddle reflects the colours of the rainbow: "Mama, look there! What magnificent colours! Mama, I want a dress like that, exactly these colours! My mother told me: 'How silly can you be! You think of a dress when we are standing here!' When we returned to the barrack, I told her: 'But

mama, if I manage to get out of here, we'll have to make a dress exactly like this. A rainbow dress!' This made her laugh" (Stojka 2016, 113).

For older children the fixation on concrete minutiae might have also been an unconscious effort to keep away the threatening reality. Gyuri Köves, the protagonist of Imre Kertész's *Fateless*, often focuses his attention on tiny material details and strives to interpret them according to the codes of normal everyday life or delegate them to an imaginary world. The hand of a "seal-faced" man, who intends to bribe a policeman to let him escape, is like a big, hairy spider; another man's hand is a bat flying around and occasionally landing on the young boy's knee. The Auschwitz prisoners are first described as convicts punished for unknown crimes; the camp is surrounded by hunters' stands and the German soldiers have walking sticks. When people's last remaining objects of value are confiscated, the young boy registers the sound the treasured pieces make when they hit the surface of the table. He catalogues facial expressions and tries to calculate the event's duration depicting it as a passage "at the threshold to a new life" (Kertész 2006, 60; 77–80; 93–95; 202–203).

In the consciousness of a growing child the borders of the self and the outside world are not yet clearly traced. The child is the centre of a universe that she/he keeps discovering. Seen through the prism of this self-centred and often tunnel-like perspective, major events of the adult world often appear as minor episodes in a foggy background.

Krysha Chiger is four years old when the war breaks out. One day there is a heavy bombing and the family runs down to the cellar. The little girl plays with the concierge's daughter and when the shelling momentarily eases, they go to the girl's flat to eat something. It's the first time Krysha eats eggs sunny-side up, which makes a big impression on her. Excited by her discovery, she completely forgets about the bombing and her fears (Chiger, 18).

In the Bergen-Belsen camp where he is imprisoned with his parents, six-year-old Jona Oberski has to run to fetch his mother, because his father is dying. It is early morning and when he steps out of the hospital barrack, he notices how green the grass is, shining with dew. He puts his father's shoes on his hands and walks on all fours admiring the sparkling drops. Noticing that the shadow cuts the nearest barrack wall in half, he invents a new game: he has to move in the shadow of the barrack so the light cannot catch him. Completely absorbed in his play, he wanders off to unknown, faraway territory. When he realizes that he is lost, he panics, but someone helps him to get back to his place. However, by this time he has forgotten the urgent message; he goes out to play with the other children without notifying his mother (Oberski, 63–66).

In 1940 their parents sent Jacov Lind and his sisters away from German-occupied Austria to Holland. Thirteen-year-old Jacov is so wrapped up in his meditations about the existence of God, Spinoza, the nature of the Universe, and the discovery of his own body, that he hardly notices that Hitler's army has invaded the Netherlands. When he does, he immediately feels responsible: "Yet I had a strange premonition. I might even have caused it by an act of pure magic." The night before the invasion, for the first time in his life, Jacov experienced the pure magic of masturbation. Next morning, at the breakfast table, the radio announces that German troops have occupied the country: "While I was still floating in a strange, new, wonderful experience, the war invaded my sex fantasies, jumped down on me with the news of parachutists. Caught unaware by forces from outside space, I screamed" (Lind, 66–69).

Janina Bauman recalls that on the day of Rosh Hasana in 1939, when the German army launched its final assault on Warsaw, she and a friend went up to the top of their building and watched the burning city mesmerized (Bauman 1986, 26). Magda Dénes and György Konrád describe similar scenes when they were captured by the graphic beauty of destruction, without fathoming that it was their home that was being devastated. And, before this realization sank in, they embraced the person next to them, as if unconsciously they were voting for life and love against destruction (Dénes 57; Konrád, 85).

Sensory world

Children's perception of the world is still principally sensory. They discover the universe through their senses, their gut-feelings. Words and rationality provide an additional dimension, but they are not yet dominant. Many of the works surveyed here recreate powerfully this particular, semi-conscious, corporeal state of mind. Happenings are frequently narrated through images, physical sensations, and impressions; smells, sounds, touching, and physical needs and reactions have a preponderant role.

Some grown-ups are well aware of the importance of sensory impressions in the child's way of learning to know the world. When Aldo Zargani's parents manage to escape from their prison and find their children hidden in an orphanage, their father insists that they taste the bread they were given in jail:

Papa pulled a greyish piece of bread out of the pocket of his wrinkled and torn gutta-percha raincoat, tore it in half, and said: 'It tastes terrible, but you must eat all of it.' The bread tasted of prison, and he had brought it to us so we could

experience that place with our mouths, even before we understood it with our minds, according to the Jewish custom. And we did. (Zargani, 154)

When Shlomo Breznitz enters the orphanage for the first time, he is struck by “a distinct, all-pervasive odour. It was a new smell, unlike anything I experienced before.” His new, lonely, extremely vulnerable state is expressed through this smell, which “would envelop me in its perennial and yet invisible clutches, day and night, and enter into my clothes, my bed, the very pores of my skin, until it would become such an integral part of me that I would not be able to smell it anymore” (Breznitz, 36).

Tania, Zdena Berger's protagonist, often describes events through her impressions and bodily sensations:

One cabbage leaf, two cabbage leaves, floating between the metal walls of a mess kit, in a liquid sometimes brown, sometimes gray. Between mess kits the space is twenty-four hours long. The line shuffles forward between the racks for sleeping. Bringing closer the smell of the barrel at the door. I put one foot in front of the other as the tall girl in front of me does. I feel full of hollowness. The round light space in the middle of my body. (Berger, 73)

Anita Lobel is five years old when the war breaks out. She spends the next five years hiding until she and her brother are denounced and deported. Her memoir, *No Pretty Pictures*, relates this experience through colours, lights, sounds, and other sensory impressions. She talks about the “stale smell that hung around her (grandmother) like a veil,” “the pungent, thick smells of the beer hall,” “the special moist smell of the earth,” and “the sunflower disks, heavy and promising, full of succulent seeds” (Lobel, 15-18). When Anita and her brother are arrested, the hectic rhythm of events, the brutality of sensations, and the strong images become overwhelming. After a brief period spent in the town's prison, the children are ordered to get to the trucks waiting outside. In the corridor they encounter one of their grandmothers. All Anita lets herself see is a large bundle of old rags propped against the wall. The soldiers grab the bundle and throw it onto one of the trucks, as if it were a sack of potatoes. In another episode, during the death march when the camp is evacuated, Anita sees in a flash a kneeling woman with a German officer standing next to her and a red color spreading out on the snow. It crosses her mind that the woman might well be her aunt or cousin, who are in the same march and had planned to escape, but in order to be able to continue walking, she concen-

trates all her attention on the contrast of the whiteness of the snow and the red stain (Lobel, 103–105; 118–123).

In Ilse Aichinger's *The Greater Hope*, events are related through the sensory impressions, feelings, and imaginary world of the protagonist, Ellen, who is eleven at the beginning of the story. After her mother goes into exile, while she is denied permission to leave, Ellen, whose father is not Jewish, is stuck in the city with her Jewish grandmother. Most of her relatives and friends are already taken away or are in danger of imminent deportation. Ellen desperately tries to escape. Her story is told through noises, smells, images, and visions mixed together with her dreams and thoughts, beyond which the reader can discern another, "objective" storyline: the everyday reality of persecution, the escalation of war, the siege of the city, and the arrival of the Red Army. Events told from the perspective of Ellen's "subjective reality," however sad and frightening they are, gain a special, poetic meaning and radiate her unwavering hope against all odds.

At the beginning of *An Estate of Memory*, Ilona Karmel's novel based on her internment in the Płaszów camp, there are well-defined places, events, and characters. As the story unfolds and the prisoners slide further down the layers of privation, everything becomes more blurred and feverish. Events and scenes begin to merge together; the reader is drawn into a chaotic flow of tumultuous, intense impressions, flashes of images, and hectic movements. This frenzied, expressionist manner of telling the story conveys the intensity of sensory impressions: the impact of sounds, smells, colours, cold, humidity, wind, and heat make the reader enter almost physically into the world of the camp.

Eventually it becomes difficult to follow what is actually happening or who is talking. Major events take place, but they are no longer told in detail: they are mentioned in splinters of conversations or whispered news that keep circulating among the prisoners. Even significant happenings, for example, the destruction of the small ghetto or the death of a main character, are told in a haze of insecurity as if they appeared in a fuzzy, half-conscious mind. Words are gradually replaced by gestures; internal monologues take the place of dialogues; and the world increasingly appears like a series of impressions, images, and physical sensations with blurred contours. As the camp sinks into infernal depths and the protagonists merge into a faceless human crowd that inevitably approaches its end, the narration itself turns into a dark mass of words that flows like a murky river, eventually throwing up flickering lights, half-sentences, and snapshot-like images.

Reality of uncertain contours

In a growing child's mind the borders between the real world and its reflection, experience and imagination, and truth and lies are still uncertain and constantly changing. During the war years the children were expelled into a world that seemed to refute everything that seemed stable and valid before, and the contours of reality became even more blurred. Relating the dawn when Hungarian soldiers brutally burst into their home to take them to the deportation train, Edith Bruck describes her shock: "What happened during these few minutes could not be real for anybody" (Bruck 2018, 35–38). The children also discovered that many grown-ups were afraid to face realities and preferred to pretend, hide truths, and lie—even to themselves. The regime's systematic, poisonous propaganda and people's misconceptions and racist prejudices about the Jews seriously challenged their sense of reality as well. In this state of confusion in a twisted world they sometimes doubted the veracity of their own experiences. Reality often became more incredible than imagination.

In János Nyíri's *Battlefields*, one day a former classmate, the son of a rich and influential Jew, goes to say goodbye to Jóska who is confined in a Yellow Star building, waiting to be transferred to the ghetto. The boy is about to leave the country in Rudolf Kasztner's "Golden train," which, according to a deal with the Nazis, took approximately 1700 rich and prominent Hungarian Jews out of the country. "I had never heard such a fairy tale as Aaron Kohn told me, not even from Uncle Samuel or from my wicked grandmother" (387). In the middle of their conversation, on the spur of the moment, the boy offers to trade places with Jóska. They both know that the proposal is illusory, but for a split second they become lost in the confusion of the real and the imaginary. Jóska feels almost drunk imagining that he could change reality by simply changing his identity. After his friend leaves, he staggers around like a moonwalker. Some days later he concludes: "reality was only a noonday shadow" (395).

The line between reality and unreality becomes even more blurred for children who hide with borrowed identities. In normal conditions kids are taught to tell the truth, but in this case they have to lie. Pretending, taking up different personalities, inventing stories, hiding and cheating, at first often appears like a game that they might even enjoy, until a sudden turn confronts them with the brutality of their reality. Their real and sham identities become confused, profoundly shaking their sense of reality, making them insecure and vulnerable.

Hiding under a fake floor in the attic while the Nazis round up their building's inhabitants, Magda Dénes ponders her chances of survival. She tries to

convince herself that she is going to make it: “I knew I was lying to myself, but I liked it. There were certain lies I very much favoured. My brother said that lying bespoke of moral turpitude. I disagreed. Some lies were like toffee and rainbows and circus clowns. Some lies filled your empty belly...” She is aware, at the same time, that lies have a corrosive impact: “Lying in general is cruel. ... It undermines one of your most precious possessions—your hold on reality. It shakes your sense of yourself, until the knowledge your bones whisper becomes uncertain and suspect” (Dénes, 161; 341). When, after hiding for several months, Jacov Lind obtains fake identity papers and goes out without the yellow star for the first time, he also feels that the borders of reality are muddled: “It’s insane to walk about freely when you are supposed to be sitting in some camp. Insane maybe, but it also makes one contented and happy to be that insane. Schizophrenia did not hurt for a change. To be schizophrenic is to be normal; unreality is reality” (Lind, 104).

The system of the camps, with its absurd but methodical rules, is an ultimately unreal world. However, in order to survive, the children have to adapt to these conditions and treat them as “business as usual.” Particularly for children who were interned at a young age, the monstrousness of the camp became a sort of normality. Otto Dov Kulka describes his childhood spent in Terezín and Auschwitz as the only universe he knew, in which he discovered existence and in which he occasionally could even find beauty.

Children who had to adapt to the rules of this cruel and surreal universe became even more confused when they unexpectedly caught a glimpse of the world that existed outside the camps. The contrast distorted even more their sense of reality, making it harder to understand what was real and what was imagined, what was “normal” and what was not.

Although she never understood why they were imprisoned, sometime after her deportation, the callous conditions of the camps gradually became the only reality that existed in Ceija Stojka’s mind. One day they were taken from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück on a genuine passenger train, with seats and windows! Ceija was shocked to see the outside world where people lived their ordinary lives: “We looked out the windows; we were free. We saw real people who worked on the fields. Some were cutting the grass, others were putting something into the good earth. We saw nice brown cows and draught horses, sometimes even a hare and nice cheerful children with their mothers. For a moment we forgot everything” (Stojka 2018, 39). This encounter with the “real world” made Ceija even more puzzled about the world in which she was forced to live. Another day she was sitting with her mother

in front of their barrack in Bergen-Belsen, enjoying the spring sunshine and the unusual tranquility: "I asked her: 'Mama, tell me, do you think Vienna still exists or the whole world is here? I don't think that anything else than this can exist'" (61).

Ruth Klüger describes a similarly confusing encounter with the outside world. When her group was transferred—in a cattle car—from Auschwitz to another camp in Christianstadt, she was equally shocked to see the beauty and "neutrality" of nature, the existence of another realm, apparently not at all touched by the destruction in the camps:

I had come from a death camp and was looking out onto a normal landscape. ... On that summer day it was picture postcard pretty, as if time had stood still and I hadn't come directly from Auschwitz. Bicyclists on quiet country roads between sunbathed fields. ... The world hadn't changed. Auschwitz had not been on a foreign planet, but part of what lay before us. Life had gone on without a hiccup. (Klüger, 113–114)

Magical worldview

In this reality of uncertain contours imagination has a privileged position. In the mind of growing children elements of magical thinking, sharp-eyed realism, and the most down-to-earth pragmatism mingle together. The boundaries of the real and the imaginary are not yet fixed; daydreams and fictional universes are still organic, complementary elements of their worldview. Imagination has a magic power. Children, who are powerless, are able to escape from their suffocating reality with the help of their mind.

In *Battlefields*, Jóska gives precise accounts of his way of spending money, finding food, and the defense and attack tactics he uses on the streets and the playgrounds. But, at any moment, he can switch into his inner world, where pieces of reality and imagination blend together. His magical thinking helps him to interpret what is happening around him and "do magic" as well. He performs secret rituals and makes personal sacrifices to conjure the forces of light against the forces of evil. In one of his secret rituals he is not allowed to step on the lines that join the strips of concrete when he walks on the sidewalk. If he manages to march normally without touching them, he is granted the survival of one of his beloved people: "My private demon's strictest law was that I mustn't tell anyone what I was doing. I made pacts with the shadows that flew about my head, bargaining for lives" (Nyíri, 333).

Other children invent similar games to fend off the dangers menacing them and the people they love. In the ever more threatening Nazi Germany, Gerhard Durlacher often plays the same game as Jóska: “The walk home is hampered by my self-imposed task of not missing any of the blue granite curb stones. One wrong step can bring unprecedented disaster, and just before we reach the front door, with the end in sight, I lose my balance” (Durlacher 1993, 28). One night six-year-old Wilhelm Dichter is alone in a dark room waiting for his mother and stepfather to come home. It’s late and he is very anxious imagining that they were attacked and he can’t run to help them. He also resorts to a magical act of personal sacrifice:

I lifted one foot and froze. My knee hurt. I tried breathing as slowly as possible, but I couldn’t stop completely. When the noise in my ears drowned out the rattling of the machine, it seemed that I had stopped time. Mother is not bleeding now. I waited with my foot raised for someone to come to her aid, because I myself was afraid to go out to the courtyard. “Meshuggener!” Andzia Katz laughed. “Why are you standing like a stork?” (Dichter, 78).

After their arrival to Auschwitz, Maurice Cling is separated from his parents and has no news about them. Looking for hidden messages of hope in his bleak surroundings, he also draws on his magic thinking. One evening, walking back to the camp exhausted after a long workday,

For a moment I forget about my fatigue and aching feet and observe the setting sun. If it hides behind the clouds, it’s a bad sign; if not, we’ll make it. One evening the sun is hiding: difficulties. If we arrive at the turn before it reappears, mama is lost; if it comes out from behind the clouds, we’ll be liberated and find each other. Victory! It emerges in the last minute, red like blood. (Cling, 127).

One of the manifestations of the children’s magical worldview that hopes to impact the events around them is their private dealings with God. Even if they are not believers in a conventional sense, they often have a feeling of direct connection with a higher entity that rules the world, with whom they try to intervene on behalf of their loved ones.

Until the Germans start to empty the ghetto, the non-religious Elli, Elżbieta Ettinger’s protagonist in *Kindergarten*, has her own tacit agreement with God:

She saw people around her rot, starve, disappear, but she believed her family would survive. Lili laughed at her saying that Elli had a secret arrangement with God concerning her family; and ridiculous as Elli knew it was, there was some truth in it. Because they still lived, on the surface of the quicksand indeed, but not sucked in, her faith in God grew. (Ettinger 1970, 68).

Battlefields' Jóska also has his secret bargains with God. He makes offerings to save lives; at one instance he is even ready to accept his favorite soccer team's defeat for the sake of the liberation of Athens (Nyíri, 177). Shlomo Breznitz negotiates with God as well. After the end of the war, teetering between hope and doubts, he waits for his parents to return from deportation:

Now that some of my prayers had been answered, did it mean that the rest would also come true and things would be better soon? Or maybe just the opposite? After defeating the Germans, might God, in an attempt to be even-handed, kill my parents? Or perhaps it was the other way around: After the Germans killed my parents, did he make them lose the war? (Breznitz, 150).

Magical thinking and private deals with higher forces, including God himself, also reflect the self-centredness of the children's worldview. They are well aware of their powerlessness, yet they also feel personally responsible for the fate of the world or at least of their family members. Unfortunately they often "fail" at saving them, which makes them feel guilty. Their powerful imagination that helped them through so many difficulties during the war later becomes one of the sources of their acute survivors' guilt.

In "The sweater," one of Norman Manea's stories that takes place in the Transnistria camp, a little boy's mother knits a sweater from stolen pieces of wool. She offers it to a little girl who happened to be in their house when the soldiers came to take them away and was arrested with them. Five-year-old Norman is completely fascinated by this beautiful, warm, soft, and comfortable object; its rich surfaces and colors that embody things he badly misses. He likes to touch it and is desperate to have it or at least wear it for a short while. His intense, painful desire turns the jumper into a magic object that takes on a life of its own. It is able to seduce, to whisper sweet promises, to caress and spoil; it can comfort and it can also kill. The sweater transmits a virus that eventually kills the little girl and the doctor who treated her. When the girl is dying, the little boy is tortured by a mixture of guilt and desire. He is convinced that if he could get hold of the sweater he might be able to save her. When she

dies, the parents want to bury the sweater with her, but at the last minute the father rescues it; their life is too precarious to throw away such a precious object. Norman wears the sweater one afternoon and next day he also feels the first symptoms of the illness. He is convinced that this is the punishment for his longing. After weeks of struggling, he survives. He continues wearing the sweater, because the winter is very cold, but he finds it uncomfortable and unpleasant; it has lost the magic power and beauty his imagination bestowed upon it (Manea, 1992, 3–16).

Magical thinking is not only an escape route. It also has the capacity to reveal the deepest layers of reality, to recognize the essence of things that is invisible at the level of everyday life, full of appearances, clichés, and lies, helping children understand people and situations better.

In Aharon Appelfeld's *Blooms of Darkness*, one of the protagonists, Mariana, declares: "Realistic predictions don't exaggerate, they show you what will be. You have to be alert and listen to them" (Appelfeld 2010, 257). (In the French translation: "Imagination does not exaggerate.") And, in fact, her own tragic end that she had envisaged one beautiful, idyllic day comes true. The magical dimension of his mind-set allows Erwin/Aharon in *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* to connect with his past, to communicate with his murdered family members, and to find his vocation in life. Aldo Zargani confirms that "in Jewish culture, prophecy does not mean that one can foresee the future, it means to see it at present. Then the question is: can a child be a prophet? My answer that I found in my memory, in my subjective reality is: yes" (Zargani interview 2009).

Four-year-old Wilhelm Dichter and his parents try to escape deportation by hiding in their hometown. They frequently have to change their temporary shelters; the little boy's life is marked by ever-present fear, anxiety, hunger, and discomfort. Completely at the mercy of external forces, Wilhelm creates his private universe where he can retreat at any time. This universe is formed of minute concrete details of reality that he keenly observes: snapshots of events, objects, places, people's appearances, and behavior. Even in the most dramatic situations, he notices minor fascinating facets. When the soldiers confiscate people's precious belongings, he notes that the rings left marks on the adults' fingers; when they run through fields trying to escape arrest, he remarks that "the ground was soaking wet. The grass sparkled with water. Our feet sank into it softly and made a gargling sound as we lifted them" (Dichter, 27).

These precise realistic observations are mixed together with his dreams, daydreams, readings, and images stored in his mind, revealing the essence

of the events. One night he dreams about his grandfather who stayed in the ghetto:

He was standing there in his Austrian uniform with his medal and sword, having a conversation with God. "Take care of them," he was pleading. "I can't do it any longer. In exchange, I won't go into hiding." "Grandpa!" I cried out. "They'll kill you if you don't go into hiding!" "Be quiet! I can't hear what He's saying because of you." Terrified, I closed my eyes.

When Wilhelm wakes up the next morning, he overhears a distraught conversation of his parents. During the night the ghetto was liquidated and grandfather was deported. The parents keep asking themselves why he refused to hide, while he urged the others to do so. Wilhelm knows why (42–43).

When the German army is approaching his village in Lithuania, Daniel, the twelve-year-old orphaned protagonist of Grigory Kanovich's *Candles in the Wind*, also has a premonitory dream. Hitler lands on a plane in the middle of the marketplace of the village (carefully tying his vehicle to a tree) and starts to chase away its inhabitants with his men. When no one else is left, they begin to pursue the dead. The generations of the dead rise and flee in panic, leaving the cemetery, the place of continuity, empty (Kanovich 1983, 155–156).

Interpreting the world

Unlike most adults around them, who are shattered by the collapse of their world or are paralyzed by fear, the children take their changed realities as a new given and try to find their way in it. Alona Frankel copes remarkably well with the hardships of persecution and hiding. She repeats several times in her memoir: "I thought that's how it was in the world" (Frankel, 1, 3, 41). Making use of the experiences of their short lives, their associative skills and still unlimited imagination, the children strive to understand what is going on and adjust to it. They lack the adults' knowledge and the complexity of their analytical competences and with the peculiar self-centeredness of their psyche, they are often unable (or unwilling) to grasp the gravity of events and the dangers lurking at them. At the same time, their regard is fresh and often more matter-of-fact than that of the grown-ups. They do not have yet the adults' impulses to wrap unpleasant truths in layers of complicated explications and good manners. "Is it true that you are going to die?" asks nonchalantly one of Jóska's playmates in *Battlefields*, while they play football in the courtyard (Nyíri 2014, 369).

Children often try to interpret their reality with the help of their readings, the stories they are told, or the conversations they have overheard. In their mind tales, books, newspapers, and people's utterances are as tangible as what they experience. The borders between the real, written, and imagined worlds are not clear-cut yet; their elements float around in their head in a sweet chaos. A poem or a fairy tale can provide as valid an interpretation of an event as any rational analysis. In fact, they often prove to be the most reliable references that help children find their way in a world turned upside down.

When Norman Manea encounters the enchanted world of books, he becomes convinced that truth lives in tales. The magic of words can reveal the deepest dimensions of reality that is often invisible for most eyes. The experience of deportation confirms his conviction: "anything could become anything ...The fairy tales were real, and each one held a threat. They were real, he felt it, the old story is coming back. The fear had come back" (Manea, 1992, 79).

The evening Hitler seized power the Nazis marched through Baden-Baden in a majestically threatening parade, armed to the teeth, holding torches, accompanied by loud, triumphant music. Gerhard Durlacher and his family were watching them from the windows of their dark living room: "Proud, menacing and unassailable, he rides past, the cruel king of my fairy-tale book. I follow him with my eyes until he's out of sight and hear my father, reminded of Schubert, whisper softly: 'the ErlKing'" (Durlacher 1993, 23). Cordelia Edvardson recounts her arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau with the terms of a chilling fairy tale. The blond camp commander Maria Mandel and the dark-haired Dr Mendele appear like "The King and Queen of the realm of the dead where the girl has been brought. ... Someone had called her, someone had sent her forth to follow this call and obey. Who sent Proserpine forth to serve the lord of the underworld?" (Edvardson, 64).

After Auschwitz, Éva Fahidi and her companions arrive at a forced labor camp in Allendorf. Seeing their miserable condition, the camp's leader allows them to rest and be fed relatively well so they can gather enough strength to work. In this camp there are trees and grass, running water, and everyone has a separate cot with her own pallet and a stinky, prickly blanket. "Our new life promised to be like something out of a children's tale," she remarks after the first couple of days. Éva remembers that they are in the region where the Grimm brothers had collected folk tales. She describes their first days in the camp like a modernized Hansel and Gretel tale (Fahidi, 188–190). Francine Christophe evokes Charles Perrault's tale describing the "phantom train" that evacuates the prisoners from Bergen-Belsen. People keep dying and whenever

the doors are opened, the corpses are thrown out of the wagon: "As this happens often, I think of Tom Thumb, who left a trail of stones; we leave a trail of bodies" (Christophe, 121).

Uri Orlev strives to interpret their life in the Warsaw ghetto as a modernized version of Robinson Crusoe, his favorite childhood story: "Suddenly I understood that it was happening to me too. I too am beginning to be the hero of an adventure story" (Orlev interview 1998). At the beginning of his deportation Maurice Cling also saw his life in the camp as an exotic adventure, coming right out of one of his books: "Curiously, one is adapting very fast when one is 15 and has been dreaming about African adventures, scout camps and above all, when the big brother, the companion, the confident is on your side day and night" (Cling, 80). When Maurice becomes ill and a female nurse gently helps him, he abandons himself to sweet daydreams: "My head still full of childhood tales, I feel I'm Pinocchio saved by his faraway good fairy in the most dramatic situations" (161).

The children frequently depict their world personifying abstract notions that might also be a heritage of the fairy tales they grew up with. Death is ever-present in their reality; still it is invisible and untouchable, impossible to understand. In the children's mind death, danger, or occupation often appear personified; they are identified with a frightful character, an object, or a place. When the Red Army occupies their town in Lithuania and makes people disappear, Grigory Kanovich notices: "Fear, dressed in a green shirt and military cap with a five-pointed star, strolled carefree along the lanes and streets of Jonava" (Kanovich 2017, 458). In Jurek Becker's *Jacob the Liar*, the protagonist is arrested after curfew. He stands paralyzed in the sharp light of a torchlight: "standing on the cobblestones and alone with his fear, is Jacob Heym, really too old for such a test of nerves" (Becker, 3). Otto Dov Kulka mentions the postcards sent from the Auschwitz family camp to those who remained in Terezín. They talk about everyday meetings with Onkel Hlad and Onkel Mavet—Uncle Starvation and Uncle Death (Kulka, 15).

In one of his hiding places, Wilhelm Dichter tries to imagine what death looks like: "Death was terrifying. Drunk like Pan Kruk, it murdered everyone it caught. It shouted and it beat people" (Dichter, 43). Death is omnipresent and keeps changing shapes.

During the Russian times it had inhabited the police building on the other side of Pańska Street. It entered into our courtyard with the Germans. Stinking of carbolic acid, it opened the door to our apartment. In the cellar, it bent

over the bucket that was filled with excrement. Since then, I had seen it everywhere. It fired from a pistol, while sitting on a horse; it pulled the shoes off Mother's feet. It looked under the bed and into the garret. It stepped on my feet on Pańska Street when we walked behind the wall of people's backs. Coughing and spitting blood, it had come to the attic. (181)

In another hiding place, in an attic in occupied Budapest, Magda Dénes also keeps meditating about death:

What is death anyway? Riding into the fog on the tail of Beelzebub, as I once read somewhere? Throwing a coin into the river Styx? Ascending to heaven? What is it? It must be like sex—off-limits to children, with no adult ever wanting to answer any questions about it. I am safe then, I thought. Children may not know of death; therefore they may not die. (Dénes, 161).

Overhearing his parents' anxious conversations about an affidavit they hope to receive from the United States, Gerhard Durlacher imagines that they are expecting an important visitor named Effie David: "Might it be the daughter of my aging uncle, Grandfather's brother, the one who is a doctor in New York? Why would he be sending her to Germany?" When Gerhard asks his mother how old the much expected visitor is, she bursts out laughing—a rare pleasure for both of them (Durlacher 1993, 78–79).

Knowing without knowing

In most cases described in these books, parents at first intended to spare their children by not telling them what was happening in the outside world. In the first half of the twentieth century the distance between generations was larger than today and parents rarely considered their children as partners with whom they could share their problems and worries. They also wanted to protect them and not upset their world with threatening news. They hid facts out of caution as well, knowing that kids are not always able to keep secrets or understand how they should behave in certain delicate situations. As Ruth Klüger puts it: "Their secret was death, not sex. That's what the grown-ups were talking about, sitting up late around the table" (Klüger, 15).

Talking about the family of her cousin, Sarah, Raymond Federman recounts that after the German occupation,

Even though Sarah and her brothers, like many children in their neighborhood, were no longer allowed to go to the public baths, libraries, movies, swimming pools, and many other such places, it was not clear to them why it had to be so. They were never given a reason, and when their parents and relatives talked about the war, they did so in hushed voices in some foreign language the children never learned. Much of what the adults discussed or lamented was always whispered, so that Sarah and her brothers knew nothing. Don't ask questions, they were told, it's better if you don't ask. Protected by this silence, Sarah had grown in total ignorance of her fate. (Federman, 1990, 59)

During the German occupation of her home town, Lvov, then Poland (today Lviv, Ukraine), Krysha Chiger had been hiding with her family and a group of other adults in the sewers. She underlines the benefits of her unawareness of the facts: "It must have been difficult for the adults in our group to remain hopeful, considering our dreadful position. For me and Pawel it was not so difficult because we were in the dark. This is an appropriate phrase, because for most of the time we sat quietly in the dark and also because we did not know what was going on" (Chiger, 138).

Six-year-old Shlomo Breznitz describes similar feelings in a remote Slovak village, where his family was hiding for a time: "In the ignorance of childhood, I had only a remote sense of the world that was crumbling around us. ... I liked the snow and the mud and the well in front of our 'castle' and the baked potatoes at the Kugels' and I was crazy about the (whipped) cream" (Breznitz, 25). Edgar Hilsenrath recalls his state of mind when they first arrived at the ghetto: "As far as I was concerned, as a 15-year-old, it was all a great adventure. We heard about things that were happening in Poland, but we didn't know any real details" (Hilsenrath interview 2005).

Gerhard Durlacher was a little German boy who had a happy, comfortable childhood in Baden-Baden that ended abruptly when the Nazis came to power. One day, on their way home Gerhard and his mother were caught up in a military march. The little boy was thrilled by the forest of flags, banners, gleaming instruments, and enthusiastically marching people. He was reluctant to leave. His mother grabbed him and made him walk fast behind the crowd:

I'm surrounded on all sides by children, older and younger than I am, proudly clutching their flags. I feel naked and excluded as I'm dragged along against my will by my mother and the heavy door shuts behind me. The marching music fades slowly away. Sitting in Father's chair, my mother throws her hands over her eyes and tears drip on to her winter coat. (Durlacher 1993, 20)

The day Hitler becomes chancellor, Gerhard goes to the bakery with his mother.

On the counter of the bakery is a vase filled with red swastika-emblazoned paper flags. Each of the children ahead of me gets one, or sometimes two. The baker's wife assumes I won't be singing tonight in the square outside the theatre and that therefore I don't need a flag. My mother agrees with her wholeheartedly and that makes me really mad. My cousin, who is not much bigger than I am, is allowed to go. Grownups are so unfair, I think, but I keep my mouth shut and don't say it aloud. (21)

Jona Oberski narrates a harrowing story of his parents' last encounter through the lens of his six-year-old self. The family was interned in the camp of Westerbork. The parents felt that their time was numbered and bribed one of the guards to let them use his room to have some intimacy. Jona describes an awkward, painful scene in which his parents tried to make love, while he was waiting outside in front of the barrack. He did not understand what was going on and kept disturbing the adults, putting everybody in danger. Finally, the guard lost his temper and chased them away (Oberski, 49–55).

The day when German soldiers occupied her native town, Krakow, five-year-old Anita was at home with her nanny. As she describes it,

One afternoon in October I was standing by the window that looked out on the courtyard. Something happened. I don't know how it happened. I did not see the beginning of it. Niania cried: "Don't look!" She tried to pull me away from the window. "Come away from there!" Six floors below an open window facing our part of the building, several people were surrounding something on the ground. I could see a dark liquid slowly appear on the cement courtyard. Without really knowing, I knew what all this was. (Lobel, 5)

She did not see, she is not supposed to know, but she is able to put together the puzzle of her sensations and understand that something sinister has happened. Alona Frankel depicts a similar state of mind. In her memoir she repeats several times, as if it were a tragic incantation: "I never listened, never looked, but I saw everything and I heard everything" (Frankel, 6; 58).

In *To Whom It May Concern*, Raymond Federman tells the story of his nine-year-old cousin, Sarah. Early one morning, her mother sends Sarah to the bakery. When she returns home, their flat is empty; all her family was taken away by the police which raided the Jewish households of Paris that day. The little

girl calls on a neighbor, who, after some hesitation, proposes to help her to find her parents. They walk to a nearby square, where many people are herded together, guarded by local policemen; some are already waiting on the trucks stationed nearby. Sarah meets some acquaintances, but no one has seen her family. Finally the neighbor decides to take her to the police station, where they certainly could indicate where to look for them. On their way to the post, the little girl suddenly breaks free and runs away; as if a veil had fallen, she instinctively understands that she is in danger. She escapes, tears the yellow star off her dress and wanders around in the city until a young prostitute finds her and takes her in.

Sarah is immersed in these events with a sort of "split consciousness." Shocked by the sudden disappearance of her family, she is carried away by the events in a haze. She registers her impressions: closed windows and lowered shutters on the street, the smell of naphthalene on the fur coat of a classmate's grandmother, the hair growing on the old lady's chin, the bright colour of the lipstick of the young girl who comes to her rescue. She doesn't seem to grasp what is going on, but deep in her subconscious she feels that it is something unusual, terrible, and dangerous. She does not have the words to name it, nor the experience to understand and figure out how to react. And the adults don't help her. They pretend that nothing extraordinary is taking place. The neighbor must know, but she suppresses this knowledge in order to shed her responsibility. She does not want to denounce or harm the little girl; she simply acts as if everything was in order and she behaved like a reasonable good neighbor helping a lost child. The French policeman refuses to take Sarah on the truck because her name is not on his list; he unwantedly contributes to her survival. The young woman who saves the little girl is a prostitute—an "immoral" marginal creature is the only person who does not pretend and offers help. Within a couple of hours the universe falls to pieces; Sarah is left alone, completely defenceless.

All persecuted children went through a similar experience, when normalcy unexpectedly and inexplicably gave way to monstrosity. After such an experience it was difficult for them to see the world intact again. This "split consciousness," the intimate knowledge that behind the surface of normality there are always other terrifying dimensions of destruction and danger, accompanied them throughout their lives.

C H A P T E R

2

PERSECUTION

During the years of persecution and war the children's life conditions dramatically changed. Abruptly excluded from their familiar environment, their schools and playgrounds, transformed into "strangers," scapegoats, and enemies, persecuted and condemned to death, they needed to understand and reinterpret their realities and discover ways out. As they strove to comprehend what was happening to them and why, they identified deep-rooted racism, prejudice, the lack of critical thinking, the power of manipulation, and the perverting impact of social inequality and injustice. They rarely use abstract notions to describe these factors, but when they relate their exclusion from their schools and playgrounds, the ways racism and prejudices impregnate their environment, they depict the mechanisms of indoctrination and brainwashing. When they show how toxic ideologies find fertile ground in both the privileged and the marginalized classes, they highlight the role of social inequalities and injustice in the erosion of moral values and social cohesion. Trying to understand what made them a target to be annihilated, they are confronted with key existential questions about identity, faith, belonging to a community, and the meaning of life and death.

Exclusion

Most of the books reviewed here begin with the presentation of the children's life before the war. They describe their microcosm: their families, friends, schools, schoolmates, teachers, their neighborhood, favorite pastimes, and main interests. Before the systematic persecution began, the authors lived like any other children in Europe. They went to school, played, discovered the world, forged friendships, and tried to understand adults. The introduction

of radical measures of discrimination and exclusion was a shock for most of them. The majority of their family members and their older acquaintances, who had already experienced such events and were aware of the threatening political tendencies of the late 1930s, received the news with a mixture of apprehension and resignation. The children, however, usually reacted with outrage and incomprehension. They didn't understand why from one day to the next, they had to sit separately in the classrooms or were sent away from school and were not even allowed to go to a playground, a park, or a shop. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, their everyday life was completely upset, their whole universe collapsed. Shlomo Breznitz felt "As a child who happened to be in the wrong place at a wrong time, caught in the maelstrom of events" (Breznitz, 1993, ix). Anita Lobel had the same sensation: "I was born in Kraków, Poland. In a wrong place at a wrong time" (Lobel, 2008, xi).

Ruth Klüger grew up in a comfortable household in Vienna. She describes the drastic changes in her everyday life after the Anschluss in March 1938:

Suddenly I had become a disadvantaged child who couldn't do the things that children in our circle usually learned to do, like swim in the municipal pool, acquire a bike, go with girlfriends to children's movies, or skate. ... Vienna taught me to speak and read, but little else. ... Anti-Semitic signs and slogans were among my first reading materials. (Klüger, 25)

Many authors recall the painful moments when they were excluded from games and joint adventures, when their classmates, neighbors, or friends abruptly refused to play or even talk with them because they "discovered" their Jewish origins. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recounts: "I was eight years old. I was about to wipe the blackboard and one of the children said, 'Don't give the Jew the sponge.' ... Then suddenly some children spat at me in the street and called me a dirty Jew. I did not really understand what was going on" (Lasker-Wallfisch testimony, 2003). András Mezei relates how his best friend, with whom he shared the school-bench, his sandwich, whom he defended in skirmishes, one day refused to sit next to him, a "stinky Jew." This betrayal hurt him much more than the glances passers-by cast at him some months later, when Hungarian Nazis led his group towards the icy Danube where thousands were shot (Mezei 1984, 115).

When her grandmother first talked to her about Hitler and his goals, ten-year-old Aranka Siegal wondered whether her schoolmates would still like her, now that she "turned out to be" a Jew. She grew up in multicultural Beregszász

where before the Nazi takeover ethnic differences were part of everyday life, a source of richness and not a problem (Siegal, 12; 23). Francine Christophe posed the same question: “Last week, I asked my best friend at school if she would still play with me, because I am no longer like her, and the proof will be written on my chest” (Christophe, 15). Livia Bitton-Jackson describes how some days after the German occupation of Hungary, Jewish children were barred from school and when they left their classes, some boys, including her classmates, shouted anti-Semitic slogans and sang racist songs. Jews were excluded from public places and were forbidden to communicate with non-Jews. They were not yet deported, but had already “been reduced to lifeless ghosts” in their own homes (Bitton-Jackson, 37).

Edith Bruck, who grew up in a very poor family in a small village in eastern Hungary, recalls that the systematic discriminations against the Jews became much worse with the increasing hardships caused by the war. During the summer before their deportation, the neighbors still helped the family build their new house and her schoolmates were happy to play with her. Next fall no one wanted to address them any longer; they were excluded from the community and treated like pariahs (Bruck 2001, 11–20).

Judith Magyar Isaakson was thirteen in 1938. One of her school’s best students, she was reciting a patriotic poem during a school celebration, when suddenly she was interrupted by rude shouts:

“Shut up, Jewess!” a belligerent voice thundered from the void. Coarse shouts startled me from terribly near: “Dirty Jew!” “Away with the Kike!” Shripping whistles sprang up from all directions, hissing their hatred and spite. I shivered, terrified. Our friendly auditorium, where I had so often played and exercised, was transformed into an enemy den. Unseeing, I faced a nightmare. My knees shook above my white knee socks and my teeth chattered audibly. All my instincts propelled me backstage. But I would not give in. (Isaakson, 9–10)

After a moment of panic, Judith pulled herself together and finished the poem to great acclaim—the majority of the school community, both children and teachers, were still protecting their Jewish students. However, the introduction of anti-Jewish laws and the difficulties of the war gradually changed the situation; restrictions and privations followed. Soon Judith’s male family members were taken away for forced labor service; in 1944 a ghetto was established and some months later the whole family was deported.

In the summer of 1942, after a year spent in Budapest, *Battlefields'* Jóska returns to his grandparents' village. One afternoon he goes to play football with a friend. In the past the village boys would slur the Jewish kids or throw stones at them when they were alone, but soon afterwards they would all play together. Playing has always been a unique federating force, bridging social and cultural differences between Jewish and non-Jewish, poor and rich boys. And through playing together, for a while, the borders among different groups became more fluid outside the playground as well. This time, however, as the two boys approach the soccer field, they are received with outright hostility. This is the point in the novel—and history—when playgrounds turn into battlefields.

The centre-forward stood in front of us. “Do you expect to watch the match for nothing?” he demanded.

“We haven't got any money” replied Laci wisely and calmly. But I wasn't calm or wise. “Call this football? I wouldn't watch this if you paid me a pengő a minute!” Galambos' eyes went wide. He recognized me.

“If it isn't that little jerk of a yid!” he said. Slowly everyone stopped playing and gathered around us. “They are insulting the Hungarians!” Galambos informed his mates. ...

“It's unfair the way they live in our village for free!” said Bela Sarkadi. He had never washed in his life, he lived in a mud hut with his ten brothers and sisters; they were the poorest family in the village. ...

By now the centre-forward was pushing Laci Fried. “Are you going to pay up or shall I kick you in the balls?” Laci hit first.

A fierce battle follows, in which the two Jewish boys are badly beaten. Things start to get out of control; Jóska is already on the ground and the whole group is hitting and kicking him, when the cheerleader of the band is suddenly lifted out of the tumult and is administered a couple of sobering slaps. Thanks to the intervention of a decent and very strong village boy the two friends miraculously escape (Nyíri, 246–249). Some months later all the Jews of the village are deported.

Ruth Klüger is eight years old when, even though it is forbidden, she sneaks into the neighborhood cinema because she badly wants to see Walt Disney's new cartoon, *SnowWhite*. Unfortunately, the children of their neighborhood baker, a devoted Nazi family, are placed right next to her. She sits through the film in agony, dreading to be caught. When the lights come up, the neighbor's

nineteen-year-old daughter starts to yell, threatening to denounce Ruth if she dares to set foot in the movies ever again. Luckily a decent cinema employee comes to her rescue. Ruth walks home in a state of shock:

I had found out, for myself and by myself, how things stood between us and the Nazis and had paid for knowledge with the coin of pain. ... I had had the feeling of deadly danger, and this feeling didn't leave me but escalated until it was justified. Without having to think it through, from now on I was ahead of the grown-ups. (Klüger, 47)

In *Drowning: Growing up in the Third Reich*, Gerhard Durlacher recalls his early childhood in Germany between 1933 and 1937. He had been growing up happily in a comfortable household in Baden-Baden. In the winter of 1933, when he is five, his parents take him to see the Christmas performance of *Peter's Trip to the Moon* in a big theatre. Gerhard is enchanted by the beauty of the winter evening, the sparkling lights, the imposing theatre, and the anticipation of gifts. Before the performance, Santa Claus drives onto the stage and calls the children by their names. They have to go up to him, sing a little song or recite a poem, and he gives them gingerbread and marzipan. When he is called to the stage, overwhelmed with excitement and fear, Gerhard cannot utter a word. Santa Claus encourages him, offering his ear to whisper into. The little boy recognizes the ear and the hair around it, and understands that their upstairs neighbor, an actor, is playing Santa Claus: "My throat opens up and I shout with joy: 'You are not Santa Claus, you are Uncle Herbert.'"

Now he is able to sing; he receives his presents and walks back to his place "satisfied and happy."

People look at me with expressions of laughter or anger on their faces. ... The blond girls in the row behind me pointedly turn their heads away. Their father, his hair cropped close, leans forward and snarls spitefully at me: "Smart-aleck little Jewboy, I'll..." The remainder of his sentence is drowned out by the opening bars of the overture, and with my heart in my mouth, I wait for the curtain to open. (Durlacher 1993, 4-6)

This episode is followed by increasingly threatening ones: family members and acquaintances are beaten up by brownshirts, guests at an elegant New Year's Eve party are poisoned, swastikas inundate the town, and Jewish stores and institutions are smashed and robbed. When he goes to school for the first

time, Gerhard and his Jewish friend are not allowed to figure in the class photo. The school that he has been so eager to attend turns out to be a dangerous place. His classmates, led by a young Nazi boy, harass him every day. At the beginning a friend and a teacher defend him, but one after the other they also turn their back on him. The family's life becomes ever more restricted and deprived. In 1937 they flee to Holland: "My house is gone, my room is gone, my dog is gone, my toys are gone, everything is gone, gone, gone. No more Harro, no more school. Even my teddy bear is gone." Gerhard and his parents drive through "the country of my birth," and when they have to stop, they look for places without a sign: "No Jews allowed" (88–89).

Everyday racism

Many authors depict a similarly rapid and dramatic change of their environment from the mid-1930s. They see how irrational and unjust racism is; nonetheless, it is profoundly rooted and, encouraged by the media and official policy, it spreads fast and becomes ever louder and more violent. The children describe an accelerating spiral of violence, the multiple ways prejudice turns into open discrimination, which, once it is "legitimized," gives way to exclusion, expropriation, and mass murder. They notice that gaping social inequalities create a most fertile ground where extremist ideologies can flourish. They also see that people who lack solid moral values and who don't think for themselves easily swallow the most absurd statements of the official propaganda and tend to join the extremist movements.

For Jóska in *Battlefields*, antisemitism is a fact of life, like gravitation, whose forms and intensity change, depending on the place and circumstances. When he first arrives in Budapest from the village, he is surprised to hear that instead of throwing stones or unleashing their dogs on them, city-dwellers chase the Jews with laws. Whenever he tries to argue, to confront people with the absurdity of their prejudices about Jews, he bumps into walls. Deeply rooted racism characterizes all layers of the society and demonstrates people's inability or unwillingness to think freely and critically. Racism is directed against all categories of "others," including Hungarians beyond the country's borders, Gypsies, and foreigners. One day the allied air force bombs Budapest, causing serious casualties. People automatically accuse the "stinky Jews" for the bombing and are particularly upset because some of the pilots are Black or Native Americans. To add insult to injury, it is "subhumans" that are damaging the noble Hungarian race. "'Terrorist Bombers!' 'Gangsters of the Air!' screamed

the newspapers. Their pages were filled with pictures of black American pilots with captions saying 'Gorilla Warfare' and 'Down from the trees'" (Nyíri 1991, 347). One photo of a Native American soldier appears in the newspaper with the comment: "His grandfather was still hunter's prey" (2014, 361).

The children witness how racism and ever harsher institutionalized discrimination mutually reinforce each other. The "matter-of-fact," everyday anti-semitism that characterized relations before the war becomes increasingly aggressive; words and acts that once were considered unimaginable become widely spread and accepted. The humiliation, expropriation, imprisonment, and murder of fellow citizens are no longer seen as a crime. They are carried out with the silent indifference or active participation of large segments of the population, many of whom know the victims closely. Simultaneously with the ever worsening conditions of the Jews, the whole society is rapidly degenerating. The very structures of social coexistence fall apart. Oppression and officialized violence against a minority undermine the foundations of the society, eroding basic moral values and human ties. Through the media, public speeches, and indoctrination trickling down to everyday level activities, a uniform, single mind-set is propagated; critical thinking and alternative interpretations of the facts are silenced and often punished.

Gypsies are at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. They are victims of racist prejudice, poverty, and social marginalization. Their discrimination and humiliation is everyday practice for most of the non-Gypsy population. In the pre-war and war periods their situation markedly deteriorates as well.

In his autobiographical novel, *The Color of Smoke*, Menyhért Lakatos describes the everyday racism that is the lot of his people in the Hungary of the late 1930s and early 1940s. From the authorities to the last drunken lumpen on the street everybody feels entitled to abuse and humiliate them. The book's young protagonist takes the discrimination of the Roma as a given, but follows the example of his parents, who stand up for their dignity, even facing the authorities. He is a handsome and intelligent boy, who, against all odds, manages to go to school and has excellent results. At one point he falls in love with the charming blond daughter of a rich landowner who seems to reciprocate his feelings, but it is clearly impossible to break through the walls of class and ethnic difference that separate them. With the war the Gypsy settlement's economic situation dramatically worsens; many die of hunger and privations. After the fascist takeover the young boy is expelled from the school (following the Jewish students) and soon his whole community is deported.

Otto Rosenberg, a German Roma boy, also grows up with everyday insults and discrimination. He also defends himself and beats up the boys who call him a dirty Gypsy. Before the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, when Otto is nine years old, his whole family and neighborhood is expelled from their houses and locked in the Marzahn camp. Otto's parents are taken away and he stays with his grandmother and other relatives. He is assigned to work in a factory, but soon his food cards are taken away and he is not allowed to sit together with his co-workers because he is a Gypsy. One day he is arrested and jailed for borrowing a magnifying glass. Before his sixteenth birthday he is sent to Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald. In the camp there are some Reich Germans, whose situation is slightly better than that of the rest. By birth Otto belongs to them and should have the same benefits, but since he is a Gypsy, he is deprived of his rights: "We were no longer allowed to be Germans" (Rosenberg, 75).

Ceiya Stojka comes from a poor Gypsy family in Austria. They are itinerants, who buy and sell goods in village markets, moving around the country. Ceiya, who grows up with everyday racism and marginalization, describes the increasingly stricter restrictions on their life following the Nazi takeover. First their free movement is banned and they are obliged to live in officially assigned quarters. Then her father is arrested and disappears, as they learn later, deported to Dachau and killed in Hartheim. Then her uncle's whole family, then her grandmother, then one by one her other relatives, along with their entire families, are taken away. Finally Ceiya, her mother, siblings, and all remaining family members are deported (Stojka 2018).

Both Ceiya and Otto recall isolated acts of solidarity and support they received from non-Gypsy acquaintances and sometimes even unknown people. Compared to the situation of the Roma in Germany and Austria in the 1930s, the fate of the Hungarian Gypsies was definitely worse, mirroring the backwardness and profoundly anti-democratic nature of Hungarian society.

Racist prejudice, often reinforced by class differences, is not unknown within the Jewish community either. Instead of depicting Jews as being fundamentally different from the rest of the society, the authors do not shy away from showing that even those who are marginalized and discriminated against can look at the "other" with the same suspicion and prejudice as others look at them.

The well-fed, nicely dressed, and adored child of a well-to-do family, Janina Bauman describes how perplexed she was seeing poor orthodox Jews in a village near Warsaw, where her Christian nanny took her once in a while. They lived in squalid conditions, had shabby clothes, their women wore untidy wigs, and their dirty kids played on the ground: "The queerness, the strangeness of

those people who were Jews like us had puzzled me as long as I could remember. ... I feared them, perhaps I slightly despised them as sometimes children do when they meet people who speak in a broken language and look different” (Bauman 1986, 3).

Elli, the protagonist of Elżbieta Ettinger’s *Kindergarten*, who also comes from an assimilated, cultured, and affluent Warsaw family, talks in similar terms about the Hassidic Jews she encounters:

I think and think and cannot figure out what I have in common with these black men with earlocks, in long robes and yarmulkes. I don’t even understand the language they speak and I don’t like, to put it mildly, the noise they make, the way they talk with their hands and bodies. I don’t think I love Jews more than Poles, except, of course, my family. (Ettinger 1970, 88)

Strangeness, being different, being “the other” even within one’s own community can easily become a source of hostility, particularly in conditions of hardships. In *Fateless*, in the Zeitz camp, Gyuri Köves is assigned to work with the “Finns,” the deeply religious Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe. When they learn that he does not speak Yiddish, “I became a nonperson, they looked at me as if I were thin air or rather I didn’t exist at all. ... ‘You are not a Jew, you are a Gentile kid,’ they shook their heads” (Kertész 2006, 138–140). Saul Friedländer recalls a painful episode in a Jewish orphanage where he is placed during the war. A group of orthodox Jewish boys beats him up because they find him different:

I was a non-Jew, a goy. And so the little Jews of Montmorency were to avenge themselves for all the things that the goyim had made them suffer ... them, their families, and the entire Jewish people. I was on my way to becoming doubly Jewish. I was tied to a tree and beaten. (Friedländer, 44–45)

This scene recalls an even more painfully absurd incident in Auschwitz, described in one of József Gáli’s short stories, “Wolfhounds”. One evening, when his group is sent to take a shower, the Orthodox Polish Jews who are in charge of supervising them nearly beat the young boy to death because he is not circumcised. His father tries to defend him with words—to no avail. Fortunately an unknown young man comes to his rescue with impressive wit and physical force and he is saved. When they get back to the barrack, the young

man explains to the battered and traumatized József the cruel laws of hierarchy in the camp.

The authors describe in detail the workings of anti-Semitism, but they highlight that racism can be directed against other groups as well. It is a major ill that affects the whole society, not only one persecuted minority. Writing about their specific experiences during the Holocaust, they aim to send a universal message to their readers. The situation of minorities is always a litmus test that reflects the overall social and moral development of a society; what happened to them expresses the state of the world. Mária Ember introduces her book *Hairpin Bend* with the statement: “The Jewish fate is not the subject of this book. The subject of this book is Hungarian history.” Icchokas Meras formulates the same idea this way: “When I write about the Jew, I think of the Russian, the Latvian or the Czech; and when I write on the Jew and the Lithuanian, I think about man” (Meras speech, 1977). Menyhért Lakatos states in an interview: “I don’t consider myself a Gypsy writer. I’m a Gypsy who writes. My books are part of Hungarian literature. It does not matter whether they were written by a Gypsy or not” (Lakatos interview, 2006). In the same spirit, by weaving together the fates of Jewish and non-Jewish Poles in *The subtenant*, Hanna Krall eloquently shows that the destruction of Poland’s Jews left a never-healing wound in the entire Polish society, not just in the survivors and their children.

Social inequalities

Violent racism, ever harsher discrimination, and exclusion are among the tough surprises the children are confronted with when the period of intense persecution begins. Another, similarly bitter, discovery for many of them is social injustice and inequality. Children who grew up in poor or modest households knew well that there were significant differences between the life style and possibilities of those on the top and those on the bottom of society. Many of the better-to-do children, however, were exposed to these realities for the first time in their lives. This was an unpleasant eye-opening experience as well.

Raymond Federman grew up in a poor family in Paris. He describes the privations of his childhood and the profound injustices the prevailing social conditions created. During the Shoah he also discovered that financial resources and a favorable social position played a decisive role in prospects for survival. His mother’s siblings were well-to-do and they all survived the war. After the deportation of his family, twelve-year-old Raymond first sought refuge with

his rich aunt and uncle. They considered him a burden jeopardizing their own survival and eventually sent him alone to work at a farm, while they took refuge in the south of France.

János Nyíri's hero, Jóska, keenly observes his environment from the viewpoint of a poor child from a broken family. He sees clearly the enormous gap separating rich and poor and the iron laws of social inequality that limit his possibilities in life and later endanger his very existence. Jóska is a gifted soccer player, but often he can't even play because he doesn't have a ball or proper shoes. As the ever dramatic events unfold around him, he comes to the uncomfortable conclusion that social differences are more decisive factors than differences between Jews and non-Jews. Wealthy and influential Jews are able to buy their way to survival, while the bulk of their community perishes. He sums up, bitterly: "Jewish laws only refer to poor Jews" (Nyíri 2014, 205). In a later section he reformulates the same thought: "even in Hell there was one law for the rich and another for the poor" (Nyíri 1991, 360). In a different country and different context, Jacov Lind comes to the same conclusion: "Racial persecution is a matter of finances" (Lind, 79).

Jóska also notices that even in the midst of systemic persecution and the threat of extermination, the Jewish community is unable to unite in solidarity and fight together to avoid its demise. Locked up in a Yellow Star building, he calculates how much rich Jews have contributed to support the poorer ones and is outraged to find a pathetically negligible sum. He is particularly upset when he learns that the Jewish leadership, which, despite the ever harshening persecution, has been preaching obedience and cooperation with the country's political leadership and the occupiers, promising the protection of the whole community, has made a secret deal with the Nazis to save a select group of the privileged and the wealthy (Nyíri, 359–360).

Several other authors recall bitterly that community solidarity is often illusory; the rich are eager to maintain their privileges and have a greater chance of survival than the rest. In a bitter irony of history, Jews are sentenced to death as a community, whereas they are as divided and segmented as the rest of the society and become even more atomized as persecution intensifies. The social hierarchy remains untouched even when the whole community is threatened; money can buy life and connections can provide better lodgings or jobs or access to food. The appalling conditions of the ghettos are made worse by the chronic lack of means to maintain basic infrastructure and social institutions due to the systemic plundering of the Nazis and their local collaborators, who also seize the opportunity for rapid enrichment. Sev-

eral authors mention that some of the Jews themselves become part of these sinister mechanisms in order to save their own life or to accumulate material possessions even inside the ghettos and camps.

Mary Berg, who herself is in a privileged position due to her family's economic standing and her mother's American passport, underlines, often with guilt, that privileges remain privileges even in captivity and money can draw the line between life and death. Edgar Hilsenrath depicts a similarly dark portrait of the ghetto, where meagre material resources can buy life and people are engaged in a cruel fight for survival against each other. Money can actually buy a decent death as well, as Ana Novac demonstrates:

In the ghetto there was a rush to suicide, a veritable epidemic, which was reserved for the rich, because the cyanide that people brought in—God knows how—commanded phenomenal prices, to die before being piled up in the railroad cars was the supreme luxury, but one to which only the privileged could aspire. (Novac 1997, 6)

Chava Rosenfarb presents a disparaging image of the “ghettocracy” of the Łódź ghetto as well. She shows how social differences are reproduced and deepened inside the ghetto and have a major impact on the chances of survival. Those who have a relative degree of power are locked in a continual struggle with the rest of ghetto's population in order to preserve their privileges and these internal economic and social divisions make it much easier for the occupiers to exploit, manipulate, and finally annihilate their prisoners. In a devastating fresco of life in the Warsaw ghetto, Bogdan Wojdowski also describes in painful detail how people cheat, steal, even kill for a piece of bread or a place to sleep, while a tiny minority enjoys relative comfort.

The road to mass murder

It all starts with words. First an artificial dividing line is drawn between social groups, “us” and “them,” and “proofs” are presented to justify this separation. Then the process of dehumanization of the “other” starts: Jews are initially presented as “different” or “strange,” and soon become the embodiment of all possible evil, described with an increasingly brutal rhetoric. They are depicted as the enemies of the nation and the worst of humanity, and that they have to be eliminated. The rapidly multiplying legal measures of discrimination and exclusion facilitate and “justify” their dispossession and murder. The racist

ideology penetrates the whole society; not only the representatives and beneficiaries of the dominant power group, but large sections of the population, including acquaintances, neighbors, former school-mates, and friends of the victims begin to consider them as dangerous enemies and participate in their marginalization and, eventually, annihilation.

Aldo Zargani tries to understand why so many people they knew turned their back on them once they became a target: “The ‘mild’ Italian racial laws, combined with the suffering of the war and the revival of age-old superstitions had created their desired effect: to most people, the Jews had become monsters. They thought that if the Jews disappeared, the war, the madness, the devastation, of which the Jews were the infernal authors, would come to an end” (Zargani, 136). The acts of violence multiply with the passive approval of the large silent majority, in an “Empire of Indifference” (43, 74).

Several authors underline the connection between profound social inequalities, injustice, and the easy propagation of racism. The frustration generated by poverty, marginalization, and forlornness, and the lack of education and democratic traditions are an optimal breeding ground for racist prejudices and violence. In Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and the Barber* the protagonist, a budding young fascist, his mother, and his stepfather participate in a Nazi rally where Hitler proclaims the “necessity of saving the nation from the Jews.” After listening to him, drunk with enthusiasm, they return home and start deciphering his message:

“He wants to exterminate the Jews,” I said.

“So what? What is the problem?” said Slavitzki.

“I was thinking about the rats,” I said. “The rats in our basement flat. Once Goethe Street and Schiller Street are cleaned of Jews, there will be flats for everybody, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes, bloody hell!” said Slavitzki.

And my mother: “Jesus, Maria, Joseph!”

“So then we can move into the Finkelstein’s flat,” I said. “And then no more rats!”

“Oh yes, bloody hell!” said Slavitzki.

“Jesus, Maria, Joseph!” said my mother. (Hilsenrath 2010, 66)

Henryk Grynberg also confirms that material gain was a key element that allowed many people to accept or actively participate in the persecution and

deportation of the Jews. It made available a large quantity of houses, businesses, animals, land, and other material possessions:

The people of Dobre weren't monsters, and some of them sincerely sympathized with the Jews. But at bottom they were pleased. Even those who sympathized. So many places had opened up in town. So many goods. They couldn't help taking a quiet pleasure in this. Even the best of them, who found it hard to admit this to themselves. The Germans had known this and had certainly counted on it. (Grynberg, 100–101)

In *Fateless*, Gyuri Köves notes that anti-Semitism comes in handy for glossing over sheer greed or dishonesty. The neighborhood baker loudly proclaims his dislike of Jews, but he is also known for cheating his clients. He claims that he is merely “acting in accordance with his convictions ...guided by the justice of an ideal” when he charges Jews more than other customers. Gyuri speculates whether he is using anti-Semitic rhetoric to disguise his dishonesty (Kertész 2006, 12).

Gerhard Durlacher records the changes which official anti-Semitism brings to everyday life both in his native Germany and Holland. As Nazi propaganda spreads, the large majority of the population becomes more hostile and accepts or actively participates in the exclusion and persecution of the Jews. The passive majority is overwhelmed by fear and gradually renounces partnerships, friendships, and solidarity with the persecuted. In 1937 Gerhard's family escapes to the Netherlands, but after a brief lull the hounding begins there as well, following the same logic. In 1942 the family is deported and only the young boy survives.

Ruth Klüger's memoir also underlines that the road from ordinary racism to mass murder can be extremely short. She had been growing up with ever harsher restrictions that kept limiting her life. Deportation seemed to her a “likely” culmination of this process:

In the few years that I had lived as a conscious person, my rights had been removed piece by piece, so that Auschwitz had a kind of logic to it. It was as if I had invaded a stranger's property and was told that my presence there was undesirable. As my presence had been undesirable in Aryan stores a couple of years earlier, according to the clearly marked signs in the windows. Now the wheel had turned one further cog, and the soil on which you stood wanted you to disappear. (Klüger, 95)

József Gáli shows how official racism and discrimination legitimate criminal impulses, sweeping away elemental decency. In one of his short stories, “Flott,” he describes the killing of their family dog. József’s father is a well-respected director of a sanatorium in a small provincial town. After the Nazi takeover the authorities send a caretaker, one of their unconditional supporters, to “supervise” the Jewish doctors who work in the hospital. The caretaker finds it unacceptable that a “stinky dog” (József’s father) owns a noble Hungarian dog. He orders the hospital worker who is in charge of the animal to kill it. The worker, who has been working with the family and caring for the dog for years, executes the order without hesitation. His son, one of József’s occasional playmates, assists him, and later tells József what happened as if this were the normal order of things. Some months later, when the Jewish inhabitants of the city are marched through the town on their way to the deportation trains, this same boy stands in the crowd watching the spectacle, cheering at the departure of the Jews.

In Grigory Kanovich’s *Shtetl Love Song*, profoundly rooted, latent antisemitism flares up with extreme violence when political conditions make it possible. Before the war the different ethnic and religious communities live peacefully side by side in Grigory’s native town, Jonava, in Lithuania. They rarely mix and often have settled views about the others, but they mutually tolerate each other and cooperate, occasionally creating friendships and partnerships. The slow-paced, traditional life of the shtetl is abruptly upset by the Soviet takeover, which is followed by the deportation of members of the Lithuanian elite and later by the entire group of proprietors and other “unreliable elements.” When the war breaks out and the invading German army is approaching, leaflets appear in the town, urging the Jewish population to leave immediately or be ready for “punishments for their sins.” Extremist Lithuanian nationalist groups use the abuses of Soviet power as a pretext to unleash murderous anti-Semitic campaigns. When the town’s Jewish population learns about the massacres committed by these armed groups and the advancing German forces, the majority flee in panic. Those who remain are massacred and the shtetl is destroyed.

Systemic exclusion, humiliations, and permanent fear become so overwhelming before and during the war years that for many children arrest and deportation almost comes as a relief. Francine Christophe recalls that she had grown so tired of being afraid that she felt almost relieved when she and her mother were finally arrested and imprisoned. Elie Wiesel also notes that once locked in the ghetto, people were in a way relieved: “We would no lon-

ger have to look at all those hostile faces, endure those hate-filled stares. No more fear. No more anguish” (Wiesel, 12). Exhausted by the years of persecution and never-ending anguish that have dominated most of his short life, ten-year-old Gerhard Durlacher wishes a rapid end when the bombing of Rotterdam occurs: “The days were covered in a veil of fear. At about one o’clock in the afternoon of 14 May the veil was rent by the sharp crack of anti-aircraft guns and the sound of heavy thunder. ... The only thing that flashed through my mind was: let it come, let it be over” (Durlacher 1991, 33).

Facing persecution: denial

To become outcast and persecuted from one day to the next was an enormous shock for the children. One of the recurrent motifs of their narratives is their astonishment and often indignation when they see that their parents and other adults are unable to face the situation and react adequately. Certainly no one could foresee the brutality and radicalism of the genocidal project—even though it was clearly articulated in Hitler’s speeches and the Nazi ideology. There were many grown-ups who assessed the situation with lucidity and tried to find proper responses to it. Some even shared their worries with their children, as in Aldo Zargani’s family, but this was a rare exception. Most often adults were in denial and sank into a fatalistic passivity. Children found it hard to understand why so many of them tried to ignore the new realities, why there was no self-organization, self-defense, let alone resistance against their community’s increasing oppression. They were stunned to discover how much grown-ups clung to their illusions; how they sought to comfort themselves (and others) claiming that this was just another wave of persecutions that hopefully would pass like many others. Even in the worst circumstances, in lethal danger, many adults were guided by convention, too much attached to their routine and their established world. Children might have a magical worldview that helps them to interpret realities in non-realistic ways and to escape it momentarily. But, at the same time, they often perceive the truth with precision and are not afraid to name it, even if it is terrifying.

The Jews were a human community, like their non-Jewish compatriots, with strengths and weaknesses, but since they were a targeted group, their shortcomings became magnified and could eventually prove to be fatal during the period of persecution. The adults’ reluctance to face unpleasant truths became disastrous when they refused to believe their own ears, to understand that what had happened to the other Jewish communities of Europe could soon

happen to them as well. Once he understood that Jews were being systematically wiped out, Jóska, in *Battlefields*, desperately wanted to escape from the Yellow Star house. He became increasingly frustrated with the inertia of the adults who kept hiding from realities and were too scared to act: “The grown-ups viewed the future more darkly because they played no chess or button-football, didn’t read, didn’t draw maps, and consequently had no occupation but fear” (Nyíri 1991, 409).

In Uri Orlev’s *The Island on Bird Street*, eleven-year-old Alex painfully concludes that once his mother was caught in a raid and deported, she is unlikely to come back. His father nevertheless keeps hoping that she will miraculously return. In *The Lead Soldiers*, Uri recalls a conversation he overheard in the Warsaw ghetto:

“They say,” said the neighbor from across the hall, whose husband and father had been killed in one night, “that they’ll murder us all.” The laundress’ husband began to laugh. “What are you talking about? Half a million people? Women and children too? It’s unthinkable. The whole world would rise in protest. There’s still such a thing as public opinion. There’s still England and America.” (Orlev 1979, 78)

Several authors highlight that most adults refused to believe what was taking place. Bogdan Wojdowski describes a scene when a fugitive from a concentration camp returns to the Warsaw ghetto to alert people of the lethal danger and urges them to resist. Nobody wants to listen to him (Wojdowski, 1997, 373–374). Elie Wiesel relates the case of Moishe the Beadle, a man from their community, who was deported to Poland, managed to escape, and hurried back to Sighet to warn people. He was ignored as well: “Most people thought that we would remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the Red Army. Afterward everything would be as before. The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion” (Wiesel, 12). Some months later, when the people of Sighet disembarked in Birkenau, Elie bitterly remarked: “The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions” (29).

Illusion was a powerful master in the ghettos of Budapest, Dés, Terezín, Warsaw, and other places, where the inmates kept hoping that they would be miraculously spared. As Norman Manea expresses it: “Their home was illusion! The illusion of home” (Manea 2003, 75). A significant part of the Jewish community felt that they were part of their nation, full-fledged citizens

of their countries, attached to it through numberless connections. For many assimilated, lay Jews it was particularly difficult to handle the fact that they were excluded and condemned to death due to their Jewishness. Reflecting about his father, Saul Friedländer sums up how they might have felt: “In any event, my father was hunted down for what he had refused to remain: a Jew. What he wanted to become, a man like others, had been taken away from him, leaving him no possible recourse. He was being refused the right to live and no longer even knew what to die for” (Friedländer, 56).

The illusion of being an organic part of their nation was particularly strong among Hungarian Jews, many of whom, particularly the city-dwellers, were rather assimilated and secular. From the early 1920s, with the introduction of a series of anti-Jewish laws, they suffered intensifying discrimination and privations; from the beginning of the war large groups were sent to forced labor camps or deported. They received news about the destruction of other Jewish communities in Europe, including neighboring countries, where many families had relatives and other ties; still they kept hoping that they would escape the same fate.

Judith Magyar Isaakson recounts that people in her hometown, Székesfehérvár, saw sealed cattle trains packed with Italian Jews, including women and children, who begged for some water and food on their way north. Most grown-ups, however, doubted the descriptions of the eyewitnesses. They kept saying “don’t believe everything you hear” (Isaakson, 36). György Konrád recalls that until their deportation their parents wanted to comfort themselves with the illusion that they would not suffer the same fate as their Polish, Transylvanian, and Slovakian relatives (Konrád, 53).

The same blindness is a returning motif in Éva Fahidi’s memoir, *The Soul of Things*. Éva had a large, affluent family, with branches in Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. After the Anschluss, her beloved Austrian nanny had to hurry back to Vienna, trying to save her family. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia, her Slovakian relatives were deported. Following the introduction of ever harsher anti-Jewish laws in Hungary, her family’s businesses had to be handed over to non-Jewish partners and young male family members were called up for forced labor service. Nevertheless, Éva kept attending (a Catholic) school, playing piano and tennis, and her parents were convinced that the war would soon be over and their “trip to work in Germany” would just be a short, unpleasant episode after which things would return to normal.

In *The Saint Imre March* György Moldova describes a scene where some men with short-term permission to visit their home during their forced labor service talk about their experiences. They recount the cruelty of the Hungarian soldiers who guarded them in Ukraine, but the experience does not seem to disturb their patriotic feelings: “I always felt Hungarian. When we came home and the train crossed the Hungarian border, I also stood up, we all hugged each other and we sang together the National Anthem and ‘You are nice, you are beautiful, Hungary.’ (A popular, patriotic post-Trianon song—YK)

‘But why?’ asks 12-year-old Miklós, the book’s protagonist, and he blushes, because he knows that as a child, he is not supposed to intervene in the adults’ conversation.

“‘What do you mean, why?’

‘You, uncle Béla, could not sing the same song as those soldiers. You were not equal. Those soldiers wanted to kill you.’

Stark had a forgiving smile.

‘You’ll understand Miklós, when you grow up a bit.’”

The adults try to convince the little boy that he misunderstands things; the fatherland cannot be identified with a couple of murderers. It will all end soon, they say, and everything will be arranged. “It’s not true, nothing will go back to normal,” replies the boy, but he is silenced and sent to bed (Moldova, 98-99).

András Mezei narrates a similar scene in a short story, “Angel for a penny” where the father of his protagonist, little Joske, is back in the ghetto for a short leave from the forced labor camp in Ukraine. He tells his family:

“Try to keep together. The Germans are correct. They don’t harm anybody. One just has to work, this is the most important. Volunteer to work.”

My mother turned towards him, drying her oily hands in her apron.

“Are we going to be deported?”

“You don’t have to be afraid of this word. If you happen to get to Germany, just tell them that your husband is already working there. Give them my name and tell them that you would like us to be together.” (Mezei 1984, 49)

Menyhért Lakatos’s writings also show how Roma who were facing the murderous machine of Nazism clung to the illusion of salvation until the very last moment. Like Jews, they were accustomed to centuries-long discrimination and persecution, but they were not prepared to grasp the implications of a project that aimed at their total annihilation. The short story *Csandra’s cart* recounts the history of a man in an unidentified camp near the Drava, who

keeps convincing himself that he has an extraordinarily good chance of surviving, even when he is taken to the river to be shot by an execution squad (Lakatos, 1981).

Lakatos's *The Color of Smoke* ends with a harrowing scene. As the war advances and Hungarian Nazis grab power, the Gypsy neighborhood is sealed off, without exit or entry. Some months later the whole community is lined up to be sent, according to the announcement of the village notary, to travel to work in Germany. Hungry, cold, confused, cut off from the world for several months, people are keen to believe the words of the authorities who have always been hostile towards them and cannot be trusted.

"To work,' coming from the mouth of the village clerk, seemed like some fairytale! Colorful, clean, bright images moved into our sooty, smoky mind-pictures of a coveted life. To work, to eat, to be free? Only the Almighty could create such beautiful music. Blessed be his holy name!" (457). The following day a small group of Hungarian soldiers escorts the people to the cattle cars. When the doors are locked from the outside, people still dream of the food they are going to receive once they have arrived at their workplaces:

"However much they give," the women sighed, "at least they won't chase us around. Who knows how long we would have been able to bear the beatings and the hunger. But our dear God has looked out for us, blessed be his merciful red blood!" ... The train's rattle brought everyone back to the world of happy, hopeful daydreams. Unknown landscapes swept past the barbed-wired wagon windows, and our smiling gazes got stuck in the showering sparks of the chugging engine. Now and then we emptied the piss-filled buckets, lest their fermenting stench interfere with our lofty imagination. (464)

A similar scene closes Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* which relates the last weeks of a group of well-to-do Jews who spend a summer holiday at the pleasant resort. Absorbed by their mundane preoccupations they refuse to take notice of what has been going on in the world, dismissing all warning signs. In the last scene armed policemen escort them to the train station. When they are pushed into "four filthy freight cars. ... Dr Pappenheim found time to make the following remark: 'If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go'" (147–148).

Nadine Heftler evokes their trip from Drancy to Auschwitz in the—exceptionally proper—passenger train, when some of their fellow deportees whisper to each other: "The Germans indeed have the air of being very decent" (Heftler,

20). Ruth Klüger describes as well how adults hang on to their illusions, even in front of the gas chambers. Soon after their arrival she met one of her former schoolmates, whose father worked at the Sonderkommando. The girl gave a cold, neutral description of the inevitable end that was awaiting prisoners in the camp, priming Ruth to be ready for the worst (Klüger 2001, 110–111).

Families in the eye of the storm

Between the two world wars the rapid advance of capitalism, urbanization, and secularization profoundly transformed Jewish life in Europe. Jews in the eastern part of the continent moreover were experiencing the impact of their belated legal emancipation. Closed communities became more open; new forms of interaction and integration with the rest of the society developed alongside new antagonisms. The most diverse political and cultural currents emerged, from various schools of Hassidism to progressive left-wing political movements like the Bund, with a wide range of publications, newspapers, social, political, and cultural organizations and activities. Many new possibilities to study, work, and move around the world opened up. The place and role Jews could play in their societies changed significantly. In the middle of this effervescence, large segments of the Jewish population of Europe abandoned their former, traditional landmarks and were in search of new forms of self-definitions, activities, and ways of life. This complex and fertile dynamic came to a halt with the Holocaust. Facing systematic persecution and threatened with extermination, Jewish communities and families were pushed back to primary self-definitions according to religion and/or community belonging.

These fundamental changes inevitably appeared inside the family as well. The traditional family roles were dissolving, the tight links of dependence and transmission became looser, and the distance between generations increased. The world of grandparents often appeared as a universe light-years away from that of the grand-children. It often represented the past's traditional system of values and way of life, while the generation of parents and children had multiple choices to define their Jewish identity and desired place in society.

Several books present serious tensions in the families before and during the war. There were major fault-lines between rich and poor and observant and non-practicing Jews that often led to violent quarrels or complete splits inside the families. The differences between generations became more discernible; parents and children often had radically different worldviews and, as a consequence, frequent clashes.

Magda Dénes's parents were secular, affluent, and assimilated Jews. At the beginning of the war, her father, a well-known, successful journalist and author, took the family's savings and left the country, leaving behind the mother with two young children. He settled in the US and never made any move to help them. Five-year-old Magda, her beloved 12-year-old brother, Ivan, and their mother abruptly had to give up their luxurious, spoilt life and move in with their traditional, humble maternal grandparents. The children had a genuine culture shock switching to a precarious life in a two-room apartment in a poor neighborhood, which also served as their grandfather's tailor workshop and a shelter for their divorced aunt and her 10-year-old son.

Anita Lobel was similarly shaken when she and her brother had to give up their comfortable, open, and cultured life in Krakow and move in with her father's profoundly religious and conservative family in the countryside. In János Nyíri's book as well, the grandparents maintained the traditional lifestyle of orthodox village Jews, while the parents had opted to live in the modern, more secular urban world of the capital. However, due to the historical events, their integration was blocked; society gradually marginalized and excluded them. They were stuck in a vacuum between tradition and emancipation, condemned to disappear.

The reaction of many families to the persecution and rapidly approaching lethal danger was to forget differences and divisions and strive to stay together to help and comfort one another. This was a given in the case of united, harmonious families, and the changed circumstances often gave an impetus to tighten ties even where there were conflicts before.

Sharp and critical-minded, Ruth Klüger had a conflictive relationship with her mother before the war. After their deportation she understood that they had to stay together and support each other by all means, pushing aside their disputes and differences. In Birkenau her mother "adopted" a young orphan girl: "Certainly my mother's care and concern saved her from a certain degree of psychic damage: the mental self-neglect that sets in when nobody gives a hoot whether you exist or not. ...with us she was part of a family, and thus valuable.... I suspect that perhaps all three of us can claim a share in having saved each other" (Klüger, 123).

Some months after their parents' deportation, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was arrested together with her sister: "Being together was such a tremendous comfort. We could talk about the 'old days', and sometimes manage to see the funny side of things in the monstrously overfilled cell in which we were confined. ... Without any doubt, we propped each other up." The sisters were separated dur-

ing the deportation, but they miraculously found each other again in Birkenau: “Being together transformed things for us. It gave us an added incentive to survive, for each other” (Lasker-Wallfisch, 69; 80). Krysha Chiger also underlines that being together with her family was the most important factor that helped her to endure the fourteen months spent in the sewers of Lvov: “Underground, at least, we had one another. I did not care so much how we suffered as long as we were together” (Chiger, 62).

Nadine Heftler was a young French girl who grew up in a comfortable household in Paris. She was not yet sixteen when she was deported to Auschwitz with her parents. They were a loving, united family and staying together was a token of survival for them: “Never be separated! Papa himself said: with us he would endure everything, but without us he would go insane” (Heftler, 22). After their arrival to Auschwitz, separated from her father, stripped of her clothes, shaved and tattooed, the young girl was in a state of shock: “It’s then that I appreciated that mother and I were not separated and I kept telling her how lucky we were for being able to remain together. Without her I’d have completely fallen apart, but feeling her close gave back my courage” (35). Later, when her mother was offered a possibility to work and have a better position in another part of the camp, Nadine begged her to refuse it: “I could not imagine living without her, not even one day. ... She was everything for me and we lived in the terrible fear that they would separate us” (54).

Sometime later, her mother fell ill and was taken to the hospital, where she died. Nadine wandered around the camp completely devastated: “I had the impression that two-thirds of my self was amputated. Until then, in fact, I did not exist, I did not have any personality, any strength of my own; I was only my mother’s daughter. When Mama was gone, I had the feeling of suddenly being born. From zero that I used to be, and this is not a strong word, in a couple of minutes I had to become an entity” (68–69). Nadine was completely aware that despite her pain, she could not afford mourning. She had to rapidly become independent and learn to fend for herself, otherwise she would perish. She accomplished a remarkably swift transformation and survived the camp, but carried the weight of her losses all her life.

Sixteen-year-old Gerhard Durlacher was deported to Auschwitz with his parents. In the chaos of arrival, after the separation of the women and the men, he caught a glimpse of his mother: “I see my mother and feel I’m alive again” (Durlacher 1991, 49). For some months Gerhard was able to stay together with his father until they were separated. One day someone notified him that his mother was selected for the next transport: “The days after the selection have

lost their meaning. My 'self' has passed away, my shadow has disappeared. In the week that follows, I mechanically do what I'm ordered, lug straw mattresses, scrub floors and stairs, drag barrels of excrement and try to get through to the transport blocks without being observed" (53).

Gerhard finally manages to cross over a field and find the group of women that is selected for transport:

Half-hidden behind the stable door, I see them standing there. ... My eyes devour the rows until they come to a halt by my mother's knitted greyish-blue, wool-blend jacket, the coat that I, as a nine-year-old boy, was allowed to choose on another planet. My gaze cries out to her and her heart hears me. The seconds that we see each other, with tears that may not be, last an eternity. (54)

Marceline Loridan-Ivens evokes the chance encounter with her beloved father that briefly re-established the order of the universe for her. She was fifteen years old when she was deported to Auschwitz with her father. They were separated at arrival, but one day they accidentally met on their way back from work:

we broke free from the ranks and ran toward one another. I fell into your arms, fell with all my heart—your prophecy wasn't true, you were alive. ... I was so happy to see you! Our senses came alive again, the sense of touch, the feel of a body we loved. That moment would cost us dearly, but for a few precious seconds, it interrupted the merciless script written for us all. An SS officer hit me, called me a whore, for the women weren't allowed to talk to the men. "She's my daughter!" you cried, still holding me tightly in your arms. Shloime and his darling little girl. We were both alive.... I was beaten so hard that I fainted, and when I came to, you were gone, but I found a tomato and an onion in my hand that you'd secretly slipped to me—your lunch, I'm sure—and I hid them right away. How was it possible? A tomato and an onion. Those two vegetables hidden beside me made everything possible once more, I was a child and you were my father again, my protector, the one who kept me fed. (Loridan-Ivens, 2017, 8–9)

Being torn away from their parents and family members was a major blow for the children and young teenagers. They suddenly lost their support and guidance, the pillars of their whole universe. Many authors underline that their parents' love and teachings accompanied them even after they were separated. As Uri Orlev puts it: "As long as my mother was alive, I thought or felt

that an invisible presence was watching over me. When she died I lost faith in it, but after a while she herself became the mysterious spirit hovering over my brother and me” (Orlev 2002, 33). Family and friendship bonds frequently became a powerful incentive to keep struggling for survival in order to find beloved people again.

Grandparents often play a special role in the histories of survivor children. The parents often belong to a generation of transition, which can mean new opportunities and tools to cope with the dramatically changed situation or, on the contrary, insecurity and doubts. Grandparents, solidly rooted in the old world with its millennial traditions and values, often represent a “golden age” when everything was still in its place. In some cases they are strange, frightening, and tough despots, in others they are “larger than human,” as if they were biblical patriarchs or matriarchs, who keep the tradition alive and hold the family—and the world—together.

In Elżbieta Ettinger’s *Kindergarten*, the protagonist, thirteen-year-old Elli, is locked in the ghetto with her family. Her grandfather, the Old Man, the embodiment of values, humanity, and rationality, keeps the family together. Unlike most adults, he is ready to face the new realities and react to them with lucidity. At the beginning of the war he tells Elli that her childhood is over. When he understands that the liquidation of the ghetto is imminent, he orders her to escape. She reluctantly obeys; but soon afterwards she can’t resist and returns to fetch him. She finds him dead; he has killed himself to make it easier for the others to save themselves. This is the moment when Elli understands that the old world order is gone forever.

Having a human bond in the camps and ghettos was so fundamental that when they were torn away from their families or friends, the children strove to establish new attachments. They created friendships and groups of mutual help on the basis of sympathy, a shared birthplace, or common experiences. Even if these links were temporary and frequently broken due to the regular selections and the permanent reshuffling of people, while they existed, they were crucially important factors of survival.

Conflicts

The role of family relationships became more complicated when the children came from a broken family and/or had serious conflicts with their parents. Among the hardships of war, persecution, and deportation, the tensions between growing children and their families, which under normal circum-

stances are part of the maturing process, could easily escalate into violent and occasionally dangerous clashes.

The Kid, the protagonist of Mária Ember's autobiographical novel, *Hairpin Bend*, cherished his father, a village doctor, who was the first to be deported in the family. The relationship with his mother, in contrast, is uneasy and deteriorates during their deportation, aggravating the tensions and difficulties they have to face. They are deported to the Strasshof camp, where they meet a few members of their extended family; some are helpful, but others are hostile and abusive. Despite their conflicts, mother and child stick together and help each other, but they are unable to genuinely share, give, and receive love. This makes their experience more painful and more difficult to heal afterwards. Sarah Kofman has a similarly idyllic (or idealized) relationship with her father and many violent clashes with her mother. She is eight years old when her father is taken away. The mother and her five children go into hiding in Paris and its outskirts. The conflicts between Sarah and her mother aggravate and sometimes threaten their very survival.

József Gáli is a lonely, sensitive young boy with caring but very busy parents who do not develop a strong intimate relationship with their children. Recalling his childhood before the war, József talks sincerely about this distance and, in some cases, about his irritation with family members. Differences, tensions, and resentments are part of family life, but in these extreme conditions they gain a tragic edge. When the family members perish, the survivors' feeling of loss is mingled with an intense feeling of guilt. After his cousin was sent to the gas chambers, József evokes with shame an occasion when he was so angry with him that he wished he would suffocate. Lying next to his dying father in the barrack in Auschwitz, he is convinced that he brought this suffering on him by cursing him in a heated dispute years before. He also recalls with pain how his mother tried to comfort him in the train car on their way to the camp and how he found her smell nauseating after so many days without washing in the June heat (Gáli, 88–101).

Beyond uneasy family constellations, differing worldviews, and ever-increasing everyday difficulties, the clashes between parents and children also express the children's disarray. They see the world turned upside down and their parents, who were supposed to be the pillars of their existence, failing to re-establish the order of things.

Francine Christophe is eight-and-a-half years old when she is arrested together with her mother. They are sent to various prisons and camps in France and later in Germany. They are always together and the mother does her best to

protect her. The little girl copes heroically, but as conditions worsen, she occasionally takes her despair out on her mother. One day during a never-ending roll call in Bergen-Belsen, half-dead with hunger, fear, fatigue, and cold, Francine unburdens her misery on her mother: "I can't take it any more, Mother. I'm cold, I'm hungry, I'm hurting. I feel my fingers and nose becoming detached from my body. I'm your daughter, do something. You're no longer my mother, you do nothing for me, I don't love you any more, do you hear, I'm cold" (Christophe, 96). All of a sudden, the mother faints. Their companions close their ranks to hold her standing up, but they can't help her before the roll call ends. The little girl becomes mad with anxiety and guilt. Finally they are allowed to disperse and the inmates carry the mother to the barrack and nurse her back to life. The little girl is shocked to discover that her mother also suffers.

There is a similar scene in Magda Dénes's book, where the child is able to step out of her self-centred universe and realize that the parent is also vulnerable. Magda is a precocious, sharp, rebellious child, a genuine kindred-spirit of *Battlefield's* Jóska. She is uncompromising, brutally honest, and fiercely independent, and is fiercely longing to love and to be loved. She has a complex relationship with her mother. They evidently love each other, but have many clashes. The mother finds it difficult to deal with her precocious and loud-mouthed daughter, who, in addition, reminds her of her unfaithful husband. She clearly favors her son, Ivan. Magda thinks that her mother can't really understand what is going on and is unable to cope. When, during the last days of the siege of Budapest, Ivan disappears, mother and daughter fall into utter despair. Their common pain intensifies their conflicts, instead of bringing them together. For days the mother goes around to the hospitals and morgues of the city in search of her son. One evening, consumed by anxiety, Magda is waiting for her in front of their house. The mother returns again empty-handed.

I lowered myself to the cold stone of the entrance and put my hands over my face to sob in privacy. My mother's voice towered above me. "No, little missy," she said, "it's not for you to cry. It is I who looked at the corpses. It is I who smelled death's stink. It is I who didn't find my son. It is not your grief. It is I who should weep tears of blood."

With every ornate sentence, I became more panicked. Had she gone crazy? Had Ivan given her, too, lessons in literature? Was the tongue of madness always Greek in style?

"Why don't we go upstairs," I said, standing up, as I gave her a little forward push.

Miraculously she became my mother again. “You can’t imagine the stink,” she said, weeping. “Or the quantity of them. There are hundreds. Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Russians, all mixed. The men in charge grab them by the hair and flip their necks back to show their faces. I cannot do it again. God forgive me, I cannot go again tomorrow.”

“Oh, anyu,” I said, “you shouldn’t. You mustn’t. There is no reason. He will be back. Ivan will be back very soon.” (Dénes, 192)

Suddenly, Magda can view the situation from her mother’s perspective. She is able to feel empathy for her and understand that now it’s her job to comfort her. She uses the tender familiar form of the word mother, “*anyu*,” that she rarely utters. She tells her lies, knowing that her mother has to hear them in order to pull herself together. After this episode their conflicts become less vehement.

When families fail

There are cases, however, when the internal splits are not healed and the family or the larger community fails badly to protect its members. The lack of solidarity within the Jewish community is a returning motif in several books. These descriptions underline how class and social differences often have a crucial impact on decision-making, overwriting not only assumed family or community solidarity but basic moral values as well. From their observers’ position, forced to discover the world in a cruel new light, children who look at the adult world for help and guidance often discover with a shock that what seemed to be a solid, value-based universe has serious failings and contradictions. Adults, including their family members, often act in an irrational, ambiguous, and sometimes utterly abject manner.

Madeleine Kahn is a happy little girl growing up in a loving family in a comfortable household in Paris. She is six years old in 1939 when she is sent to spend the summer holiday with her maternal grandmother in Romania. An aunt accompanies her, because her mother is expecting a baby and cannot go with her as usual. The war breaks out, the borders are closed, and Madeleine cannot travel back home. She remains in the country which soon falls under fascist rule. She is deported to a concentration camp in Transnistria, suffers hunger and terror, and witnesses massacres, like the rest of Bukovina’s Jews. Even though her parents could not have foreseen this turn of events, Madeleine feels that they abandoned her; they cannot even be considered parents any longer, because they failed to shield her: “We stopped talking about them,

they became hazy images who played their role of absent figures to the point of ceasing to exist, parents who had no time to protect me and safeguard me against misfortune” (Kahn, 37).

Several other hidden children who were separated from their parents felt that they had been abandoned. Alona Frankel also felt betrayed: “Unwanted. After all, her mother and father wanted her to stay in the village, to be like a Christian girl. A mother and father she no longer knew, whose language she no longer understood” (Frankel, 62). Later, when the family was reunited, they struggled together with determination and managed to survive. Nevertheless the pain of the split was never effaced and they were never able to recreate genuine closeness.

Raymond Federman, who was from a poor, left-leaning, artistic French family, suffered from the behavior of his well-to-do relatives even before the war. When the war started, shortages and discrimination made Raymond’s family’s situation precarious. Their relatives, on the other hand, were doing all right but were not particularly inclined to help. Before the large-scale police raid of 1942, when most Paris Jews were rounded up, the affluent family members packed up their valuables and reserves and left the capital, without even warning Raymond’s family, let alone giving them a hand. Raymond’s parents and siblings and those on the poor side of the large family were all deported and killed. When he returned to Paris after the Liberation, he found their flat completely looted. His wealthy aunt and her family had returned safely from their refuge in the south of the country and lived on the floor below; their valuables were intact and they continued to live a comfortable life, while Raymond was starving. Later on he learned that his loving family members even collected the reparations the state began paying to the relatives of the deported and assassinated victims; including the payments for him, who had the cheek to survive (Federman, 2001).

Raymond also recounts that when Sarah, his nine-year-old cousin, escaped from the clutches of the “well-meaning” neighbor who was about to take her to the police station, she rushed to one of their rich aunts’ flat. She arrived just as the old lady entered into an overloaded taxi. She kindly waved goodbye to the little girl who was running to catch her (Federman, 1990, 65). After the war this aunt and other surviving family members, who failed to help during the war, were “*deeply in sorrow*” for their lost family members.

Trust is a basic mechanism that ties together a growing child and his or her environment. Children ideally grow up feeling that they can rely on their parents, family members, friends, and community. This spontaneous trust

in the adult world is repeatedly shaken by war. The loss of this “primordial trust” in adults and in the world they have built is one of the gravest losses children can suffer during a period of persecution. It often accompanies them throughout their adult life. As Anita Lobel puts it in the prologue of her book, she becomes suspicious when something is going well in life (Lobel, xiii). Anita’s trust in the grown-ups’ world rapidly eroded during the war. After years of hiding and deportation, she came to the conclusion that no one could be genuinely trusted. During the death march from Płaszów to Auschwitz, her aunt and cousin, whom she adored before the war, urged her to escape with them. She refused the proposal. They were imprisoned in Płaszów together and though the two women occasionally helped her, she found their behavior dubious: “If I just kept walking straight ahead, didn’t say anything, didn’t look around, I would be safe. I didn’t want anything to do with my aunt and cousin” (Lobel, 121).

Gyuri Köves, Imre Kertész’s protagonist in *Fateless*, comes from a broken family; his parents are divorced and his extended family is divided and conflict-ridden. Gyuri feels alienated from his relatives before the war; he is deported alone and after his return is not welcomed with open arms. In the camps the lack of the protective layer of a family or a group of friends makes him more vulnerable and alienated than many others. When his fellow inmates selflessly help him, he finds it difficult to believe that such selfless solidarity exists. As his situation deteriorates, his alienation becomes cosmic and, as we learn later, irreparable.

Arnošt Lustig asserts that in the extremely hard circumstances of the camp, even family ties can fracture and people begin to consider their relatives as a burden, rather than a buttress. One of his protagonists ponders the dramatic breach of trust and family solidarity in captivity:

He thought of that father and his two sons. They stayed together for three weeks. And then when the first son started to get so horribly skinny, the father told him suddenly that they might not be staying together. He felt it in his bones that because the Germans were going to be making a third selection, the three of them should separate. At least for a few days, until the first son got through it. “You want me to go to the ovens?” the son asked. And the father in reply asked, “Do you want us all to go there?” So they remained alone. Many people were separated by fear. People were afraid to be together. Then they had nothing more to lean on. The first and the last—children, mother, father could change from being a support into a dead weight. (Lustig, 465)

The evolution of the relationship between Elie Wiesel and his father painfully underpins this thought. Young Elie adores and respects his father. Separated from other family members, they are able to stay together in Auschwitz. At the beginning, the father takes the decisions and does his best to protect his fifteen-year-old son. As the father's state deteriorates, the roles slowly change; Elie instructs him to march, to appear strong and young to escape the selections. During the evacuation of Auschwitz the boy feels ready to die, but the thought that his father would remain alone makes him continue. Later, after a short rest in a frozen hanger, his father saves him from death, by waking him up and making him walk again. They meet their village rabbi, Rabbi Eliahu, who is looking for his son. They have been together, protecting and encouraging each other from camp to camp, until the son disappeared during the death march. Suddenly it dawns on Elie that Rabbi Eliahou's son left deliberately. He prays to God to give him strength never to do what the young man did.

Elie and his father survive the infernal train ride and arrive together at Buchenwald, but in a moment of chaos, they lose each other. Completely exhausted, Elie collapses on his cot and falls asleep. Next morning he starts to look for his father feverishly: "Yet at the same time a thought crept into my mind: If only I didn't find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength to fight for my own survival, to take care only of myself... Instantly, I felt ashamed, ashamed of myself forever." Elie eventually finds his father. He continues to help him, but his father is rapidly fading and deep in his heart Elie admits that his efforts are half-hearted; he fails, like Rabbi Eliahou's son. In the final moment, an SS officer hits his father and Elie is too frightened to help him. Soon afterwards his father dies. Elie's pain is mixed with a feeling of liberation. Liberated from every human bond, he becomes completely empty and indifferent. He sinks into a state of vegetation, driven by the sole desire to eat. Weeks later, after liberation, he is recovering in a hospital: "One day when I was able to get up, I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me" (Wiesel, 86–91, 106; 115).

Children becoming parents

Under normal circumstances parents take care of their children and provide for their development, accompanying them in their process of self-discovery and gaining autonomy. In the conditions of war and persecution, this process

is often disturbed. When they are forced to hide, the children have to remain “small and invisible” to avoid awakening interest or suspicion. Such situations might create total dependence, like in Louis Begley’s novel, whose little Maciek is completely at the mercy of the adult world, principally his aunt, Tania. She takes every decision and controls the boy’s every move with draconian vigor. Maciek occasionally ventures into the children’s world on the playground or in the fields and has some aborted outbursts of revolt, but his attempts are doomed to fail. In a way his independent development is halted. After the war, in exile, he builds a completely new life, “skipping” childhood and adolescence.

In most cases, however, children who grow up during genocide are forced to mature very rapidly. They are extremely vulnerable; they have to discover the world on their own and learn to fend for themselves. Often they have to assume responsibilities that do not correspond to their age and they must tackle fundamental existential questions even adults are often not able to cope with. They are abruptly pushed into instant adulthood, without the experience and problem-handling tools adults have accumulated over their lives.

Their development is also accelerated because under the special circumstances of war and persecution the conventional, tightly controlled social and familial structures of the pre-war period loosen up. The adults are too busy trying to make ends meet, to find escape routes, or sink into apathy and the children frequently enjoy more freedom than before. Francine Christophe describes the children’s life in the Drancy camp as a sort of bizarre holiday free of school, tasks, and close adult control. Chava Rosenfarb also evokes the “feeling of maturity which smelled like freedom” many children and young adolescents felt in the ghetto, often away from adult supervision, assuming responsibilities and organizing their lives independently (Rosenfarb, II. 33; 41).

In several cases the children had to assume the role of their parents, who were too weakened or too shocked by the sudden collapse of their world, and had to carry the burden of the everyday fight for survival. In Nyíri’s *Battlefields*, when eleven-year-old Jóska realizes that they will perish if they do not go into hiding, he starts to take decisions on behalf of the family. Miriam Akavia’s young protagonists also act independently, as if they suddenly became adults. “Poor parents, thought Ania, it must be very difficult for them not to be able to protect us,” ponders the author’s alterego (Akavia, 131). One of Ilona Karmel’s protagonists also depicts the complete retreat of her once strong and energetic father from decision-making, delegating the responsibility to cope to the mother and the child. In Magda Dénes’s family as well it is often the

children who take the crucial decisions that save the family members during the period of hiding. Janina Bauman describes how, at the age of sixteen, with her father missing, she becomes the head of the family who manages daily life and finds solutions to key problems. Edith Bruck recalls that in the train that took them to Auschwitz, “Papa and mama suddenly became old at the age of 48. And we, their children, suddenly became the parents of our parents” (Bruck 2021, 46).

Stolen childhood

Persecution and war put an abrupt end to childhood for the persecuted children. The happy insouciance that is supposed to characterize these early years was taken from them; they lost their primordial trust in adults and the order of things and they had to face problems far beyond their reach. In this forced march to maturity, they gained insights and understanding that far surpassed their age, while other dimensions of their self could not develop properly.

Several authors evoke a key event that became the symbol of their rudely terminated childhood. At the beginning of the summer of 1940 Judith Magyar Isaakson was still able to perform the role of Ilona Zrínyi, a key heroine of Hungarian history at the end-of-year school performance. During that summer she noticed, with a mixture of thrill and confusion, that boys had started to get interested in her. She had no time to sort out her feelings; in the autumn a soldier entered the synagogue, interrupting the celebration of Yom Kippur, and read out the names of men called for forced labor service, including Judith’s family members. In a few months the whole family was deported (Isaakson, 29–34).

Zdena Berger grew up in a comfortable household in Prague. She was fourteen when the war broke out. In *Tell Me Another Morning*, a novel based on her experiences in Terezín, Auschwitz, a Hamburg labor camp, and Bergen-Belsen, she recounts the beginning of the war. In the middle of the night, her father wakes up Tania, the author’s alter-ego, and tells her to dress quickly, because the family is leaving the capital for the small village where he was born. As they travel through the dark city and countryside in silence, occasionally meeting other cars with covered lights, Tania is beset by dark premonitions: “I was in my bed before. Now I am sitting here. Everything was nice before. ... Everything will be different now. I feel I would like to stop it before it happens” (Berger, 9). She eventually falls asleep and when they arrive at the village, late at night, she realizes that she has had her first period.

Edith Bruck was thirteen years old when the village Jews were herded together in the synagogue before their deportation: “We stayed all night in the synagogue. I looked around, and I became aware of the world I was living in, and I saw— but no longer as a child—what was happening” (Bruck, 2001, 21). She returns to this crucial event decades later in *Lost Bread*. The narration starts in a fairy-tale style in the third person depicting a happy childhood, full of discoveries and little pleasures, despite the great poverty in which the family lives. On the morning when they are taken away, the story switches to the first person, as if to show that the narrator’s real life begins with the deportation: “Suddenly, I became an adult...” (Bruck, 2021, 35–38).

Andrew Kennedy was thirteen when he was interned in the Debrecen ghetto: “The children played or tried to play perfunctorily, but I no longer regarded myself as a child and had no inclination to join any group” (Kennedy, 74). Before taking the train to Budapest with a special permit bought with his family’s last reserves, fourteen-year-old György Konrád looked back at the village where he grew up: “Something has finished. Today I would say it was the end of childhood” (Konrád, 57). Recalling his departure he states again: “One becomes adult the moment when he faces his own death; I am an adult since the age of 11” (78). The abrupt termination of his childhood had a significant impact on the author’s later life. “In the place of childhood a void remained; an untold story that may be impossible to tell” (149).

When her parents went to work, seven-year-old Krysha Chiger was left alone with her little brother in a hideout in the Łódź ghetto. These were the most dreadful times for her: “It was frightening and bewildering, never knowing if my parents would return. I was like a parent and a sister to my baby brother, but this was too big a job for such a small girl. In this way, my childhood was taken from me. The Germans, they did not take me, but they took a part of me” (Chiger, 63). In Imre Kertész’s *Fateless*, the day his father leaves for forced labor service, a distant uncle tells fifteen-year-old Gyuri Köves that his “happy, care-free years of childhood” are over. Gyuri nods, but he is slightly startled by this statement. His childhood has been far from happy or carefree and he does not consider himself a child any longer (Kertész, 2006, 19–20).

Aldo Zargani recalls the event that marked the end of his childhood at the age of eight. One day his father took him and his brother for a stroll in a park. While the children played, the father sat on a bench reading his newspaper. All of a sudden, he lost his temper and threw the paper away in disgust. Aldo was perplexed. He never saw his father behaving like that. When he asked what happened, his father explained that the paper printed an article demeaning

Jews: “That day in the park something irreversible happened in me. The words ‘Jewish hatred,’ my father’s rushed, but effective explanation, and the anger which I saw in him, effectively swept away the serenity of childhood, as far as serenity and childhood exist” (Zargani, 115).

“And then July came. And on the 16th of that month, my childhood ended,” writes Raymond Federman, describing the moment when, at the age of twelve, his mother pushed him into the cupboard as soldiers came to arrest the family (Federman 2010, 166).

During the long frightening hours I spent in the darkness, not daring to open the door, slowly sinking into oblivion, I felt that my childhood was being erased. That my childhood was tumbling into...

Federman, watch out. Control your emotions and the tone of your sentences or you are going to end up writing decadent lyricism. And you are not going to start making metaphors, you who abhor metaphors.

I’m trying, I’m trying to control myself, but it’s not easy when you tell something traumatic. Something which has remained in you all your life like a hole in your stomach. Or rather a hole in your memory, since my childhood was in the process of disappearing. (10–11)

Michał Głowiński describes the event which marked the loss of his childhood innocence. In the Warsaw ghetto, where for a certain period his family lived in relatively comfortable conditions, his parents promised him a piece of cake if he were patient during a long illness. When he recovered, his mother solemnly took him to the pastry shop, where they bought the much desired piece, had it nicely wrapped, and then started their festive walk home. Suddenly, a ragged street kid grabbed the parcel from Michał’s hands, ran away a couple of meters, and devoured the cake:

The event was a shock for me, in a sense my world collapsed. I wasn’t yet seven years old and already I had come to see that, along with everybody else, I was living in a terrifying world. ... I’d grasped that nothing would any longer happen as I wanted to, that I was vulnerable to aggression, and that what I wanted for my own and what mattered to me would be taken away. (Głowiński, 19)

A year later, after they had managed to escape from the ghetto and were living in hiding on the other side, Michał learned much more: “I was already eight years old and aware of my situation. Fear is an excellent teacher. It rapidly

engenders a consciousness of one's position and fate, cures a child of fantasies and delusions and precludes the development of childhood interests" (60).

Their dramatic experiences during the war years provide the children with segments of a mature knowledge about the world; knowledge they assimilate as if it were obvious, even though it is fairly difficult to handle. Hanna Krall's five-year-old alter-ego in *The Subtenant* impresses the people who give her shelter with her maturity: "You know, my mother said that the most shocking thing was your awareness. You were five years old and apparently you understood everything" (Krall, 18). As Madeleine Kahn puts it: "I had this imminent knowledge, this exemplary truth like the children who know everything without knowing anything, because the child is always closer to the truth" (Kahn, 48).

Madeleine's accelerated maturation process was triggered by her experiences of being abandoned. Separated from her family in France and stuck in a village in Bukovina, the day when the village's Jews are arrested, Madeleine's aunt asks the family's servant to hide the eight-year-old girl. The young woman shelters her for the night, but the next morning she takes her to the woods and dumps her there. Patrolling German soldiers find her and take her back to her grandmother's house. Madeleine's grandmother and aunt have just been released after a police raid, but instead of rejoicing at the miraculous return of the little girl, they receive her with a dull numbness. They are in a state of shock; the village men, including the aunt's husband, were all massacred. "This lack of tenderness was the second rupture of my life; it made me fragile, easy to break" (47). Madeleine is not yet able to see the wider context of which her personal drama is a tiny segment. All she feels is that she is not important any longer. Her separation from her parents already felt like abandonment; now this second trauma further shatters her trust in the adult world.

Soon afterwards, Madeleine, her aunt, and her grandmother are deported to a camp in Transnistria. After two years spent in subhuman conditions, thanks to her French passport and the insistence of her aunt, she is able to leave and is taken to the French consulate in Galatz. She is filthy, emaciated, dressed in rags, and traumatized. When the consulate employees discover that on top of it she is also full of lice, they strip her, cut her hair, and force her into a tub full of hot oily water. "The melodious and sensitive child I have been ceased to exist. From this moment I left childhood and stopped thinking about it" (74).

Later, when she is hidden in a catholic convent, “a world where dreams are killed,” Madeleine’s transformation into a bitter, precocious adult is completed: “Confronted with the implacable toughness of people, we fell silent, we learnt to endure everything; too mature for our age we knew that life was made of unhappiness; we only managed to steal some fleeting instances of joy. The hatred accumulated by the oppressed and the anxiety remained with us, draining our life” (155).

Gerhard Durlacher describes his peculiar state of mind that developed during the war: a mixture of a child’s perspective and that of an ageless old person exiled from childhood. He is ten years old when his family flees from Germany to Holland and during a few months of relative calm he is able to go to school: “For a short time I taste youth” (Durlacher 1991, 38). Some months later they are deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He notes later: “Everything is clearer now than it was two months ago, when, in semi-darkness, I landed in this hell. Now, en route to the unknown, I feel a hundred years older” (57).

Joseph Bialot also describes how the experience of the camp transformed his personality: “For seeing what no human ever should see, at an age when one ought to be dominated by dreaming, mentally broken into pieces, effectively destroyed, not finding any longer the traces of my family upbringing” ... “I was educated in Auschwitz, mother” (Bialot 2002, 59; 106). The protagonist of Edith Bruck’s novel, *How Many Stars*, notes bitterly: “They don’t know or they don’t want to know that during one year in the camp one becomes an old person forever and learns everything” (Bruck 2018, 90).

Jona Oberski was six years old when his father died in Bergen-Belsen. The little boy insisted on being present at his death.

The next day the big children let me go with them because my father died and I had been there. I wasn’t a baby anymore. But I had to promise not to snitch, and they said there’d be some other test for me to go through. They didn’t know yet what. We went across a field. We met the little children and they asked me if I wanted to play with them. But I said I was in a hurry, and besides I wasn’t a baby anymore, and didn’t they know my father was dead? (Oberski, 1983, 73).

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch writes that at liberation, “I was nineteen years old and felt like ninety” (Lasker-Wallfisch, 96). Francine Christophe was six years old when the war broke out and twelve when she was liberated from the camp. She calls herself “*an old child*” (Christophe, 153). Norman Manea was five years old when he was deported to Transnistria. On their return, “in April 1945 I was

an old man of nine” (Manea, 2003, 86). In October 1939, Mary Berg opened her diary with these words: “Today I am fifteen years old. I feel very old and lonely” (Berg, 1). “I’m just over fourteen, but I feel I’m older than my great-grandfather,” says Tomáš Radil to one of his companions in the camp. When, after his return home, he is invited to play soccer with some of his previous playmates, he replies: “I’m too old to play football!’ They were laughing, as if I told a funny joke” (Radil, 527).

Livia Bitton-Jackson evokes a scene after the liberation of the camp. The American soldiers take the citizens of Seeshaupt to see what had been committed behind the barbed wires right next to their homes. Livia has a short chat with a middle-aged woman, who is impressed by her good German. The woman thinks she is talking to a person in her early sixties. When she learns that the girl is fourteen, she is so shocked that she runs away from her. Livia resumes: “So this is liberation. It’s come. I’m fourteen years old, and I have lived a thousand years” (Bitton-Jackson, 199).

Identity

The question of identity is one of the key motifs in the works of child Holocaust survivors. They encounter violent racism and systematic persecution for the first time in their life and keep wondering why this is happening. Unlike their parents and other adults, who have already had similar experiences, they react to the outbursts of hatred and acts of violence with astonishment and often indignation. They keep asking: Why? Why did the world turn against us? What makes us different from the others? So different that the others want to kill us? As András Mezei’s protagonist sighs: “If only they told us what we should do so they don’t have to hate us ... if only they told us...” (Mezei 1984, 152).

Hugo, the eleven-year-old protagonist of Aharon Appelfeld’s *Blooms of Darkness*, is hiding in the backroom of a Ukrainian prostitute in a brothel. During the long hours that he spends alone, he keeps speculating about why Jews have to run for their life: What harm did the Jews do that everyone is persecuting them? Why do they have to take shelter in hiding places? ... What do we have in us that makes us enemies of humanity? Several times I’ve heard people here saying, “The Jews are a danger to the world, and they have to be destroyed” (Appelfeld, 2010, 207).

Due to intensifying anti-Semitism and official restrictions, György Moldova’s twelve-year-old protagonist, Miklós, becomes increasingly isolated in his school. One afternoon he goes home in a gloomy mood:

During his long walk he was wondering why among so many kids it was he who turned out to be a Jew. He felt he was exactly like the others, if he could, he would be happily marching with them and sing the “Fujiyama,” get over-excited about the Germans’ steel-blue bombers that were able to turn on their side and emit bird-like sounds, what is more, he admitted, he would even mock the Jews, if he were not one of them. (Moldova, 14)

Anita Lobel similarly does not comprehend what makes Jews so detestable that they have to run for their life. Nor does she understand what makes her Jewish. She has ambiguous feelings about it, both due to her unconditional love of her Catholic nanny, Niania, and mixed experiences with her fellow-Jews, including some of her family members. One afternoon, watching the Hitler Youth marching on the streets of the city, she remarks: “They were on the right side of things. I wished I could be on the right side of things. Away from Jews” (Lobel, 54–58; 67–71).

Janina Bauman also starts to wonder about her identity rather early:

I asked my father what “Jew” meant when I was five years old. I don’t remember exactly what he answered, but I believe it was very hard for him to explain this, not only to his young child, but also to himself. What I clearly remember, though, is a kind of litany: “I am a Jew, you see mama is a Jewess, you are yourself and your little sister; uncle Julian is a Jew.” ... “And auntie Maria is a Jewess” ... “No,” he said, slightly embarrassed, “Auntie Maria is not, she is a Christian.” (Bauman 1986, 2).

Auntie Maria was their nanny who became a family member.

Janina keeps looking for answers. The poor Jews in their shabby clothes speaking an incomprehensible language are Jews, like those incredibly rich families, whose world she could not even peer into. Some of her family members have black hair with dark eyes and high-bridged noses; others are blond, with green or blue eyes and straight noses. Some go to synagogue, others, like Janina’s family, do not. They have a Christmas tree in December and they also have gorgeous meals on Jewish holidays at their grandparents. Jewishness obviously has nothing to do with being nice or nasty, poor or rich. What then?

I knew it was better not to be a Jew. There were posters on the walls in Warsaw saying, “Don’t buy in Jewish shops.” Once in the street I heard a stranger calling another stranger “you filthy Jew.” When I told my mother about it, she

said some people did not like Jews at all. They were anti-Semites, she said. I personally did not know any of them, everybody liked me, I was sure. To be quite certain, I asked our Christian maid whether she did or not. She said yes, of course, she liked me very much. “Do you like Jews?” I insisted. She seemed taken aback. “No, not really.” “Why not?” “Jews are evil,” she said, “they murdered our Lord Jesus.” (4)

Francine Christophe also wonders what makes her Jewish. When she is imprisoned in the camp, she has a conversation with a deeply religious friend. The other little girl describes with enthusiasm the bright future expecting them in Jerusalem. Francine is not convinced. She interrupts her: “But you’re Jewish. I’ve only been Jewish since Hitler.” (Christophe, 108). In Imre Kertész’s *Fateless*, Gyuri Köves’s young neighbors have a heated discussion about being Jewish. None of them is observant; none have ever felt the need to define their Jewish identity. They wonder whether Jewishness is a social construction or an inherent feature of their existence. Like Francine, Gyuri argues that it’s a definition created by external circumstances, without a proper inner meaning, but some youngsters find this too hurtful and the exchange ends with tears and embarrassment (Kertész, 2006, 34–39).

For Gyuri Köves, Jewishness remains an externally determined burden, but for *Battlefields*’ Jóska, it gradually becomes part of his identity. At the beginning Jewishness mostly means unpleasant duties and difficulties in his everyday life, but as events unfold he keeps discovering other dimensions as well. He rejects his grandfather’s obsolete religiousness and he finds the lessons in the Jewish school boring and senseless, but through his attachment to people, like his adored uncle Erik or his teacher Mr Dévai, being Jewish progressively becomes an internal commitment for him. When he visits the wife of his beloved teacher who was sent to a forced labor camp and tells her that he frequents a non-Jewish school, he adds: “Mr Devai knows I’m Jewish anyway” (Nyíri, 239).

During the apocalyptic days after the Nazi takeover, Jóska has an illuminating discussion with his father. To be a Jew doesn’t mean that you have to suffer for God, explains his father. It’s not slavery; on the contrary, it is freedom, a genuine alliance with God. You adore him, because he liberated you. The remaining nine commandments are there to enjoy and defend your freedom, in a constant struggle with God and with people. His father’s interpretation is like a revelation for Jóska; he can entirely identify with it. It is in the course of this conversation that he calls him “my father” for the first time in the book. (305–311)

Hiding identities

The questions of identity became even more complex and painful for children who had to hide under fake identities. Whatever their attitude towards their Jewishness had been earlier, they now had to conceal it in order to survive.

In Bogdan Wojdowski's *Bread for the Departed*, David, the young protagonist, keeps wondering about what it means to be Jewish. He often feels it is just a burden, but he can't escape from it or change it, even though he doesn't really understand what it is. He is very attached to his deeply religious grandfather, but he obviously can't discuss these questions with him. On his deathbed, grandfather blesses him and urges him to change his identity and escape from the ghetto:

Run away David. Run as far away from here as you can. ... No one will be left alive here. David, forget that you are a Jew. In order to live you have to forget. ...Live like a mad dog and run through the fields as far away from people as possible, but live. Don't be afraid of anyone, of anything. He who is afraid will be lost. ...When people say nasty things about the Jews, be silent. When they make fun of the Jews, be silent. Close your eyes and ears to everything. Forget who you are, who your father and mother are. Forget who your forebears were. Don't let your eyelid twitch when you see your own people driven to the pit. Turn away from that place and walk on. David, do you hear me? You have to have a stone instead of a heart. Do you hear me? Drive us all out of your memory. And live, amen. (Wojdowski, 1997, 230–233)

Dawid eventually follows his grandfather's advice, runs away, and lives under assumed identities until the end of the war, like Bogdan Wojdowski, the book's author. The problem of his identity, an identity he embraced and refused at the same time, continued tormenting the writer until his suicide in 1994.

To give up one's identity in order to survive is an extraordinary effort, particularly when it's expected from young children. The little Jewish girl, who is hiding in the flat of a Warsaw family in Hanna Krall's book, at first does not even have a name. She is called "Our Subtenant," or "Our Former," until she is randomly given the name Marta. On the rare occasions when the family dares to take her out for walks, she has to hide her eyes: "We pulled your scarf deep over your forehead and pulled up your collar but that was not enough. Your eyes were still there, and the eyes were the worst." The mother suggests she pretend playing hopscotch; pushing a stone with her foot, she would not

lift her head. Whenever she tries to look up, the mother reacts “with relentless vigilance: ‘Keep your eyes down!’” (Krall, 58; 18–19).

Henryk Grynberg and his mother live under false identities in a small village in the Polish countryside. They have to be permanently on guard to avoid making a wrong move that would reveal who they are: “Sitting at the same table with people whose bread we ate and who told us everything about themselves, we paid them back by pretending and telling the stories Mother had invented. ... In the end I hardly distinguished between invention and truth” (Grynberg, 44). Henryk plays the game well, but he also has to be careful to conceal his glance:

At first at Sliwa’s they tried to keep me together with their children, so that I could play and run about in the yard with them. It was thought to be even safer this way. But I had forgotten how to play with children and had no desire to run about, so the disappointed children began to poke me in the ribs and sometimes to smack me harder. I took it all in silence, thinking that it was to be like that, until one day a farmhand dropped in at Sliwa’s and started to stare at me ... “Whose is he?” he asked. “He can’t be yours?” [...] “...He looks at one so strangely... He must be a Jewish child.” (13–14)

Alona Frankel also recalls how dangerous a glance could become when in hiding: “You didn’t need such subtle discerning skills to recognize a Jew like my father and me. It was enough to look into our eyes” (Frankel, 165). Before his escape from Amsterdam with false identity papers, Jacov Lind spends a long time in front of a mirror, trying to change his facial expression: “My nose is straight, as straight as Hitler’s, but there was something wrong with my eyes. Not the sight, but the expression. The Germans thought the Jew is attached to his nose—the Jew was in the eyes. The kind of Jew I could recognize without a yellow patch. The Jew was a certain soft, reflective look. A look of shame and humiliation, a wise look, a pensive one” (Lind, 102).

The obligation to give up their name, deny their origins, and suppress their memories creates a split in the hiding children’s personality that will take a long time—if ever—to heal. Saul Friedländer recounts how the various changes of identity destabilized his sense of himself. Born in Prague to assimilated parents, he was originally Pavel or Pavliček. He became Paul when the family fled to France, and Paul-Henry when he was baptized and taken to a Catholic boarding school. After the war, when he arrived in Palestine, he turned into Shaul and later Saul, as a compromise between Paul

and Saul: “In short, it is impossible to know which name I am, and that in the final analysis seems to me a sufficient expression of a real and profound confusion” (Friedländer, 94).

Elisabeth Gille’s *Shadows of a Childhood* shows powerfully the profound impact of shedding an identity for the sake of survival. Elisabeth Gille was five when her mother was deported. Her father, before he too was arrested, managed to place her and her twelve-year-old sister in a Catholic convent. The girls survived two years of hiding, but their parents and other relatives were murdered. *Shadows* tells the story of five-year-old Léa Levy, who is brought to a Catholic convent in the middle of one night by a young member of the resistance movement. The nuns try to take off her clothes and put her to bed, but she vehemently resists, clutching her belongings. The sisters are about to despair, when one of the little girls in the dormitory begins to play with the shadows on the wall. The improvised spectacle and the girl’s friendliness captivate Léa, who relaxes and immediately falls asleep. She is quickly changed into convent-wear; the Mother Superior takes her clothes, shoes, and doll and burns them in the oven. (Gille, 3–13)

Léa is a gifted and resourceful but very difficult child, who keeps getting into trouble and can only manage thanks to her exclusive friendship with Benedicte, the girl who charmed her the first night. After liberation she learns what happened to the deported people, including her parents. The news changes her whole personality and sets off her descent towards her tragic end that no friendship, supportive adoptive family, or new life perspectives can prevent. “This child really knew nothing at all about herself, either about her origins or her identity. She was no more than scorched earth, a landscape of ashes, enclosed in the shifting boundaries of a human form by the magnetic force emanating from Benedicte” (Gille, 126). (*Un paysage de cendres, A landscape of ashes* is the original French title of the book).

Taking up fake identities inevitably leaves traces on people’s behavior and concepts of themselves. After months of separation from her mother who lives outside the ghetto with falsified papers, thirteen-year-old Elli in *Kindergarten* starts to see her as a stranger.

Mama looks so different. Young, beautiful, but entirely different. Aryan, I guess. Her face harder, she speaks in a different way; the delicate, elegant woman I knew has disappeared. ... The people on the Aryan side, she said, didn’t imagine the extent of misery here. I do not believe it. She justifies them, because she lives in their world, not ours. ... She is a world apart now. There

was nothing I could tell her, nor was there anything I wanted to tell her. ... She is Aryan. (Ettinger 1970, 261–62)

One of the most upsetting experiences for the children in hiding is to witness what happens to their condemned fellow-Jews, while they pretend to have nothing to do with them. Fourteen-year-old György Konrád and his sister board a train that takes them to Budapest, where they will eventually manage to hide and survive. They pass another train of cattle cars carrying a group of deported Jews. The little boy is struck by the gaze of the people who look at him from behind the tiny windows sealed with barbed wire. Their expression remains engraved in his memory (Konrád, 57). In Miriam Akavia's book, one of the protagonists, a young boy who is hiding in Lvov with fake papers, watches the city trolleys on which the Jewish population is taken away with the same mixture of pain, shame, and relief that he is not among them (Akavia, 80–81). Louis Begley describes Aunt Tania and Maciek watching silently the deportation of the Jews of Łódź through the curtains of their hiding place. They “bartered their life for a lie” (Begley, 81; 258). Elli, in Elżbieta Ettinger's *Quicksand*, uses the same expression: “For years she had lived a masquerade. She lied and she lied until her life had become one huge lie. ... in the process of saving her life she had bartered away some part of herself” (Ettinger 1989, 30–31).

In Elżbieta's other book, *Kindergarten*, after having escaped from the Warsaw ghetto, Elli and her sister live under assumed identities in a provincial town across from a camp where Jews are interned. In constant fear and anxiety, Elli works for the German army, in an office set up for the administration of Jewish estates, “which they, out of courtesy, prefer to call ‘abandoned’.” One day the daughter of one of their disappeared cousins is sent to them. In the morning the two young girls have to report for work and are afraid to leave the little girl alone. They can't find another solution than to ask the camp's guards to take care of her, after instructing her to be silent about herself and her family. Miraculously it all works out, except when at the end of the day, they pick her up and face the devastated Jewish prisoners and their comments. Another day Elli has to accompany her boss, a German officer, who decides to check out a denunciation personally. He in fact discovers a Jewish family hiding in an attic and promptly executes them. Elli walks home in a state of shock, but can't let any of it appear. Both Elli and her sister survive, but they are destroyed psychologically (Ettinger 1970, 138–139; 164–167).

In the last stage of the war, Ruth Klüger and her mother manage to escape from a death march. They acquire papers as German refugees and travel on

a train together with others who flee the advancing Allied forces. Ruth lies down to rest on the bench and tries to sleep. An unknown woman puts a blanket over her. The little girl is grateful for this spontaneous maternal gesture, but can't help wondering whether she is the right beneficiary: "She thinks I am one of theirs, and she's covering me because she takes me for a German, an Aryan, child. And then again, no. She is giving this blanket to me, three-dimensional me, and to no one else. She can see me falling asleep ... it was me whom she meant to cover. Am I taking something that wasn't meant for me, or am I receiving a gift?"

Mother and daughter eventually settle in a small German town, pretending to be refugees from the East. One day, when she goes out shopping, Ruth comes across a convoy of Jewish prisoners. She, a "little German girl," watches them dragging their feet on the road, exhausted, emaciated, visibly at the end of their strength. She is overcome by a complex mix of guilt and relief: she wants to register their image in her memory, but she is grateful not to be in their ranks, not to belong to "my people" any longer (Klüger, 144–146).

In Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird*, one autumn, when the peasants and the young boy protagonist go to the woods to harvest mushrooms, they see heavily guarded cattle cars transporting people. The villagers learn that they are Jews or Gypsies sent to be killed in a nearby concentration camp. The boy pretends to have nothing to do with those people, even though some peasants claim that he belongs on the trains. The people locked up in the cattle cars sometimes manage to throw out messages, their belongings, or even small children. Once when they find a dying young boy next to the rails, the book's protagonist feels the same mixture of shame, fear, and relief that Ruth describes (95–102).

God—Faithlessness

In trying to define their identity, including understanding their Jewishness, the persecuted children—even those who did not grow up in religious households or who rejected formal religiousness—frequently meditate about God. They keep asking questions, trying to find a meaning to what is happening to them, to understand the world and God's place—or absence—in it. Several have an intimate personal relationship with a being they call God, who is often far away from the texts and rituals of the Jewish tradition.

Magda Dénes comes from a secular, assimilated family and is not at all religious, but she has frequent conversations with God. She keeps looking for him, testing him. One day the Hungarian Nazis raid their building and the

family and some neighbors hide under the floor of the attic. They have to keep quiet and motionless for hours. Magda meditates about God:

Since we climbed into the attic, we hadn't moved, eaten, drunk or gone to the bathroom. I didn't mind any of that. I just wanted to survive. I thought if perhaps I could make myself into a small, barely visible ball of pure energy, I could explode at will and send a lightning bolt through the sky into God's garden, to fall at His resting feet and alert him that he was needed immediately. (Dénes, 70)

Later, in another hiding place, her mother asks if she should pray for her. Magda refuses: "I spoke to God directly, and I berated Him as often as I begged. These days I didn't praise Him. It didn't matter. He didn't care" (133).

In his typical sarcastic tone Joseph Bialot describes the prisoners' intense metaphysical quest in Auschwitz:

Everyone for themselves and God for all! The only hurdle is that when He realized what the beings He created in His image were doing, He got so scared that He escaped and He is still on the run. ... In the camp everything was simple. Believer? Nothing was left but suicide. Atheist? It was absolutely indispensable to discover the faith, at least have faith in oneself, in order, not to live, but to endure. Those who were unable to resolve this dilemma died first. (Bialot 2002, 206)

Several other authors evoke that faith often helped people to endure their ordeal. In Edgar Hilsenrath's *Night* the only protagonist able to preserve her dignity and have a chance to survive is the profoundly religious Deborah. In Jurek Becker's *Jacob the Liar* pious Herschel sees God's messages of hope in tiny concrete details in the miserable life of the ghetto.

Otto Dov Kulka transfers the quest to a metaphysical dimension. In his meditations about God's whereabouts in Auschwitz, he has a vision of God's invisible presence that accompanies human beings in their uttermost suffering and deprivation, independent of their beliefs:

And I saw—the terrible grief of God, who was there. All that time. In His image. At first I felt Him (only) as a kind of mysterious radiation of pain, flowing at me from the dark void in the unlit part of the cremation ovens. A radiation of insupportably intense pain, sharp and dull alike. Afterwards He began

to take the shape of a kind of huge embryo, shrunk with pain.... A figure on the scale of His creatures, in the form of a human being who came and was there—also—as one of His creatures in the kingdom of slave armies.... in the world of those created in His image, and He was grieved and was with them, and felt Job's pain when he 'was in the hand' of His great, dark servant. For what he spoke and allowed to come into being—the 'immutable law of the Great death and its dominion' as it was then ... did exist and was not just a parable. (Kulka, 98–101)

However, most persecuted children felt abandoned both by humans and by God, whose very existence they questioned in the face of what they had to endure. Describing a convoy of Jews heading towards the train station to be deported, Edith Bruck transforms the biblical motif from a symbol of liberation into one of annihilation: "It was like the exodus from Egypt, but without Moises, without the appearance of the Eternal; and instead of the Red Sea, the cattle trains opened" (Bruck 2021, 44). One day Anita, the protagonist of *How Many Stars*, steals some carrots in a concentration camp. A soldier catches her, but instead of shooting her, he "only" hits her and afterwards he even helps her to stand up. After this miraculous survival, "I wanted to pray, just to hear a human voice, but the gate of my heart was closed for God. He did not have a place there, not even a tiny slice, as if all the bad things that happened to me were his personal responsibility, his, who took away the people I loved most in the world" (Bruck 2018, 99). Anita, who grew up in a religious household, tries to understand what is happening: "Did God condemn to death his chosen people?" (176). Looking at his fellow Jews escorted by German soldiers on their way to a camp, one of Miriam Akavia's protagonists asks the same question: "*God, I thought, do You see how Your people look, your Chosen People? You chose them, but for what? For suffering? For cages? For humiliation?*" (Akavia, 81).

Placed in a Catholic convent and actively participating in the religious ceremonies, Madeleine Kahn also keeps wondering about God's intentions: "I just didn't understand how it was possible that God who created the world, made it so imperfect that he had to keep us away from it by locking us up, us, his favourite creatures. By the way, he was unable to preserve my Grandmother and this I was not going to forgive him. We argued frequently" (Kahn, 80). Many persecuted and imprisoned children had the feeling that, as Hanna Krall puts it, "all those prayers were useless anyway, because there was no God on their side of the wall. When Father B. insisted that God was everywhere,

that person repeated that perhaps he was, but He stopped right at the wall on the Aryan side” (Krall, 13).

In the face of relentless murder, injustice, impunity, and ubiquitous death, *Battlefields’* Jóska also challenges God: “I am a slave condemned to death and if I’m a slave then You are not God. ... As far as you’re concerned I’m no longer a Jew, because You’ve broken the First Commandment . . . Choose yourself a new people” (378). When, after Budapest is liberated and the family returns to their home, Jóska finds the dead body of his best friend, little Lang, he cries out bitterly: “God is wicked. ... God is mad” (524). Wandering around in the ruined ghetto after liberation, András Mezei’s protagonist also asks: “Where was God’s soul? Did it float above them? Did he witness all this without saying a word? That is impossible, because then one should say that God is a cruel, callous human” (Mezei 1984, 194).

At the end of Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and the Barber*, the mass murderer, who assumed the identity of one of his victims and lives happily in Israel, unbothered by justice or his own conscience, finds himself in front of the Unique and Eternal who is to judge him. God is about to pronounce the sentence, when the man starts to ask questions:

Where were you in those times when the defenceless were murdered? Were you sleeping?

· I never sleep, answers the Unique and Eternal.

If you weren’t sleeping, where were you, insists the man.

· I was here, answers God.

And what were you doing, if you weren’t sleeping?

...

And the Unique and Eternal said: “I was a spectator.”

· A spectator? That’s all?

Yes, a spectator, that’s all.

· Then your crime is bigger than mine ... And if this is so, you cannot judge me.

· That’s exact, said the Unique and Eternal. I cannot judge you.

What are we going to do?

...

And so, we are waiting. Both of us. The just sentence. But who can pronounce it? (Hilsenrath, *Barber*, 479–482)

Elie Wiesel had been a heartfelt believer before the deportation, but his experiences in the camp shook his faith profoundly. He was shattered when three

men, among them an angelically beautiful young boy, were publicly executed. The prisoners were forced to pass by the bodies of their murdered companions: “Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’ And from within me I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where—hanging here on this gallows...”

Sometime later, the inmates celebrated Rosh Hashanah in the camp. Tortured by his doubts, Elie was reluctant to join them:

Blessed be God’s name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fibre in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? ... I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy.

Nevertheless, Elie continues to believe, putting his faith in humans:

Yes, man is stronger, greater than God. When Adam and Eve deceived You, You chased them from paradise. When You were displeased by Noah’s generation, You brought down the flood. When Sodom lost your favour, You caused the heavens to rain down fire and damnation. But look at these men that You have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed and burned, what do they do? They pray before you! They praise Your name! (Wiesel, 64–68)

Aharon Appelfeld’s remark echoes Elie’s thoughts: “It was not God that we saw in the camps, but good people. The old Jewish saying that the world continues to exist only by virtue of a few righteous people is as true today as it was back then” (Appelfeld 2004, 141). After long meditations about God’s absence in the camp, Anita, Edith Bruck’s protagonist, comes to the same conclusion: “Maybe God is distributed in small portions in the best of people, but there are not too many of them” (Bruck 2018, 267).

Sacrifice

The persecuted or imprisoned children find it extremely difficult to understand that their friends, peers, acquaintances, and often their own family members accept that they are sentenced to death. One of the possible explanations they find is that they are sacrificed for a higher, though for them incomprehensible, purpose. Sacrifice, including human sacrifice, is part of human history. Sacrifice for a purpose—for a good harvest, for a rainfall, a good outcome of a war, or to honour God—is a weighty element of mankind’s history, which keeps posing essential questions. The sacrifice of a child—or a virgin, another embodiment of innocence—is one of the key motifs and taboos of human history, as the texts of the three monotheist religions and our other founding myths testify. In the period between the two world wars, Jewish children, even the ones who came from secular backgrounds, were familiar with the basic biblical stories. Locked in ghettos and camps, several of them recall the story of Abraham and Isaac. Is it possible that what is happening to them is a meaningful sacrifice for a reason?

Erwin/Aharon, the protagonist of Aharon Appelfeld’s *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, frequently reflects about the story of Abraham and Isaac:

I was amazed by the objectivity with which that dreadful trial ends. But, on the other hand, where was the morality of obedience to an inhuman command? What could Abraham say to himself? I’ve succeeded. I’ve obeyed the command of God. I stifled the compassion within me. I have served as an example to future generations. What could he say to his son? Thank you for standing with me. You did so with great daring. Your courage is greater than mine. (Appelfeld 2017, 163–164)

Hugo, the eleven-year-old protagonist of *Blooms of Darkness*, is also fascinated by the story. He is very pleased that Isaac’s life was saved, but feels sorry for the sacrificed goat (Appelfeld 2010, 6).

In the Warsaw ghetto, David, Bogdan Wojdowski’s protagonist, also keeps evoking the story of Isaac’s sacrifice trying to decipher its message.

In a moment the lamb will come running up, the angel will avert the blow, the son will escape alive, and the sacrifice will take place without bloodshed. But now there is no angel, and no voice sounds from on high. The pyre is already

burning and Isaac's hands are bound. It is happening now and it shall never pass. That moment, that fire, that fear. (Wojdowski, 169)

The young boy finally concludes that it is Abraham's own voice, his own conscience that stops the knife. Human life is more sacred than obedience to the law. In other passages, however, the angel is busy pocketing extortion money (382).

In Chava Rosenfarb's book, *Bunim*, the poet, meditates about Abraham and Isaac:

He would not view the agony of his people as meaningless. He saw the Jewish people prostrated on one great altar, in the very centre of the world—a collective total sacrifice; all the Jews as one Isaac. And deep down, within him, he had the conviction that God would refuse to accept this sacrifice, just as He had refused to accept that of Isaac; that He only wanted to bring about the purification of the world, through the suffering of the Jews ... Because man, Bunim mused, had not grasped the meaning of his mission. Man was wasting all his gifts, doing not what he was destined to do, but just the opposite: rendering ugly the work of creation. (Rosenfarb, II. 96–97)

In Icchokhas Meras's *The Stalemate*, Abraham Lipman, who has already lost his wife and six children, has a meeting with the ghetto's German commandant and asks him to halt the imminent deportation of the remaining children. The commandant proposes a chess match with his son, Isaac, a 17-year-old chess prodigy: "If he wins, the children will remain in the ghetto, but I will shoot your son. Myself. If he loses, he'll remain alive, and I'll order the children taken away tomorrow" (148). Abraham is forced to accept the proposal and offer his last son as a sacrifice in order to save the future of the community. Isaac succeeds in reaching a stalemate. Human effort and solidarity—or divine intervention—achieves a temporary suspense of the machinery of death.

The narrator of *Wartime Lies* also meditates about sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of children. Unlike the histories of Greek or Roman mythology, where a child sacrifice is "justified" in the name of a higher purpose (and is sanctioned with atrocious punishments for generations to come), the victim of the Holocaust is unable to find a hidden meaning. What happened to him is not fate ordered by the Gods, but Fateless: "Our friend, tossed around in the sea, is emptied of his substance, deprived of everything and finds it impossible to understand his fate. The scenes he remembers are material for nightmares, not for myths" (11).

A scene in Anita Lobel's book evokes the motif of sacrifice from a different angle. After fleeing the city, Anita, her brother, and their nanny find temporary shelter in her father's profoundly religious family in the countryside. When Passover comes, defying the occupiers' interdiction to honor Jewish traditions, Anita's aunt obtains the ritual matzos. One afternoon, a German patrol approaches their house. The aunt hides the matzos under Anita's dolls in a toy cart and sends her out to walk in the fields. Partly thrilled, but mostly frightened to death, the little girl obeys. Fortunately the soldiers don't notice what has happened. The author doesn't comment on the scene, but the implicit question is evident: on behalf of what kind of faith would a family member risk the life of a child? (Lobel, 24).

Cordelia Edvardson is in fact sacrificed to save her mother and her new family in Nazi Germany. The "girl," as Cordelia calls herself in her book, is born out of wedlock. Her father is Jewish and her mother also has Jewish origins. When "the girl" is small and her mother is a lonely, abandoned woman, they develop a strong symbiotic relationship. The mother finds consolation in the company of her child, reading her poems, singing to her, "for the guiltless, innocent child is the mother's refuge, her salvation and her sacrificial lamb" (Edvardson, 4). Years later the mother marries a non-Jewish German man, who is close to highly placed Nazi dignitaries. They have three daughters and the first-born is side-lined. When the systemic persecution and deportation of the Berlin Jews starts, Cordelia increasingly feels that even though they try to find solutions to save her, her family's efforts are half-hearted and her presence is a burden. One day fourteen-year-old Cordelia and her mother are summoned to the Gestapo headquarters. Cordelia has to confirm that she is a German citizen. If she signs, as a Jew, she is destined to be deported. If she doesn't, she is threatened; her mother will have to face grave consequences for having tried to escape German laws.

Once again the girl looked at her mother and was met with the gaze of the beautiful, brown eyes, eyes that shone with intensity, eyes that could cast a spell on the girl but which were filled with a silent, helpless pain. No one said anything, nothing needed to be said, there was no choice, there never had been, she was Cordelia, who kept her vow of fidelity, she was also Proserpina, she was the chosen one, and never had she felt closer to her mother's heart. Her voice was choked, but finally she got the words out: "Yes, I'll sign." (53)

Soon afterwards Cordelia is arrested and sent to Auschwitz. When she says farewell to her mother and stepfather the whole weight of the situation falls upon her:

Was this how the saints and martyrs felt when they climbed the pyre? But how did they deal with their trembling fear, their choking terror, their solitude and helpless crying? They probably did as the girl did—they swallowed what had to be swallowed, in order to endow the meaningless with meaning. ... The fear, the cold sweat of terror, and the lonely suppressed tears—Mother, why have you forsaken me!—which were with the daughter throughout her life, would hunt the mother only at night, at the onslaught of dreams. (Edvardson, 58)

Both Cordelia and her mother survived the war, but guilt and rancour separated them until the end of their lives.

Visions of apocalypse

The children's magical worldview, the power of their imagination occasionally provides glimpses into the deepest layers of reality that rational thinking cannot reveal. These images often become a sinister foreboding of an apocalypse to come. With the devastation of the war and their rapidly deteriorating situation in hiding or imprisoned, nightmares begin to crowd out dreams.

Aharon Appelfeld describes a beautiful, solemn Sabbath evening in his grandparents' village. After the service in the synagogue, the family has a delicious festive meal and goes for a stroll through the woods to the river. In the midst of all this beauty and harmony, the little boy suddenly feels overwhelmed by a baleful presentiment:

Yet, even as I am immersed in this hidden joy, sorrow constricts my heart, so slight that I almost don't feel it, though, slowly and imperceptibly, it spreads inside me. I burst out crying, and Mother, who is in a wonderful mood, gathers me in her arms. But I am gripped, locked in this sadness and fear, and I refuse to be consoled. The fit of crying seizes me, and I know that this is the last summer in the village, that henceforth the light will be dimmed and darkness will seal the windows. (Appelfeld 2004, 15).

In fact, Aharon's father arrives at the end of the evening, announcing that the war has broken out.

In Menyhért Lakatos's *The Color of Smoke*, a group of travelling Roma stops to rest in an open field. They dig a hole, put in dough, and make a fire to bake bread. As they sit around quietly, exchanging some words or staring at the flames, their elder notices the shadow of an eagle on the setting sun: "There will be war, you'll see ... a very big war.' ...'The eagle that has covered the sun will consume human flesh. There will be so many dead that the living won't have enough time to bury them,'" he declares. Transported by this apocalyptic vision, deep in thought, he absentmindedly draws some lines on the ground. When the bread is ready, the men clean the ashes and are horrified to see the contours of a bird burnt on it. It looks like the embodiment of the old man's sinister forebodings. There is a moment of frozen silence. In a little while they chase away their dark thoughts and, hungry as always, throw themselves on the bread. They devour death (212–214).

Bogdan Wojdowski's book begins with the floating images of David's internal world in which real and imaginary elements are organically intertwined. The little boy's experiences, the adults' words, everyday gossip, conversations he overhears, words of sacred texts and children's stories, fragments of religious ceremonies, and his readings, dreams, and daydreams blend together in a colorful, permanently swaying, dreamy universe. Then, suddenly, the end of his street is walled up, the school is closed, and his mother sews a white band with a star on the sleeve of his coat. Daydreams turn into nightmares on the evening when David's family gathers to celebrate Purim, a feast of liberation. In the middle of their modest dinner, German soldiers break into the flat. They threaten and humiliate the family members, take or destroy some of their precious belongings, take away a young woman and threaten to come back soon. After their departure the family members remain standing, petrified with fear and incredulity (Wojdowski, 36–39).

David strives to understand the increasingly brutal reality that surrounds him and find an escape route. One day, in a feverish vision, he sees the ghetto's inhabitants rise up and begin to walk to Madagascar. The dead, the crippled, the sick, the emaciated inmates, an immense crowd dressed in rags, moves forward in a silent, determined march to the new Promised Land (282–284). This liberating vision turns into an apocalyptic scene at the end of the book, on the day of the final action, when the majority of the ghetto's population is taken to the Umschlagplatz. The pieces of a broken world: shreds of hasty, desperate conversations, delirious prayers and prophecies, fragments of an SS officer's speech, shouted orders, wailings, whispered advice, songs, cries, and mechanical noises swirl around in the streets of the ghetto. In a chaotic

dance macabre the condemned people are pushed towards the gates, lamenting and commenting on their own demise, like a demented Greek choir (342–361).

Hostile nature

Children are particularly close to nature, but in conditions of ever worsening persecution and dangers, when the whole world turns against them, they feel that even nature becomes a threatening domain, where the forces of destruction lurk.

On a winter morning in freezing Budapest, Magda Dénes's mother takes her from one hiding place to the next. As they hurry through the sleeping city trying to be invisible, Magda feels that even nature has become hostile to her: "At dawn we set out, hand in hand. Evidently there would be no sunrise. The cold morning air smelled of yesterday's rain and of imagined snow. The sky was the colour of gravestones. Nothing shined. Nothing reflected" (Dénes, 103).

When Edith Bruck and her family are taken to the ghetto, Edith looks back before leaving their home: "I stopped for an instant to look at our new house, the trees, the garden. To me they seemed long dead. The weeping willow beneath the window was bent all the way to the ground, and its branches were human beings who had been hanged, so many dead limbs falling down" (Bruck 2001, 20). When German soldiers march by the school in the small Italian town where Aldo Zargani is hiding, "Even the skeletal trees seemed to hold their branches up in a terrified gesture of surrender under the leaden sky" (Zargani, 67). On the deadly march towards Transnistria, Madeleine Kahn also feels that nature has become a heavy, hostile menace joining the soldiers who accompany them (Kahn, 61). Jiří Pick writes that "it was always raining in the ghetto. And when it rains in the ghetto, it's bad" (Pick, 13). Ana Novac talks about the "the unbearable sky of Plasow" (Novac 1997, 119).

When spring arrives at the camp in Transnistria, a little boy in one of Norman Manea's stories, "Death", looks at the flowers and birds in fearful wonder: "on the other side of the fence, flowers were blooming. Spring had come, you could hear birds. He had no way of recognizing them, he could not name them, no one had found the time to talk to him about flowers and birds, nor about the many insects that had come out with the sun" (Manea 1992, 19). Once he understands that they don't threaten him, he closes his eyes and opens his shirt to the spring sunshine. But even in this state of quiet relaxing, the image that comes to his mind is that he is offering his naked body to a bullet. And then, suddenly, something hits him. He feels a stringent pain.

Panicked, he runs towards the adults hoping they will save him before he is finished. After a frantic search for aid, he finally finds his mother, who comforts him that he was simply bit by a bee. The little boy, however, feels devastated. He has proof that even nature threatens his life.

In Chava Rosenfarb's evocation of the Łódź ghetto, nature usually appears as a realm of hope and beauty. There are, however, several passages where it becomes part of the heavy, depressing environment that pulls its inhabitants down. Still alive, people become part of their deadly grey surroundings:

The first autumn in the ghetto, with its eternal rains, winds and fogs, with the cobwebs of greyness that wound and wove themselves around houses and fences, around sidewalks and cobblestones, around carts and people, stitching everything together with the invisible threads of destiny. ... There was no sky. And even on earth everything was washed out, faded. The church's towers seemed like amputated necks, their tips swallowed by the clouds. ... Even the fence encircling the ghetto ... gave the feeling of being cut off from life by more than barbed wire; of being suspended in a boundless void. (Rosenfarb, II. 141)

In Edgar Hilsenrath's *Night*, nature rarely appears and when it does, it is hostile and dead. It is a barren, abandoned terrain, the last and worst refuge of the homeless, or it is a river that carries corpses. When the book's protagonist walks through the centre of the ghetto, "it seemed to him as though the shadowy wings of a great bird of death had gradually lowered to cover the mud and the ruins. The burned-down stumps of walls at the edge of the street laughed silently at the wan sky." The trees of the park had been cut for heating, only their tortured trunks remained: "There they stood, serried like naked corpses who, diabolically, were condemned to stand upright" (11; 454). Above the ghetto "the sky was as red as blood" (256). Mary Berg has a similar image one morning: "The sky was red, and for a moment I thought that a building was burning, but it was the sunrise, as red as the blood that has been shed in the streets of Warsaw for the past three years" (Berg, 157).

The metaphor of bleeding sky appears in Bogdan Wojdowski's book as well. "At sunset the day parted from the earth, spurting red in its flight." (283). Nature is a rare domain of calm and beauty for David, the protagonist of *Bread for the Departed* living in the Warsaw ghetto. He often goes to a place from where he can see the tops of the old trees of a nearby park on the other side of the wall. However, as the situation in the ghetto deteriorates, even nature starts to send messages from hell: "A dirty light drizzled from the cloudy sky"; "the sun hung

over the city like a typhus-carrying louse threatening everyone” (61; 157). Like in Chava Rosenfarb’s book, the ghetto becomes an enormous, decaying body that is perishing together with its inhabitants. “The sky outside the window pushed its way indoors like green gas. A gray dawn without end permeated the dim apartment; a rotten new day was beginning”. “The sun was setting behind a dirty cloud and in the grayness a trembling light crept among the dark, hazy figures, the murky shadows that spread in all directions at nightfall. The street was dying in wild motion” (272; 241). In a landscape of total desolation, “the rats said Kaddish over the corpses in the emptiness” (152).

Stranger to oneself

As a Jew, Jóska, the protagonist of *Battlefields*, is labelled a stranger in society. But he is also an outsider in his own family and community because he is different and keeps questioning the rules. In his mind, being Jewish, being a stranger, and being excluded are inextricably connected. In several other authors’ works Jewishness blends together with being a stranger and being excluded.

On the way to mass murder, society makes the persecuted people “strangers” in their own homes. Due to their increasing marginalization, the children in fact start to feel different and alienated from their peers and become strangers in their schools and neighborhoods. As events escalate and their social ties are cut, their belongings are confiscated, and they are expelled from their homes, they are gradually deprived of the markers of their identity. They are uprooted and begin to feel alienated from themselves as well. This process culminates in an overwhelming feeling of abandonment and alienation in the ghettos and camps.

One of the instinctive defense mechanisms children often use to protect themselves during this process is to put a distance between themselves and their conditions and the events of the external world. This alienation from oneself usually proves to be helpful during the war years, enabling them to register horrors without processing them and to carry on struggling for life. After the end of the war, however, the survivors often find it difficult to get rid of this protective carapace.

Magda Dénes describes this process of isolation from the outside world during the period she spent in hiding. She gradually became alienated from everything, including her own body. Recalling one day when she had to change hiding places, she notes:

- I felt encased in some invisible substance that stood between me and the world. It was as if my eyes were not quite seeing what they saw. As if my feet touching the pavement stayed up in the air with every step. I did not believe my hands could actually grasp an object and feel its substance. To others I probably looked normal, but I knew the world and I had ceased to be contiguous. (Dénes, 87)

Thirteen-year-old Andrew Kennedy observes the dramatically worsening situation of the Jews after the German occupation of his hometown. German troops patrol the city's streets, they requisition most of their spacious apartment, his nanny has to quickly leave, Jews are rounded up and obliged to wear the yellow star, and some friends and acquaintances commit suicide, while others disappear. Andrew's parents frantically look for escape routes, but they are unable to make up their minds. Rumors about their forthcoming deportation circulate. One neighbor visits the family to discuss the sinister news and the next day he jumps out from a fifth floor window. Andrew comments:

The impact was horrible but already dampened by the instinctive need to build emotional defences against disasters. I don't know how other members of the family reacted, but it was about this time that I began to develop a kind of immunity, mixing detachment and curiosity. Or rather it was not "I" who developed such a state of mind; a new "I" was developing unbidden and stayed with me for a long time, for a good portion of my war experiences. These would have been much more traumatic if I had not succeeded in pretending that I was only an onlooker. (Kennedy, 70).

When the family is herded into the ghetto, Andrew observes: "I again felt I was not really part of this masquerade. I had been dropped into an alien world by some parachute and it was my job, for the time being, to keep my eyes open and watch the strange goings-on" (73).

Seven-year-old Krysha Chiger watches from her hideaway as her cousin and grandmother are detained during a raid in the Lvov ghetto:

Already, I was learning that there was no room in our lives for tears. ... Watching my cousin and grandmother taken away to their certain deaths, I was all through with tears. ... We were all sad ... but there was only so much time for sadness, so we put it out of our minds. Not because we did not love them or cherish their memories. ... There was no longer any room for crying. ... At any

other time, we would have been collapsed in grief, but at this time we could only hope that we would not be next. (Chiger, 50–51).

People are forced to wall up their emotions in the everyday struggle for survival in the ghettos and camps. The process of dehumanization triggered by the mechanisms of persecution is accelerating under their deteriorating life conditions. “When does a man cease to be a man?” asks one of the prisoners of the Warsaw ghetto in Bogdan Wojdowski’s book (259).

Gerhard Durlacher describes his state of mind on his arrival to the camp:

There is no language in hell to convey what I see, hear, smell or taste. Terror and dread have cordoned off my emotions. I smell the stench of decay and oily smoke, but don’t understand. I see and hear the trains, the stumbling masses of people en route to the flames, the dull blows, the naked and shorn women, their private parts exposed, three of them crouched under one grey rag, dripping rain water, but I don’t understand. Night and day, my senses record what’s happening on the other side of the barbed wire and the watch-towers of the “Ramp” and in the neighboring sections of the camp, but I don’t understand. (Durlacher 1991, 51)

Otto Rosenberg also recalls that after some time spent in the camp, people become apathetic. They pass by the corpses, they experience atrocities, sometimes even participate in them, without feeling concerned: “You don’t feel anything anymore. The people become, how should I say, unfeeling. They feel nothing any more. ... In a situation like that people lose their feeling for human beings” (Rosenberg, 78–79). Otto tries to explain this indifference. “They gave us an injection up here where the heart is. Nobody reared up. Nobody said: ‘No, we won’t allow you to do that.’ ... Maybe it was a vaccination. It must have been a vaccination or I would not be sitting here” (86).

In *Night*, Edgar Hilsenrath often uses impersonal formulations to describe the ghetto’s inhabitants as a faceless mass, whose life and death is part of an autonomous physical process. When someone dies, the living ones seize his/her place and belongings, only to perish later in their turn. The German and Romanian soldiers who guard the place are never visible; their presence is a heavy, ubiquitous menace that hangs over the prisoners’ lives; the night raids raging on the streets after curfew are like waves of a natural disaster. Ranek, the book’s protagonist, is completely alienated from his fellow prisoners and from himself. The writer occasionally addresses him in the second person, cre-

ating a sudden, uncomfortable closeness and then switches back to the position of a distant observer. One evening Ranek catches a glimpse of himself in a window: "It was half effaced: an unshaven face featureless in the shadow of the hat's wide brim. He stepped even closer to the window, but his face did not become more distinct. Then he suddenly felt as though this were not his own face at all staring back at him, but another face, which legally belonged to the hat: Nathan's face" (Hilsenrath 1967, 130).

Chava Rosenfarb as well often describes the Łódź ghetto as an amorphous living being, a big hungry stomach, or an agonizing beast. With the passing of time the difference between humans and objects is effaced; people become part of the peeling walls, decaying houses, and run-down streets, while the walls, windows, and gates occasionally appear to be alive:

An eerie sadness enveloped the houses; the windowpanes, like eyes, incessantly shed fountains of tears. ... The people, wrapped in their soaking grey garments, moved through the streets, passively surrendering to the downpour, with an indifference that made them appear related to the grey stones of the pavement, the grey walls of the houses, to everything that existed but had no will. ... Dawn was dozing like a blind beggar woman wrapped in a rain-soaked plaid with dripping fringes. (Rosenfarb, II. 138)

During the long winter months "Long black blotches like weird black fingers ran from the snow-covered roofs down the walls. ... Some of the windows, their panes broken, the holes stuffed with dark rags, seemed like blind eyes" (189). Images like these reflect the uttermost alienation of the human beings locked within the ghetto who seem to merge with their dilapidated environment, to form one amorphous universe condemned to vanish.

Space and time out of joint

When people, particularly children, are cut away from their points of reference and are thrown into a context they don't understand and definitely do not control, their basic senses, their fundamental life coordinates, such as time and space, also become distorted. Time is definitely out of joint and there is no one to set it right. Space also becomes difficult, often impossible, to grasp. The feeling of alienation that has been intensifying due to the children's social and psychological marginalization gains another, cosmic dimension.

A powerful image in Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life* expresses this state of being outcast, excluded from the world's common space and time. One of the book's protagonists goes for a walk with his daughters in the Łódź ghetto: "They wandered through the noisy streets, halting on their way home in front of the church. They looked up at the tower for a while. The immobile hands covered one another, pointing at the number ten. They resembled a knife which cut off the time in the ghetto from the pulse of the world" (Rosenfarb, II. 35–36).

Magda Dénes writes about the loss of the sense of time during the war. On one occasion, while she lies hidden under the boards of the laundry room in an attic, time seems to be suspended: "Silence. Time passed. No, that is wrong. Time did not pass. It hovered in the air. It became a palpable aspect of danger, a hungry vicious bird with an ugly beak, eager to devour us" (Dénes, 70). After more than two years spent in the ghetto and various hiding places in occupied Poland, time and space lose their contours for Michał Głowiński: "I knew that the world I'd known before my arrival, the world in which I once lived, no longer existed, and that behind me was empty space and nothingness. ... My existence was limited to what was here and now" (Głowiński, 126). Michał describes his loss of sense of space as well: "I am unable to place where we lived, I'm unable to point to what felt close and what far away. I know now that special images had no objective dimension, for behind the walls—as in any prison or camp ...—peculiar spatial relations come into being" (13).

Aharon Appelfeld evokes the feeling of timelessness in these terms: "When World War II broke out, I was seven years old. The sequence of time became confused—no more summer and winter, no more long visits to my grandparents in the country" (Appelfeld, 2004, vi). George Perec also writes about the loss of a sense of time and space he felt, when, at the age of six, he was separated from his mother and was moving from one hiding place to the next in Vichy France:

What marks this period especially is the absence of landmarks: these memories are scraps of life snatched from the void. No mooring. Nothing to anchor them or hold them down. Almost no way of ratifying them. No sequence in time, except as I have reconstructed it arbitrarily over the years: time went by. There were seasons. There was skiing and haymaking. No beginning, no end. There was no past, and for very many years there was no future either; things simply went on. You were there. It happened somewhere far away, but no one could have said very precisely where it was far from. (Perec, 68)

Livia Bitton-Jackson describes how time became disjointed when they arrived at Auschwitz:

An abyss separated us from the past. The rapid succession of events this morning was an evolution of aeons. Our parents and families belonged to the prehistoric past. Our clothes, our shoes, our hair—had they been real? The homes we left only recently were in distant lands, perhaps of make-believe. We were new creatures. Marching expertly in fives at a rapid, deliberate rhythm, we were an army of robots animated by the hysterics of survival. (Bitton-Jackson, 80)

Gerhard Durlacher evokes a similar feeling after their arrival at Auschwitz: “Any awareness of time has vanished” (Durlacher 1991, 49). Once the prisoners adjust to the camp’s murderous routine, the notion of time dissipates further. “One day is tacked on to another in endless dullness and resignation” (51). Joseph Bialot confirms: “Time is unravelling. In the camp time has lost its usual signposts” (Bialot 2002, 139). Maurice Cling also recalls “the progressive loss of reference points to mark time” after his deportation. One day, when his group is sent to work outside the camp, they cross a train station. Maurice is astonished to see the building’s clock—as if time existed to be measured (Cling, 15).

Zdena Berger also describes the loss of the sense of time during the deportation. There is no continuity; past and future are cut off—only an overwhelming, heavy present exists: a motionless eternity: “Now there is only now. There is the train, there is the motion, there is the dry tongue swelling in my mouth” (Berger, 57). The monoton life in the camp also erases the notion of time. “The days follow each other, always the same. The feeling of loss, always there, and it is only that, the feeling of loss, over and over again. Wanting to stop time and start it all over” (78). “Time going by and around the four corners of the camp, not moving inside, not changing anything. I can only tell time by the color of the sky or by my body” (152). After several months spent in captivity, she feels that she is wedged in an eternal, unbearable present. “The past is almost gone now. It is as if there has been no distant past. I think of the near past, the past of camps. But even that does not hold together; events unravel, and places and times pull apart” (160).

Norman Manea asserts as well that the camp experience changed the dimensions of time and space in his mind: “I also have no memory of the rooms where I languished during the four years in the labor camp, windowless and doorless.... Nor do I have any recollection of the houses we lived in in

Bessarabia, after the Red Army liberated us—lost spaces all, belonging to a lost time. Only after our return did time recover me, and space, too, began to acquire a shape” (Manea 2003, 201). The insecurity about the genuine coordinates of his life accompanied Norman for a long time: “Without past, without future, was I inhabiting the illusion of a rented present, an insecure trap?” (218).

Some authors use biblical references to try to describe this peculiar state of being cut off from reality’s coordinates of time and space. Bogdan Wojdowski’s David evokes the story of Jonah, one of the last texts his grandfather read to him before his death. In the belly of the whale Jonah is suspended between two worlds, like the prisoners in the ghetto; they are not given back to life, nor yet sent to death (Wojdowski, 223–228). Jona Oberski’s *Childhood* was published in Hungarian under the title *Jonah in the Belly of the Whale* and had an Italian film version with the title *Jonah Who Lived in the Whale*.

After managing to dodge several selections, Cordelia Edvardson describes her state of floating in a shadowy world-in-between:

She became a survivor. Someone who was left over; someone who had been pulled across the border between life and death, who had slipped and stayed behind in the grey mist of no-man’s-land. This was ‘the land that is not,’ the land of intangible, unredeemed fear without language and without words, and therefore without strong, clear feelings. ... She is mute. In the beginning was the word, but in the end there were ashes. (Edvardson, 79)

Final deprivation

The camp is the ultimate expression of a social system where human beings do not matter at all, where everything is geared towards their ultimate expropriation and destruction. People are turned into disposable spare parts of a machine that is meant to accumulate unlimited power and wealth for those in power. The inmates are exploited until their last bit of energy, after which they are killed and even their body can eventually be “re-utilised.” The machine of destruction aims to create a passive, obedient, faceless mass driven by the sheer instinct for survival. In this final stage of privation and alienation, people become strangers to themselves. Their own body turns into a strange object that makes them suffer, but does not belong to them any longer.

The majority of the children, who became the authors of these books, grew up in a prudish, strict world, where parents and children lived in relatively separated circles and where bodies were not exposed publicly as they are today.

Most of them never saw a naked body before their deportation, let alone the naked body of their parents and family members. Their first encounter with nakedness in the conditions of the war is often traumatic and sometimes marks them for life. Their body that not so long ago had been a source of rich discoveries becomes a source of humiliation and pain, a dark pit that one should no longer explore.

Maurice Cling describes how stunned he was when he saw his father shaven for the first time in his life, before the family's transfer from Drancy to Auschwitz. During the train-ride in the sealed wagons, in suffocating heat, when people started to take off their clothes to obtain a little bit of relief, the fifteen-year-old boy was "troubled and shocked" when he perceived bras and exposed female flesh (Cling, 69). The first time sixteen-year-old Nadine Heftler saw numerous naked backs was in the Gestapo prison. She describes her horror of seeing the naked bodies of women of all ages and all shapes, when they were taken to the shower in Auschwitz (Heftler, 16; 35).

When their train arrives at Auschwitz, Judith Magyar Isaakson looks up at the sky and sees the Great Bear. She is relieved: the sky is still there; there is a familiar reference point in the harsh new universe she is thrown into. Hours later, when she steps out of the shower building, naked and hairless, she is in "a hostile planet", the sky is infinitely far away and her own body has become alien (Isaakson, 65–68). Nakedness becomes the expression of extreme vulnerability and humiliation. As Marceline Loridan-Ivens puts it in an interview: "When the first man who sees you naked is a Nazi who obliged you to undress, you and the others, it's like a collective rape. By the way they look at you, by the contempt of that regard" (Loridan-Ivens interview 2018). Joseph Bialot confirms that the circumstances of coercion and violence transform the nature of a naked human body: "When it is not erotic, not agreed upon, nakedness is degrading. The person who is stripped against his will is deprived of his personality" (Bialot 2004, 81).

Maurice Cling also becomes painfully aware of the vulnerability of his body in the camp. He feels that even his miserable uniform helps him to create a thin layer of protection against the brutality of the outside world. The nakedness imposed on the young boys in their barrack exposes their utter defenselessness and displays the unequivocal signs of their approaching death: "The striped uniform to a certain point conceals us from the others and from ourselves. Naked, we are exposed in our sheer biologic reality: flabby-looking flesh, ever more protruding bones, as if the skeleton were gaining ground. ... Nakedness ... rams us further down in our void. By the image of our progressive deg-

radation, it convinces us about our inevitable and rapidly approaching destiny” (Cling, 95).

Ana Novac also describes the prisoners’ utter dehumanization in the camp: “Perhaps we make up a new species never before recorded in history; ... somewhere between a human being and a thing. The only human attribute that it retains is the ability to suffer; it is, more precisely: a suffering thing” (Novac, 1997, 40–41). After her transfer to Auschwitz her state deteriorates further, she becomes apathic, locked into her misery: “Thinking makes me tired. I snooze sitting up. That’s how I spend my time, from roll call till the soup distribution, from the soup distribution till the bread distribution. For how long? No idea! Nothing, for that matter, is as important as it was at Plaszow” (191). After long years of internment, Tania, Zdena Berger’s protagonist, is in a similar state in Bergen-Belsen: “Already the feeling that it does not matter. There is such a loneliness in being hungry and with the loneliness a feeling of wanting to go even farther back into myself. Into private rooms where the windows are unbroken, steps silenced, and dreams come without the faded color. ... I listen to my breathing: quiet, slow and steady, as if it did not belong to me; in and out it goes” (Berger, 206).

Marceline Loridan-Ivens evokes the apathy that gradually overtakes her in the camp as well. She mechanically digs trenches for the dead, which the crematoriums can no longer handle, among them probably her distant relatives; she listens with indifference to the news of the revolt of the Sonderkommando and its bloody end. Even her most precious object, her father’s last letter that was smuggled to her, loses its significance:

Your letter arrived too late as well. It probably spoke to me of hope and love, but there was no humanity left in me, I’d killed the little girl, I was digging right near the gas chambers, every one of my actions contradicted and buried your words. I served death. I’d been its hauler. Then its pickaxe. Your words slipped away, disappeared, even though I must have read them many times. They spoke of a world that was no longer mine. I had nothing to hold on to anymore. My memory had to shatter, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to go on living. (Loridan-Ivens, 2017, 23)

Anita Lobel also depicts a sensation of complete alienation in the camp that culminates during the death march.

Somewhere under us, far below our bodies, crunching the snowy road, were our feet. We no longer felt them. Through the steely night we felt as if little motors were propelling us forward. ... In the glow of the immense and cruel winter night we forgot hunger and thirst. On the feet that no longer belonged to us, lulled by the crunch of snow beneath them, we slept. Walking. Moving. Forward. In our frozen numbness we were nobody's children. We were free. (Lobel, 122–123)

Anita has lost everything; she is detached from her own body: “Somewhere, before Montelupi, before Plaszow, my brother and I had been forced to leave ourselves. Anchored in numbness, our bodies were nothing but two hungry, itching lumps” (Lobel, 136).

Elie Wiesel describes the same experience in similar terms: “I was putting one foot in front of the other, like a machine. I was dragging this emaciated body that was still such a weight. If only I could have shed it! Though I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn't help thinking that there were two of us: my body and I. And I hated that body” (Wiesel, 85). During the evacuation of the camp Maurice Cling also becomes even more alienated from anything he has ever been. The first person narration suddenly switches to the third person, describing a “piece” that is floating in a faceless human mass on its way to extermination. The first person singular only returns when Maurice is finally liberated by American soldiers (Cling, 175–177; 214).

Imre Kertész's *Fateless* presents the process of alienation with extreme precision. At the beginning of his deportation Gyuri Köves makes efforts to adjust to the circumstances and seeks to make sense of what is happening. He tries to see the deportees with the eyes of the Nazis; finds Dr Mengele “sympathetic,” with “kind-looking eyes” and considers many of his fellow prisoners “unusable.” Once he can no longer pretend to ignore the nature of the place, his attitude changes, but he still strives to maintain his distance as if he were not the subject of events, but a neutral observer. After some months he registers that his own body has become a strange, burdensome object. Soon, almost without noticing it, he becomes a *Muslim*, an irritable skeleton, whose only wish is to be left alone. His companions take him to the hospital, saving his life, where he is surprised to see some people “with normal, recognizable faces.” When he is transported back to Buchenwald, he muses about his own “earthly remains.” He only hopes that his inevitable death will be painless. When he miraculously ends up in another hospital barrack and the nurse asks his name, he has to think for a while before he can recall it. Here the narration suddenly switches

from the first to the second person, adding one more layer of distancing; to return back later to the first person (Kertész 2006, 84–87; 175–186).

Uprooted, torn away from their beloved ones, robbed of their objects, names, past, their bodies turned into non-distinctive “items” shuffled around in the continuous re-arrangements within and between camps, people are confronted with a cosmic solitude. Arnošt Lustig describes this state with chilling precision:

When a person feels deserted and alone, he is no longer bothered by anything, so he is no bother to anybody, not even to himself. ... Sometimes it went so far that he felt no responsibility even for a part of his own mind or body. He was unable to tell his left hand from his right, his feet from his hands, and one hair from the other, as though they were branches of a distant tree. ... That lonely feeling came back to him at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was as big as hundreds of military outposts, or thousands of villages put together. A planet of night, but different nights than he had ever known. ... It was a raw and melancholy sort of loneliness. It was wishing you were not alive, feeling that the best way in the world would be not to be. (Lustig, 417–420)

The first part of Miriam Akavia’s book ends with the arrest of the young boy protagonist. The last sentences evoke the same cosmic solitude, of broken lives lost in a never-ending night: “Darkness has fallen, blackness, and I didn’t quite...The night continued and another day never broke” (Akavia, 104).

The overwhelming feeling of abandonment and uselessness is reinforced by the fact that no one seems to care about the fate of the imprisoned masses. Gerhard Durlacher recalls that in August 1944, while standing at roll call in Auschwitz, the prisoners saw Allied planes flying above the camp. They watched the stripes in the sky mesmerized, unable to understand why they did not intervene to save them. The indifference of the outside world confirmed the captives’ sentiment that they were worthless “items,” expelled from the world, whose demise made no difference at all (Durlacher 1991, 9–13).

C H A P T E R

3

COPING:
REFUGES AND ESCAPE ROUTES

Many children, including the authors of the works explored here, were able to emerge from these abysmal depths thanks to their resilience and creativity. Condemned to death, persecuted, hiding, locked in prisons, ghettos and camps, torn away from their familiar environment and often from their families and friends, deprived of personal objects and, in the camps, even their own clothing and body hair, the children had to find resources in their internal world. Astonishingly, they managed to mobilize a rich array of means that helped them to cope and survive. They were able to draw strength from their imaginary worlds, their personal memories, and memories of culture, mankind's collective memory, which helped them to hold on to their values that proved to be meaningful even in these circumstances. They were able to find comfort in natural beauty that represented a universe not soiled by human destruction; in their spirit of discovery and revolt, their sense of humor, their ability to switch off their external circumstances and play, have fun, or be creative in many other ways. They strove to maintain or create strong human connections that helped them enormously in coping with their situation. Adults also found some of these survival tools, but the way children used them was unique to them.

Imagination as a refuge

Imagination was one of the most precious and distinctive refuges where the children could find consolation and strength.

Even before the war, Krysha Chiger, the little girl who was hiding with her family in the sewers under Lvov, had an imaginary friend, Melek. They often played together and she shared her most secret thoughts with him. When they

moved to the gutters and she was first confronted with the horrendous conditions in which they had to live, Krysha consulted Melek:

“Well, what do you think?”

He answered, ‘It is not so bad, Krysha.’

This was Melek, trying to lift my spirits. This was me, trying to convince myself that everything was going to be okay.”

Several months later, exhausted by their confined life in the gutters, and after the accidental death of her beloved uncle, Krysha’s resistance started to waver:

We were trapped here, I realized, and the only escape was death. ... But of course I could not say anything to my parents or to anyone else. I could not cry about it. I could only place these thoughts as part of my inside life, alongside the other things I kept to myself and struggled to understand on my own. To talk to them might have been too upsetting for the others to hear. I could talk about these things with Melek, my imaginary friend. I could say, “Melek, I am scared.” I could speak these words in a tiny whisper. I could imagine Melek would stroke my hair and take my hand and tell me everything would be okay. He could tell me those things, but I was not sure I could believe him. (Chiger, 130)

Later on, when the whole group’s endurance started to wear off and their helpers had been missing for several days, Krysha turned again to Melek: “What do you think, Melek? I said. ‘They have been killed?’ ‘It will be okay,’ he said. ‘They are coming’” (244). And in fact, the workers re-appeared some days later, bringing the happy news that the city was liberated and the fugitives could finally emerge from the sewers.

Imagination provides a powerful support for various persons in Chava Rosenfarb’s book as well. On their way to moving into the Łódź ghetto, a group of youngsters discusses how they would spend their time confined there.

Mietek turned to Bella, “And you, what will you do in the ghetto?”

Junia giggled. “It won’t make any difference to her, ghetto or no ghetto, she will go on burying her nose in her books. She’s a dreamer don’t you know?” Mietek, pretending to be serious, pressed Bella’s arm, “Wake up, wake up, Deborah! We are not going to a place designed for dreamers. You must face reality, to be able to protect yourself against it.”

Bella felt like biting her nails. “Thank you for worrying about me,” she muttered confusedly. “And do you know how much reality you will be able to take

yourselves? When you feel really bad, where will you escape? You'll see... you will create, like I do, such... such little boats of dreams and jump into them." Mietek and Junia laughed at her strange words. (Rosenfarb, II. 20)

In *Fateless*, Gyuri Köves describes imagination as one of the most efficient methods that help him flee the conditions of the camp: "There is a corner in one's nature that, as indeed I came to learn, is a person's accepted and inalienable possession. The fact is one's imagination remains unfettered even in captivity. I contrived, for instance, that while my hands were busy with a spade or mattock ... I myself was simply absent" (Kertész 2006, 155–157). To his surprise, instead of attractive, exotic places, his imagination often takes Gyuri back home. He revisits his past life and promises himself to improve things if he survives.

Alona Frankel's imagination helps her immensely in coping with the ordeals of the war years. Sheltering alone in a village contemplating a minuscule detail on a wooden surface or the clouds' changing shapes, she invents stories and games; hiding in a very restricted place in the ghetto she makes up worlds from the stains on an old pillow case and creates minuscule birds from breadcrumbs. When they are eaten up by mice, she tames the latter to have some companions. In face of permanent lethal danger, she clings to the fairy tale in which the wolf, pretending to be the mother goat, enters the house and devours the kids. Only one survives, hiding in the clock. Alona is convinced that she is the goat who hid in the clock while the bad wolf was eating up her brothers (Frankel, 23; 167; 54).

Several children talk about their imaginary meals or festive events in the camps. Francine Christophe recounts that after black-out the prisoners frequently 'went out,' describing in great detail what they wore and what they ordered in the chic restaurants they once knew or would have liked to know (Christophe, 82). Nadine Heftler evokes a group of young girls, who, during the evacuation of Auschwitz, sat together in the middle of the wagon sharing their fantasies of dream-menus and dream houses, oblivious to their circumstances (Heftler, 155). Éva Fahidi also recalls that the inmates regularly exchanged recipes and cooked and served imaginary meals in order to forget their harsh conditions and excruciating hunger. They also took turns telling stories, reciting poems, and presenting theatre performances they once saw (Fahidi, 196; 202).

Michał Głowiński recounts how he managed to handle his fears during a summer thunderstorm in the Warsaw ghetto by imagining that lightning

would strike the German officers in their impeccably clean uniforms and destroy them: “I wanted to believe that from somewhere deliverance would be forthcoming. It was not forthcoming in the real world, so I envisioned its being borne by thunderbolts from a convulsing sky” (Głowiński, 175). In Bogdan Wojdowski’s book there is a little boy who collects broken pencils in the Warsaw ghetto and spends his time drawing. The world he creates looks like the one around him, but he introduces little changes that create big differences. In the drawings his mother sells sweets and he can eat as much as he wants. His friends walk to the control post and hit the guard. He draws the ghetto’s wall, but it is too enormous; it blocks the horizon. With a sudden determination, the little boy adds some zig-zagging lines that open a breach in the wall. He continues drawing: through the opening a bird flies out of the ghetto (Wojdowski, 101).

Hanna Krall’s hiding little girl in *The Subtenant* also resorts to her imagination which helps her to forget her fears and sorrows during the long anxious days when she is left alone in a flat in occupied Warsaw: “When everybody left, the apartment was silent and empty, one could open the stove door and watch the red embers. They arranged themselves into sprawling, strangely bright cities. Sometimes I would populate them with people and invent their names and life stories, but the stories had to be short and tragic, because the embers quickly died out and the cities disappeared” (Krall, 105). During the two years that Léa and her friend Benedicte spent sheltering in the Catholic convent in Elisabeth Gille’s *Shadows of a Childhood*, they also kept retiring to their imaginary worlds, drawing new strength from acting out hopeful scenarios that would change their lives.

On a particularly strenuous work day in the camp, unable to carry more heavy stones and take more blows from the guard, Gerhard Durlacher collapses. He sinks into a world of dreams and imagination; the only space where liberation is possible:

The voices fade away, a merciful silence. As if through clear water, I see the rolling landscape, a stream that fades into the blue-green woods on the horizon. My fall is painless. Blades of grass caress my cheek. Above me is the same landscape, unsullied by tears. I see myself escape my hunters with large, graceful bonds over fields and hills. My twin antlers are proudly outlined against the sky when I reach the other side of the stream, almost flying. My silhouette gets smaller and smaller, until it’s swallowed up by the embrace of the far off forest. I feel freedom as I’m enfolded by darkness. (Durlacher 1991, 73)

In *The Sandgame*, Uri Orlev recounts how much his imagination helped him handle the hardships he had to face in the Warsaw ghetto, later hiding in the city, and even in Bergen-Belsen. He and his younger brother spent most of their time playing in their imaginary worlds:

One day I made up a story that everything that had happened—the war, the ghetto, the Holocaust—was a dream. I was the son of the emperor of China, and my father, the emperor, had ordered my bed placed on a large platform and surrounded by twenty wise mandarins. ... My father had ordered them to put me to sleep and make me dream so that when I became emperor myself one day, I would know how terrible wars were and what it means to be hungry and without parents, and I would never start any war. My brother never tired of this story. Whenever anything scary or dangerous happened to us, he would ask for it. ... Once, when I was eleven and he was nine, we were caught on an illegal excursion outside the ghetto by two Germans in civilian clothes. They brought us to the ghetto wall, stood us against it, and drew their pistols to shoot us. My brother tugged at my sleeve. I knew what he wanted and I whispered: “Right, I’m dreaming it.” At times like that, I really was sure that I was dreaming. (Orlev 2002, 31–32)

In Zdena Berger’s *Tell Me Another Morning*, Tania is sitting next to Peter, a dying little boy she befriended soon after their arrival in Terezín:

“Close your eyes and I will make a room for you. Blue. The room will be light blue. And the first thing you will hear will be barking. You open your eyes in the morning and there on the rug is the puppy. His tongue is out and he wags his tail so hard, he shakes all over.” “Does he have a name?” “He is brown and small, so you call him Peanut. You have a red ball under your pillow that you throw at him. He spins so fast he slides on the rug. You will run out of the house with him and roll down a hill that is all grass. He will chase the red ball.” ... “How do you like that morning?” He smiles. “Tell me another.” (32–33)

In Jurek Becker’s *Jacob the Liar*, Jacob, a lonely middle-aged man, is sent to the ghetto police’s headquarters because he was caught shortly before curfew. Waiting for a verdict in the corridor, he overhears news about the advance of the Russian troops. When he is released, he shares the good news with some of his acquaintances and rather involuntarily he begins to spread hopeful news to the inhabitants of the ghetto. He pretends to own a secret radio and reports

about the state of the war, announcing fairly often the promising advance of the Red Army. Jacob finds this extremely difficult because his imagination is limited and he feels guilty for tricking his companions and dreads being caught; still, he wants to give some hope to his fellow sufferers.

One day he has a bitter argument with a doctor who, unaware that he is confabulating, tells him how dangerous his undertaking is. Gentle Jacob loses his temper and exclaims:

Have you ever once seen their eyes when they beg me for news? No? And do you know how badly they need some good news? Do you know that? ...Isn't it enough for you that we have almost nothing to eat, that in winter one in five of us freezes to death, that every day half a street gets taken away in transports? All that still isn't enough? And when I try to make use of the very last possibility that keeps them from just lying down and dying—with words, do you understand? I try to do that with words! Because that's all I have!—then you come and tell me it's prohibited! (165)

The doctor doesn't reply. He reaches into his pocket and offers Jacob a cigarette, a genuine one, smuggled into the ghetto. They make peace smoking in silence. After this solemn truce Jacob adds that ever since the good news started to circulate, there are no more suicides in the ghetto. The doctor casts an astonished glance at him and agrees.

Jacob's invented good news is so important that even deeply religious Herschel, who is convinced that they endanger the ghetto's inhabitants, cannot stop transmitting them. One afternoon he sneaks to a sealed wagon that is stationed in the ghetto on its way to the camps and whispers the latest promising news to the people held inside. "The people locked up inside thank him, utterly bewildered; a little white dove has strayed into their darkness" (115). When Herschel tries to slip back to his workplace, one of the guards shoots him dead.

Jacob's other secret is that he takes care of Lina, a little girl of six, whose parents were deported because her father forgot to put on his coat with the yellow star on his way to work. Lina escaped arrest because she disobeyed her parents and went out to play in the courtyard, so the soldiers who came for her mother, didn't notice her. Since she has been left all alone, Jacob hides her in his attic-room, shares with her his meagre provisions, and entertains her with stories and 'private' radio broadcasts. Smart and curious, Lina quickly discovers that Jacob is making up the good news. Unlike some of the adults, who crack when

the truth comes out, Lina goes on struggling, playing, and daydreaming, feeling safe in the protective nest of Jacob's love and her imagination.

András Mezei's hero, little Joske, lives with his parents in a tiny flat in a crowded, decrepit neighborhood of Budapest that later becomes part of the ghetto. The little boy's favourite game to help him forget their poverty and his parents' daily fights is to stare at the stains on the wall next to his bed and set free his imagination: "It was much better than any cinema, because in the movies I could only see what they showed me, but here what appeared on the wall was the fruit of my imagination" (Mezei 1984, 20–21).

In several of András Mezei's stories only a miracle can save the protagonists' lives. The narrator's father is badly beaten up by Nazi youths, but he is able to preserve his dignity and escape; little Joske and his mother escape deportation thanks to their elephant-eared, handmade backpacks and the magic of a Shabbat evening; the animals of the Zoo plot a revolt against the occupying forces; a horrifying scene of stealing potatoes and lynching turns into a tale of sharing and brotherhood. Each of these tales has a magic turning point, when destiny starts to run backwards and the irreparable does not take place. The author recreates the child's complex internal world woven of fragments of a surrealistic reality and imagination. As he puts it: "It's not easy to find the way between the meanderings of Joske's dream-world and the dreamlike, fantastic reality.... It would be impossible to separate what happened and what did not happen, to examine the two parts of Joske's dual world separately, because neither of these worlds described him without the other" (88).

In one of József Gáli's autobiographical short stories the little boy protagonist invents an imaginary friend, an African seal. His village playmates make fun of him, but although he himself is aware of geographical realities, he still maintains that such a creature exists because the beings of his imagination are real. When the boy and his family are deported, marching through their city in rows of four, one of his former playmates cries out:

"They are taking away the African seal! He will become seal-soap!" The guy did not lie, though he had no idea what he was talking about. The seal was there, walking by your side, very discreetly, because you only acknowledged his presence when you wanted to. He never forced himself on you, always knew when he had to become present. He knew when he had to play a funny dance with a big red and blue ball on his nose, when he had to lie next to you on the cement to warm you up and he never pestered you for water, not even on the hottest days with the most unbearable thirst, even though seals really cannot

live without water. ... The African seal was your secret, and without a secret everybody is more prone to perish. They could take away your clothes, your backpack, they could shave bald your head, armpit, groin—the seal remained there for you. (Gáli, 98–99)

In Ilse Aichinger's book, Ellen and her friends, all of whom have "four grandparents of the wrong kind," try to escape deportation via their imagination. One day they decide to flee the town to travel to the only place that would accept them: the Promised Land. A hearse coachman offers to take them to the border. On the way they meet a young man who is persecuted by villagers because he is a stranger. He finds refuge with the children and when he calms down, he politely presents himself: "David, King David,' he whispered, embarrassed, 'on my way to the Promised Land.'" By the time they arrive, the border is already sealed: "It's high time you woke up!' The coachman shouted. 'All this for nothing. Everything is lost. We cannot cross the border anymore!' 'We passed it already,' exclaimed the children.' They jumped off the coach and without looking back, started to run and returned into the darkness" (Aichinger, 51–78). The young travellers understood that their journey itself became a process of liberation; once they managed to overcome their fears and find their internal freedom, they did arrive at the Promised Land.

The children's imagination proves to be extremely useful in an emergency, when rapid creative solutions are urgently needed. In Grigory Kanovich's *Candles in the Wind*, there is a raid in the ghetto, when the children are taken away: "The light of the headlights cut stripes in the falling snow. The white fluff the angels shed fell on the open trucks which were filled to the brim with adults quivering in the cold—half an hour ago they were still children" (510). The book's protagonist, Daniel, is sheltering in a house with several other people, including a woman with her little boy. The military trucks are already in the next street. In the last desperate moment Daniel takes the little boy to the garden and builds a snow-man around him. The soldiers break into the house and search it thoroughly together with the garden and the attached shed. They notice the snowman, but don't realize that someone is hiding inside. One of the soldiers mockingly draws a Star of David on it. When the soldiers leave, the little boy emerges from the snow: "But it seemed to me that it was not Wilhelm who came out, but a new-born. Naked. Curly haired. Happy. ... The mixed choir of the living and the dead sang a lullaby to the snowman" (515–516).

Refuges: The magic of words

Words and books play a crucial role in helping and sometimes saving the persecuted or imprisoned children. Words have a special, sacred meaning in the Jewish tradition, which becomes reinforced when the children experience that words can in fact save lives. Words transport them to imaginary worlds, but they also help them escape seemingly hopeless situations, for example, when they invent stories to avoid being caught or lie about their age at the selections. Words, languages, and communication have a primordial importance in the camps. Many authors underline that those who were isolated in their mother tongue and had difficulties in communicating, like the Greek prisoners, became far more vulnerable than others.

Words, both written and uttered ones, have a magic power for Jóska in Nyíri's *Battlefields*. He is convinced that words can change realities. He occasionally tests the validity of this conviction, for example, when he utters God's name—which is strictly forbidden—and the world does not collapse... Slightly disappointed, he concludes that one always needs to check the reliability of the adults' statements. As the war escalates, he is upset that he doesn't know English, so he can't pronounce the words that would eliminate Hitler. His brother can only recall the verb "fade" instead of kill—no wonder Hitler survives.

One night a protagonist of Chava Rosenfarb's book hears a French song on his hidden radio in the Łódź ghetto. The simple romantic tune becomes a message of hope for him: "It was not just the love song of a woman in distant Paris. In the darkness of the shed, the words and the tune took on another significance. Now it meant that the enslaved world, and he, enslaved Samuel, were singing the song of freedom, 'I shall wait for you, day and night I shall wait for you'" (Rosenfarb, II. 35). The same song appears as a wartime message of hope in one of Joseph Bialot's novels as well (Bialot 2004, 25).

Inge Auerbach recalls with fondness the English lessons she was able to get in the Terezín camp. One day they learned the expression: "I wish I were." The possibility of expressing a desire for the future opened a whole new horizon for her. She wrote down the precious expression several times and used it in a poem about her wish to be free (Auerbach, 54–56). Grigory Kanovich recalls that during their flight from the approaching German troops, they were joined by a Russian soldier from the retreating Red Army: "He spoke without stopping. It was as if his words would distance him from imminent danger, or repress his growing fear for his life. The soldier's outpouring was like the incantation of a shaman that would ward off all woes and troubles" (Kanovich 2017, 500).

After months of internment, Ana Novac's state had seriously deteriorated. Sick, numb and exhausted, she was sent to the Auschwitz hospital barrack. One night the young patients recited poems to comfort each other. Ana discovered a girl who was equally passionate about literature and this encounter gave back her will to survive: "Pure delight! ... What a shower of words! What an orgy! Timeless, forgetting illness, there was nothing else, just the night, our voices, our eyes and our mutual burning curiosity. Everything that was the camp, everything that was not us, disappeared" (Novac 1992, 233).

The children learned that words can save lives, but they can also betray and bring mortal danger. When Michał Głowiński was hiding in an orphanage, he nearly gave himself away because he used a more sophisticated language than the uneducated country boys around him: "Once I used the word 'archipelago.' It sounded strange to them, and one of the boys claimed that everything foreign-sounded was Jewish, and declared, 'He is a Jew, because he speaks Yiddish.' From that moment on, I was careful not to use words that could evoke my classmates' suspicion" (Głowiński, 98).

The children also recognized the massive abuse of words by the Nazis and their followers. This often provided food for fun for them, but at the same time they frequently felt that the language itself had become an instrument of the murderers.

One of Jiří Robert Pick's characters in his biting satire about the Terezín camp, *The Society for the Protection of Animals*, is Mr. Brisch, a former bar violinist from Berlin, Herman Göring Strasse 7. Mr. Brisch is a secret Communist, who refuses to use his mother tongue. He expresses himself in broken, funny Czech: "Mr. Brisch... had renounced his nationality. That was why he had learned Czech. 'After ze var,' he said, 'zen ve vill see. If ze Chermans are decent people, zey vill go beck home. But if zey are ze Schweinehunde, zey vill stay here.' He refused to speak the same language that Adolf Hitler used" (Pick, 127). Mr. Brisch speaks German on one special occasion, when, in order to help one of their inmates to escape, he has to get hold of the keys of the hospital gate from one of the Catholic nurses. The freshly converted nuns are extremely rigid and it is impossible to negotiate with them, so Mr. Brisch has to resort to force. As the two fight fiercely for the key, he suddenly breaks out in an elaborate verbal assault. His language is so powerful and exquisite, that the nun, completely stunned, lets go of the key.

Literature

Many authors write about the extraordinary importance books had for them during their ordeal. They were a unique source of distraction and consolation. When they ventured out from their hiding places among the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, Janina Bauman and Uri Orlev's little Alex always looked for food and books in the abandoned flats after the deportation of their inhabitants. When they found some, whatever it was, they grabbed them and rushed back to their shelter, both ashamed and satisfied.

Confined to their grandparents' tiny flat following the German occupation of Budapest in the summer of 1944, Magda Dénes, her brother and her cousin take refuge in the marvellous world of books, reading through the stock of the local library: "We escaped our life for hours, and barely wanted to return" (Dénes, 250). When she is scolded or in danger, Magda recites poems to tune out blame and fear. During the siege of Budapest, when the family is sheltering in the outskirts of the city with fake identity papers, when people disappear, are killed, raped, and robbed all around him, *Battlefields'* Jóska is completely absorbed in his book, Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, a soothing tale about swapped identities. In the heated discussion about the meaning of their Jewishness, *Fateless's* Gyuri Köves also quotes *The Prince and the Pauper*, trying to prove to his companions that identity can well be a sheer external, social construction (Kertész 2006, 36).

Hiding from the fascists, both Wilhelm Dichter and Maciek, Louis Begley's protagonist, are deeply immersed in Adam Miczkiewicz's epic poem *Pan Tadeusz*. They find encouragement in the heroic struggle of Lithuanian-Polish noblemen against the far more powerful Teutons. Reading poems "filled in the empty spaces of your soul." Maciek also likes to recite old prayers, even though he is not religious. The words are beautiful and they represent continuity: they were repeated by generations before him and he hopes they will be recalled in the future as well. Thanks to these words, he belongs to a community and is less lonely and vulnerable (Begley, 96; 107).

Mary Berg recounts how she and her friends in the Warsaw ghetto were passionately discussing the works of Ignacy Wyspianski and Julian Tuwim, looking for relief and guidance in their words. Reading was a precious escape route for Mary. When someone lent her a book, she recounts that "my mattress ceased being dirty, I no longer felt the fleas or the hunger. I read the life of Catherine, who was a real heroine and behaved with great courage in difficult circumstances" (Berg, 201). Francine Christophe writes about the chil-

dren rambling around restlessly in Bergen-Belsen; only books were able to make them stay still. When she and her mother were transferred to another camp and were only allowed to take the most necessary items, her mother wanted to leave behind the two books they owned. Francine desperately protested and convinced her to dismantle the books and stuff the pages in their pockets (Christophe, 116).

When Gyuri Köves, in Kertész's *Fateless*, arrives at Buchenwald and learns that Goethe once lived nearby and that there is a tree he planted on the camp's grounds, he feels reassured. He recalls the lines of Goethe's *The Erl-King* that he learned in school, and feels he has something to hold onto (Kertész 2006, 127). Ruth Klüger recounts that in the forced labor factory they worked in, her mother asked an old worker, who occasionally helped them, to bring a book for her daughter. Some days later he brought an old, ravaged school text book. Ruth was overjoyed: "This present was far better than anything I was hoping for. A well-known gate has reopened and I found once again my familiar entrance to the world" (Klüger, 1997, 181). Ruth also recalls the poems that helped her enormously to endure the horrors of the camps. The magic of the words gave her encouragement and food for thought during the never-ending hours of roll calls or hard work. She was able to create a "bubble of one's own time," a fragile, but precious private space. She also composed her own verses, "both a poetic and a therapeutic attempt to refuse the absurd and destructive circus in which we descended" (141–146).

Cordelia Edvardson also highlights the crucial importance of words in her survival. She had been brought up with her mother's reading, poems, and songs. When she first arrived at Auschwitz, "even the poem, the fairy tale and the song fell silent. ... The girl was filled to the brim with the grey emptiness. ... Words that fell like heavy dead stones into the boundless, bottomless void" (Edvardson, 64–65). Nevertheless, later on words were "given back to her" and helped her to cope. On their way to work, she mechanically followed the orders shouted at them, but inside she recited her favorite poems learned from her mother: "Within its shelter, the girl was invisible and unreachable, here she could rest. ... She walked and walked, forgetting her gnawing hunger and the pain of exhaustion; she walked straight into the luminous eternity of the poem and let it fill her through and through" (13).

There are several scenes in Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life* that highlight the crucial importance of literature and arts that offer consolation to the ghetto's inmates and renew their motivation to fight for their dignity and survival. One of the book's key characters, Bunim, a starving poet, often feels miser-

able, but whenever he returns to literature, he regains strength. The young girls in the ghetto's gymnasium are profoundly moved by Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, a message of hope coming from the German culture, defying those who trample their own heritage. One of the most uplifting scenes of the book is a poetry reading in the ghetto painter's flat. Listening to music and poems, discussing ideas, and looking at paintings the young adolescents have an intoxicating feeling of freedom and hope (Rosenfarb, II, 205–212).

Writing

Like many adolescents, 13-year-old Livia Bitton-Jackson wrote poems. Her notebook was one of her most precious objects that she took with her when they had to move to the ghetto. One day the prisoners were ordered to hand in every piece of paper, book, and document. Livia hesitated at first, but at the last moment she decided to hide her poems, risking severe punishment. When all books, documents, family photos, and letters were gathered in front of the synagogue, the soldiers set them on fire. Later, when they were deported, Livia found no other solution than to ask the friendly Hungarian soldier who escorted them to take care of her notebook. He solemnly promised to preserve it and the prospect that she'd find her poems upon her return gave the young girl hope throughout her deportation. After several months spent in Auschwitz and Płaszów, Livia was transferred to a forced labor camp and worked in a factory. She asked one of her co-workers, an older German man, who sometimes furtively helped her, to bring her some paper. When she managed to find a pencil and was able to write poems again, she felt she had become a human being again (Bitton-Jackson, 58–61; 166).

Writing was an existential need for Ana Novac from a young age. In the camps writing became her lifeline and also an act of resistance. She wrote on every possible scrap of paper, under the most difficult of circumstances. She had a "hunger to write that was stronger than any other hunger, any other fear, stronger than fleas, than diarrhea. It was stronger than the Reich!" (Novac 1992, xi) Writing was a dangerous activity in the camp and after a while Ana's notebook had to be smuggled out. She also entrusted it to a soldier, a murderer in this case, who, miraculously, delivered it to her neighbors.

Writing was a vital necessity for Jacov Lind as well. During his years of hiding under an assumed identity he could not risk writing because it would not have fit the person he was pretending to be. Reflecting on this, he noted, "Writing was something I dreamed to do again in peacetime, something beautiful

and pleasant that will only occur when one is allowed to live again” (Lind, 112). Unable to wait until the war ended, Jacov occasionally found a solution by feigning that he was writing love-letters to his sweetheart in Holland. David, Bogdan Wojdowski’s protagonist, collected scrap-paper in the ghetto to produce an illustrated literary journal, *CHRONICLE of our courtyard*. He wrote about a world that was related to the one in which he lived, but was superior and full of hope. The journal also gained him the recognition of his companions, many of them tough boys who managed to survive in the ghetto thanks to criminal activities (Wojdowski, 98–100).

Music and other forms of art

Through literature and art the youngsters also felt less excluded; they felt a connection with others who shared the same values, independent of borders and historical epochs. They had the sensation that even if they perished, literature and art would continue to exist. Before the liquidation of the Łódź ghetto, the authorities confiscated the inmates’ musical instruments. One of the outstanding musicians intended to burn his violin rather than hand it over, but at the last minute he changed his mind: “Let the violin survive me. Let’s someone’s hands hold it... Let’s someone’s ear lean against it. From the violin’s insides, that ear will surely hear my voice. I’m inside it.’ ... ‘The poet Rilke said ... that when music speaks, it speaks to God, not to us. We stand in its way, so it passes through us. It is we who are the violins” (Rosenfarb, III. 272–273).

Music, arts, and all other forms of culture helped the imprisoned children remember that beautiful and sublime things existed; they transposed them into elevated, human dimensions far away from the bleak universe of the ghettos and camps. It could be as simple as humming a melody. Ceija Stojka recalls the power of singing in the camps:

I have also sung a lot in the camps, many of us did, just for oneself, inside, in one’s head, without a sound. Like this you could sing to chase away fear or bad thoughts. You think of the song and you are already someone else. My mother has been humming along all the time. She has been continuously singing my father’s song. ... Often you were standing next to another woman in the rank and you heard her singing inside. It was a way of surpassing all that trouble, all that misery. (Stojka 2018, 236–237)

Judith Magyar Isaakson recounts that one day in Auschwitz-Birkenau the prisoners had to stand for hours in the pouring rain after a roll call. Someone began to sing a sentimental Hungarian song, "Above me weeps the sky," and as if a wave of thrill had run through the crowd of prisoners, the others joined in. They sang so forcefully that the capos didn't even try to stop them (Isaakson, 76–77). Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who became a member of the Auschwitz female orchestra at the age of seventeen, relates that playing music was a life-saving opportunity for the orchestra's members and eventually their family members. It spared them (often only momentarily) selections and hard work and they enjoyed slightly improved conditions. But, most importantly, the beauty of the music reminded them that they were human beings and not animals of prey.

Edith Bruck and her family spent five weeks in the ghetto before they were deported. As she recalls that time, "I sang and danced, which often angered everyone. My mother would say, 'Poor thing! She's a half-wit. That's just what I need!' Singing and dancing saved me from madness" (Bruck, 2001, 23). In the rude and tough life of the orphanage in the Italian mountains where Aldo Zargani was hidden, his only private domain, his island of peace were the lullabies he sang to himself after black-out, including an old nursery rhyme his grandfather used to sing to him (Zargani, 62; 116). Michał Głowiński talks about the importance of music when he was taking refuge in a Catholic orphanage and assisted the Sunday masses. In his shabby and destitute existence this was the only occasion, "when the sublime was made manifest" (Głowiński, 113).

One day little Joske, András Mezei's protagonist, has a conversation with a ravaged beggar who plays the violin in the streets of the Budapest ghetto. The boy feels sorry for the beggar's miserable state, but the man replies, "Oh, my son, it's easier for me than for the others. Why? Because I play music to them and sing. ... What would happen to them, if I didn't do it? When one hears music, one should not think, there one can't think of anything bad, I tell you, my son" (Mezei 1984, 48). Bogdan Wojdowski recounts the story of Natan Lerch, a world-class violinist who became famous in the US and returned to Poland to visit his elderly parents, when he was caught up in the "final solution." Locked in the ghetto, first he played in the theatre, then in a restaurant, but later he was forced to beg on the streets. In the end, he didn't have enough strength to descend to the street; he opened his window and played to the street kids, to the miserable, sick, and starving people who gathered in front of his house. Many had never been to a concert in their life; they listened to him spellbound (Wojdowski, 241–261).

In the darkness of their hiding place in the sewers, Krysha Chiger's father wrote plays and short sketches that the adults and children performed together. Some members of the group did not participate in this activity, considering it a waste of time, "but doing so was how we reminded ourselves that we were still a civilized group, that we could be creative and productive, that we were human beings after all. We came to look forward to these performances—the sewer workers, too. ... These aberrations from routine were life itself" (Chiger, 215).

In several ghettos and camps the prisoners prepared concerts and theatre performances, risking their lives. One evening in Auschwitz, hungry and exhausted, András Juda Garai entered the block master's separated space in their barrack. To his surprise, he found himself in the middle of a cabaret performance. He was immediately transposed to a different world. At the end of the piece, a musician played some pieces from Peer Gynt and Carmen. The experience was so overwhelming that András broke down sobbing. Throughout his deportation he forced himself to be strong and hardy; he only cried once, when he buried his best friend, but the beauty of the music shook him so profoundly that the protective shield he built around himself cracked (103).

Otto Dov Kulka's most significant memories from the family camp at Auschwitz were the lessons he received from his fellow prisoners in the improvised school and in the hospital barrack. One of the inmates gave the children history lessons, another introduced him to world literature, yet another offered him his only book, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. There was a satirical cabaret in the youth barracks with themes like "Solutions to the German Question." One young man organized a choir and the children sang Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* next to the crematoriums. As in Chava Rosenfarb's novel, the evocation of this particular piece of music was both a romantic act of recalling universal human values and an act of defiance vis-a-vis the German soldiers, who were destroying them, together with their own cultural treasures. These enriching moments were "the means of the continued upholding of the values we had brought with us from the humanistic heritage" and were acts of resistance (26; 47–48).

Elie Wiesel describes an apocalyptic night during the death march, when the mass of exhausted, half-dead prisoners arrived at the camp at Gleiwitz. In the barrack Elie found Julieck, a young Polish violinist, who had played in the camp orchestra in Buna. In the middle of the night, with great effort, Julieck managed to free himself from under the pile of dead and dying bodies, pulled out his violin, and began to play:

The darkness enveloped us. All I could hear was the violin, and it was as if Juliek's soul had become his bow. He was playing his life. His whole being was gliding over the strings. His unfulfilled hopes. His charred past, his extinguished future. He played that which he would never play again. ... When I awoke at daybreak, I saw Juliek facing me, hunched over, dead. Next to him lay his violin, trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse. (93–94)

Escape routes: Nature

Nature often remains the only domain of freedom and beauty for the persecuted and imprisoned children. The ghettos are meticulously designed to exclude nature. There are no parks, no flowers, no trees left, except for some tiny islands. In the camps the prisoners' space is usually completely barren; Goethe's oak tree left in the middle of Buchenwald is a mockery. Sometimes the sky remains the only refuge that is not contaminated by the horror and filth of the surrounding world.

Michał Głowiński writes that everything in the Warsaw ghetto had the same colour, "the sort of color that might signify every collective misfortune: a gray-brown-black ... a kind of 'discoloredness.' ... Even the most intensive rays of sunlight would not brighten or even vaguely tint this discoloredness. But did the sun ever shine in the ghetto? Can the sun appear in a place without an inch of green?" (Głowiński, 6–7). Elżbieta Ettinger also describes the bleakness of the Warsaw ghetto: "The only place where some trees are growing is the garden surrounding the church for converts. I took Emmi for a walk there. ... I wanted the child to see what a tree looks like and how it smells. The first tiny green leaves had just come out. Emmi wanted me to give her a branch or a leaf; she wanted to touch it, but I was afraid to pick it" (Ettinger 1970, 235). Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar* starts with a passionate ode to trees and the absurdity of their interdiction in the ghetto. In the final scene of the book the narrator contemplates the landscape from the tiny window of the cattle car on way to an extermination camp, completely absorbed in the admiration of the trees.

Ana Novac describes her astonishment when she realizes that throughout her deportation from camp to camp, she was deprived of nature. "All of a sudden I understand what the feeling of absence is that I carry around with me so unhappily: the absence of green. At Auschwitz I didn't see any trees, and none on this long Polish road, either; not one from the time they first put me on a train. Strange that I hadn't noticed it. Are they even 'exterminating' the trees? Shit" (Novac 1997, 53–54). One day in the Warsaw ghetto David, Bog-

dan Wojdowski's protagonist, walks into a stable, where a coachman lives with his family. The little boy inhales the smell of leather that reminds him of the smell of summer meadows. He's delighted. The young son of the coachman does not understand what is happening to him:

Dawid asks him: "Don't you know what a meadow is?"

'No, I don't,' replies the little boy.

"But I remember,' ...

'What else do you remember? Tell me.'

'Pine trees.'

'What are pine trees?'"

(Wojdowski, 94)

In Icchokas Meras' *Stalemate*, which takes place within the closed walls of the Vilnius ghetto, plants, flowers, and animals—every sign of nature—is forbidden. Planting a flower is considered an act of resistance that is punished. Isaac, the young protagonist of the book, who works outside the ghetto, wants to smuggle in flowers for Esther, his beloved. When he is caught, he is severely beaten and his flowers are thrown away. Nevertheless, he keeps trying. One day he is caught and punished again and his flowers are trampled on the ground. Once they pass the checkpoint at the gate, the young boy discovers that each of his fellow laborers had smuggled in a flower for him. That day he goes to meet his sweetheart with a huge bucket of fresh daisies (Meras, 48–52).

After many months of hiding in a dark and minuscule space in the sewers, Krysha Chiger becomes seriously depressed. She wants to breathe fresh air, see the sun, and to hold a fresh bouquet of flowers in her hands. Seeing her miserable state, one day the Polish sewage worker who takes care of them takes her to a hidden opening. She recalls, "It was the first bit of sunshine I had seen in over a year. I lifted my face to it, to soak in its warmth. I could not believe it, that I was feeling this little bit of sunshine. A part of me had believed the sun had set so long ago" (Chiger, 224). She returns to their hiding place full of hope and energy.

Hanna Krall evokes a plant with a velvety stem and a small yellow blossom that remained the only reliable companion of the hidden little girl who keeps moving between unknown families and hiding places in occupied Warsaw: "This is the only thing you recognize. You are going to new, strange people, the wall is new and strange, and the fence, and even the sky, because the clouds you tried to remember when you were leaving have long since disappeared (you are

trying to push your sweaty hand into the hand of the man who walks beside you, but the man is so tense from having to be with you in the street in broad daylight that he cannot possibly notice your hand) and only the light yellow flower is the same, intimately yours. And that is loneliness. When you notice the flower, you immediately calm down. You know that everything can be new and strange, but at least the earth is the same, beyond doubt” (Krall, 22).

During their perilous flight from Jonava, Grigory Kanovich’s family and their companions stop to rest in a farm during the night. Lying on a hay loft, the little boy contemplates the sky: “The sky was lit by bright June stars while around the farm a line of ancient chestnut trees protected the pristine peace like knights of old. There were no Germans or Lithuanians or Jews, just human beings. Beneath the bright nocturnal firmament there was only the pungent, peaceful scent of cut hay and a vision of a world not desecrated either by ungodly hatred or bloodshed” (Kanovich 2017, 493).

In Chava Rosenfarb’s book there is a scanty cherry tree in the Łódź ghetto that no one notices at the beginning. However, during the first spring, the tree suddenly starts to bring forth new leaves and begins blossoming. It immediately becomes the centre of attention and social life in the ghetto:

It seemed strange, almost abnormal, that a tree should burst into bloom in such surroundings. And this marvel that bordered on the miraculous, filled people’s hearts both with hope and with a kind of philosophical resentment—that the world, that Mother Nature carried on as if nothing had happened. ... In the evening, after curfew, young and old alike would stream out from every nook and cranny towards the tree. ... The cherry tree, its colour dissolving into the darkness, seemed enormous, as if the cupola of the sky were its crown. The white blossoms looked like stars while the moon—like one huge flowering blossom. The people under the cherry tree began to feel very close to one another. ... Peace and tranquillity reigned in the empty yard with its shut gate. There were no Germans, there was no war. There was only this night, this dreaming earth, and spread out upon it, cuddling next to it was a flock of tired sleepy children. (Rosenfarb, II. 43; 52)

People start to call the cherry tree “the tree of life” and it brings them hope and beauty until the complete destruction of the ghetto. At the very end the members of the last hiding group are still able to harvest its last fruits and take some when they are caught and pushed into the cattle cars. One of the young protagonists offers some to the ghetto’s leader, who is deported with the last

train-load: “Here, Mr Rumkowski, taste a cherry from our cherry tree. ... It’s a remedy for the heart” (Rosenfarb, III. 361).

The beauty, the vastness, the unbridled freedom of nature appears as a consolation, something to lean on even in the worst situations. On the death march towards Auschwitz, during a clear, freezing winter night, forgetting for a split second fear, hunger, and abandonment, nine-year-old Anita Lobel is captivated by the striking beauty of nature: “Above us the moon was full. The open sky was dense with stars. ‘How beautiful this is,’ I whispered to my brother. ‘Just think. If we were safe at home, we could have never have known this’” (Lobel, 122). Nadine Heftler is also able to find consolation in the beautiful sunrises during the early morning roll calls in Auschwitz. During the evacuation of the camp, when the prisoners walk through occupied Poland like an enormous black river, Nadine can’t resist admiring the beauty of nature, the snow-covered trees illuminated by the pale winter sun (Heftler, 40). Whenever he can, the kid, Mária Ember’s young protagonist, ventures out of the camp at Strasshof to see the vast meadows with growing plants. He knows he risks his life and if she finds him, his mother would severely punish him; still he is unable to stop himself (Ember, 143).

Sometimes just the image of the sky or sights of nature give a spell of hope to the imprisoned people. In Chava Rosenfarb’s book people in the Łódź ghetto long for rooms with a ‘free view.’ from where segments of nature can be seen. The most appreciated are the ones where not even the barbed wire is visible (Rosenfarb, II, 205–212; III. 34). In Auschwitz, Tania, Zdena Berger’s protagonist, finds support in the presence of the sun:

“You close your eyes and the sun makes red squares under your eyelids.” I feel warm. I like the sun. It is so high and yet feels so close. It is like a thing from the past that still exists. ... “Sun and maybe music. And books, of course. Yes. These three things are very hard to lose. Back home, when we couldn’t go anywhere—no school, theatre, movies—we could still read, we could still listen to music. And we had the sun. Now there is only the sun.” (Berger, 82).

Otto Dov Kulka writes about the beauty of the blue summer sky of Auschwitz which transported him to another dimension, far away from the grim realities of the camp:

When this boy ... asks himself ... where you escape to in pursuit of the beauty and the innocence of your childhood landscapes, the answer is: to those blue

skies and silver aeroplanes, those toys, and the quiet and tranquillity that seemed to exist all around; because I took in nothing but that beauty and those colours, and so they have remained in my memory. This contrast is an integral element of the black columns that are swallowed up in the crematoria, the barbed-wire fences that are stretched tight all around by the concrete pillars. But in that experience all this seemingly did not exist, only in the background and not consciously. Consciousness has internalized and submerged the bold summer colours of that immense space; of the cerulean skies, the aeroplanes—and of the boy gazing at them and forgetting everything around him. (Kulka, 75–76)

Nature becomes a catalyst that helps Ruth Klüger to push her mother and a friend to decide to run away from the prisoners' convoy during the evacuation of the camp: "There was the lure which arose from the surrounding land. In spite of the cold of that February, there was the promise of spring in the air, a seduction I have felt every February since that time. ... You could feel it merely a few steps from the misery of the camps, which we carried with us on our backs together with the blanket and the yellow patch. Out there was the breath of nature, organic, silent" (Klüger, 129–130). After their escape and a night spent hiding in a barn and a good wash, "the countryside seemed freshly washed, too. Nature had thus far been largely a matter of cold and heat to be endured during roll call and work. Now it was full of gleaming objects. The land seemed to welcome us, as if asking us to live up to our new roles" (136).

Memory as a refuge

Memory is a precious refuge and a source of hope for the persecuted children. Deprived of everything, separated from their families and friends, hiding or imprisoned, they can still return to their recollections of the past that remind them of who they are, who their beloved ones are, and nurture the hope that they will find each other again. The estate in the middle of the forest where one of Ilona Karmel's protagonists used to live becomes an *estate of memory*; a place to return to, where she can reunite with the people she loves. Shlomo Breznitz roams around in his rich *fields of memory*, trying to conjure up his lost father and childhood.

Several authors describe their pre-war childhood as a heaven of harmony and fun, a miraculous lost paradise; "a life, where everything had its place and time" (Konrad, 139). Michał Głowiński talks about "the mythical time before

the war,” and Ilona Karmel writes about “a world that was still a world.” Louis Begley evokes the “golden year of 1937” (Głowiński, 45; Karmel, 12; Begley, 52). Zdena Berger’s Tania conjures the times when she and her friend talked about “the world as if it were solid, touchable and we could close our hands around it, turn it and see all sides of it” (Berger, 28). She frequently recalls scenes from the past, listing every tiny detail, and these trips to her past take her away from the appalling conditions of the camps.

Éva Fahidi relates that in Auschwitz, whenever she started to sink into apathy, she summoned up the past. This gave her strength to carry on: “I was afraid that I’d forget who I was. So each morning when the horrible shouts of *los! los!*—quickly! quickly!—woke us up, ...I repeated my name, my address, and searched for something in my head, a poem, a tune, anything I could remember, before I dragged myself out to the Appel” (Fahidi, 196–197). Aranka Siegal also underlines that her memories helped her to preserve a sense of herself during the deportation: “All through my internment in concentration camps I held on to my memories. These were my only identity left after all other recognition was stripped away. ... I would go over them often until in my moments of fantasy I was back in the countryside of Komyat and be myself, instead of the skeletal figure with head shaved, in a dirty, shapeless grey sack, wooden shoes, starving, with hunger pains in Auschwitz, a place devoid of nature, surrounded by death” (Siegal interview 2009).

Joseph Bialot also stresses the importance of preserving memories, even in the most atrocious conditions of the camps:

Never forget who you have been and know where you are Remember yourself and the others, most of all the others, if you want to remain who you are Here one has to remember even the most banal of days so one does not forget the references of the outside world, does not erase the past, does not annul the teaching of our forefathers, without life there is no ethic, without morals there is no law, without law oblivion wins and triumphant oblivion is the victory of the Black Order. (Bialot 2002, 131–139)

In his lonely misery in the Warsaw ghetto, Bogdan Wojdowski’s young hero, David, recalls the stamp collection he had before the war. He lists the stamps one by one, evoking every tiny detail: their colour, their images, the exact place where he put the precious new stamps in his album, the walk with his father to the philatelist’s shop. Each stamp meant a whole unknown world to him and by recalling them he is able to relive some of the past’s enchantment (Woj-

dowski, 80–81). One day Maurice Cling hears the Auschwitz orchestra playing a popular French song:

When I heard that the orchestra at the entry gate played *La Madelon*, I could not help but to get emotional, exactly like when I saw a Renault truck standing by the road. This irruption of the past and the country into this, in every sense, strange world recalled that buried deep inside me I have another self; that another world used to exist and keeps existing somewhere else. (Cling, 98)

Ana Novac recalls the days without work in the camp when the prisoners recount their lives before the war:

We spent all day and all night talking about how we had lived, how we had dressed, what we had eaten in our “civilian” existence. That existence seemed so far away, almost legendary, that our own words sounded foolish, even suspicious, to us. Yet they were very simple stories: “in my bedroom the rug was like this,” or “Mama used to say that.” And there we were in a fictional world, where one had her room, where one said the word “Mama” quite naturally. (Novac 1997, 295)

Six months after the separation from his parents, Aharon Appelfeld had the sensation that his past had disappeared forever: “My previous life seemed so far away, it was as if it had never been. Only at night, in my sleep, would I be next to my mother and father, in the yard or on the street. Awakening in the morning was a blow, like a slap in the face” (Appelfeld 2004, 54). Later, when he was hiding in the forests of Ukraine, surrounded by nature, he was able to find some calm and travel back to his past: “The little boy who was on the verge of getting lost—or even killed—in that savage foreign land could go back to being the child of his father and his mother: walking with them along summer streets, an ice-cream cone in his hand, or swimming with them in the River Prut. These hours of grace preserved me from spiritual extinction at the time, and afterward as well” (139).

Flashbacks of the past keep returning to the inmates in Ilona Karmel’s book as well, often in their dreams:

Their riches, though, were all of the past. After the names of husband and child came “of blessed memory”... and memory seemed as an estate where those remembered had chosen to dwell ... Moonlight lit up the barracks. Then,

blurred by sleep, a voice would call a name of long ago, another called, then another. She listened: from the estates of blessed memory the dead were coming into the night. (Karmel, 354–358)

Summoning up the past offers the children an intimate space of refuge where they can retreat from the horrors of their present and recover their former world. However, it can prove to be a painful exercise as well, reminding them of their losses. Therefore they sometimes block their memories and push them back to the distant regions of their minds, occasionally burying them so deep that they can no longer extract them, even after the war.

In Ilona Karmel's book the majority of the camp's prisoners cling to their memories which give them strength and hope, while Tola, the only survivor of a wealthy, prestigious family, intends to wipe away the traces of the past from her mind. To erase the pain of their loss, she tries to forget her parents who were shot during the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto: "They had not been killed, they had simply never existed; she had always been alone—this camp, this bunk her only home, the only greeting of her mornings the hoarse 'All up!' Grief was just this: the tension between this disbelief ... and the faith that they once had been, had smiled at her, had touched her face" (Karmel, 41).

Maurice Cling describes a similar reaction: "I know too well that it is treacherous to evoke the past's happiness; it makes one feel sorry for oneself and start to slide down on the slippery slope of despair. To prevent this I locked deep in myself the memory of my family and of the spoilt child I have been, preserving that world of pure values and tenderness to an eventual future" (Cling 156–157).

Escape routes: Solidarity

Solidarity was a key factor of survival within the ghettos and camps and for those in hiding. The secret clandestine networks of aid helped Hanna Krall, Michał Głowiński, Janina Bauman, and many other persecuted children to survive. Krysha Chiger often stresses that without the help of the two sewer workers, her family and their friends would not have held out. She noticed that several persons in their group were reluctant to cooperate and to share tasks and their meagre provisions. One night they secretly abandoned their improvised shelter, taking some of the others' belongings. The situation of those who were left behind became more difficult, but also easier, because group cohesion became stronger afterwards. Krysha's group survived nearly intact the 14 months of hiding, while those who left all perished.

One of the means of annihilation used by the Nazi system was to destroy every possible tie that united people. Camp authorities kept re-arranging and re-organizing the prisoners, repeatedly fracturing families, groups of friends, and other links. The slightest manifestations of solidarity and mutual help among the prisoners were severely punished. Systemic privations, hard physical chores, continuous humiliations, the omnipresent danger of death, and regular severing of human contacts aimed to turn the prisoners into a homogenous mass of subhuman beings or “Stücke” (pieces) to be processed. Isolated, people became more vulnerable and could be turned against each other more easily in their desperate struggle for survival.

The books that take place in the camps and ghettos show that two principles existed side by side in these closed, condemned universes. On the one hand, there was a ruthless economy of privileges that created strict and merciless hierarchies, where the chances of survival were very uneven. On the other hand, there were networks of sharing and mutual support that considerably improved the prisoners’ lives and contributed to their survival.

Chava Rosenfarb, Bogdan Wojdowski, Jiří Pick, Edgar Hilsenrath, and many others depict the cruel hierarchies of their respective ghettos and the merciless struggle to stay alive. Ilona Karmel, Tomáš Radil, András Juda Garai, Otto Rosenberg, and other camp survivors describe the superimposed layers of power in the camps, in which the prisoners’ chances of survival depended on the place they occupied in this system. There are distressing descriptions about the ways the prisoners’ desperate struggle for life was used to serve the Nazi machine of destruction and exploitation.

In this context human bonds and solidarity, sharing and mutual help were key factors of survival. Several children, including Imre Kertész, Tomáš Radil, and Jacov Lind, survived thanks to doctors and solidary helpers who managed to keep them in the hospital wards even after curing them of their ailments, providing some protection against strenuous work and selections. Sometimes a simple gesture of goodwill carried enormous meaning. It showed that someone noticed the children’s dismal state and meant to help them; that there remained some humanity and compassion even in the worst circumstances. Anita Lobel recalls how grateful she was when in a barrack in Auschwitz the prisoners treated her and her little brother as children, trying to comfort them. Joseph Bialot recounts a New Year’s Eve in Auschwitz when one of the inmates offered him a piece of stolen cracker. He refused it at first, but when he finally put it into his mouth and it started to dissolve, “something broke inside me and for some minutes I became a human again: I was crying” (Bialot, 103).

In one of the camps where he was interned, Otto Rosenberg was assigned to work in the fields outside the campsite, near the house of a civilian foreman. After working for a while, he noticed that the foreman's wife put a glass of milk on the windowsill:

I was not permitted to accept anything from them, and they were not even allowed to speak to us. I was working directly under the window and just looked in like this. Then she put the milk down for me. I just continued working at first, then I took it. That was as if the sky made the great big sun to shine and it was raining May rain—that is what it was like, such joy. (Rosenberg, 100)

One day in the Płaszów camp, Ana Novac's group was assigned to carry out heavy field work in suffocating heat. Ana was thin, small, and weak; she lagged far behind her companions. Despite her fear of punishment, she was about to give up, when one of the women came back to help her. Later she helped Ana out on several occasions. At the beginning Ana mistrusted her, but they gradually became friendly; the girl came from a village near her birthplace, was a communist, and a gifted sculptor. During the infernal train ride that took them to Auschwitz, she looked after Ana for days. However, at the end of the trip she fell ill and died. Getting out of the wagon Ana discovered that with her last effort she had saved her precious notebooks: "I went through hell. I got to know one HUMAN BEING there. Maybe I'll become an adult" (Novac 1992, 93–96; 153–155).

In Zdena Berger's *Tell Me Another Morning*, there are three young girls who stick together and help each other through years of deportation in four concentration camps. They have different backgrounds and personalities, but they forge a strong friendship that helps them to survive. They share their food, belongings, news; they cooperate in work and save one another's lives several times. In the rare cases when they manage to find some extra food, they often split it with those who are unable to obtain it themselves: "I honestly believe that none of us would have survived without the others," said Zdena Berger in an interview (Berger interview 2008).

Ilona Karmel's *An Estate of Memory* narrates the story of four women who meet in the Płaszów labor camp. Despite their differences of character, former social position, and experiences, they unite their forces to save the life of a child one of them is pregnant with. From isolated individuals who strive to survive under the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the camp, they become a small, strong community that is able to achieve the inconceivable: protect

and nurture the pregnant woman until she gives birth and smuggle the child out of the camp. Their shared goal gives a sense to their existence and lends them unexpected strength and resourcefulness. Solidarity breaks the walls of their solitude and alienation and distinguishes them from most of their inmates whose life becomes a brutally egoistic battle for survival.

After getting the child to safety, one of the four women, Tola, cracks and volunteers to become a capo's helper. However, after a temporary relief, enjoying slightly more comfort and slightly more food, she begins to feel isolated, unhappy, and vulnerable. The reader learns from the epilogue that she finally returns to protect the last surviving member of the group and dies during the evacuation of the camp.

Many authors describe such small groups of friendship and solidarity that were indispensable for their survival in the camps. If a larger community was also able to organize itself according to these principles, if a purposeful goal kept a group together, people were able to diminish their vulnerability and suffering, even in the worst circumstances. Several authors evoke the social organization in Terezín and in several other ghettos, like Vilnius, and in some sections of certain camps that maintained structures of mutual aid and solidarity. Livia Bitton-Jackson describes how during the weeks they spent in the ghetto of Nagymagyar people organized and helped each other, making it easier to endure their conditions. Otto Dov Kulka recalls that in the family camp at Auschwitz the prisoners were able to reconstruct some community institutions and organize mutual help and activities, including cultural events and teaching. The 'Buchenwald boys' were able to survive thanks to the support the resistance networks organised for them. Ceija Stojka and Otto Rosenberg highlight that solidarity was very strong among the Gypsy deportees and was a key factor of their survival.

Aharon Appelfeld notes that those who had genuine faith, either in their ideology, like the Communists, or their God, like the truly devoted, remained human even in the worst conditions in the camps. Ruth Klüger mentions as well that in Auschwitz the Zionists and the Socialists represented a strong constructive, collective spirit. Joseph Bialot also underlines that faith or a strong political commitment, principally among that of the Communists and Social-Democrats, helped people to join forces to improve the situation of a whole group.

There were cases when solidarity turned into self-sacrifice. Some works evoke family members who committed suicide hoping to help the remaining ones or children who chose death in order to save someone. Ruth Klüger recalls

her former classmate, who decided to stay with her father, a Sonderkommando member, when the camp was evacuated, even though she knew that it meant a death sentence. Otto Rosenberg recounts that when the Gypsy camp was liquidated and some of the prisoners were selected to be sent to another camp, his friend Oscar exchanged his number with someone to be able to stay with his young brother, so he wouldn't have to face death alone. Arnošt Lustig tells the story of a little boy who protected his friend with his body when a German soldier wanted to shoot him for stealing bread.

The Righteous ones

The authors also consider it very important to keep alive the memory of those often nameless people who helped or actually saved them, risking their own lives by providing documents, bringing them food or other indispensable goods, or sheltering them. They often name them, underlining the importance of their often invisible assistance. They recall simple gestures that became enormous in the midst of discrimination, humiliations, and persecution; small deeds that helped them to feel human again. The Righteous ones were teachers, nannies, schoolmates' parents, neighbors, acquaintances, or completely unknown persons. Sometimes they became the only representatives of a decent adult world the children could still trust. Quite often teachers played this role. They protected and supported the persecuted children, representing a unique, precious pillar of humanity in an increasingly hostile world.

When Holland was occupied by the Nazis and Jews were no longer allowed to attend public schools, Gerhard Durlacher took private lessons with a Jewish teacher: "The weekly lessons were a relief rather than a burden to me; an enchanted garden, to which fear had no access." The happy routine ended with the suicide of the teacher. The child's former, non-Jewish headmaster continued to give him private lessons, neglecting the danger this represented. When Gerhard's family was arrested and waited to be deported at the local police headquarters, he managed to pay them a last visit: "Dr Logemann stood at the door of our cell. Older, gentler, having trouble holding back his tears. A math book in his hand: 'Take this with you, maybe you can still do something over there. They let me come and wish you bon voyage'" (Durlacher 1991, 40–41).

Judith Magyar Isaakson evokes her beloved Latin and literature teacher, Dr Biczó, who came to see her at the fence of the ghetto to give her one of his most cherished books. Edith Bruck recalls with gratitude her primary school

teacher who defended her when her schoolmates started to ostracize her. Rebellious Sarah Kofman, who incessantly fought with her mother and other adults, became so attached to her primary school teacher, who stood by her even in the Paris under occupation, that she chose her family name when they went into hiding under assumed identities. In the poor Paris neighborhood where Maurice Cling grew up, for two years no one attacked him in his school, because the teachers tacitly protected him. One of them, Mr Delbay, made his students perform Racine's play, *Esther*, and occasionally took Maurice out for long walks; a rare luxury, the young boy did not dare to risk on his own.

Menyhért Lakatos paints a portrait of Mr Garabuczi, who defended him against the attacks of the other children and his own colleagues. János Nyíri also depicts two excellent teachers, Mr Dévai, from the village Jewish school, and Mr Torma in Budapest, a devout Christian and Hungarian patriot who stood up for human values, risking his job and later his life. In *Kaddish* Imre Kertész evokes the unnamed "Teacher," who, before the camp's evacuation, risks his life in order to give him his portion of food for the journey. Otto Dov Kulka honors the memory of those people who taught him fundamental lessons about culture, science, and life in the Auschwitz family camp. Tomáš Radil recalls with gratitude several adults who felt it important to transmit to him their experience and knowledge, guiding and protecting him in the camp.

Several authors evoke their extremely heroic teachers in the ghettos and camps, who, braving the interdiction of education, organized clandestine classes in caves or flats. In some cases, in Terezín, for example, they even managed to smuggle in books and other educational material to furnish basic education. These lessons provided the children with meaningful activities and transmitted values, knowledge, and snapshots of a different, human world that helped them to cope with their conditions.

One of these remarkable teachers is Mr. Baum in Bogdan Wojdowski's book. Schools were closed in the Warsaw ghetto, but Mr. Baum went to David's home and gave him lessons in exchange for a bowl of soup. He introduced the little boy to a fascinating, rich human and natural world. Listening to his spirited explanations about the universe, history, and the arts, David was able to lose himself in other possible worlds and envisage a positive, free future for himself. In the dreadful day of the final action, David perceived Mr. Baum in the middle of the human flow that was pushed towards the ghetto's gate. He stopped for a minute, looked at the boy and called out to him: "David, remember!" (Wojdowski, 344).

A similarly inspiring figure is Miss Diamond, a lonely, somewhat haughty spinster in Chava Rosenfarb's book about the Łódź ghetto. At the beginning Miss Diamond kept her distance from people and her Jewish heritage (including Yiddish which she considered a language of the plebs), convinced that she did not belong in the ghetto. She was, nevertheless, a dedicated teacher, eager to introduce the children to the treasures of universal and Polish culture, to show them beauty and humanity even among their rapidly degrading conditions. Her life in the ghetto and her deepening relationships with her pupils and neighbors gradually changed her. She became able to open up, to give and receive love, to appreciate simple human gestures. Her teaching had a deep impact on her young students that continued accompanying them even after Miss Diamond's deportation.

Nannies also played a very special role in the persecuted children's life. Between the two world wars many better-off Jewish households employed household help, including live-in nannies, who often played a key role in the children's education. Nannies were usually young, often Catholic girls from modest households in the countryside. The world of nannies, their views, their language, the places they frequented, the way they interacted with others, and eventually their own homes and families, provided Jewish children with first-hand experience of other people's lives. It was one of their key entry points into the majority society.

When, due to the war and discriminatory regulations, their nannies had to leave them, the children understood that something was going seriously wrong. There were cases where the nannies remained with the Jewish families despite the official interdictions—in cases even against the will of their own families—and became their main support. Often they were genuine heroines, helping the endangered families in their worsening life conditions, assisting them even when they went into hiding or were locked in ghettos. In some cases they hid with them and managed to save the lives of the children—and sometimes even of their parents.

Anita Lobel's Niania was a tough, stubborn, profoundly Catholic village woman, who did not like Jews. Still, she helped the family throughout the war years and remained attached to them even after the war, until her death. As the persecution intensified, she came up with ideas for finding food or money, and organized hiding places and communication between family members. For a while she took the children to her own village, pretending they were hers. This in itself was a remarkably courageous act for an unmarried woman in the very conservative Polish countryside. She was the only person both Anita and

her brother trusted blindly and whose love and protection continued accompanying them in the worst of their ordeals. The families of Janina Bauman and Norman Manea were also lucky to have nannies of extraordinary character who helped them throughout the war and afterwards.

Other Righteous ones could be far more distant acquaintances and even completely unknown people. Livia Bitton-Jackson names one of her classmates and her mother, who dared to go to the fence of the ghetto in their little town to bring food to her starving family (Bitton-Jackson, 49–51). Anita Lasker-Wallfisch evokes Fräulein Neubert, who, under the pretext of making her work, visited her in prison where she was held before deportation and brought her news, food, and greetings (Lasker-Wallfisch, 59–60; 69). György Konrád recalls that his grandfather's non-Jewish shopkeeper took the risk of accompanying him and his sister to Budapest where Hungarian and German Nazis wreaked havoc. At the same time, the children's uncle, who was supposed to give them shelter, abandoned them to their fate (Konrád, 66). Henryk Grynberg evokes the Orlińskis, an unknown couple his mother approached one evening in occupied Warsaw, when they had to escape from their hideout and had no place to stay for the night. The Orlińskis took them in and arranged their journey to the countryside (Grynberg, 37). After their escape from the Yellow Star building, Jóska and his family in *Battlefields* were helped by a young soldier they met by accident. He sheltered them, brought them food, and gave them his own family's identity papers (Nyíri, 405; 425–435).

Bogdan Wojdowski dedicates his book to those, often nameless, “infallible people who put their own life at risk to save another man's life” he encountered during the two years when he was hiding in various places after his flight from the ghetto (Wojdowski, 2014, 5–7). Bogdan also describes a trolley conductor who always slowed down when he crossed the ghetto and threw a loaf of bread to the starving inhabitants. One day the German soldiers pulled him out of the tram and shot him dead. “The motorman who was shot was survived by his cry, ‘Long live Poland!’ And for a couple of days the trolleys passed slowly, like one funeral procession after another (Wojdowski, 275–279).

One of the most unusual outsiders helping the persecuted people is a German officer in Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies*, who hid little Maciek, his aunt, and his grandmother for months, making extraordinary efforts to save their lives. Through his intimate relationship with the aunt he began to understand the criminal nature of Nazi politics and started to forge plans to desert. When he was denounced, he still managed to assist Maciek and his aunt to escape.

Then, to spare her humiliation and torture, he killed the grandmother and committed suicide.

Aldo Zargani evokes the memory of several Righteous people who made possible the miraculous survival of his nuclear family. While many of their acquaintances and even some family members turned their back on them, unknown people, like Dr Pagani from the city hospital, Signor Pandoli, a policeman, and Suor Giuseppina, the Catholic mother superior of the prison where his parents were held, risked their life to save them. Aldo pays an emotional tribute to them:

I had the good fortune of seeing in my youth that there are people who help their brothers without asking themselves why. ... That brief period of persecution, which occupies almost all of my sixty-year-old consciousness, is still the most terrible period of my life but has also become the best and the most yearned-for. ... Because of the people who saved us, I have acquired faith in my neighbor, a faith which has become faith in humanity. (Zargani, 305)

Resistance

One of the most painful questions children kept asking adults—and themselves—was why they didn't resist. How could they endure humiliations, privations, and torture, be driven towards their inevitable death, and not even try to rebel and fight back? Revolt and curiosity are characteristic of childhood and might have the same roots: not taking for granted the established truths, asking questions, and examining issues thoroughly with a fresh regard. The lack of independent, critical thinking was one of the reactions that exasperated children when they were confronted with racist clichés that were impossible to shake with sound arguments. They were upset to discover the same mental passivity and incapacity to envisage alternatives when the adults of their own community did not even consider challenging the orders of a clearly criminal regime. Children and young adolescents were far more inclined to resist the destructive mechanisms that were about to wipe their world away.

Magda Dénes sums it up: "I was taught that rebellion was a key to survival" (Dénes, 62). Magda was a frank and rebellious child by nature and her beloved brother (who eventually joined a left-wing Jewish resistance group) turned her instinctive reactions into a conscious attitude. She followed his teaching throughout her life and her courage and recalcitrant spirit helped her to stay alive. Sometimes a simple gesture of not giving in became an act

of resistance. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recalls with admiration how her grandmother reclaimed her dignity when the family was arrested. People had to line up in front of a table where a Gestapo officer read their names. "When he called 'Lasker', my grandmother walked past the table, but not without stopping in front of the Gestapo man. She looked him straight in the face, and said very loudly: 'Frau Lasker to you'. I thought he would hit her there and then, but not a bit of it. He just said simply: 'Frau Lasker'" (Lasker-Wallfisch, 49).

In Baden-Baden, after the Nazi takeover, the Brownshirts, drunk with their new power, went on a rampage, destroying Jewish-owned shops, humiliating their owners, and terrorizing the employees and passers-by. Gerhard Durlacher's grandparents' furniture store was also vandalized. Gerhard was very impressed by the behavior of his aunt who was visiting from the Netherlands. Ignoring her brother who tried to stop her, she stepped out to the street "swathed in an apron and armed with a bucket, cloth and sponge" and started to clean the dirty words written on the shop window. "A Brownshirt shouts something at her, tries to kick over her bucket. She looks him right in the eye and unleashes a raging torrent of Dutch on him. He stares at her in incomprehension and doesn't know what to do with himself, when she suddenly changes languages and snaps at him that she 'will be informing the Dutch ambassador of this.'" Seeing that the spectacle is over, people disperse; the aunt returns to the store, cleans the bucket and washes her hands. "She nods satisfied and self-assured: 'That's how we do things in Holland'" (Durlacher 1993, 33-36).

After having witnessed many scenes when the Ukrainians mistreated the persecuted Jews, seven-year-old Krysha Chiger decides to punish them. One day, after a heavy rainfall, on her way to fetch water with her grandmother, she jumps into the largest puddle in sight and spatters two young Ukrainian women who walk by. The women chase her furiously, screaming insults. Krysha and grandmother have to run home and the entire family is very upset about her irresponsible behavior. But she does not regret it: "It felt so good, splashing them like that, so powerful. It was nothing, just a little bit of water, a little bit of mischief, but it made me feel that I was not so helpless after all. ... It made me feel we could stand up to the Ukrainians, to the Germans, to whatever might happen next" (Chiger, 46).

Edith Bruck relates that the young Nazi soldiers who escorted them to the railway station kept insulting the prisoners:

I could not stand to hear these insults. No one had the courage to reply, but I screamed, "Pigs! Filthy animals!" My mother begged me to keep my mouth

shut. A young man in uniform approached me. I looked at him with contempt and called him a pig. He looked at me and said that it was a pity I should die so young and beautiful, my face was not as dirty as that of the others, and if I were a little older he would be disposed to soil his bed with me. “With your mother!” I replied. But I was shaking with fear. (Bruck, 2011, 23–24)

Edith also recounts that one day in Bergen-Belsen, when she is badly beaten by a guard, her sister comes to her rescue, fiercely attacking the man. The soldier is so stupefied that instead of executing them, he spares their lives: “If this shitty nothing of a filthy Jew dares raising her hand on a German, she deserves to survive. God curse you!” (Bruck 2021, 72–73).

In Ember Mária’s *Hairpin Bend* the village Jews are taken to a transit camp before their deportation. The little boy protagonist carefully observes the conditions and finds a solution to avoid what is in store for them:

“Uncle Otto, asked the kid, why don’t we attack them? There are five thousands of us and only two of them. Why do we let this happen?” “Because they have a gun, my son,” answered uncle Otto scornfully. ... “And how many bullets can they have before they have to reload? Twenty? Two hundred? Then those twenty or two hundred who are ready to die should go in the first line. But the remaining 4800 would be free and could go home. I’m ready to go in the first line.” Panicked, Mother covered the kid’s mouth with her hand. “Are you mad?” she asked. “They can overhear you.” Uncle Otto flipped his hand. “You are still a child, no doubt. Go home? Where? How many armed men would wait for us there, what do you think? And how many informers?” (76)

In Jurek Becker’s *Jacob the Liar*, most of the ghetto’s inhabitants accept their destiny with resignation: only the small boys forge plans of resistance (78–80).

Elie Wiesel evokes with bitterness how after their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, when the deported people learn what is awaiting them, some strong young boys plan to attack the guards. They want to resist or at least send a sign to the outside world to show what is happening in the camps, hoping to save those who can still be saved. The older men intervene and manage to calm them down. They still cling to the hope that something would prevent their condemnation. The agitation is over and the prisoners’ line slowly moves forward towards Dr Mengele (Wiesel, 31). Ana Novac also recalls her frustration seeing the passivity of adults, particularly after hearing the news about the Warsaw ghetto uprising:

We had no weapons, of course, except fingernails, teeth, and, in the brickyard, bricks by the thousands. There were twenty thousand of us, and a dozen guards... One day, in a small group, I even raised the question: "What if each of us picked up a brick?" That set off a fuss something terrible! "We must isolate the irresponsible elements, they *irritate the authorities*." (Novac, 1997, 71–72)

Ana had a mad moment of resistance one night when the Germans started to liquidate the political prisoners and other people arrested in town. The condemned captives were sitting right outside her barrack. She was unable to sleep, thinking about the people who were about to be killed. Suddenly she realized that they must be thirsty and leaning out of the window she offered them some water. One of the prisoners motioned to her that she should urgently close the window. "But I don't care, I really don't care; in the space of a second I'm free, almost euphoric, I straighten up in the window opening. If they want to shoot, this is the time!" (182–184). As soon as she stepped back from the window, the shooting started.

The authors recount with admiration the rare episodes when adults, even rabbis called people to resist. The Warsaw uprising, the armed resistance in the occupied countries, the revolts in the camps are evoked with awe. Grigory Kanovich and János Nyíri insert scenes in their books where the village rabbis speak out against the persecution and encourage their community to resist. Their words have a galvanizing impact (Kanovich 2017, 471–474; Nyíri, 243–244). The first time David, Bogdan Wojdowski's protagonist, sneaks out of the ghetto to buy some food, he is sick with dread. Scurrying down a street, he discovers the messages resistance fighters have painted on the walls. "Suddenly, the stones came to life. ...His heart beat with joy at the sight." He feels that he is not completely alone; his life and that of his fellow prisoners' matter to someone; somewhere around there are people who fight for freedom, his freedom as well (Wojdowski, 172–173).

There are several scenes in Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life*, where the young protagonists rebel against the status quo—both at the level of their families and the ghetto—and are eager to resist. They organize acts of sabotage and strikes at the production units, mobilize protests against the conditions of life and the cooperation of the Jewish authorities in the systematic expropriation and annihilation of the ghetto's population. Some groups dream about armed resistance. There are a handful of desperate acts of resistance, all quenched in blood. Ilona Karmel also highlights the value of a dig-

nified death after an act of resistance: “At times, when hushed voices spoke of someone ‘killed, shot on the spot,’ for throwing himself at an SS man, for spitting right in his face, silence fell. Because this was the real, the prewar death” (Karmel, 59).

In one of Arnošt Lustig’s stories two children comment on the news about the Treblinka uprising. They recall a rare moment of resistance they witnessed in the Terezín camp, when a Danish prisoner hit the German officer who insulted him:

“It only took eleven minutes in Treblinka, according to what Frank found out from those Polish prisoners. And they had been preparing for it for years. Some uprisings only lasted a matter of minutes. It must be beautiful, a minute like that.”

“The thing that Danish Jew did in the Little Fortress at Theresienstadt probably didn’t take more than half a minute.”

“I remember him. It was beautiful, too.” (Lustig, 464)

Many former prisoners of Auschwitz evoke with respect the resistance of the Gypsy inmates when their camp was about to be liquidated. They managed to push back the armed soldiers and postpone the final destruction of their barracks. Otto Rosenberg was one of the participants of this event. He describes how people became apathetic and egoistic in the harsh conditions of the camp, but as soon as the word went around that the Nazis had decided to eliminate the Gypsy section and the block elders had opted for resistance, everyone came back to life. People, including the very young ones, organized themselves. Equipped with sticks, bricks, utensils, anything they could put their hands on or with their naked fists, they fought back and forced the SS soldiers to retreat. The camp’s liquidation was cancelled and the prisoners had a several months-long suspense during which a third of them—among them Otto—were selected and sent to other camps. Those who remained were murdered later, again, only after some resistance (Rosenberg, 81-84).

Escape attempts from the camps were also acts of defiance and resistance. In most cases the fugitives were caught and publicly executed to deter the rest of the prisoners. However, their example, on the contrary, prompted admiration. Imre Kertész’s Gyuri Köves describes a day when the prisoners are forced to stand for hours at roll call because some of their companions escaped. No one complains; there is “a nascent burst of enthusiasm,” as if standing still

would provide a collective support to the fugitives. When they are finally caught and hanged, people start whispering the Kaddish. Gyuri is not a believer, but the force of the joint prayer profoundly moves him (Kertész 2006, 159–162).

Several of the authors who were young adolescents at the time joined the resistance movements of their respective countries. As Anita Lasker-Wallfisch put it: “I could never accept that I should be killed for what I happened to be born as, and decided to give the Germans a better reason for killing me. I involved myself in clandestine activities—forged papers for French prisoners of war to escape with. Eventually, I tried to escape myself with forged papers” (Lasker-Wallfisch testimony 2003). Joseph Bialot was arrested because he was taking part in the resistance movement in France. It only turned out later that he was also Jewish.

Jiří Pick’s Mr. Brisch, the former bar violinist and secret Communist from Berlin, Herman Göring Strasse 7, also talks about the importance of resistance: “‘Every sink is game,’ said Mr. Brisch. ‘Where ends life and where begins game? Don’t ask me. It is what is done by the little man with the mustache and the hair, it is also game. But it affects the life. Otherwise I agree with you. What we need is active resistance. Only that will impress the Germans’” (Pick, 112). Later, when one of the young boys intends to escape the transport to an extermination camp, Mr Brisch comments: “‘That should be normal,’ said Mr. Brisch wistfully. ‘Every young man should be rebellious. With your permission, gentlemen. Erlauben die Herren,’ he said, and took his violin out of its case. He played for ten minutes or so. ‘That was the Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven,’ he said when he was finished. But also with a big piece of rebellion. Very big.’” (119). Mr. Brisch is selected for a transport the next day.

The courage of despair

Resistance is a conscious act of saying no. The persecuted children sometimes have spontaneous reactions, which, even if they are just a display of courage or utter despair, often turn into acts of resistance. They reflect the children’s spontaneity, their fearlessness, or their unawareness of dangers, or, maybe, their penchant to treat danger as a challenge. These instinctive acts and the brief moments of freedom they provide, help the children recover their stamina to fight for survival.

Soon after his arrival at Auschwitz, Joseph Bialot notices a truck that transports the belongings of the recently murdered prisoners. In the blink of an eye, in a sort of unconscious reflex, he jumps on it and steals a pair of shoes.

He feels that he would need proper shoes to survive in this place. None of the armed guards seem to notice and the driver of the truck does not react either. As he puts it:

I am in Auschwitz. I am aware of what is going on here. I know. I know, yes, but I don't understand it completely. One does not transit wide awake and alive from everyday life to a nightmare, without any period of adaptation. ... Maybe it's due to my age, to my immaturity. I know, but I don't accept it, otherwise I would have never undertaken these exploits, which lead to an atrocious death if you fail. (Bialot, 2002, 55)

Joseph tells the story of a young Polish orphan, Yanek, who arrives one day with the transport from the Warsaw ghetto. "Yanek is nine years old and he is an old man, a sensitive and desperate bundle, whose soul is withered and who knows everything, who has nothing more to learn, nor fear or understand, neither believe nor love." Yanek knows that he should keep away from the trucks that supposedly help the old and weak to get to the camp. When the guards push him to the last vehicle, he jumps down, defying the armed soldiers and the camp commander. Astonished, the German officer questions him. He boldly answers that he prefers to walk, because he is strong enough to work as an adult. After an unlikely exchange, in which the little boy firmly defends his position, the commander lets him go. Yanek eventually survives the camp (251–253).

Her blind courage helps Ana Novac to resolve one of her major problems. She has been transferred to a part of the camp where she can't find any scrap paper to continue her diary. She is getting desperate. Writing is as vital for her as breathing. One afternoon she notices a Polish kapo on his way to one of the offices with some notebooks in his hand. She boldly approaches him:

"Herr Lagerkapo," I tell him, with all the assurance of someone, who, by principle, neglected her German classes since the sixth grade, "please, give me this exercise book! ... I need to write," I tell him. "I need a notebook. I'm a writer." I look at him very determined. "Hum," he says, deep in thought, while a maze of tiny wrinkles appears around his eyes. And when his narrowed blue eyes stop on me, suddenly I see myself, irresistibly comical in this huge shirt-dress that floats around me, my match-stick legs and my bald Gypsy head... A genuine scarecrow! "I'm a writer." I burst out laughing, although he doesn't even smile.

Ana finally receives a notebook and even a pencil to write with. She is delighted: “Today, I’m the Queen of Hell” (Novac, 1992, 30–31). Later, thanks to the same capo, the Queen of Hell is assigned to a relatively quiet workplace, where she is able to write, which definitely helps her to survive.

Refuges: Friendship and love

Love and friendship are major driving forces that help the children to survive persecution, hiding, and life in the ghettos and camps. These children are precocious and immature at the same time. Their emotions oscillate between innocent admiration and adoration of the other to consumed, absolute love, whose “seal is stronger than death.”

Magda Dénes had a beautiful relationship with her brother, who taught her everything worthwhile to know in life from poetry to making mischief, from the importance of being honest to the imperative to always think critically. Magda’s absolute, unconditional love for her brother helped her to get through the war. A similarly intense affection for her father animated Marceline Loridan-Ivens. They were arrested and sent to Auschwitz together, but her love was stronger than her fear. “I loved you so much that I was happy to be deported with you” (Loridan-Ivens 2017, 72). Anita Lobel’s attachment to her little brother, her determination to protect him was the fundamental force that helped her to cope with the difficulties of hiding and later captivity.

Inge Auerbach relates how her eight-year-old friend, Ada, supported her when she fell ill and was taken to the hospital in Terezín. Ada kept her company, helped her to get better, and even taught her a new song to give her hope in the future. The song accompanied Inge, even after Ada’s death (Auerbach, 50–51). Cordelia Edvardson recalls a young woman, Halinka, who gently pulled her out of her numbness in Terezín and made her join a group of children, where she started to play, sing, dance, and recite poetry. Halinka’s warm friendship and her beautiful love story with a young inmate made Cordelia regain her trust in human emotions. When Halinka’s companion was sent to an extermination camp, Cordelia did not hesitate risking her life stealing a bowl of hot soup and a warm sweater to comfort her (Edvardson, 61–62).

Friendship literally saves the life of a young boy in one of Arnošt Lustig’s stories based on his own experiences. During the days-long evacuation of the camp, when their train stops, the little boy steals a loaf of bread from the compartment that carries the accompanying soldiers’ reserves. He is caught and a German officer is about to shoot him, when his best friend jumps in front of him:

Marquis opened his eyes and saw the little one leap in front of him, shielding the muzzle of the German's pistol, a dilapidated human wall between the bullet and his head. The kid was almost strangled by fear. Drops of cold sweat as big as rosebuds stood out of his dirty, scabby skull. "Scheisse, you shit," said the Scharfuhrer and turned back towards the train. (Lustig, 223)

The officer is so astounded that he finally lets both boys go. In the meantime the bread is devoured by Orthodox Polish Jews who have been hiding behind the train. Sometime afterwards an American plane bombs the train by accident, without realizing that it transports prisoners. In the chaos of the attack the two friends manage to escape. For several days they hide in the forest, walking eastwards, hoping to find their way back to Prague. They mutually support each other until their arrival; whenever one is about to give up, the other pushes him to continue.

In *Stalemate*, Icchokas Meras's poetic novel about the Vilnius ghetto, love is a key force that helps the protagonists to survive. There is a young Polish boy, Janek, who is the best friend of a Jewish boy. When the latter is killed and the town's Jews are ordered to move into the ghetto, Janek decides to join them to be able to protect his late friend's sister, Esther. In the ghetto, Esther and Isaac, the young chess champion, fall in love. Their love is like a light that illuminates people's lives. Janek befriends Isaac and helps the young couple and many others in the ghetto, until he is arrested and sent to the killing fields. On the way his fellow Jewish prisoners help him to escape from the truck. Gravely injured, Janek finds a hideout, but he is about to succumb there alone, unable to move. When Esther and Isaac learn what has happened, they sneak out of the ghetto, find, and save him. Abraham, Isaac's father, is a symbol of love, instead of sacrifice: he fights for every life that can still be saved. His love gives strength to the others, including Isaac, who is charged with the mission of saving the ghetto's children.

Battlefield's Jóska is a sharp, rebellious child, who, beyond his apparent toughness, is sensitive and hungry for love. Fighting against the whole world, nearly always on the defensive, he is almost paralyzed when someone is good to him. At the same time, when he loves someone, he is loyal and generous. He, the eternal stranger, finds his place with those he loves: "I saw my real self wandering on the mountain with Elek" (Nyíri, 1991, 201). In the middle of the war Jóska spends two weeks in a hamlet with the family of Elek's wife. They are hard-working, prosperous peasants, of whom "during the week, God Himself wouldn't have known that they were Jewish." Jóska shuts off the sinister

news of the war and spends some carefree sunny days surrounded by gorgeous nature in a world of quiet normalcy. He is enchanted by Elek's sister-in-law, a luminous and beautiful girl, who is several years older than him and seems to be a kindred spirit. Ten-year-old Jóska has a foretaste of what genuine love might be; all his being is blown away by longing; the whole universe vibrates with beauty and desire (234–237).

Magda Dénes is ten years old and is hiding in an orphanage in Budapest. One day a thirteen-year-old boy, Ervin, arrives. He is a precocious, independent-minded, funny, and resourceful orphan, who has walked through the besieged city to find this refuge. Magda and Ervin immediately find a common wave-length. They share their food, stories, laughter, and sleeping space. One day he asks her:

“Do you want to be my bachurach?” “What does that mean?” “Fuck it?” “No, I’ve heard that before. What does bachurah mean?” “You are amazing,” he said, truly exasperated. “You are in mortal danger. You are hiding for your life. You may have to run any minute and you don’t know the simplest things. How do you expect to live? Bachurach means girlfriend in Hebrew.” “What does that involve?” “Well, we share our food.” We both laughed so hard that Mrs. Ungar came over to ask us if we were all right. When she left, Ervin said, “You know perfectly well what I meant. I told you you didn’t have to give me your food. I would have gotten some for both of us.” “I know. What else does it involve?” “At night I’ll lie down next to you in this corner, although I hate corners. I’ll put my arm around you and you won’t have nightmares.” “What else?” “You are too young for the other stuff.” “What do you mean?” “Forget it.” “What else?” “Forget it, I said!” (Dénes, 112–113)

Rachel, one of the adolescent protagonists of *The Tree of Life*, meditates on love and life after Ms. Feiner, their teacher, reads Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* in literature class:

In her mind’s eye, Rachel saw the cherry tree bursting into bloom in the backyard of Hockel Street. Ms. Feiner was like the cherry tree; she flowered amidst the dirt and muck, blooming with a white untarnished love. Rachel’s heart expanded, overflowed with tenderness. A dazzling thought struck her mind: here, in the ghetto, there was only one way to set oneself free and thus escape annihilation: Love. (Rosenfarb, II. 81)

Love, even unhappy or unreciprocated love, in fact helps several of the book's protagonists to rise above their humiliating and devastating conditions and feel human again.

Francine Christophe evokes her very first flame, a boy called Guy. In Drancy they participate in theatre productions together and at one point they dance a minuet to a Boccherini piece. This is the culmination of their silent emotion, before the boy is sent to Auschwitz (Christophe, 50). Thirteen-year-old Livia Bitton-Jackson also describes a silent love story that flares up in the ghetto of Nagymagyar and ends when the men are taken away (Bitton-Jackson, 45–47). It is love that makes sixteen-year-old András Juda Garai denounce himself as a Jew and join his sweetheart and friends in the ghetto of Pécs, in southern Hungary. Love helps András to cope in the ghetto and during the long train ride. They are separated after their arrival, but he struggles through the trials of the camp driven by the hope of finding her again. He survives and returns home to learn that she and all his friends were killed. Nevertheless, András keeps waiting for her for decades.

In Auschwitz Joseph Bialot makes friends with a young girl who is working in the canteen. The decisive moment in their romance is when they tell each other their names: “Then came the gift of exchanging our first names. She is nothing but a number and I am nothing else than a transit between my past life and my death that might be imminent.” The nicest gift Joseph can offer to her is the story of the last film he saw before his arrest, *L'Éternel Retour*, a modern version of the story of Tristan and Isolde. When an SS officer discovers that the young girl brings Joseph an additional portion of coffee, he beats her. Joseph never sees her again (Bialot 2002, 124–127). In an interview Otto Dov Kulka evokes an encounter in the family camp:

Something like first love. In the afternoon, after the work, women and men were walking on the main street ... watching the crematoria burn quietly—and not taking in what was happening. I went with a girl of twelve and we were walking among the adults. I don't remember her face but I remember her existence. She didn't survive, of course. But that was a marvellous experience to which I can return. (Kulka interview 2014)

In the dark and hopeless universe of the Prokov ghetto in Edgar Hilsenrath's *Night*, where people use, abuse, cheat, and mistreat each other in their desperate struggle for survival, only those who love someone—a child, a spouse, someone from the past—are still able to make human gestures. Even Ranek,

the book's burnt out and contemptuous protagonist, is able to become more human when he unexpectedly finds Deborah, his sister-in-law and secret love from before the war. Joining their forces, they can cope better and have some moments of peace and tenderness.

After Ranek's death, Deborah has a conversation with an old woman who hated him because several months earlier he stole the shoes of her dying son:

"Ranek loved you," the old woman said thoughtfully. ... "I could never understand why because he was someone ...to whom nothing was sacred any more ... I told myself: someone like that isn't capable of loving any more. But Hofer was right after all."... "Only the dead can't love anymore...that's what he said." ... "I said to myself: you would never have thought that bastard capable of so much tenderness. ... then I told myself: there's happiness even among us." (Hilsenrath 1967, 510–511)

At the end of the book, Deborah escapes the infected night shelter, taking with her an orphaned baby. In the midst of despair and destruction, she is determined to fight to save a life and love.

Fifteen-year-old Cordelia Edvardson is completely alone in Auschwitz. One day she discovers that the number tattooed on her arm was worn before by another woman who had already been killed. She clings to that number as if it were a genuine connection linking her to another human being; a symbol of continuity and even a hint of hope: "This number became a link between them, a bond of blood. 3709 would not be forgotten, not be completely extinguished, as long as A3709 still managed, however tenuously, to live and to breathe. From now on the girl's life would never again be hers alone. Another woman partook in it, "now and in the hour of our death" (Edvardson, 35).

The children have such an elemental need for love that sometimes they become passionately attached to their pets. Jiří Pick's protagonist, Toni in *Terzín*, takes care of his little grey mouse, Helga, with genuine devotion. Uri Orlev's hero, Alex in the ruined Warsaw ghetto, finds consolation in the company of his particularly intelligent white mouse, Snow. Hiding alone in a village, Alona Frankel is so hungry for tenderness that she makes relatives of her "cute little toes, my family." Her best friends are pigs, mice, and other farm animals; they are the only beings with whom she can communicate and feel some kind of affection (Frankel, 5; 22).

Sexuality

Aldo Zargani, Louis Begley, György Konrád, János Nyíri, Cordelia Edvardson, and others recall the delicious erotic games of their early childhood. These innocent first steps into the mysterious realm of sexuality gain a completely different meaning with the arrival of the war. In the extreme circumstances of persecution, living in physical closeness in the restricted areas of the ghettos or guarded houses, and under the threat of imminent death, there are rapidly developing romances, the “fever of getting married” and accelerated sexual maturation. The time needed to know each other and become intimate is significantly shortened because no one knows how much time they have left. It is also easier to get the families’ consent, if needed. Relationships are formed and sealed across the borders of class and age. The fact that the children and youngsters live in a lawless world also erodes the strict codes of behavior between sexes that has been characteristic of traditional society, including the Jewish community.

Ilona Karmel describes the hectic search for a mate in the Kraków ghetto:

The town teemed with couples—the ill-assorted couples that exile breeds: willowy, gentle girls matched to men with salesman faces; behind hefty wenches, all bosom and hips, little professorial creatures trotting on spindly legs. Peasants armed with pitchforks chased them out of the fields, children out to collect kindling stumbled on their lovemaking. But they persevered; arm in arm, branded by star-marked bands, they passed her window. (Karmel, 53–54)

Zdena Berger depicts a similar atmosphere in Terezín: “Sometimes I walk through the town and feel the urgency of all the people, as if they have to hurry before time runs out, to live more by living faster. The coupled shadows in the evening, the exchange of bread for love, a new affair beginning on the leftovers of the old one” (Berger, 38–39).

Fourteen-year-old Cordelia Edvardson loses her virginity in the Jewish hospital of Berlin, “*the vestibule of hell*.” The hospital is the last stopover for a small group of Jewish youngsters who for various reasons have temporarily escaped deportation, but are subject to everyday selections. As she recounts, “In the meantime, what did matter was living and surviving—at any price. Everyone slept with everyone, all the medicine cabinets were quickly emptied, the last supply of narcotics dwindled away, there was a flourishing trade in black market cigarettes.” Cordelia sleeps with two half-Jewish brothers, “definitely not for sexual pleasure, for the fourteen year old was not yet awake to the urgen-

cies of sex, no prince had stirred her from her dreams and fantasies with a kiss. She was ‘late,’ had the merest suggestion of breasts, and had not menstruated yet.” Spending a night with one of the boys, “the girl consoled him as well as she could, but had only her body to offer” (Edvardson, 54–58). Later on, the same boys accompany her to the room where the people selected for the next transport are guarded.

Several other authors talk about sexuality as a temporary relief, as a private heaven of peace and pleasure—and as an act of resistance. Elżbieta Ettinger’s book describes a party in the Warsaw ghetto in July 1941, when it was still possible to organize such events. One of the protagonists goes to dance, the other stays at home with her boyfriend: “She said she wasn’t well, but I didn’t believe her. At night, when I came back, she said a grave is not the proper place to dance upon. It is more proper to make love with Abel?” (Ettinger 1970, 106). Chava Rosenfarb describes the same in the Łódź ghetto. For many couples the only possible relief is love-making, even in the middle of bitter conflicts: “The bed became their blessed escape” (Rosenfarb, II. 98).

In Jiří Robert Pick’s book about the Terezín ghetto, sexuality represents a momentary safe haven in the midst of destruction and inhumanity; a powerful way to chase away anxiety, solitude, and the ubiquitous presence of death. In the ghetto of Amsterdam, the day his street’s inhabitants are about to be deported, Jacov Lind decides to hide in a singular safe place, a woman’s body. The first time in his life, he goes to see Ilse, who is famous for being generous with her charms: “They will have to drag me from Ilse’s breasts and remove me from her womb because that’s where I was going to hide, right in Ilse” (Lind, 89). Jacov manages to escape deportation that day; he continues to flee and hide in other female bodies all along the war.

In the loneliness of the Catholic orphanage, in permanent fear, suffering hunger, cold, and all types of violence, Aldo Zargani discovers the pleasure his own body can give him. He is shocked at first, but when he understands what is going on, even though the priests and religious texts preach that masturbation is a sin, he cannot care less:

The final pleasure, which took me by surprise, was ruined because when I felt something wet, I was convinced that it was blood and that I was menstruating or haemorrhaging. ... I bade farewell to eternal bliss; I had created my own pleasure for the first time, and now I could sleep, in a state of mortal sin, in the clear, starry, arctic night, singing to myself, content and oblivious to the world. (Zargani, 68–69)

In one of Arnošt Lustig's short stories one evening, after a long, exhausting day in the munitions factory of the camp and a rare hot shower, two young boys get in their bunk-bed. They are good friends who share space, chores, food, and worries. They are not lovers, but in that singular instant of peace and rest they instinctively touch each other, not even erotically, just discovering that they have young, human bodies that have other needs than pure physical survival. For a fleeting moment they reclaim their body from death:

Suddenly the darkness seemed even darker than usual. They held each other tight to keep warm. They were freshly bathed and there was no need to shrink away from each other. For a few moments, something raged inside them both, a realization of what their bodies meant—beyond what they meant on the job or beyond the simple fact that they existed, the things they toyed with and didn't understand. (Lustig, 453)

Judith Magyar Isaakson recalls scenes of love-making in the wagons or in the stables that were used as temporary collecting places before the deportation trains arrived (Isaakson, 44, 56). Elie Wiesel mentions that during the long train journey that took them to Auschwitz in the overcrowded, filthy cattle-car some young couples were making love at night (Wiesel, 23). Tomáš Radil describes a similar scene on the train on their way to Auschwitz. When some of their companions voice their outrage, his always polite and delicate mother replies: "Cut it off, you witch! ... They love each other and they might never see each other again. What can be wrong in two youngsters loving each other? This is the only good thing that happened on this doomed train. God bless them!" (Radil, 225).

Several books evoke that in hiding, in the ghettos, and in the camps sex not only serves as a momentary relief, but also as a means of survival. It can become a tradeable good, the price for a shelter, for a better job, an extra portion of food, a cigarette, or a momentary escape from the list of convoys. A number of authors mention the "Pipel," the young boys who served the older men in the camp hierarchy and potentially had a better chance for survival. Arnošt Lustig mentions that in trying to save their children even parents occasionally encouraged them to become a Pipel. Several books depict persons who use their bodies to gain a better position at the expense of others or without the slightest intention of helping their companions. There are, at the same time, some key figures, who, when they have nothing else to offer for saving a life, offer themselves. Maciek's aunt in *Wartime Lies* and beautiful Esther in *The Tree*

of Life resort to this act, which, nevertheless, does not represent their downfall. In Edgar Hilsenrath's *Night* the privations and suffering of the ghetto's inhabitants are often presented through the degradation of women's bodies. An elderly mother offers herself to the workers of the funerary services to pay for her son's burial. Even Ranek, the cynical protagonist of the book, qualifies her act as a sacrifice (Hilsenrath 1967, 97–98).

Some persons who trade sex are more human than many others who consider themselves decent. Sarah, Raymond Federman's young cousin, is saved by Josette, a young girl from the streets; Sheindle, the streetwalker in Chava Rosenfarb's book is a big-hearted, courageous, and honest woman, who genuinely helps others. Wilhelm Dichter and his mother find shelter in the attic of Pani Hirniakowa, who sleeps with German soldiers, but does not denounce the hiding Jews as some of their earlier hosts did and is genuinely happy when she finds them alive after the war. Tomáš Radil recalls a beautiful young prostitute from his hometown, who, as a last gift before they are deported, shows him her naked body in the transit camp. Later they meet again by accident in Auschwitz where she trades her body for food and tries to help others, including Tomáš (Radil, 212; 290–291; 306–307).

Aharon Appelfeld's *Blooms of Darkness* tells the story of a young Jewish boy, Hugo, who is sheltered by Mariana, a former school friend of his mother, who lives and works in a brothel. When he arrives, eleven-year-old Hugo is a cosseted child, who knows the world through books and the protected universe his parents created for him. During the two years that he spends in the backroom of Mariana, a beautiful, passionate and generous woman, he discovers love and sensuality, and learns much about people and life. He is confined and constantly threatened; still his existence becomes richer and more meaningful thanks to their relationship.

Escape routes: Laughter

One way of keeping away the omnipresent horror is to laugh at it. Laughter is liberating; the child is able to distance himself or herself from the situation, see it from a different, more detached perspective, and tackle it, instead of just suffering from it. Laughter often bursts out in the most desperate situations. Éva Fahidi describes how after their arrival at Auschwitz, when her group of well-to-do, spoilt upper middle class girls came out of the showers, shaved, tattooed, and dressed in rags, they looked at each other and burst into irresistible laughter. The huge gap between their old and new selves could only

be bridged with black humor that accompanied Éva throughout her ordeals (Fahidi, 182).

Ceija Stojka also recalls that laughter often helped her family through the most difficult moments, both during the period of hiding and later in the camps. Mary Berg, too, writes about the importance of laughter: “The typhus epidemic itself is the subject of jokes. It is laughter through tears, but it is laughter. This is our only weapon in the ghetto—our people laugh at death and the Nazi decrees. Humor is the only thing the Nazis cannot understand” (Berg, 104). Ana Novac evokes the extraordinary power of laughter as well: “I never laughed as much as in the camp. It was enough to look at each other to burst out of laughter. Nothing is more grotesque than misery! When you don’t have more tears to cry, all that is left is laughter” (Novac, 1992, xi). She describes that in Plaszow she is given a wooden clog several sizes bigger than her feet.

I drag my “barges” as well as I can in the mud (it’s still raining); I have to stop and empty them constantly. Needless to add that I’m a source of constant hilarity; I spread mirth as I pass by—which is better than spreading a cold or the runs, after all. ... People constantly commiserate with me while convulsed with laughter, assuring me that once the mud freezes I’ll be able to take up cross-country skiing and other winter sports. (Novac, 1997, 206)

When the German army occupies his hometown, two soldiers enter Tomáš Radil’s grandparents’ butcher shop. The officer is polite; he buys some food and pays for it. He is seemingly pleased to have a chat with a fine elderly lady who speaks perfect German. After he leaves, grandmother and grandchild sit down to eat together. Grandmother begins to act out a new version of the scene, addressing Tomáš in polite German as if he were the new customer: “I’m happy to serve you! Are you a tourist? Or do you have some business to sort out in our town?” “Thank you very much for your interest. I came to help you to solve this goddamn Jewish problem and defend you from the attack of Eastern hordes’ ... ‘I’m happy you liked my sausage, I hope you don’t mind that we are Jews!’ ‘Not in the least! At least we don’t have to drag you out of the basement!’” answers Tomáš and pretends to whip out his revolver like a cowboy in the films. “‘Oh, I’m sorry!’ exclaimed grandmother, I just realise that by accident I cut a piece from the sausage we use to kill rats! Never mind, I’m pleased you enjoyed it!” (Radil, 158). Black humor accompanies Tomáš even in the darkest moments of his deportation in Auschwitz. He always seeks the company of like-minded

boys and they always find a common language of teasing. Self-derision, jokes and banter are signs that they are still able to be the young adolescents they were before the war, even in the middle of murderous abnormality.

When Joseph Bialot goes to the latrines for the first time in Auschwitz, he is looking for toilet-paper. One of the older inmates finds this utterly hilarious. After a violent attack of laughter he hands him a note of 5000 francs. Now it's Joseph's turn to guffaw. He imagines being persecuted as a forger of banknotes and has a vision of the prestigious French National Bank as a giant toilet paper factory (Bialot, 2002, 106–107). On New Year's Eve, walking among the prisoners suffering from dysentery, Joseph meditates: "To wish someone happy new year in the camp sounds like sheer provocation. Or, since cynicism can still be a form of self-defence, one can find new formulas of good wishes, sort of 'Happy New Year, good caca, perish more quickly, you'll rot less'" (100).

When Kertész's protagonist and his companions arrive at Auschwitz and ask what the number tattooed on people's arms means, they are told: "a celestial telephone number" (Kertész, 2006, 107). Maurice Cling remarks: "Each time we meet a man with an arm-band or an SS, we have to report our number in German and in Polish. ... Fear makes miracles as a foreign language teacher" (Cling, 80). Otto Dov Kulka evokes the cabaret in the youth barrack of Auschwitz, where the prisoners prepare skits based on their reality, among others, scenes of "Heavenly and Earthly Auschwitz," and use a specific language of a unique black humor (Kulka, 20–21). Ruth Klüger also evokes the liberating force of laughter which often eased their life in the camp and accompanied them after their evasion: "We laughed a lot, for humor thrives on danger, for whatever reason. ... And then there was the thrill of adventure, for Susi and I were children" (Klüger, 138).

Krysha Chiger underlines several times that one of the keys to their survival was the excellent sense of humor of her parents. She grew up in "a house of laughter" and laughter often helped them through the most tragic moments during the war. In the ghetto Krysha's father had regular conflicts with the commandant. One day the Nazi officer condemned him and one of his colleagues to death. They were stripped of their clothes and stood naked under the gallows, when the commander suddenly changed his mind and decided to let them go. The father left the scene in such a hurry that he forgot to take his clothes. The officer had to call him back to remind him that he was undressed. Krysha and her mother watched the scene from the window of their flat. They were petrified with fear. When they saw the father rush away stark naked, they had an irresistible attack of laughter and tears.

I remember hugging and laughing and crying with my mother and brother as we watched this. Hugging and laughing and crying, all at once. It was so unexpected, to look out of the window to see my father to be hanged, to see him suddenly set free, to see him scurrying away from the gallows without his clothes. There was nothing to do but hug one another and laugh and push away our tears. We had all been so scared, so terrorized, and now we were so weakened by our fear and overcome with relief that we could not help but find this picture a little bit funny. (Chiger, 83)

Later on, whenever the family evoked the hanging scene, they couldn't resist laughing. In the sewers Krysha's father wrote satires and funny new texts to popular songs that they performed together to amuse themselves and their helpers, who brought them food and other vital supplies.

Magda Dénes also confirms that laughter was one of the forces that helped her family survive. In many utterly dramatic and dangerous situations the family members, even though they permanently fought and argued, burst out in liberating, mad laughter. Laughing brought them together, and gave them relief and energy to carry on. In one such scene, during the siege of Budapest, Magda, her mother, and her aunt venture out of their hiding place to find some food. It is very cold. They see devastation and death all over. A dead horse, cut into pieces, a dead Russian soldier with his ring finger missing, red snow underneath him.

“I am going to throw up,” Rózsi said. “No you aren't,” said my mother. “We will turn back.” Exactly then, a six-story building on our left sustained a cannon hit and began to disintegrate in slow motion. An oddly clownish collapse. I knew it was wrong, it was worse than wrong, it was truly sinful, but I could not contain my laughter. I rolled, I cackled, I wept, I held my aching belly. I lost my breath and laughed and laughed and laughed. I lowered myself to the frozen ground and laughed some more.

“Please! Did you see that? Oh, please!” I shook. I yelled.

“There has always been something wrong with this child,” my mother said, turning to face Rózsi, who was not there. At some point, Rózsi had lowered herself onto the snow and begun laughing with me.

“Did you see those windows go, one after the other, down, down? Haha-haha. Did you see it, aunt Rózsi? Hahahaha.” “And the doors, Rózsi said. Haha-haha. They wobbled back and forth. They were almost airborne! Then they fell. Did you see that? Hahahaha.” “Yes, yes, hahahaha.”

“That building could have been us, the three of us,” my mother said bitterly. Rózsi and I laughed harder, and without any caution at all, we stretched straight out on the dirty snow. “That’s just the point, Margit,” Rózsi said, and we laughed again. “It must be the liquor,” my mother said. Rózsi sat up. “What liquor? I could use a drink.” (Dénes, 178–179)

The ironic tone of relating the events highlights their cruel absurdity. Edgar Hilsenrath’s novel *Fuck America* starts with a correspondence between the father of the protagonist (one of the author’s alter-egos) and the Consul General of the United States of America in Berlin. The Consul General keeps lecturing his ever more desperate letter-writer about the higher considerations of his country’s leaders, the importance of respecting the rules and being patient. He generously comforts him that by 1952 he and his family might well obtain their much desired visa; bad luck if they happen to be exterminated before that.

Creating an ironic distance may have helped the authors describe their experiences; it also makes it easier for the reader to enter into their stories. Aldo Zargani often narrates dramatic events with fine humor. When his father, who has the habit of reading the morning paper in bed, learns about the imminent deportation of the Jews, he has a frenetic reaction in front of the perplexed eyes of the maid who is about to deliver his morning coffee:

“Oh God, oh God, oh God, ooooooh Gooooood!” my father exclaimed, kicking the covers and pulling the tasselled nightcap off his head; he got out of bed and took off his pyjama trousers, making no attempt to hide his dangling parts—extremely uncharacteristic for a man as modest as he was—and pulled his trousers on while still wearing his pyjama top. He had forgotten to pull on the long woolen underwear which he always wore in winter and which, along with his nightcap, his military Cross, and his chronic bronchitis, were the last vestiges of his service in the Great War. ... “For God’s sake!” he repeated, removing his trousers in order to put on his long underwear. (Zargani, 39-42)

Ilona Karmel’s novel begins with a scene at dusk in the Płaszów concentration camp. It’s time for roll call, the inmates stand motionless in perfect lines of four. To prevent any attempt at escape, the camp commander orders large bright red crosses to be painted on the prisoners’ clothes. After an hour, when the SS and the Ukrainian guards become tired, the Jewish camp police take over the job.

“Quiet!” they yelled, but for once nobody took heed of them. Here a woman giggled, tickled by the brush; there “Hello, Rembrandt,” a man guffawed, the painters reciprocating with “Would you rather be wall-papered, sir?” until the joking turned on him who had ordered the painting as a precaution against escape—on the German Lagerkommandant himself.

“Someone else would have wasted money on prison uniforms, but he, he paints us,” they said and they laughed. “What a head! A Jew he should have been, with such a head.”

“A Jew.” Seidmanka was laughing so hard the red mop of her hair shook and shook. “Guess what? After the war I’ll make him a partner in my business.” (Karmel, 7).

In another scene, when the prisoners are transferred to a new site of the camp, the author talks about “now seasoned tourists who travelled light, each with just a small suitcase in hand” (56). One of the book’s protagonists, who pretends not to be Jewish and works as a supervisor in the non-Jewish section of the camp, secretly helping the inmates, one night approaches the woman who spies on the prisoners and denounces hidden Jews: “‘Listen.’ Suppressing her revulsion, she drew closer. ‘There is a Jew who’s walking about free, who’s lording it over the whole world.’ ‘A Jew? How do you know?’ ‘He has dark eyes, dark hair, dark moustache. He’s more cunning than a snake. Sounds like a Jew, doesn’t it?’ ‘Who is he? Who?’ ‘Haven’t you guessed yet? It’s he—Hitler!’” (81).

In Zdena Berger’s *Tell Me Another Morning*, during a long train-ride from one camp to another, the women are in a jolly mood, because they are relieved to be selected for further slave labor, instead of extermination: “A girl got up to drink, stumbled over my legs and said, ‘Excuse me.’ We laughed and called ‘excuse me’ to each other, the old words funny now. ... Some asked the question, ‘Where are we going this time? Where?’ ‘Rome!’ someone answered. ‘Paris!’ another” (Berger, 109). Later, during a death march, to divert their attention from their misery, the three friends talk about simple events of their past; an outing, a fair, a stuffed mouse they received as a present. One of the girls is very sick and at the end of her strength. She urges Tania to keep talking: “Go ahead. Say something, anything!’ ... ‘It’s time for tea,’ I say. ‘More.’ ‘My tailor is better than your tailor. ... The sun is very old. The sun has a place in the sky and will not give it up, not for the moon.’ ‘That’s funny.’ Her eyes are open now. ‘Is the sun a he or a she?’ She doesn’t answer. ‘Is it a he or a she, I ask you?’ ‘Son of a bitch. It’s a he.’ ‘All right. We should have some kind of an order on earth’” (190–192).

Livia Bitton-Jackson describes the scene when her contingent of 500 female prisoners is transferred from Auschwitz to the forced labor camp of Augsburg. When they get out of the train and line up, the German commander and his soldiers are shocked to see the bizarre mass of sexless skeletons in rags:

“We expected a transport of women from Auschwitz,” the tall officer repeats. “Are you from Auschwitz? Were you sent instead of the women?” “We are from Auschwitz. And we are women.” ...But where is your luggage? Laughter rings from the lines. Our luggage? “We have no luggage, Herr Offizier,” the interpreter says softly. “We have nothing.” “Tell him, our valets are bringing our luggage on another train.” ...Wisecracks begin to fly. “My luggage is being sent special delivery.” “Oh, I forgot my golf clubs in Auschwitz!” (Bitton-Jackson, 145–146).

The theatre of the absurd

In the turbulent pre-war and war years, children experience a world whose contours they have just started to discover crumbling around them. They witness the loss of their points of reference, the adults’ disarray, and mounting chaos all around. The system is guided by prejudice, hatred, ignorance, and irrationality; the persecution of the Jews and its ideological ‘justification’ is just one of its manifestations. The children, at the same time, perceive a weird, absurd logic that directs events. If they want to survive, they have to understand and adjust to this incongruous universe as quickly as possible. They usually manage to adapt swiftly, but they are also aware of the profoundly distorted nature of this world. They often recount the ever more dramatic events of the persecution and captivity in a detached, neutral tone, as if they were just banal events of everyday life, which underlines their brutality and cruel absurdity.

Battlefields and Playgrounds has some poignant miniature absurd dramas in which bitter laughter and irony are used to show the aberrations of society and human beings. In one of the painfully hilarious scenes Jóska and his friend, little Láng, roll over with laughter when the latter presents a chillingly humoristic presentation of the “final solution.” With the escalation of the war the gap between reality and its distorted interpretations keeps increasing, producing some utterly absurd scenes. As the country and the “civilised world” descend into chaotic self-destruction, Jóska gradually comes to the conclusion that the universe of adults is not simply full of absurd conventions, meaningless formalities, and hypocrisy; it’s a mad system governed by a fool. This fool, however, is able to push the entire world into indiscriminate butchery and

destruction, imposing its will on heads of states who are supposed to represent basic human values—or at least rationality.

When he spoke on the radio or in the cinema, it became clear that he was an insane screaming buffoon who astonished people in much the same way as someone pissing on the tram. What frightened me was the fear I saw on the faces of adults who were supporting the English. If he had come into Zafir's pub they'd have thrown Hitler out without even thinking about it. He was dangerous, noisy and stupid, like a bomb. Churchill called him a "bloodthirsty guttersnipe" and he didn't mean to insult him; he merely provided an accurate description. What mad people loved in Hitler was the mirror of their insanity... (Nyíri 1991, 211)

In Ilona Karmel's book the camp is the world of the absurd, where looking for a sense or any kind of rationality is not only a futile but is, in a way, a legitimizing exercise: "To say, as others did, 'The OD men beat us to save their skin,' 'The Lagercommandant shoots to stay away from the front'—to grant this nightmare any logic would have meant admitting it into the world, which, Rubinfeldova insisted, 'one day will be a world again'" (12).

For Bogdan Wojdowski increasingly dark humor seems to be the only possible way to describe the degenerating life conditions, and the absurd and inhuman world of the ghetto. There are bleakly farcical scenes in *Bread for the Departed* where people discuss the enviable fate of rats who live much better than humans or their favorite modes of dying and relate ghastly scenes of cheating, stealing, and fighting for a piece of bread in a sinisterly sarcastic way. Judith Magyar Isaakson also recalls that in the camp children and youngsters wholeheartedly joked about the different methods of suicide they would use. She describes her grandfather's passing away before the deportation as a successful escape. (Isaakson, 73, 12)

Jiří Pick's *The Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals* shows with exquisite black humor the ludicrousness of Nazi regulations of life in the Terezín ghetto. The events are related in the calm, detached voice of nine-year-old Toni, who takes the absurdity and cruelty of the camp for granted. When the Germans occupy Prague, Toni, a "not clever, nor stupid," lonely pre-adolescent is interned in Terezín with his mother. Toni's lungs are failing, so he spends most of his time in the ghetto's hospital, in the company of adult patients, who spend their time talking.

Nobody is supposed to die during rest time, said Mr. Kurt Brisch. One should die between 10 and 12 a.m. Those are the working hours. He said this ironically, but the gentlemen did not find it so absurd. There were so many weird regulations in the ghetto. Some time ago, said Mr. Lowy, the administration issued a decree that in the territory of the ghetto, non-Aryans are forbidden to walk their dogs on the riverbank. ... There was no riverbank in the ghetto (there wasn't even a river). So why should the gentlemen be surprised at a regulation stating that inhabitants of the ghetto had to die between ten a.m. and twelve noon? (Pick, 125)

As everything else, this question is thoroughly discussed by the patients.

In the midst of arbitrary destruction, privations, hunger, and cold, knowing that a deportation order might arrive any moment, banned from school or any kind of structured activity, Toni wants to find a purpose in life. One day he presents his hospital friends and some of the camp's workers with the idea of establishing "The Society for the Protection of Animals." This is nonsense in itself, since Jews are not allowed to have pets, outside or inside the camp. The only animals they could possibly protect are mice, rats, cockroaches, and fleas, and, as they discover later, Fifinka, the Nazi camp commandant's ratter. The *Society* makes some efforts to fulfil its mission, all of which fail. Nevertheless, their common goal creates a small community whose members care for each other. As time passes, Toni's associates are sent to extermination camps one by one and he remains alone with Helga, a grey mouse, a present of one of his last departing friends. Helga becomes his protégé and friend.

The domain of the absurd is the only remaining realm where justice can prevail in one of András Mezei's short stories, "The miracle worker". When the deportations start in his village, a little boy, Joske, goes to the office of the local notary, a convinced Nazi, to plead for the release of his grandmother, who was taken to the nearest ghetto. The notary wants to humiliate him and demands to be greeted with a Nazi salute. Joske is reluctant and the notary becomes increasingly violent. Frightened, the little boy summons his imagination to resist him: "My God, freeze his arm! Freeze it!" he pleads silently. And it works. The notary's raised right arm freezes in the air. After a first attack of rage, when he realizes that he has lost control of his own arm, the man storms out of his office and begins to run around in the village in a panicked search for help. The villagers follow his mad rampage with fearful, astonished glances. No one can help him, not even the doctor.

After several grotesque episodes, it turns out that Joske's grandmother is the only person who could eventually remedy the notary's problem. She has been treating the villagers with her healing power and knowledge of medicinal herbs for decades. The poor Gipsy coachman, who took her to the ghetto some days earlier, is sent to fetch her immediately. On their way back to the village they stop at the cemetery so grandmother can say farewell to her beloved ones. She is allowed to walk freely in the meadows; she gathers her plants and prepares a magic potion that cures the notary. The moment when he is able to move his arm again, "Hungry, great yellow flames started to burn in his eyes, but the old woman's glance was illuminated by the dying flames of the Sabbath candles that burnt out with a hiss, cutting frightening shadows through the room. 'Miracle,' shouted the notary and jumped out of the bed" (Mezei 1984, 102).

Playing

Playing is freedom. Under any circumstances, children use every possible occasion to play, to amuse themselves and enjoy a moment of liberty, however short it is. They play locked in the guarded houses, in the ghettos, and in the camps, completely forgetting their dismal surroundings.

When Jews were obliged to wear the yellow star, many children tried to take this in a playful manner. Seven-year-old Inge Auerbach decided to turn the object of discrimination into an object of pride. "I'm a star" she writes in a poem. "Only 'special' children wear a star, / I am noticed from near and far. / They have placed a mark over my heart, / I'll wear it proudly from the start" (Auerbach, 3). Tania, Zdena Berger's protagonist, is reluctant to go out with a star on her coat. She finally decides to try it, "just once. See how it feels." When she takes the tram to school "it is a gathering of stars. They talk, and laugh and read newspapers as on any other day. And I think, there has never been a day when so many stars could be seen" (Berger, 14–15).

When Tomáš Radil puts on his coat with the yellow star for the first time and meets one of his friends in town, he greets him saying: "Hello, I see you also became a sheriff! Congratulations!" "And your soccer club chose a starry uniform!" replies Tomáš (Radil, 187). Ellen, the protagonist of Ilse Aichinger's *The Greater Hope* plays with the yellow star in a similar way. She takes it as an adornment, an honor, a sign of belonging, a source of light: "In this darkness it is necessary to shine and the star is there sparkling." One evening, braving the interdictions, she goes out with the star on her coat, try-

ing to buy a birthday cake for her friend. As she runs through the deserted streets, “the star on her coat gave her wings.” After her triumphant entry into the bakery, the magic of her imagination is smashed and she is violently thrown out of the shop.

Playing is a key element in Ilse’s book. The outcast Jewish children, who are permanently chased and excluded, play everywhere and all the time. When they are excluded from the public places, they go to play in the cemetery, when they are expelled; they go to a room in the attic and play until the moment they are arrested. “Play. This was their unique possibility, to stand before the intangible, preserve their elegance facing the mystery. This was the most secret commandment: Play in front of my face! In the onslaught of torments they figured it out: like a pearl in the shell, love was hiding in the play” (Aichinger, 99–103; 123–154).

Children who have to hole up during raids often treat hiding as if it were a game. This seems to help them to make time pass and avoid thinking about what would happen if they were discovered. Shlomo Breznitz describes the strange thrill he felt hiding in one of the dormitories when the German soldiers came to search the orphanage where he was sheltering. Hiding under a heavy comforter in a nauseatingly smelly bed, he first fancied playing hide and seek, but all of a sudden he realized that the outcome of this “game” was his survival. “It is like hiding from Death itself. Can one hide from Death?” (Breznitz, 124–126). Waiting in the dark storage place where his mother pushed him, Raymond Federman first also tried to interpret the situation in a playful manner: “Though he was a little scared of the dark, being in that closet was like a game, except that he didn’t know when he was supposed to stop playing. Or maybe it was a punishment. His mother put him in here because he had done something wrong and he had to stay there until she came back and told him that he could get out” (Federman 1990, 139–140).

Play is also a refuge where one can hide from the world’s horrors. Norman Manea narrates that when the soldiers came to arrest his father, he was playing outside with a group of friends. He noticed what happened, but concentrated all his attention on the children who were skimming pebbles in the river. He tried to hide the figures of the armed men behind the image of the smooth, flat stones that skipped on the surface of the water (Manea 1992, 47). György Konrád evokes that during the sinister days when his family was anxiously waiting for the deportation order he went to the garden and swung for hours, until he became dizzy. He could only escape the situation through permanent movement between earth and sky (Konrád, 48).

Shlomo Breznitz liked to play with the two heavy bells of the church in the orphanage where he was hiding:

On several occasions I came up with one of the bigger boys, and while he rang the heavy bell I would take care of the smaller one. Its sound had a higher pitch, and it could swing much more rapidly, so I could swing twice for each of the heavy deep sounds. Playing such a duet I would forget everything: who I was, where I was and what was happening in the world. (Breznitz, 137)

In the Warsaw ghetto and in various hiding places in the city, in miserable conditions and under the constant threat of death, Uri Orlev spent most of his time playing with his younger brother: “We had a game that we played. I was Tarzan, Commander of the World, and my brother was either my chief enemy, if we were at war, or the friendly head of the neighboring country, if we were at peace. Each of us had a large army, and during the six years of the real war, we fought our own imaginary one” (Orlev 2002, 28–30). Uri and his brother were later deported to Bergen-Belsen, but “even in that Hell, children played. My need to play was like hunger, just as intense. I will play under any conditions” (Orlev interview 2008).

Cejja Stojka also recalls that when the SS soldiers who controlled their section of the camp were far away, the children were allowed out of the barracks to play: “Aunt Ria said: ‘Children, you can play a bit, but don’t make too much noise.’ Then we really went out. Resi said: ‘Let’s play hopscotch!’ I did not even remember how you do it. Rupa showed it to me. We all laughed and for a moment we forgot our misery” (Stojka 2018, 45). Maurice Cling confirms the vital need to play under any circumstances. He recalls that in Drancy, but even in Auschwitz, whenever they found the occasion, in the rare moments of pause or when they were assigned slightly easier work, the children immediately started to play and kid one another. They played with stones and sticks, transformed the heavy carts they worked with into a sled; they dressed up and danced and sang: “A child prisoner is a child first of all” (58).

Children found consolation in re-playing everyday life scenes from the times before the ghettos and camps. Bogdan Wojdowski describes the sick, hungry children of the Warsaw ghetto who gathered in the courtyard and played at buying food on the market. The older boys enacted Western adventure stories and they always managed to win (Wojdowski, 103–106). Often, however, the children’s sordid daily existence crowded out peaceful memories and the horrors that surrounded them became material for play. Aranka Siegal

recalls that in the brick factory where they were held before deportation she kept acting out ordinary household scenes with her little sister and brother, trying to draw them back to a world of normalcy. Other children played police control, torture, and execution (Siegal, 150–151).

Children keep playing, even at the threshold of death. Ruth Klüger remembers a naked little boy of around two who was playing happily with a walking stick found in the building of the baths in Auschwitz. Around him everybody was terrified, not knowing what would come out of the showers (Klüger, 102). In one of his stories, Norman Manea describes little girls playing in the Transnistria camp. They are dirty and skeletal, dressed in rags, but they are “playing mannequin.” They walk around gracefully, strike a pose, show themselves around, and then, at a sign, they become immobile and remain motionless for a moment. The little boy who observes them is worried that this game might become dangerous; the girls’ sudden immobility might invite death to surprise them in the middle of their playing (Manea, 1992, 18). Arnošt Lustig remarks about one of his alter-egos: “As long as you’ve got the strength for it and you are good at make-believe, it’s one more proof that you are alive. You can play games even if you are hungry and thirsty and scared. But once they’ve killed you, you can’t play anymore” (Lustig, 219).

Children play with everything, including words. In one of Norman Manea’s stories, a doctor comes to see a gravely ill little boy in the Transnistria camp. He asks about symptoms and the feverish child starts to play with the word: “It sounded nice, ‘symptoms.’ I dragged the word after me, I was falling, plunging; symptoms, it was almost reassuring, I was sliding, going down; I no longer knew anything. Wet slippery fish brushed my burning lips; they licked my ears, and I floated with them” (Manea 1992, 13). Marceline Loridan-Ivens evokes that in Drancy inventing words and imaginary destinations helped children to amuse themselves and dissipate their anxieties: “we still didn’t know where we were going. Like everyone else, we said over and over again: ‘We’re going to Pitchipoi,’ that Yiddish word that stands for an unknown destination and sounds so sweet to children. They would use it when they talked about trains as they set off: ‘They’re going to Pitchipoi,’ they’d say out loud, to reassure themselves after the adults had whispered it to them” (Loridan-Ivens 2017, 5).

Michał Głowiński recalls his fascination with the word ghetto: “I envisaged this mysterious and incomprehensible ghetto as a huge, many-storied carriage riding through the streets of the city, pulled by some umpteen horses. Into such a carriage they would put us, and we would live there; on the whole it would turn out to be something quite exciting and entertaining. I imagined

that in this carriage there would be all kinds of staircases, so that one could run freely from one floor to the next, and many windows as well, so that nothing would stand in the way of looking out over the unknown world” (Głowinski, 5). Bunim, the poet in Chava Rosenfarb’s book, also offers the word “ghetto” to his daughter so she can play with it while they are moving there (Rosenfarb, ll. 10).

Playing sometimes turns into a life-deciding event, like the chess-match in Iccchokas Meras’s *Stalemate*. A similarly important chess match takes place in Michał Głowiński’s book. After Michał and his family manage to escape from the ghetto and hide in a flat, the little boy spends a lot of time playing chess. Chess is his favorite pastime that helps him to cope with fear and boredom. One day a *szmalcownik*, one of the (many) shady characters who blackmailed hiding Jews and extorted their last remaining belongings, forces his way into the apartment. While he is waiting for the money to be delivered, he proposes to play a match with the little boy. Michał can’t refuse. While they play he gets ever more anxious, convinced that the outcome of the game will determine their destiny. The match abruptly ends when Michał’s aunt returns with the money she was able to gather. After this game the little boy loses all interest in playing chess: “Yet I believe that what most influenced this sudden change was the chess match played against the *szmalcownik*—or rather, against Death, who on this occasion had assumed the form not of a skeleton with a scythe, but rather a well-built young man with a roguishly trimmed moustache” (Głowiński, 61–65).

Shlomo Breznitz describes a similarly dramatic chess match. Shlomo’s family is hiding in a small Slovakian village. A friend warns them that the next morning they will be deported. The parents feverishly look for a solution, and at the last minute they find a Catholic orphanage that agrees to take in eight-year-old Shlomo and his older sister. The family rushes to the convent. To distract him, his father asks Shlomo to play a game of chess with one of the kids who hangs around in the courtyard. The children sit down and play in the last rays of the setting sun. Behind his back Shlomo hears his parents’ hasty whispers as they discuss the conditions with the Mother Superior. Shlomo is a child chess prodigy, who has won matches against many excellent adult players earlier. It rapidly turns out that he is playing against a weak adversary. Nevertheless, he is going to lose the game.

“Behind my back, slightly to the left, there was a sound of quiet sobbing. I turned my head, desperately trying to penetrate the darkness to see Dad and Mum just once more, but my eyes were veiled with tears and my opponent was urging me to continue playing. I quickly returned to face this purest and fairest

of all games, where the imperfections of the real world have no standing. And yet the unfairness of what was happening in the real world managed to somehow penetrate the neutrality that governs chess, and I played g7 to g6, falling into the trap, losing the rook, losing my parents, losing everything” (30–31).

The metaphor of survival as the random outcome of a game appears in Uri Orlev’s *The Sandgame* as well. Like Elżbieta Ettinger and Bogdan Wojdowski, Uri uses the image of quicksand to depict people’s destiny during the Shoah. He relates that back in his childhood in Poland, children used to play tossing “a handful of sand into the air and try to catch the grains on the back of their hand, announcing, ‘So many children will you have!’ On the next throw, they turned their hands palm up, this time calling out, ‘This many will die in the forest . . . be run over . . . die of the plague . . . kidnapped by the Gypsies! . . . fall off the roof... fall down the well.... be poisoned.’ . . . it was like that with the Germans. They kept throwing us into the air and a great number of us died, but my brother and I landed safely each time” (Orlev 2002, 3–4).

If there is nothing else to play with, children play with death, the ubiquitous presence in their life in the ghettos and camps. Uri Orlev evokes that in the Warsaw ghetto “sometimes in the factory we held contests with other children to see who had more murdered relatives. Even when we found out that the whole family of my mother, who wasn’t originally from Warsaw, had been sent to Auschwitz, giving us a score of 98, the boy next door was still ahead with over a hundred, so my brother and I invented a few more uncles and aunts and beat him” (98).

Francine Christophe recalls that the children in Drancy and for a while even in Bergen-Belsen were still able to organize themselves, play, sing, and create theatre performances. Later, when conditions became unbearable, they could only play with the dead. One day, when Francine passed by a pile of corpses, she said: “How ugly they are, all these corpses. They’re all grimacing. One head sticks up and stares at me with its cold eyes. I smile at it. Greetings, dead ones. See you soon” (Christophe, 87). Ceija Stojka also recalls taking refuge among the piles of dead bodies that provided some protection against the biting cold in the winter of 1944–45 in Bergen-Belsen. She talked to them and played with them as if they were her mute playmates (Stojka 2016, 39–40).

Jona Oberski recalls a chilling episode when, just to have a little bit of entertainment, some older children encourage him to mock one of the German soldiers who guard the camp of Westerbork. Jona is five years old and is easy to convince. He pulls his tongue and shows a “long nose” to the guard. Frightened, the other kids run away. Fortunately the guard does not pay attention to

Jona (Oberski, 57–61). There is a similar scene in Cordelia Edvardson's memoirs. One day Cordelia goes to see a young girl she would like to befriend. The young girl and her friend push Cordelia to ask the female camp commander, who is walking her two hunter dogs next to the children's barrack, for some food. Thanks to the surprise her request provokes, Cordelia manages to run away. She learns later that the commander often leashed her dogs on the prisoners who were torn to pieces (Edvardson, 72).

Otto Dov Kulka and his fellow child prisoners in the family camp at Auschwitz also have their sinister games with death. There is Great Death and Small Death. Great Death is beyond reach; it is inevitable, indomitable, and can only be feared. However, one can eventually risk playing with Small Death:

There were other amusements in that camp, too. As children we were very curious to know whether the barbed wire of the electrified fence was really electrified. The question gave us no rest. We would approach the fence—by day, not at night—and compete among ourselves over who would dare to touch the barbed wire and stay alive. For the most part, the fence was not electrified during the day. Our fear was great, but so too was our need to overcome this small fear. To overcome the great fear of the crematoria and of the immutable law that led to them was impossible. (Kulka, 22)

Play provides a unique, precious opportunity for the children to feel free, so it is not surprising that liberation is often experienced as regaining the right to play. When Bergen-Belsen is liberated, Otto Rosenberg lies in the hospital barrack convalescing. Outside on the camp's streets, chaos and insecurity reign. One day Otto gathers together all his strength and ventures out of his block: "To go out on the camp street was a sure sentence of death. Despite this I left our block. I went down the camp street and into another block. There I climbed up the stairs all the way to the attic, and in this attic I found a horse, a hobby-horse, and this hobby-horse—I was weak and ill—I dragged down the many steps and went back along the camp street with it to our block, to my room, set it down before my box and laid down again. Yes. And then I had it with me, that hobby-horse" (Rosenberg, 110).

Liberation also means the possibility to play again for Aldo Zargani. At the end of the war, after long months of danger, privations, fleeing, and hiding, Aldo's family is reunited. One evening they are waiting for the night train to take them back to their home town. As they stroll around, they come across a rink with bumper cars, where one lonely American soldier goes around in circles:

Papa decided, in a flash of joy brighter than the lights of the rink ... that it was time for a gesture, a joyful proclamation of our newly recovered safety—we were ten hours away from Germany's unconditional surrender. With his typically regal attitude, he declared ... that we could go around as many times as we liked, each in his own car. "You decide how much I should spend. Have fun." The American was overjoyed ... and he crashed into us again and again, screaming like a Mohican, laughing his loud American laugh He let us crash into him, and then, selecting the least protected one of us, attacked astutely and fiercely, yelping in terror at our two-pronged retaliation. This went on for countless turns, until Roberto and I were completely exhausted. (Zargani, 218–219)

Several decades after the end of the war, the announcement of Joseph Bialot's death reads like a last laugh in the face of the death that was defeated with every day he lived after he was liberated from the camp: "His family and friends are sad to announce the definitive departure of Joseph Bialot ... identification number 193.143 in Birkenau, identification number B.9718 in Auschwitz. These numbers never came out in the lottery in this order!" (Bialot, Death notice 2012).

C H A P T E R

4

THE AFTERMATH:
SURVIVING SURVIVAL

The return home, when it is part of the story, is always one of the most painful sections of the books. Once every instant is no longer occupied by the all-absorbing struggle for survival, in the frantic rhythm of the camps, or in the permanent dread and constraints of hiding, the survivors face the enormity of their losses and the extent of the destruction. Moreover, they often have to cope with this brutal new situation alone. Their surviving former companions of the camps or ghettos are dispersed; their remaining family members, friends, and acquaintances, who did not undergo similar experiences, are often unable or unwilling to understand their state and accompany their process of recovery with the necessary empathy and patience.

In addition to coping with their personal losses, the young survivors also face the society from which they were supposed to disappear. If during the war they were able to nurture illusions about things returning to “normal” after the war, hoping that the period of persecution and genocide was just a tragic historical deviation, the experiences of the return usually proved the opposite. Many survivor children came to the bitter conclusion that what they had experienced during the war was just a condensed, particularly extreme version of the order of things; the world is governed by violence, injustice, the hunger for power and material gain, and not at all by humanity and rationality. The tragic feeling of cosmic alienation and the futility of human existence that many of them experienced in the ghettos and camps became a key feature of their worldview. Some authors, like Imre Kertész and Iccchokas Meras, affirm that the universe of the camps revealed the basic laws of a ruthless and meaningless human existence: “Auschwitz has been hanging around in the air since long ago, who knows, perhaps for centuries, like dark fruit ripening in the sparkling rays of innumerable disgraces, waiting for the moment when it may at last drop on mankind’s head” (Kertész 2004, 36).

There is a significant difference between the post-war trajectories of the survivors depending on whether they returned to their homelands or went into exile. For those who returned, the experience was even more harrowing because they had to face the material proof of their losses and to learn to live with this void—often living among those who passively witnessed or participated in the destruction of their childhood world and its inhabitants. Most authors went into exile after the war. A few never returned to their birth-places, but the majority made the voyage back home at least once.

Return to what used to be home

The return home was particularly daunting for the child survivors, because they realized that they could not go back to their childhood. A chapter of their life, in principle the richest in sensations and possibilities, remained unaccomplished, lost forever. They found themselves wedged between childhood and adulthood—having elements of both, but not fully fitting either. They had experiences that people around them, including their non-persecuted peers, could not and often did not want to know about. Frequently they were the only survivors of their families, friends, school classmates, and acquaintances, deprived of the familiar context in which they had lived before the war, isolating them still further. Before the war they were labelled strangers; now they have in fact become strangers.

When Marceline Loridan-Ivens returned to France, she observed, “I was not a kid, I understood everything about the human race, but I was not an adult either, I knew so little about life” (Loridan-Ivens 2018, 83). When György Konrád returned to the village where he was born, he learnt that out of two hundred Jewish children only seven came back. The year he spent away drew an invisible “border of silence” between him and his schoolmates. “They were normal children. I was not” (Konrád 60, 128). Norman Manea relates their voyage home from the camps full of hope: “We hadn’t come back on a magic carpet. For long months we had straggled along, dizzy with the roar of artillery, ravaged by hunger, behind the troops. But time had shrunk; in the end it seemed like an instant’s flight over the golden bridge between two worlds. No one had had a chance to get ready for meeting the other realm” (Manea 1992, 73). Norman soon had to realise that there was no “golden bridge” and they did not return to a country of fairy tales created in their nostalgic longing for their homes during the deportation. They became strangers, and later outcasts, in their former home.

In one of Norman's short stories, "The exact hour", a young survivor visits the well-to-do family of the girl he hopes to marry. He is politely received, but he is increasingly ill at ease. When he hears unknown words, which entered into circulation during his years of captivity, he panics and becomes unable to continue the conversation. "The boy was startled. He closed his eyes and held on to the word; he saw fritters, little brown lizards with long greenish tongues spurting poison. Fritters, hundreds of them, jumping up suddenly through the tall, thick grass — too late to protect himself from their thin, icy hiss" (Manea 1992, 63–64). He concludes that the gap that separates him from his peers who were not deported is impossible to bridge.

Raymond Federman also relates how the euphoria of liberation turned rapidly into bitterness. After years spent hiding in the countryside, Raymond returned to Paris riding on an American tank, overjoyed:

What a happy journey. He was going home. His mother, his father, his sisters, the whole family would be there waiting. He was certain of that. Like so many who survived with this false hope, and now he was racing toward that delusion. He stood on the tank and for hundreds of miles he sang songs with the soldiers. It was beautiful! (Federman 1990, 47)

Nobody was waiting for him at home. Nobody survived. He kept returning to his old neighborhood, hoping to find someone alive, and one day he miraculously encountered his cousin Sarah, who was also the only survivor of her family. Raymond calls his life after the war "the beginning of a long absence from himself ...a false resurrection" (142).

In Aharon Appelfeld's *Blooms of Darkness*, the protagonist, Hugo, returns to his hometown after two years of hiding. He passes by his former school and is very happy to find the same caretaker in the courtyard. He greets him, but the man doesn't recognize him. When he introduces himself, the man notes: "I see that the Jews are coming back." Hugo returns to his former home, but an old Ukrainian man chases him away. His parents' once beautiful pharmacy is half-ruined and turned into a miserable grocery store. "Only now, standing before the ruins, does he absorb what has happened: what was will never return" (Appelfeld 2010, 269–271).

Mária Ember also talks about the pain of her return to Hungary. When they came back from the camp, her mother was unable to support her and for a while placed her in a Jewish orphanage in Budapest:

For me that year in the Anna Szenes orphanage was worse than the deportation. Because out there you said ... you will be either killed or not. If you were killed that was the responsibility of the murderers. ... But to come back—you hoped you'd come back to your old home. To the home of before. Everyone was longing for the velvet cushion of the sofa ... the regained freedom, in the conditions of the dispossession, of total privation, now clearly without my father, with the perspective of marginalization, of no future ... was much more difficult to endure. (Ember 2002, 20–21)

Aldo Zargani also writes about the difficulties of coming back:

For months we waited in vain for the return of the survivors, unable to accept the reality, which was already obscured by the Empire of Indifference which has returned only weeks after the end of the war to the world of the non-Jews. At first, when we spoke of the horrors we have seen, we encountered sympathetic reactions, but soon the responses changed in tone: “Well, you know, my son broke his foot in '44 and we had to set it with a piece of wood from the carpenter's shop, imagine!” We were seen as petulant whiners in a world of courageous, stoic folk full of Christian forgiveness. (Zargani, 74)

For Inge Auerbach homecoming was less traumatic than for many others, because she encountered some unusual gestures of solidarity. A little German girl offered her a doll; their confiscated house was returned—entirely looted, but with a bucket of fresh flowers. Inge was the only child survivor of the whole province of Württemberg. “The townspeople ... insisted that they knew nothing of the horrors we had suffered” (Auerbach, 73).

The homecoming was often very complicated even inside the families themselves. The war radically changed the relationships between parents and children and both sides had difficulties in readjusting afterwards. Ruth Klüger, Magda Dénes, Mária Ember, Marceline Loridan-Ivens, and others describe bitter clashes with their surviving family members, particularly their mothers. If relatives shared the same destiny during the period of persecution and/or deportation, their bonds became so strong that not even profound disagreements undermined them, but when they had dissimilar trajectories, the distance was almost impossible to overcome.

Louis Begley notes that his father, who spent the war incorporated in the ranks of the Red Army, despite his own difficult experiences, never fully understood what happened to him and his mother during the years they spent hid-

ing in Poland. Aharon Appelfeld found his father years after the Holocaust. He often treated him as if he were still the nine-year-old whose trace he had lost during the war, even though Aharon had already become a father himself. The affectionate relationship between Uri Orlev and his father broke down forever with the war and the following years.

When Madeleine Kahn's mother discovered her in the bus that took her back to Paris after six years of war, deportation, camps, and hiding, she let escape a cry: "*Is this my daughter?*" Madeleine became a stranger in her own family, feeling neither loved nor understood by her parents, who only once asked what happened to her in Romania and didn't want to answer her questions about their experiences during the war years in France: "From now on I belonged to these two adults who did not even seem to be happy about my presence, the only thing that mattered was the absolute right of progenitors" (Kahn, 100).

When, two years after the end of the war, Anita Lobel and her brother were reunited with their parents, who were not deported, they also had the uneasy feeling of meeting strangers. The family tried to build a new life in Sweden. Before the war in Poland, Anita's father was a prosperous, well-respected businessman. In exile, without knowing the language, without connections, he could only get precarious, unskilled jobs. When he finally found a job as an elevator man in an office building, he was utterly unhappy. One day he broke down: "I can't do this," he sobbed. "I can't do this!" ... "In this country I am nothing!" Thirteen-year-old Anita watches his agony with incomprehension and slight irritation:

I had lost nothing I had cared about. I had only vague memories of having things that belonged to me before the war. I had become used to not having books or toys or pretty clothes or friends. ... I had been without my big, good-smelling father for so many years. But now I was ready for this smaller, found father to take charge and to take care of me. I could not understand why it was not enough for him just to have survived and to have his wife and children back. And to be alive in a country where there was plenty of food and where people were quietly helpful to strangers and the hating of Jews was not their main purpose in life. (Lobel, 205–206)

The return often meant the beginning of a new struggle for survival in very practical terms as well. The former prisoners had to readapt to the post-war realities and to everyday life. Many had difficulties eating, sleeping, concentrating, studying, or working. Joseph Bialot recalls: "My mother prepared me a nor-

mal bed, with a frame, mattress, blankets and pillows. Of course, I physically could not endure the softness of this bed and lied down on the floor. I needed time to get used to sleeping differently” (Bialot 2002, 271). Marceline Lordin-Ivens also mentions that at first she was also unable to sleep in a proper bed.

Nearly all survivors faced serious economic difficulties. They had to struggle to make ends meet, to go through often humiliating procedures trying to recover their flats, stolen belongings, or receive some official help. To the pain, traumas, and sufferings of the war new pains, sufferings, and humiliations were added.

After their return from the camps, Francine Christophe and her mother had to fight to get back their flat occupied by a collaborator:

No way of returning to our home. Our home no longer exists. This is the grand surprise of our return. Having completely stripped the apartment, the Germans had installed a collaborator and his family there. ...During our imprisonment, he earned some money and wants to buy an apartment. In spite of that, he makes the most of the situation to get as much out of us as possible! (Christophe 152)

Francine’s family finally decides to borrow money and pay him, since the legal system is so slow that they cannot wait for a trial. Joseph Bialot also notes that many Jewish survivors had to confront the new occupants of their former homes and the virulent anti-Semitism they displayed in “justifying” their position (Bialot, 2004, 77).

Several months after liberation, Edith Bruck and her sister decided to return to their village.

My heart pounded, walking on those familiar roads. At our house we found only a cupboard and two sofa cushions covered in shit. The walls were besmirched with inscriptions against the Jews. We tried to clean up, but it was no longer the family home of our past. ... The neighbors pointed out so-and-so who had our furniture. We hoped to get everything back and to remain in our village. But the family that had taken the furniture threw us out of their house, calling us stinking Jews. I didn’t feel up to staying, being insulted even in our poverty, and accumulating pain on top of pain. (Bruck 2001, 71–72)

Sarah Kofman, Mária Ember, György Konrád, and many others had similar returns to a completely looted home or one occupied by those who remained

and often benefited from the war. Tomáš Radil describes how he spent months trying to rebuild their ransacked, destroyed, and filthy house—a house that never became a home again. Eventually he moved out (Radil, 618–631).

When they first emerged from the sewers of Lvov, Krysha Chiger and her family received gifts and generous help from unknown people. Soon, however, they realized that they had to keep struggling to have a place to live and something to eat. The Soviet authorities considered Krysha's father, who owned a small textile store before the war, a bourgeois, so he couldn't find a job. The new powerholders were also suspicious of surviving Jews, intimating that they might have been collaborators. When her mother enrolled eight-year-old Krysha in school, the school registrar first didn't want to believe that there were still Jews alive in the town. Then she advised them not to mention their origins. Krysha was marginalized in school because she was very poor and very different from everybody else.

In Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar*, the narrator, one of the few, unnamed survivors of the ghetto where Jacob was held, recounts that one day he could not resist the urge to return to the place, even though "the trip would merely ruin the whole of my next year." He also went to meet one of the Nazi soldiers who worked for the ghetto's commander. The encounter between the former prisoner and the 'de-Nazified' soldier is calm and objective; however, the immense difference between the post-war lives of the two men is self-evident. The visitor is a lonely, broken man, haunted by his memories, while his host has a comfortable life, with a nice family in a nice flat (177–182).

Return to "normal"

Children longed to return to their pre-war life, but their war-time experiences and often bitter homecoming dissipated their illusions about "re-establishing normalcy" or "things going back as they were before."

In the last days of their captivity, Livia Bitton-Jackson and her brother were sitting by the fence of the camp. They knew that the US army was approaching and liberation was imminent. Livia's brother pondered whether they were the only survivors of their family: "April wind. Freedom. The Americans will be here soon, and we will be liberated. We will be freed—to do what? To face a world in which little children were gassed with their mothers. To face the world in which this was possible. My God. My God. I have just been robbed of my freedom" (Bitton-Jackson, 177). Miriam Akavia recalls a conversation in the camp of Płaszów after her grandmother was taken away. Her mother asks

in a trembling voice: “When will this end?” “Never,” whispered Ania. “Because, even if we survive, this hell will never leave us” (Akavia, 137).

Joseph Bialot talks about a return “to a world called normal,” to a “normal life,” always in parenthesis (Bialot 2002, 103). Norman Manea calls the deportation “the Initiation” the introduction to the genuine world. He skeptically observes the adults’ eagerness to prove that everything has returned to “normal” following their arrival from the camps: “It was just the need for yet another sign that all was normal. Nothing else but the rush to accumulate proof, to have relatives and neighbors and former friends confirm that, yes, everything was in order, that life had reaccepted them, that it was just like before, that they were the same as before.” (Manea 1992, 86–87).

Lingering racism

Survivors often returned to their former home to find that far from being sympathetic and expressing solidarity, people were often indifferent or utterly hostile. Many of those who witnessed—and often participated in and benefited from—the exclusion and persecution of the Jews, found it difficult to face those who came back. Guilty conscience was mixed together with the deep-rooted racism and anti-Semitism that did not disappear with the end of the war. When mother and sons returned to the grandparents’ village in Nyíri’s *Battlefields*, they learned that they were the first survivors to return: “Of the eight hundred Jews in the village, thirty-five remained alive. When about twenty of them returned, a joke went around in the village. ‘Ten went away, and twenty came back’” (Nyíri 1991, 531). Imre Kertész’s narrator in *Kaddish* evokes a sleepless night when looking out of the window, he sees three half-drunken men walking on the street singing at the top of their lungs: “We’ve just come from Auschwitz, there’s more of us than before” (Kertész 2004, 81).

After the liberation of the camp and recovering some strength, Tomáš Radil sets off alone to return to his home town on the border of Czechoslovakia and Hungary. He travels with a paper proving that he is a former concentration camp prisoner and authorities are requested to help him during his journey. After two months on the road, on the last stretch of his trip in Hungary, the conductor on a train refuses to accept this document. A nasty scene follows, in which the conductor and other passengers attack him with anti-Semitic insults and throw him out of the train. When Tomáš finally arrives home, he finds every single Jewish house, including his home, sacked and sullied. Even-

tually his father also returns from forced labor service. The mother was killed in Auschwitz. The two orphaned men live side by side, unable to reconstruct their warm, intimate pre-war relationship. In addition, they have to struggle to make a living. When Tomáš's father succeeds in establishing a modest enterprise, he is accused of being a "former capitalist," because before the war he worked as an agricultural expert on a large estate. During the Slansky trials he is harassed as a Jew (Radil, 624–626).

After his return from the camp, József Gáli is initially placed in a Jewish orphanage located in a flat in Budapest. One day he overhears one of the neighbors saying: "Fortunately ... next year they are going to close this brothel. It's high time to close this Jewish mess financed with dirty imperialist money. Helping out the deported, eh? Why was I not deported? No one is deported without a reason" (Gáli, 198). Judith Magyar Isaakson recalls her first trip back to her home town in Hungary in 1977. On the train they engage in conversation with a woman. When she learns that most of Judith's family was killed in Auschwitz, she shivers with horror: "'How dreadful!' she shuddered. 'D'you know what's the worst mistake the Nazis made?' 'No,' I sighed stunned by her question. 'They should have gassed all the Gypsies instead!'" (Isaakson, 135).

During the war, hiding in occupied Ukraine with his mother, Wilhelm Dichter was most afraid of children who might have denounced him. When the war ended, he was nine years old and had never been to school. Enrolled in a school in now Soviet Ukraine, he did not feel safe at all. He was considered an outsider and was regularly bullied: "Putting my leather backpack on my shoulders, I tried not to let it creak. The boys held their noses. The coat smelled of kerosene. 'He is little, but he already stinks,' one of them said. 'They all stink.' 'Of what?' 'Gas.' ... Even after the war, childhood was not safe" (Dichter, 104). Wilhelm had similar experiences after the family settled in Poland. He was chased away from his school by anti-Semitic children and teachers, until he found refuge in a liberal, progressive school.

In *The Victory*, his memoir covering the aftermath of the war, Henryk Grynberg describes the uncertain, murky world of post-war Poland, full of fear, insecurity, rancor, rivalries, and old and new accounts to settle, where one could not trust anyone. He also writes about the vivid anti-Semitism that survived the war:

When after two years the Fryds came out of the hiding place beneath their bakery, that grave where they had been buried alive, they thought that after all they had suffered—almost the only Jews in the whole town to survive—

everyone would have compassion for them, lend them encouragement, perhaps even rejoice that they were alive. But that night those armed men hadn't gone to anyone but the Fryds for money because the Fryds were Jews. And, if a Jew has money, everybody else thinks he's got the right to take it. That's why I didn't want to be a Jew. (Grynberg, 100–101)

Marceline Loridan-Ivens also had her dose of persisting racism after the end of the war: “From 1945 a leaden silence covered the destruction of Jews of Europe. In France it was about rehabilitating the country that had betrayed the Republic with the support of the majority of the people and give it an image of resistance—resistance that was in fact heroic, but heart-breakingly small-scale. Anti-Semitism was very strong after the war. I will never forget the remark of the young woman from Francis's family: ‘It seems that the Jews are not like everybody else, they have horns on their feet.’ And I see myself taking off my shoes to show her the opposite” (Loridan-Ivens 2008, 163). Edith Bruck recalls the graffiti on the walls of the small Czechoslovak town where she took refuge after the war: “Jews out, go to Palestine!” (Bruck 2001, 83). On their way from Bergen-Belsen to Toulon, where they were to take a boat to Palestine, Uri Orlev and his brother travelled through Paris. They noticed how “on the walls of the working class suburbs someone had scrawled: JEWS TO THE GAS CHAMBERS! In French. And German. And Polish” (Orlev 1979, 217).

When Madeleine Kahn returned to school in post-war France she found silence and undisturbed anti-Semitism. One day one of her classmates called her “a dirty Jew.” Quite uncharacteristically, Madeleine gave the girl a majestic slap. She was taken to the school principal, where she explained what happened. The director punished the offender. For the first time in her life, Madeleine returned to the class with dignity. This experience made her decide to dedicate her life to the fight for justice and historical truth (Kahn, 114–115).

Magda Dénes evokes a tragicomic episode that highlights how even the persecuted Jews had not shed their racist prejudices after the war. Soon after liberation, Magda, her mother, and her aunt headed for the countryside to exchange their last meagre possessions for some food. People in Budapest were starving, the transport system was heavily damaged, there were few trains running, and it was almost impossible to board them. After several failed efforts, the women found an open wagon

... piled high with coal, on top of which were piled many loud, colorfully dressed, despised Gypsy women. “Join up, join up,” they shouted down to us,

in their weirdly accented, fractured Hungarian. “Up, up!” one said. “Quick,” said another. “Gypsies good luck,” called a third.

“No,” my mother said to us quietly. “We cannot travel with Gypsies.” “Why not?” I asked. “They look friendly enough, and they have room up there.” “No,” my mother said. “They are filthy and they steal children.” “They do what?” “They steal children.”

“Oh, I get it,” Rózsi said, completely losing her temper. “They are better than we Jews. We eat children. Haven’t you read that in the newspaper? I have. At Passover the pascal lamb is really the limb of a Christian child. They lie about us. Also about the Gypsies. The gypsies don’t steal children and we don’t eat children. And as for filth, I don’t think a person can be dirtier than we are.” “Ours is new dirt, the dirt of war,” my mother said lamely. “It stinks the same,” I yelled. “Enough,” Rózsi said. “I’m climbing up.” (Dénes, 211)

Ceija Stojka relates that discrimination against Gypsies, coupled with the denial of their fate during the war, remained ubiquitous in Austria as well. After their return from the camps, she and her surviving family members had to struggle to obtain a place to live, to get work, and to obtain some financial assistance. The local authorities eventually assigned them a nice flat, but soon they had to leave it, because the former tenants, who were Nazi collaborators, regained the right to occupy it. People ignored or pretended not to know what happened to the Roma during the war, but Ceija often encountered open racism or sarcastic comments when people saw the number tattooed on her arm. One day she was selling fresh eggs at the market, when an unknown man approached her stand and started to shout: “You, dirty Gypsy, you are still alive? Hitler forgot you!” He began to break the eggs and no one went to help Ceija, who had to run to find a relative to defend her (Stojka 2018, 180).

Otto Rosenberg recounts that in the 1950s, when the issue of war reparations came up in Germany, he had to go all the way to the Supreme Court. He notes, “They said I was not a true German and had no ties to the city of Berlin.” Instead of the twenty or thirty thousand marks Otto was entitled to receive, the authorities finally offered him nine thousand, but deducted five thousand for welfare he had received for medical expenses, when he had been ill. His lost family members are not even considered:

For my brothers and sisters who died in Birkenau, for my brother Waldemar who was in a KZ in Bialystok and was killed, for my father who was in the KZ of Bialystok and about whose death I have conflicting reports, and for my

mother who died as a result of her imprisonment in a KZ, I did not receive a single penny. “Prove that this is your mother, that these were your brothers and sisters.” But I did not have any documents from before! They had taken even my birth certificate away! ... I procured the papers as far as this was possible, and then they said: “We see a possibility here. You apply for a certificate of inheritance and then you tell us where your mother is buried. Then we must do an exhumation.”

I do not recall what happened next. There was a terrible scene, I tipped the desk over, some people grabbed me. “You fat pig.” I said. “You are all Nazis. My mother, who suffered so much, who lost all of her children, you want me to have her exhumed, just so that I can collect this blood money!” I then renounced all claims, just so that I would not have to be confronted with all this any longer. And that is what happened to many of us, often because they could not read and could not write and did not know what their rights were. (Rosenberg, 126–128)

Their wartime traumas and the lingering anti-Semitism moved several Jewish survivor children to want to shed their heavy heritage. They strove to dissociate themselves from their identity and forget about the past. This was one of the reasons why many decided to stay silent and did not share their experiences with their families and the outside world for decades.

At the end of the war, Henryk Grynberg and his mother watch the Soviet tanks rolling through the village where they were hiding for a year. Henryk’s mother is overwhelmed with emotion: “We’ll be able to live like everybody else. And won’t have to be afraid of anyone ever again” (Grynberg, 63). Henryk is not convinced. The mother is eager to return to their hometown, hoping to find some survivors of the family and their home, but Henryk is reluctant to go back. He finally blurts out:

“Because I don’t want to be a Jew anymore.” Now she did not answer. “Mama, didn’t you hear what I said? ... I don’t want to be a Jew anymore, all right?” Again she didn’t answer. She raised her head but didn’t look at me. She stared off into the distance. “I won’t be a Jew anymore, all right?” “We’ll see,” she answered. “No. I want to know for sure.” “Well, all right, all right, as you want. I won’t force you. Who knows if there are even any Jews left.”

“I didn’t want to be a Jew even more than before when I wasn’t allowed to remember my father or my grandfather or my real name ... Even more than when the priest taught me how much harm the Jews had done to the world...

More than when we returned and people thought it strange for us to still be alive. And even more than when it turned out I could not even ask who killed my father. ... When the church was empty, I would kneel before the painted figures and ask them this once to use their almighty power and make me not be a Jew anymore.” (100–103)

Norman Manea wanted to bury his experiences and identity after the war as well:

When I was sent to the camps, I was five years old. I was not a Jew. I was nothing. I was a little boy. What did I know how Jewish I was or if I *was* Jewish. I came back very eager to become like everybody else. In order to no longer belong to this “*chosen* people” or this damned diabolical people. This explains why I became a very young communist: the ideology, the utopia of everyone being equal and anticipating a great collective future was a wonderful fairy tale for a young boy of nine, ten, fourteen. Thankfully I woke up in time—at fifteen, I think. (Manea American Reader interview 2013.)

Francine Christophe was also eager to blend in and be a “normal” child: “I was twelve when I was liberated and most of all I wanted to be like the others. I did not want to be different any longer. I didn’t understand why I was imprisoned because I was Jewish. I didn’t want to tell what I went through, it was impossible to tell it” (Christophe interview, n.d.). The desire to put a radical end to a history of persecution and loss appears in Mária Ember’s *Hairpin Bend* as well. One day, still in the camp, the mother declares: “If you get out from here alive, after the war, marry a Christian girl. It’s high time to finish with Jewishness” (Ember 1974, 197).

After being liberated from the camps, Anita Lobel and her brother were sent to Sweden to recover their health. Anita learned the new language quickly and discovered the pleasures of a different, unknown world that helped her to build a new post-war self. Her mother-tongue became a burden, a dark tie that pulled her back to her unhappy past. One day an unknown person appeared in the sanatorium where she was treated. He spoke to her in Polish and brought her Jewish stories written in Polish.

With the entrance of this dark man, I felt the circle I had been able to stay inside of disintegrate. I felt threatened by something muddy and dark coming to reclaim me from the life I now lived in bright colours. ... I looked into

the smiling face. A Jewish face with droopy eyelids and a big nose, tempting me with Jewish gifts. I was angry, angry!

“Get out of here,” I began to scream in Polish. “I don’t want these things! Get out of here!”

The man was startled. Sister Svea tried to calm me. “These are Jewish stories for you.”

“I don’t need Jewish stories,” I cried in Swedish. “I’m Christian.” I threw the offerings laid out on my bolster on the floor. “Get these things out of here!” (Lobel, 166–167)

Silence

Chapter 28 of Chava Rosenfarb’s *The Tree of Life* ends with the liquidation of the Łódź ghetto and the deportation of its last inhabitants.

“Chapter Twenty-nine...

Thirty...

Thirty-one...

Ad infinitum

AUSCHWITZ. WORDS STOP, UNDRESSED, NAKED THEIR MEANING, THEIR SENSE SHAVEN OFF. LETTERS EXPIRE IN THE SMOKE OF THE CREMATORIUM’S CHIMNEY...” (Rosenfarb, III. 362).

Six empty pages follow.

After liberation and the return from the camps, most survivors remained silent about their experiences. This silence expressed both the extreme difficulty of putting into words what they had been through and the reaction to people’s reluctance to listen to their stories.

Otto Rosenberg describes the pain of evoking his wartime experiences: “Even now I could not just tell it like this if it were not so many years ago. In the beginning I had to take a break after every third word. That is how much it moved me. I was not able to tell anything about my parents or my brothers and sisters” (Rosenberg, 103). Marceline Loridan-Ivens quotes a letter she wrote to herself some years after the war: “Keep silent, to tell everything means to die” (Loridan-Ivens 2018, 31).

Michał Głowiński needed decades before he was able to write about his life during the war. His parents also tried to bury the past: “They’d hung a curtain of silence over their experiences and revisited them only unwillingly, as if remembering amounted to a renewal of suffering, suffering that was impossible—and impermissible—to forget, but also difficult to speak of” (Głowiński,

14). Gerhard Durlacher also describes the difficulties of evoking the war years and people's unwillingness to listen: "When we arrived home, we turned out to be travellers with an impoverished vocabulary. We lacked the language to describe our experiences. The worn-out words that did exist did not get uttered, for virtually nobody was there to hear them and virtually nobody wanted to listen to them, let alone try to comprehend them" (Durlacher 1991, 99).

There were a few cases when the survivors were able to talk and write about what happened to them soon after the war, most often driven by the imperative of witnessing. Some took notes after the war, but only wrote their books years, often decades, after the events. The large majority, however, chose—or were pushed to choose—to remain silent.

When Marceline Loridan-Ivens returned home, her uncle met her at the train station. She describes their encounter:

When they got back to France, my uncle and his companions wanted to describe what happened to them in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nobody wanted to believe them. They thought they were demented. I was happy to meet my uncle, but was terribly shocked when he told me: "Don't tell them anything, they don't understand anything." I realized very fast that in fact, I could not speak. I tried. My mother said: "No, don't think of this any longer." She didn't understand where we came back from. (Loridan-Ivens 2008, 139)

The only person Marceline could talk to about her wartime experiences was her thirteen-year-old little sister. Some years later, her sister, engulfed by the family traumas, committed suicide. Their younger brother, who never got over the loss of his adored father, became mentally ill, turned into a violent anti-Semite, and finally killed himself.

Edith Bruck relates a very similar reception both in her memoir and in her autobiographical novel. In the family nobody talks about the war. Every time she wants to evoke the camps, the memory of their murdered family members or their pre-war life, her sister—her aunt in the novel—who survived the war hiding, cuts her short: "Don't play the victim, we are all victims." In another conversation the aunt declares: "I heard that the survivors are not very normal,' she said with such ease that the words got stuck in my throat." Anita's feelings are reflected in the words of her brother-in-law, who seems to perceive what she is going through, but is unable to help her: "If you can't tell the horrors, if nobody listens to them, Auschwitz can kill you, it can destroy reality itself." (Bruck 2018, 58; 76; 82).

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and her sister arrived in England nearly a year after they were liberated in Bergen-Belsen. Anita had the impression that people were slightly disappointed to find two pretty, relatively healthy young girls, instead of miserable human wrecks: “When we first came to England, Renate and I badly wanted to talk, but *no one* asked us any questions. I know very well that, on the whole, people want to protect themselves from too much knowledge. Under the pretext of not wanting to bring back memories—in case they should be upsetting—they allow silence to prevail” (Lasker-Wallfisch, 15).

On their way to exile in Cuba, Magda Dénes and her surviving family members stopped for a day in New York. Their relatives, who had settled there before the war, went to meet them on the boat:

“I don’t suppose you would want to tell us what happened there,” Laci said. “You are right,” my mother replied, setting her face to iron. “You know the essential things, anyway. My father, uncle Zsiga died. My son was murdered. So was Rózsi’s son. That is it.” They hang their heads. “Tell us about life in America,” Rózsi said to ease matters. They tried, but they didn’t want to reveal themselves either. (Dénes, 379).

After their arrival in New York, Ruth Klüger and her mother visited some distant family members who immigrated to the United States before the war. They were rather well-to-do, had a comfortable life, untouched by the Holocaust (during which they were not particularly active trying to save their relatives). When they took their visitors back to their lodgings, in the back seat of their luxurious car, her aunt told Ruth:

“You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard.” And to make me understand better, she gestured as if wiping a board with a sponge. I thought she wants me to get rid of the only thing that I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived. But you can’t throw away your life like old clothing, as if you had another outfit in the closet. Would she want to wipe away her own childhood? (Klüger, 177)

A similar conversation takes place when Imre Kertész’s Gyuri Köves returns to his father’s home and meets two old Jewish neighbors who survived the war. One of them tells him:

“Before all else,” he declared, “you must put the horrors behind you.” Increasingly amazed, I asked, “Why should I?” “In order,” he replied, “to be able to live” ... “Live freely” ... “One cannot start a new life under such a burden,” and I had to admit he did have a point. Except I didn’t quite understand how they could wish for something that was impossible, and indeed I made a comment that what had happened had happened, and anyway, when it came down to it, I could not give orders to my memory. I would only be able to start a new life, I ventured, if I were to be reborn or if some affliction, disease, or something of the sort were to affect my mind, which they surely did not wish on me, I hoped. (Kertész 2006, 256)

On his way back from Auschwitz, Tomáš Radil stops in a small town in northern Hungary. The few Jewish men, who managed to survive forced labor service in Ukraine and return home, give him shelter and ask him to relate his experiences. Tomáš gives a brief, objective description of the camps. When he finishes, there is dead silence. Then the people attack him ferociously. They accuse him of lying, treachery, and collaboration, and are about to beat him up, when an older man stops them (Radil, 580–583). Arnošt Lustig also talks about the near impossibility of sharing his experiences with those who were not in the camps: “For example, I liked my school teacher a lot. When I told him where I came from and what happened, he started patting my head. He treated me like a silly, crazy, sick man, he didn’t believe it. I thought it was impossible to share this experience. So I started writing, and they accepted it because they considered it very authentic” (Lustig interview 2007).

Coping with the loss

When they were imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen, Jona Oberski witnessed his father’s agony and death with apparent calm. Death is “normal” in the camp. Some weeks afterwards, after liberation, when he learns that his mother, who has been convalescing in a hospital, also died, he has an attack of rage. He screams, hits, kicks, and breaks things, cursing the whole world and everybody around him. Later on, he is taken back to Amsterdam, accompanied by one of their former fellow prisoners. When she, the last person who was with them in the camps and knew his parents, leaves Jona with an unknown elderly couple that will adopt him, the little boy is completely at a loss. When the old lady kisses him, he interprets the awkward gesture of affection as an attempt at murder. Back in the camp his mother taught him that it was dangerous to

kiss people on the mouth, because one can get a disease. In his new home, Jona has difficulties fitting in. Eating is one of the sensitive areas; he often throws up the food that is forced on him. He is asked to clean up after himself. He is not even eight years old, alone in a world where no one understands him and nothing he used to know seems valid any longer.

The impact of the years of destruction, angst, and loss impregnates the children's existence. They usually try to sweep it under the carpet, but it keeps sneaking back in their imagination and dreams. Wilhelm Dichter seems to have a quiet, consolidated life after the war, but his experiences keep haunting him. The family lives in a nice apartment in a small Polish city where the stepfather found a good job. Wilhelm passes his time looking at the images found in the magazines the German officers who occupied the flat during the war left behind.

White and pink soldiers bathed in a sky-blue lake. Flaxen-haired or red-haired. They laughed and splashed each other with water, paying no attention to me. I closed and opened my eyes, but they were always in the same place. As long as they were in the water, I had the advantage over them. But only a few steps separated them from the rifles placed on racks beside their backpacks If the soldiers in the water were to alert the officer, he would pull his pistol out of its holster and shoot before I could rip out the page and tear it into pieces. (Dichter, 111)

Some months after liberation Magda Dénes's family manages to reorganize a sort of ordinary functioning:

In the eyes of a hypothetical stranger, our lives would have seemed almost normal. Mother went back to work for Pista Papp. Rózsi worked for Garbovits. Grandmother cooked. I pretended to be a child. There were paydays and Sundays and Mondays. But below this visible world a deep rot ate away at everything we were. Both Mother and Rózsi lost chunks of their hair. They each needed some teeth pulled. Mother developed boils. Rózsi couldn't contain her temper. Grandmother hid in corners and wept. As for me, I endlessly fell out of endless windows. I was hit by buses. At the backfire of every car, bullets pierced my body. I was repeatedly broken and bled. It wasn't just me. Without notice, my mother was suddenly in a coffin, carried to a graveyard on a sunless day, in a seasonless year. My brother, pale and water-bloated, floated on the ceiling. The teeth of my grandfather, one by one, like tilted dominoes, fell

into the soup-plate in front of him. I was not starving anymore, so that wasn't the explanation. Evidently I had gone mad. It is of the utmost importance, I thought, that I keep this a secret for as long as I can. (Dénes, 263)

The survivors' overwhelming sensation of loss mingles together with guilt, shame, self-doubt, a feeling of futility, and a crushing sentiment of indebtedness to the dead. They keep asking why they survived, instead of their beloved ones, who "deserved it more."

In her worst nightmares, Elli, Elżbieta Ettinger's hero, sees her murdered mother accusing her of undeserved survival. The mother joins those who persecuted Elli during the war, questioning and torturing her; it is impossible to escape them (Ettinger 1989, 307–308). András Mezei's protagonist asks himself: "Now, after the execution that did not take place, he'll wander around in the desert until the end of his days? What can he do with himself? To whom should he entrust his life stuck on the reverse side of death; when nobody needs it!" (Mezei 1984, 214). Some of the young survivors crack under the weight of so much loss and guilt. Several authors mention that they seriously pondered killing themselves; some did. In *The man who never slept* Aharon Appelfeld relates the suicide of one of the young survivors who kills himself after their arrival to Palestine. He was unable to cope with the burden of survival and became the instrument of the execution of the death sentence cast on him and his people. "Death, which had only been waiting for us in the thicket, had pounced again" (Appelfeld 2017, 64).

Meditating about his survivor's guilt, Jacov Lind adds the dimension of using a false identity: "Can one say 'thank you' for being alive and cursed forever to explain existence as the result of an assumed identity?" "I hated them both again—Jews and Germans. The first because they aroused my pity, the second because they could (I thought) claim my gratitude. I had survived as one of them. As Aryan non-Aryan, which made me a silent accomplice in a massacre. I hated myself, and them, doubly" (Lind, 101; 184).

When the war ends and mother and children return to the grandparents' village in Nyíri's *Battlefields*, they see death and destruction everywhere. All their family members were murdered, together with most of the village's Jews. The villagers give them the keys to the vandalized synagogue that the German soldiers used as a stable. Silent and determined, the boys start cleaning the building. Without loud declarations, they affirm their Jewish identity; they become the living memory of their destroyed community. Jóska looks at the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments above the

tumbledown arch and perceives a frozen image of a bird. The herald of freedom has stopped flying.

Our temple was dead and decaying, it didn't even have the dignity of a gravestone. It was a lion's carcass left to rot by vultures. ... A shadow in the shape of a bird clung immobile to a broken windowpane. ... Through the cracks in the walls, through the damp smell of putrefaction, mould and stale manure, I heard a sound. At first it was no more than a rumour, like smoke in the night, but slowly it grew into an impenetrable murmur, led by the quiet voice of my teacher Devai, singing. . . . The voices of dead men, from deep within the walls ... (Nyíri 1991, 531–532)

The loss of their parents and families at an early age leaves a profound mark on the children. The void will accompany them throughout their lives. “Is one still an orphan when one gets older than one’s parents? Older than when they died? ...At what point of life does one stop being an orphan?” asks Raymond Federman (Federman 2006, 104). During the war years they had to be strong and resilient. After the war they feel extremely susceptible and insecure. They are hungry for affection, but often find it difficult to sort their feelings out; their experiences didn’t teach them about this domain. Ceija Stojka confides that the loss of her beloved father’s love and guidance left a huge void that influenced her—not so fortunate—choices of partners later in life: “Many men did not come back and most girls did not have a father. We were very much exposed to the desire to find the lost warmth and protection, the love of a father. A young girl like me was looking for a man’s love, to compensate for what she had lost, what was taken away from her by force and destroyed” (Stojka 2018, 99).

Edith Bruck’s protagonist also recounts the emotional hollowness her parents’ loss created in her:

Since my mother died, I was paying heed to her words more than when she was alive, sometimes I even spoke to her loudly, as if she were my burnt God, I prayed, asking her to help me, be on my side, tell me what should I do with my life, abate my fear of the world and my pain caused by her permanent absence. ... Maybe the parents, rich or poor—and mine were really very poor—are like a runway for their children. Their death, particularly if it is a violent death, cuts the ground from under their feet. (Bruck 2018, 22–23)

After the end of the war, both Ceija and Edith became involved with men who abused their need of tenderness and belonging. They both became pregnant. Ceija gave birth to her first child at the age of fifteen. The baby was taken away from her and even though she later managed to recover him, their life was very tough. Sixteen-year-old Edith was forced to abort the child. In *The Soul's Accidents*, a fictionalized account of her post-war years in Romania, Ana Novac also describes an abusive, destructive love affair with an older man that she found very difficult to renounce, so immense was her craving to be seen, touched, and appreciated. These traumatic experiences deepened the damage caused by the war.

For some children the only way forward seemed to be to erase the past together with the pain of their losses. This exercise sometimes meant burying whole chapters of their former life.

I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four, my mother at six; I spent the war in various boarding houses. ...It was not a set topic on my syllabus. I was excused: a different history, History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps. (Perec, 6)

This is how Georges Perec evokes his childhood in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, his only book that deals directly with his wartime experiences and their traces in his further life. His father was killed in the war; at the age of six he was separated from his mother and sent to the south of France. His mother was killed in Auschwitz. In *W* he combines two story lines. One is a description of *W*, a dystopian society established on a faraway island; the other is a recollection of his scarce childhood memories and a few related objects. The two seemingly unrelated accounts meet at the end of the novel, when the reader realizes that the void described in the personal story is the consequence of a murderous system presented in an abstract form in the other story-line.

In one of the last scenes of the book, George recalls a photo exposition he saw at the age of ten: "Later on, my aunt took me to see an exhibition about concentration camps. It was being held somewhere near La Motte-Picquet-Grenelle (that same day, I learnt there were metro stations that were not underground but on stilts). I remember the photographs of the walls of the gas chambers showing scratchmarks made by the victims' fingernails, and a set of chessmen made from bits of bread" (158). The photos and the discovery of above-ground metro-lines are related in the same neutral tone as if they had the same

importance. The book's apparent objectivity seems to suggest that emotions were erased together with the child's memories, as if they were impossible to have after such losses.

From persecution to opposition

"Freedom: You sit on the train in times of peace that follows war that came after peace." In one of József Gáli's short stories young survivors return home from a camp on the roof of a train. In an outburst of euphoria, one of them jumps up, singing, playing, and leaping up and down. In his overwhelming joy, he doesn't notice a slim metal bridge above the tracks that crashes against his head: "It's getting dark. You sit on the roof of the train, now one person less. Stars above your head. Milky Way, Big Dipper. ... In the camp you thought that when you will be free you will no longer see corpses" (Gáli, 77).

This episode is like a sinister warning: the end of the war does not mean the end of lethal dangers. As Joseph Bialot puts it: "To be liberated does not mean that you are free" (Bialot, 2002, 226). József Gáli experienced this very soon. In 1956, after Hungary's popular uprising was crushed, he was condemned to death for his participation in the events.

Many of the Eastern European survivor children returned to their home countries where sooner or later a Communist seizure of power took place, followed by the introduction of a Soviet-type repressive political system. In the new regime and its interpretation of the facts of World War II there was no place for Jewish victims. The survivors' difficulties to convey their experiences multiplied with this externally imposed silence. Depending on the countries' wartime trajectories, the official narratives operated with the notion of a heroically resistant, victim nation (Poland and France) or a 'sinner nation' like Hungary, which remained the last ally of Nazi Germany.

Stalin's post-war anti-Jewish campaign, which turned into a witch-hunt that included some highly publicised court cases against Communists of Jewish origins, was echoed in other countries of the Soviet bloc. Official policy tolerated and enabled manifestations of lingering anti-Semitism. Pogroms, which were hushed up, took place in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, often targeting people who had just returned from the camps. The fact that many in the Communist leadership, which had introduced highly unpopular policies, were of Jewish origin, even if they denied or openly dismissed it, also fomented widespread anti-Jewish sentiments. Opposition to the political system was therefore often tainted with latent or open anti-Semitism which

eventually surfaced in the large-scale popular movements that demanded policy changes.

The situation in Wilhelm Dichter's family mirrored the options facing surviving Jews in the countries of the Eastern bloc after the war: they could deny their Jewish roots, seal off their war-time experiences, and dedicate themselves to building the new society; they could claim that being Jewish was no longer a problem, like Wilhelm's stepfather; or they could monitor every possible sign of re-emerging anti-Semitism, like his mother. The latter advocated leaving the country. Ultimately it was not up to the family members to make their choice, the authorities made it for them: in 1968 several thousand Jews were compelled to leave Poland. Wilhelm's family immigrated to the United States. Henryk Grynberg's *Victory* presents the same dilemmas and options in his own family; he also left Poland for the United States in the late 1960s.

Nearly all the authors of Eastern European origin cited in this book who returned to their home country had conflicts with the Communist authorities. Right after the war many enthusiastically took part in the reconstruction of their homelands. Motivated by their pre-war and war experiences of oppression, exclusion, and injustice, most were left-leaning; several joined the Communist Party. As Henryk Grynberg explains: "Communism was the best way out for Jews, if not the only way. It was their best refuge. In the party they were treated as equals, full-fledged members. They could develop themselves, dedicate themselves, display their talents" (Grynberg, 119). However, sooner or later, they became disenchanted with Communist policies and became increasingly critical. The knowledge they acquired as children—their critical regard, the capacity to look through lies and appearances, and their instinct of survival—helped them to rapidly perceive that the new forces in power had turned away from the values of equality, justice, freedom, democracy, and solidarity they loudly proclaimed and were building another oppressive system.

Their critical attitude sooner or later became uncomfortable for the regime and gradually they were marginalized again, both as "enemies" of the system and as Jews. When the anti-Jewish purges began in Communist Poland, Janina Bauman first refused to believe this was possible, as her parents had refused to believe that they were condemned to death during the war (Bauman 1988, 105). Mária Ember reacted to similar events in Hungary with the same incredulity: "I didn't want to understand that yet again, there was a problem with us" (Ember 2002, 32). Hanna Krall's protagonist was also incredulous and anxious seeing the return of a new anti-Semitic campaign in Poland (Krall, 96).

Writers and public intellectuals—including many of the authors discussed in this book—played a crucial role in the various reform and opposition movements of Eastern Europe. In Poland they took part in the mass social movements of the 1960s and 1980s that demanded a democratic and free society. In Hungary nearly all participated in some form in the 1956 uprising that started with demands for a more democratic and just socialist system. János Nyíri played an active role in the insurrection and had to flee after it was crushed by Soviet military intervention. His first autobiographical novel, *Streets*, relates this experience. After the consolidation of the oppressive Soviet-type regimes in their country, Norman Manea, Jurek Becker, Ana Novac, Janina Bauman, Icchokas Meras, Arnošt Lustig, Elżbieta Ettinger, Grigory Kanovich, and Wilhelm Dichter were considered too critical, hence dangerous for the system; sooner or later they were pushed to leave their homeland. The authors who participated in the reform and opposition movements and didn't go into exile were punished after the suppression of their respective movements. Several were imprisoned, forbidden to publish, lost their employment, and were blacklisted. Many could only find manual jobs or 'neutral' activities as editors, translators, teachers, or social workers.

This new stage of loss, betrayal, and exclusion was particularly painful, because the survivors had, for a while at least, trusted the new system, hoping it would build a different world based on humanistic values. They became bitterly disappointed. As Norman Manea summarizes it: "The new horror had not only replaced the old one but had coopted it: they now worked together, in tandem" (Manea 2003, 29). One of the protagonists of János Nyíri's *Streets* has a similar diagnosis: "Race of murderers. Fascists or Communists, it doesn't matter. They are incapable of creating a non-murderous society" (Nyíri 1979, 120).

Dániel Szerencsés, the eponymous protagonist of András Mezei's book about the post-war period, is a young survivor of the ghetto. After some years of trying and failing to build a new life in post-war Hungary, he finally decides to leave the country. During his voyage to the border he encounters a man freshly liberated from a Communist internment camp. Dániel is deeply troubled by his story: "Why did he think that after 1944 one of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century, the barbed wire, was abolished? Clearly it was not abolished at all, which means that the world is in pretty bad shape" (Mezei 1983, 137).

Elli, the protagonist of Elżbieta Ettinger's *Quicksand*, struggles with the material, political, and psychological hardships of post-war Poland. With the passing of time, she has to acknowledge that the brave new Communist Poland is also persecuting its remaining Jews, that intrigues and merciless

infights for power are wiping away the hopes of the end of the war, and that her own chances of survival are dwindling. Many of her friends and fellow survivors emigrate, but with a desperate stubbornness she refuses to go. Her political, professional, and private life becomes ever more restricted and gloomy and unlike during the war, she can no longer anticipate a bright, just, human future. She gradually sinks into despair and self-destruction. Like *Kindergarten*, the author's previous book about the war years, the story ends with Elli's attempted suicide, the outcome of which is left open.

József Gáli evokes the pain of the post-war period in several short stories. In "Szúnyogok és nemeskócsagok" he commemorates one of his closest friends, the young man who some years earlier saved his life in the showers of Auschwitz, when the Orthodox Polish Jews were about to lynch him because he was not circumcised. They both survived the camps and went back to Hungary full of optimism. They began to reconstruct their lives and became involved in the 1956 uprising, hoping to make the system more humane and just. After the suppression of the uprising both were condemned to death again. Thanks to international pressure, József's sentence was eventually converted to a long prison term, but his friend, a man of honesty, integrity, and dignity, was executed (Gáli, 159–201).

Critical thinkers, including the authors discussed here, were stigmatized and faced severe consequences under the Soviet-type regimes. Nevertheless, many of those who ultimately settled in the West had no illusions about their host countries either. Marceline Loridan-Ivens, Raymond Federman, George Perec, Icchokas Meras, Ana Novac, and several others highlight that exploitation, inequality, injustice, racism, and manipulation characterise contemporary Western societies as well.

Exile

After the end of the war several authors returned to their native countries. They wanted to find their relatives, friends, and homes, and, despite everything they had gone through, they still had strong emotional attachments to their homelands. Many also felt obliged to stay close to their few surviving family members and to serve as guardians of the destroyed past. However, their life after the war turned out to be very difficult and sooner or later most opted for emigration, even if taking the decision was extremely difficult.

In Mezei Andras's *Szerencsés Dániel*, the young protagonist is split between his desire to leave Hungary after the suppression of the 1956 uprising and

his reluctance to leave behind his elderly mother, with whom he survived the ghetto, his friends, his city, and his hopes. He also feels that his departure would mean a final, definitive annihilation of his murdered family members. One night he has a vision that he has to hold up a wagon in which all his slain relatives are locked. The wagon is very heavy and slowly slides down a slope. Dániel has to gather all his strength to prevent it from tumbling into an abyss. Finally he can no longer prevent it from falling; at the last moment he jumps aside to avoid being crushed (Mezei 1983, 170–173).

When, after long and painful indecision, the survivors finally opt for leaving or are pressured to leave their home country, their departure is extremely upsetting. With enormous effort they had reconstructed a new existence after the war. Now they have to leave it behind together with the vestiges of their childhood world, their remaining families and friends, their hopes of a better world, and their illusions of belonging. They have to face the “vacuum of emigration” (Bauman 1988, 142). They no longer belong anywhere.

They even seem to forsake their identity. When Alona Frankel’s family leaves Poland for Israel, “they changed from people into new immigrants” (Frankel, 244). On the boat that takes them to Haifa, Alona has her first period. This could be a merry passage to womanhood, but after everything she had gone through, it makes her feel vulnerable and at the mercy of external forces, sensations that determined all her childhood. The pain of uprooting blends together with the palpable sensations of physical pain, shame and powerlessness: “It was horrible, it was terrible, and it was happening to me. ... Suddenly, without being injured, you bleed. You can’t control it, and there is no way of knowing how long it’s going to continue. It’s amazing and it’s terrible. Horrible” (257).

In their new countries the emigres have to create a new life from scratch. During the war they were excluded and declared strangers in their own homelands. Now they are in fact strangers. The adjustment to their new environment requires a change of language, often a change of name and a change of identity. Even if they succeed, the process is long and painful. They have to renounce—or push aside—the remnants of their past; the name, the mother tongue, and the way of life of their disappeared childhood world. They cannot help feeling themselves complicit in the project of annihilating their people and their history.

Andrew Kennedy recalls that after his return from the camp he was wandering around in Budapest and Debrecen, his hometown, completely at a loss. He lost his family and friends, his whole world was destroyed, he was a “*chance survivor*.” Some years later, he immigrated to England. He became a

lonely, unhappy adolescent in permanent conflict with the outside world. He gradually descended into depression; in the spring of 1949, barely four years after his liberation from the camp, he seriously considered killing himself. He eventually chose life at the price of a radical identity change: he began to use an Anglicized version of his name, decided to drop the word “home” from his vocabulary, and cut himself off from everything Hungarian including his mother tongue.

In János Nyíri's *Streets*, some of the book's key characters escape from Hungary following the violent suppression of the 1956 revolution. After a perilous voyage, a few of them make it to Paris. They have major difficulties in eking out a living, still trying to digest the shock of losing their illusions and leaving their homeland. One night they are invited to a reception hosted by politicians and philanthropists of the local elite. The young refugees' first “official” encounter with the “free world” is disappointing and humiliating. Their hosts treat them with slightly scornful compassion, with the curiosity aroused by exotic beings, or with utter contempt; someone intends to manipulate them for political purposes (Nyíri 1979, 288–290).

After some bitter years spent in post-war France, Raymond Federman was eager to leave his homeland where “the Unforgivable Enormity” took place. He immigrated to the US, the “country of illusions,” where, after many years of drifting, he established his domicile “in a cave of despair” (Federman 1990, 99; 34). Edgar Hilsenrath and his surviving family members received their long desired visas after the war and were finally able to leave for the United States in 1951. Edgar had no illusions about his host country either. He was a poor marginal outcast living from odd manual jobs that barely provided food and shelter. The only people he was able to communicate with were other penniless migrants. He suffered from the cruelty of an unjust, consumerist, racist society, where money was the principal value and people were forced to fight each other in order to survive.

In *Fuck America*, where he depicts this experience, his alter-ego is Jacob Bronsky, a lost, lonely man, who lives in utter misery in New York and desperately tries to earn enough money to be able to write. He also longs for human contact. He is a dedicated viewer of a television show hosted by a famous and sexy therapist, Mary Stone. One evening he manages to conjure Mary Stone out of his landlady's TV set. He heals her psychological problems, they spend some pleasant time in bed, and then Jacob talks about his own difficulties, the “problems of an unknown starving writer, but above all the problems of a German writer of Jewish origin in a foreign country, a country I don't understand

and that does not understand me.’ ‘America is the Promised Land!’ ‘America is a nightmare’” (Hilsenrath 2018, 276–277).

Many authors left their country for Palestine/Israel, both because that was the only place that accepted them without difficulties and because they felt an emotional or political attachment to it. But there as well, in the early post-war period Holocaust survivors were not necessarily received with empathy and solidarity. In the name of the new nation-state-building ideology, the Holocaust was treated as an unhappy chapter in the history of the Jews that should be quickly forgotten. The Jewish establishment and many of the local Jews urged survivors to turn their backs on what happened to them during the war. Numerous survivors were immediately enrolled in the armed forces and thrown into yet another war, this time against the Arab inhabitants of the land. Left alone with their traumatic memories, pushed into a war whose justification was not at all evident for many of them, the newcomers were often at a loss. Many of them eventually found a new home in Israel, but many left the country after some years for yet another exile.

When she arrived in Palestine, Miriam Akavia was confronted with an upsetting welcome: “When I first came I wanted to talk of my experiences, but the other young people, the sabras, made us feel that we had been cowards, that we didn’t fight back, that we couldn’t save our children and our parents. It was very painful but I understood that I have to keep quiet” (Akavia interview, Deutsch, 2008). After some difficult years spent in Poland, Krysha Chiger and her family immigrated to Israel. Krysha’s first impressions were similar: “In Israel, nobody talked about the war. Nobody talked about the Holocaust. Whatever we experienced, however we had come to this place, it was in the past and not to be discussed” (Chiger, 271). Aharon Appelfeld describes a comparable experience: “In youthful Israel, an ‘idealistic, socialistic country,’ memories of the genocide were taboo. ... No one wanted to hear about such terrible experiences... The slogan was, ‘Forget it! You should begin again’” (Appelfeld, Independent interview 2012).

Otto Dov Kulka encountered a similar reaction upon his arrival. He places this experience in the context of the feverish building of a new Jewish state:

Each and every one of us had his or her own story of survival. Either in the camps or in hiding or in the mountains. But we never talked about it. It was immaterial. Because we were participating in this great historical event of a people returning after 2,000 years and building a new culture and new language and new society—it was so overwhelming that we regarded our past

as something irrelevant. ... People did not regard (the past) as essential. It was behind them. But in my dreams and diaries I lived a double life. (Kulka interview 2014)

In *To whom it may concern*, Raymond Federman recounts the encounter, several decades after the war, between his alter-ego and his only surviving cousin, Sarah, who settled in Palestine. The narrator arrives from the US, “the land of misrepresentation” to the “land of false promises, a piece of desert full of mirages,” some hours after a suicide attack that killed a large number of people. During the conversations of the two cousins, Sarah recounts that some time after her arrival, living in a newly established settlement at the edge of the desert that was often attacked by the Arab villagers, whose land was confiscated, one night she killed a young boy. This painful event haunted her all her life. Years later, when her son was born, his face reminded her of the features of the murdered young man. Sarah’s son later joined the special military units, engaged in everyday confrontations with the Arab population, and was constantly exposed to lethal danger. It was as if the nightmare could never come to an end (Federman 1990, 10; 89–90).

The nightmare also continues in Icchokas Meras’s book, *Sara*, written after his emigration to Israel. The book’s protagonist, Sara, survived the Holocaust as a little girl, but lost all her family and witnessed terrible atrocities. After the war she settles in Palestine, hoping to build a new life. The war, however, continues, not only in her head, but around her as well, taking away one by one the people she loves. At the end she understands that she will never be able to escape violence, inhumanity, destruction, and angst.

Exiled to a new language

Most exiled authors chose to write their books in the language of their new country. Norman Manea is one of the few who felt unable to leave his mother tongue. After the war, despite the increasingly unbearable situation he and his family had to suffer, he refused to emigrate. He finally left and settled in the US, but continued writing in Romanian:

For a writer ... language is his placenta. ... Language is always home and homeland for a writer. To be exiled from this last refuge represents the most brutal decentering of his being, a burning that reaches all the way to the core of creativity. I postponed the decision to leave Romania because I was childish

enough to fool myself that I didn't live in a country, that I lived only in a language. Eventually, I took the language, the home, with me, as a snail does. (Manea, 2002)

Edgar Hilsenrath also felt alien in the language of the US. He communicated in English, but could only write in German, and had difficulties publishing both in the US and in Germany. In 1975 he moved back to Germany. His books eventually had a belated but significant success. Icchokas Meras continued writing in his native Lithuanian after moving to Israel. Grigory Kanovich writes in Russian, the language of his first exile. Settled in Israel, Chava Rosenfarb chose to write in Yiddish, the language of the lost Yiddishland, instead of Hebrew. Several Hungarian authors who chose to remain in the country after the war and 1956 said that their attachment to the language was one of their main motives.

Yet for other authors their mother tongue became too closely associated with the Holocaust and they developed an ambiguous relationship with it. Jacov Lind wrote his first two books, *Soul of Wood* and *Landscape in Concrete* in his mother tongue, German, but he felt so uneasy writing in this language that after his emigration to England he switched to English. Twenty years after the war, living in California, Ruth Klüger decided to study Germanistics. She relates how difficult it was for her to speak, write, and think in her mother tongue in which she was condemned to death, the language that kept evoking her destroyed childhood and the city from which she was expelled. One of Joseph Bialot's characters calls German "désesperanto ...the despair-ento of the twentieth century" (Bialot 2004, 71).

Joseph Bialot's first exile from his homeland and mother tongue took place at the age of eight. He was born in Poland, but his parents decided to move to Paris to escape mounting antisemitism. Joseph was so eager to learn French that the new language crowded Polish out of his brain. In Auschwitz he was able to catch fragments of his mother tongue and have simple conversations. After liberation, on their way to Kraków, he and a former inmate were invited to sleep at a Polish couple's house. Joseph did not participate in the conversation: "I have nothing to say to the living ones" (Bialot 2002, 226). Later, when he decided to write, he chose French.

Some authors found it impossible to return to their mother tongue after the war. Ana Novac and Andrew Kennedy buried their native Hungarian together with large sections of painful memories. Livia Bitton-Jackson tried as well and was astonished to see it re-emerge—with many harrowing recollections—

when she went through analysis. For others their different languages seem to live together in a fertile co-existence. Krysha Chiger left Poland for Israel, from where she moved on to the US. She expresses this confluence of languages this way: “My memories come to me in Polish. I think in Polish, dream in Polish, remember in Polish. Then it passes through Hebrew and somehow comes out in English. Sometimes it has to go through German and Yiddish before I am able to tell it or understand it” (Chiger, 2). Raymond Federman enjoyed playing with both his native French and adopted English.

Out of time in a no-man’s land

Instead of a home and a “normal” life, the young survivors very often returned to a no-man’s land. Their pre-war universe was shattered and there was no way to reconstruct it. They felt themselves strangers in the post-war world as well, where they had difficulties fitting in. They often had the sensation of being out of space and out of time—as if their war-time experience had definitively alienated them from the world. They were alive, but had the impression of belonging to the domain of the dead to where most of their beloved ones had departed.

When they return from the camp to Budapest, Edith Bruck and her sister understand “that between us and those who didn’t experience what we did an abyss opened; we were different, a species apart. ... The rest of our life was just a huge weight” (Bruck 2021, 87–88). Anita, Edith’s fictional heroine in *How many stars*, calls herself “an insecure, shapeless, eternal survivor, tossed around, like a numb, soul-less puppet, without memory, heart, blood. She is like “a dead person left behind, exiled in the world of the living ones, who arrived there by accident” (Bruck 2018, 85). Anita Lasker-Wallfisch sums up a similar feeling: “Survivors of the Holocaust are a race apart. However complete their reintegration into normality may be, there will always be an untouchable compartment which will remain the sole property of those who have mysteriously been spared against overwhelming odds” (Lasker-Wallfisch, 144).

Francine Christophe is twelve years old when she returns to France after years of prison and deportation. She goes back to her old school and finds that it is impossible to reconstruct her former universe; she is light-years away from her pre-war friends: “No, I am no longer of your world, I’m from a world apart, I’m from the world of the camps.” She manages to build her life, but the feeling accompanies her ever since. “No deportee ever truly returns from his camp, and every day I experience the living proof of that” (Christophe, 161; 163). Aharon Appelfeld describes the survivors in these terms: “it is obvious

that something within them has died. And the part that is left can't explain what has happened to them" (Appelfeld, 2010, 263).

Éva Fahidi also writes about "a feeling of uprootedness that is still my constant companion and will remain so as long as I live" (Fahidi, 226–227). Joseph Bialot depicts this state this way:

We all died in the camp, all of us. A survivor is nothing else then an appearance, an illusion with a human face, who continues fucking, eating, working, thinking. Like a tooth without roots. It is dead, but it continues fulfilling its function, to bite, to devour, but inside it is empty, it is hollow... [...] Everybody who has been in the Lager knows this loss of contact with reality. (Bialot 2002, 277–279)

During the war the children often felt insecure about the contours of reality and their place in it. The joy and relief of liberation is often accompanied by confusion. When Bergen-Belsen is liberated, Ceija Stojka is unable to tell whether what she experiences is reality or a dream. When the Warsaw ghetto walls are dismantled and the streets are opened again for new, non-Jewish tenants, Alex, Uri Orlev's protagonist in *The Island on Bird Street*, is profoundly troubled. Everyday life returns to the neighborhood as if nothing happened and he starts to wonder whether the line that used to separate life and death had ever been there. When, after five excruciating months of coping alone, his father miraculously re-appears among the ruins, looking for him, neither Alex, nor his father is sure whether the other is real or a product of his imagination (Orlev 1984, 154; 159–162).

András Mezei's protagonist, Joske, has the same troubles. After liberation he walks to the border of the ghetto and watches people rapidly taking apart the wooden wall and carrying away the planks to heat their homes. Suddenly it seems completely unreal that just a few days before, anyone who approached this place was shot dead: "Tomorrow we won't be able to show it to anybody. 'We were afraid of this wall. We didn't dare breaking it.' ... Now, he crosses the line, with one leg. No big thing. One can't even see...." As Joske stands there, completely puzzled, an angel visits him. He warns him that exactly like he is standing on the invisible border between life and death, the survivors' life will be divided between the realm of the dead and the living ones (Mezei 1984, 196–199).

By the end of the war, after more than a year spent alone in an orphanage, Michał Głowiński is in a state of emotional numbness: "I knew that the world I'd known before my arrival, the world in which I once lived, no longer existed,

and that behind me was empty space and nothingness.” One day a boy tells him that his mother has just arrived to pick him up. Michał doesn’t believe him at first. “I was distrustful of everyone and everything.” When he finally goes to the office and finds his mother, he just stands there, silent and distant. After a long while, he says: “‘Mama, a huge louse is marching around on your beret.’ ... Paradoxically, that louse enabled normal human contact; it enabled me to overcome my overawed state, and to some extent brought an extraordinary situation into the realm of ordinary and quotidian. For insects were not foreign to me” (125–127). Aharon Appelfeld describes a similar—in his case imaginary—encounter with his beloved mother, when the first thing he tells her after years of separation and longing for her is that he is eager to eat the plum strudels that are awaiting him at home (Appelfeld 2017, 8).

The sensation of not belonging to the “normal” world becomes more intense with the passing of time. The survivors feel like strangers in their new realities, but at the same time, their everyday contact with this reality makes them doubt their war-time experiences. Their memories, however, keep haunting them, alienating them even more from their present.

Ceijs Stojka is thirteen at the end of the war. She is happy to be alive, to find some surviving family members, and to be able to travel again with her mother and stepfather in the Austrian countryside. Nevertheless, her sense of reality is profoundly shaken by the experience of deportation. “Sometimes I thought that I only dreamed all this. I could not put aside the past like my book, it always caught up with me” (Stojka 2018, 85). Her memories continue troubling her throughout her life. “It’s like as if it were always just right behind me. I turn and I am there again. Nothing has changed” (105).

Marceline Loridan-Ivens also describes how the war remains present in her life even decades after its end: “I have the feeling that what happened to me is not the past, it’s always present. Even when I don’t think of it, I think of it. Suddenly I realise I don’t think of it and then I think of it. Sometimes, in the evening before falling asleep, I tell myself: ‘Well, well, today I haven’t thought of it’” (Loridan-Ivens 2008, 132). The survivors are marked for life. “If you only knew, all of you, how the camp remains permanently within us. It remains in all our minds, and will until we die” (Loridan-Ivens, 2017, 95). As Imre Kertész puts it, “there is no cure for Auschwitz, nobody will ever recover from the disease of Auschwitz” (Kertész 2004, 77). Like Ceijs, he also feels that the experience of the camp keeps alienating him from his everyday environment, making him question the veracity of his sensations: “I am seized by total uncertainty

about the extremely suspect experiences that are presented to my senses as is for reality, the real existence of myself and my surroundings altogether” (62).

The sensation of floating between the two worlds, being a part of both, but not really belonging to either one, expresses the particular state of mind of many survivors. Aharon Appelfeld describes it through a powerful metaphor in *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*. When the war ends, Erwin/Aharon, the book’s young orphan protagonist joins a group of survivors who head for Italy where they hope to embark to Palestine. During the long journey the young boy is fast asleep. His companions carry him on trains, trucks, on foot through various countries, unable to wake him up. When they arrive in Naples and later in Palestine, he has longer conscious periods, but regularly falls back asleep. Awake he struggles to adjust to a new life in a completely new environment; in his dreams he keeps returning to his parents and childhood home in Bukovina. They have long conversations that drift between past and present, between the world of the dead and the living. The past contains the present; sometimes it appears like an eternal past, as if time had stopped with the destruction of the war; in other cases the dreams seem to take place in the domain of death, where there is no time and no change. This dreamy universe is the only place where the young boy feels alive and connected to the world.

The war is not over

The constant sensation of lurking dangers even in their newly reconstructed lives haunts many survivors. They frequently feel that once their death sentence had been pronounced, it would sooner or later be executed. After having escaped from the ghetto and fought in the resistance, having lost most of her family and friends, liberation finds Elli, Elzbieta Ettinger’s protagonist in *Quicksand*, traumatized, sick and with a rage to live. She stays in a small flat that had been in the ghetto during the occupation:

One night on the way home, weary and absentminded, she tripped and fell down. A crumbling remnant of red brick wall wrapped in strings of barbed wire was blocking her way. She fled, wet and breathless, her hands and knees bleeding. The way home became a nightmare. If she were not extremely careful she would end up in the ghetto, behind the wall, and would have to climb it again, and this time they would get her. (Ettinger 1989, 137)

Michał Głowiński also talks about the persistent feeling of being condemned to death that cast a shadow on his existence even after the war. Recalling a scene of hiding during a raid in the Warsaw ghetto he ponders:

That sojourn in the cellar remained with me to this day, it didn't come to an end with the opening of the doors—and not only because the danger remained even after the concrete threat had passed. In a world in which the only governor and lawmaker is a crime systematically executed according to a plan imposed from above, threats and danger do not end—their final phase can only come in their fulfilment, their full realization, after which there remains nothing. (Głowiński, 13)

In *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, Imre Kertész also evokes his never rescinded death sentence that will eventually be carried out—with his participation. The essence of his writing is in fact the act of further digging his grave that was not finished in the camp: “How could I have explained to my wife that my ballpoint pen is my spade? That I write only because I have to write, and I have to write because I am whistled up every day to drive the spade deeper, to play death on a darker, sweeter string?” (Kertész, 2004, 31). The protagonist's refusal to have a child is also part of the final accomplishment of the sentence; sooner or later he has to put a definite end to his existence.

Saul Friedländer formulates a comparable sensation this way:

When I was around thirty, I realized how much the past moulded my vision of things, how much the essential appeared to me through a particular prism that could never be eliminated. ... If our reactions may sometimes seem strange, let there be no mistake about it: behind the harmless surface of words and things, we know that at any and every moment abysses await us. (Friedländer, 145).

Aharon Appelfeld writes:

Sometimes just the aroma of a certain dish or the dampness of shoes or a sudden noise is enough to take me back into the middle of the war, and then it seems to me that it never really ended, but that it has continued without my knowledge. And now that I am fully aware of it, I realize that there's been no letup since it began. (Appelfeld 2004, 90)

Otto Dov Kulka recalls his recurring dreams that keep taking him back to Auschwitz, with the certainty that his death sentence will sooner or later be implemented. The imprint of the experience is indelible, not only in his consciousness and body, but in the deepest structures of human existence: “The world, with the Metropolis and the immutable law of the Great death having been, can no longer and will never again be able to free itself of their being part of its existence.” In one of Otto Dov’s dreams, Dr Mengele appears as a tour guide in Auschwitz. Everybody in the group of visitors is aware that it is him. When Otto Dov asks him where has he been since the war, “His reply which to him seemed the most natural and self-evident in the world, was, ‘What do you mean, where was I? I was here. I was here all the time’” (Kulka, 92–94). It is as if this nightmare also came true in Edgar Hilsenrath’s novel, *The Nazi and the Barber*, in which the Nazi murderer takes the identity of his Jewish victim and benefits from the situation. There is no justice, no deserved punishment after the crimes; life goes on as if nothing happened.

Marked for life

In Edgar Hilsenrath’s *Fuck America*, the Bronsky family survives the war hiding in a cave in Germany. When they come out and see the sun for the first time after years spent in darkness, they try to cry, but they are unable to do so. They look into a mirror and find that their eyes have changed. There is no more sparkle: “‘I think we lost our souls in the cellar,’ said Nathan Bronsky. ‘I think so, too,’ said his wife.” They begin a search for their lost souls. They descend to the cave, call the concierge to help with his torch, but find nothing. They go to the cemetery and find an old rabbi. They ask for his advice. He tells them, “‘No one can lose his soul. ... You just have lost the sparkling.’ ‘What happened to the sparkling?’ asked Nathan Bronsky. ‘It’s up there,’ said the rabbi and showed the sky. ... ‘It was taken there, that’s all.’ ‘Who took it?’ ‘The six millions’” (Hilsenrath 2009, 19-22).

The scene is a telling metaphor about the condition of survivors after the end of the war. They were able to struggle through the war years and build a new life, but their losses and the experience of persecution and imprisonment left ineffaceable marks on their lives.

Ruth Klüger describes how her life was marked by her deportation, both internally and in the eyes of the outside world:

Auschwitz is a point of origin for survivors. ... People who want to say something important about me announce that I have been in Auschwitz. But whatever you may think, I don't hail from Auschwitz, I come from Vienna. Vienna is a part of me—that's where I acquired consciousness and acquired language—but Auschwitz was as foreign to me as the moon. Vienna is part of my mind-set, while Auschwitz was a lunatic terra incognita, the memory of which is like a bullet lodged in the soul where no surgery can reach it. (Klüger, 112)

In *Fiasco*, Imre Kertész' novel that portrays the post-war life of *Fateless*'s narrator, the protagonist is a bitter, elderly writer, whose manuscript about his experience in the camps is rejected by the editors: He recounts a meeting when one of them is eager to find a constructive message in the book: "In other words, the publishing man wanted to read into my novel that notwithstanding—indeed, precisely notwithstanding—everything that had happened to me at that time and place, Auschwitz had still not sullied me. Yet it had sullied me. Surely I was sullied in other ways than those who had transported me there, but I had been sullied none the less; and in my view this is a basic issue" (Kertész 2011, 37). Edith Bruck expresses a similar idea: "Auschwitz makes you enormously hungry for survival, but it also poisons your blood and makes you disgusted with mankind" (Bruck 2018, 23).

Hiding all through the war, Alona Frankel and her parents escaped capture several times. Once out of immediate danger, she felt: "Our death continued to live with us" (Frankel, 66). During the war years Alona wore rags. One day her mother managed to get her a scratchy wool men's jacket that was too heavy and too big for her. She wore it with a string tied around the waist and rolled up sleeves; it was a heavy, unpleasant feeling. Her war-time memories are present in her life as if she continued wearing that coat; those rolled-up sleeves "weigh heavily on me to this very day" (41).

In her memoir Alona managed to reconstruct the way she experienced the war as a very young child, particularly through her sensory memories. She describes even horrific events with calm detachment and her capacity to find beauty, to marvel at the world's richness, even in the most sordid circumstances, gives her text a poetic touch. A few scattered sentences, however, reveal the suffering she carries at the core of herself to this very day. She has been strong and disciplined during the war and only breaks down after Liberation, first when she is taken to stay with a nasty rich Jewish couple and later to an orphanage: "I cried, and I cried, and I cried. I cried, and I cried, and I cried. I cried, and I cried, and I cried. ... That crying, this crying, hasn't stopped yet. It

never will. These are tears that have no end. You can't stop crying them." "The crying died down. I stopped crying even though the crying never ended." "I will die with half my tears uncried" 42–52; 192).

Ana Novac describes the guilt that haunts most survivors all along their life. "The fact that I had the toughness to live, to function, to keep my health and my sanity, after and despite the loss of my family, meant that—as illogical as it may seem—I carried, and still carry, the weight of a solitary crime: having lived. Absurd, you say; but it has never been erased from my conscience, and never pardoned by it" (Novac 1997, 9).

In *A Hidden Life*, Johanna Reiss describes how she and her surviving family members live with a feeling that behind everything they experience there is a shadow—a shadow of fear, of guilt, of shame, of doubt. Even decades after the war, under the thin layer of security and well-being, they always sense the presence of a menace, a dark abyss that is about to swallow them up. Johanna recalls that even on her wedding night, in faraway United States, there is a moment when her past violently breaks into her happiness. In the early 1970s, she travels back to the Netherlands with her family to gather material for her wartime memoir. One day Johanna and her husband visit the farm where she and her sister were sheltering through the war. During the train ride, while her husband falls asleep over his book, she stands up and leans out of the window, admiring the beautiful nature of which she could only see a minuscule fragment from her attic window during the years in hiding. She doesn't notice that her husband has woken up. When he tenderly touches her shoulder, she has a panic attack. They are in her home country on a train travelling to the east, where all those other trains headed that brought no travellers back (99–101; 128; 206–207).

After the visit to Holland, Johanna's husband returns to New York and commits suicide. Johanna spends decades striving to understand what happened. They had a happy family life, he was content with his work; the only explanation she is able to find is that the exposure to the tangible details of the Holocaust destabilized his already fragile psyche.

The high price of survival is also emphasized in Hanna Krall's *The Subtenant*. Both victims and outsiders are marked for life. The children in the Jewish orphanage, who miraculously survived the war, are profoundly damaged. They take the world's cruelty as a given and instinctively harden themselves to be able to face it, again and again. They call the little girl who is born from a German soldier's rape "Kraut," they make fun of another survivor who just came out of hiding, because she was not told that the war had ended. They

laugh at Jakubek, who is not sure whether he is a boy or a girl, they talk without frowning about the abuse one of them had to suffer as a counterpart for being sheltered. One day the renowned poet, Julian Tuwim, visits the orphanage. He is shocked to encounter

those little cynics in the bodies of seven and ten year olds. He glanced at them only once, asked one question, and, it seems, got frightened by something, because he left immediately, without as much as looking back. When he visited later on Sundays the children tried all kinds of tricks—they played hopscotch or “merry-go-round,” they laughed cheerfully like children—but nothing worked. Tuwim would pass them quickly without looking and run to the new-borns, to whom he would read his poems for hours. (58–66)

Return to life: rediscovering the beauty of nature

During the war nature had been a precious refuge for the persecuted children. After the war, after having seen what humans are capable of doing, nature often appears as a unique element in which they can find peace and harmony. On his way back home through ruined Germany, András Juda Garai first felt a “spontaneous, cruel, malicious glee” to see the devastated country. But after a while the beauty of nature dispersed his anger and lulled him into an unexpected state of optimism (Garai, 147).

On his journey back home through the liberated lands of Poland, sitting on top of a train, Michał Głowiński discovered nature: “I think it was just then, for the first time, that I became enchanted with nature. I gazed at it with a disinterested eye, not fearing that something would unexpectedly attack, destroy and devour me. ... Fear precludes the contemplation of nature A hunted animal seeks refuge—and does not reflect upon the potential beauty of its surroundings” (Głowiński, 135–136).

Joseph Bialot returned home on a ship that took the former camp inmates back to France through Turkey. He describes the riveting moment when the boat arrived at the strait of Istanbul:

A forgotten scent drifts towards us from the ground: the lilacs are blossoming on the European shore and their fragrance fills our nostrils. A first inhuman breath for the people who for a thousand years only sensed the smell of shit, the sour, so typical odour of filth, the stench of death and despair. All passengers are on the deck. Nobody or almost nobody knew the Bosphorus, and the

people coming out of the world's asshole, rediscover beauty and peace at the gateway to Istanbul. (Bialot, 2002, 25)

The encounter with nature is often the first moment when the children comprehend that they are in fact free. When the train that takes him back home stops for a long time amid cornfields, Andrew Kennedy gets off to urinate. He looks around at the open field and suddenly realises that he is out of the camp, on his way home: "I got off and enjoyed pissing in a bush. I enjoyed that more than anything for a long time; for there were no fences and no guards, not a human being in sight, only spring corn and a line of trees in the distance" (Kennedy, 107). Aharon Appelfeld recalls the day when his group of liberated prisoners arrived to a beach in southern Italy: "The sun and the water welcomed us; they were our first friends. On that vast and empty shore the winter within us began to thaw. My friend T. was so excited that he refused to get out of the water, even at night. It was in the warm sea water that we felt the first sensations of freedom, and that the first words burst out of us" (Appelfeld 2004, 177).

After some difficult and precarious years spent in Hungary after the war, Magda Dénes, her mother, and her aunt flee the country. On their way to the ship that is to take them to America, they stop in at a small Spanish port. After a good meal and a good night's sleep, they stroll around on the streets in a euphoric haze. Walking through a vegetable market, Magda is astounded by nature's bounty: "The colours of the market were unbelievably beautiful. Yellow bananas and yellow lemons tinged with green, and greener limes, and deep green spinach, and lettuce in rainbow greens. Red tomatoes, purple eggplants, pale grey mushrooms. The palette of God was more various and cheering than any painter's work. And so it should be, if He existed. Oh God. ... Please. Thank you" (Dénes, 361–362).

After liberation, when she was able to travel again in the countryside, nature always comforted and reassured Ceija Stojka. Decades after the war she and her surviving siblings returned to Auschwitz for the first time. It was a beautiful, sunny day, but as soon as they arrived at the gate of the Gypsy camp, there was a sudden downpour: "Kathi, I told my sister, 'you see they all cry because we are here. These are the dead people's tears, of all those souls who perished here, gassed and burnt, all those who know us and knew us.' It was pouring rain, we were soaking wet, but it was magnificent, a welcome, a greeting. It was a warm rain." Later, when they went to see the monument to the victims, Ceija was unable to light a candle: "Suddenly a light breeze emerged

from the ground. Not a normal wind. I felt it was a greeting breeze of the people whose souls were there. I talked to the wind: ‘Yes, I’m here, we survived’” (Stojka 2018, 177–178).

In Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and The Barber*, it is also in nature where the souls of murdered victims continue to be present. The “forest of six millions” is the only place where the protagonist, a mass murderer, has to account for his crimes and feels miserable (Hilsenrath 2017, 393–394; 434–437).

Feeling human again

In the first stage after liberation the young survivors were in an extremely vulnerable state. Fragile and apprehensive, they moved around in a haze, never sure what was awaiting them in the next moment. The rare human gestures, heart-warming encounters, the sudden insights of beauty or unexpected moments of carefree fun helped them to feel that they belonged to mankind, and that mankind still existed.

Gerhard Durlacher recalls the period of convalescence he spent in a hospital in Germany after the war:

June 1945 smells of sun, grass and freedom in Upper Silesia. The outside attracts me, but is still terrifying; life without barbed wire is so unusual. Shuffling and unsure, I explore the surroundings of my sickroom: the patch of grass outside the window, the hall, the other rooms. My fellow-sufferers in or by their beds are strangers and yet familiar. We find ourselves again, step out of the shadow world and recognize each other as human beings. (Durlacher 1991, 77)

Maurice Cling and his liberated companions are driven back home to France on trucks through Germany. They stop in Mannheim and Maurice wanders off in search of some food.

I drift around on the streets, aimless and sick. In this greyness, cold and hunger, the feeling of abandon and weakness makes me feel as if I were floating like a shipwreck. All of a sudden I notice two young girls watching me from the ground floor window of a grey house. It’s like a vision. One of them invites me to get closer. Me? I don’t believe my eyes. Her radiant smile floods the sinister road. I approach with shaky steps, dazzled. She gracefully gives me a piece of bread with honey that I approach to my mouth, with tears in my eyes, like

in a dream. Completely confused beyond words, I feel the milk of human tenderness flowing in me. I wake up to life by the magic of a young girl's smile and the gift of a piece of bread with honey. (Cling, 226)

After being liberated from the camp and having gathered some strength in a Red Cross hospital, Otto Rosenberg and his cousin set off to Berlin by foot. The situation in Germany is chaotic; there is no law and order. One day the two young boys storm into a farmhouse and demand food from the woman they find there. She is all alone with several children. After the first, potentially violent, encounter, the situation calms down and the boys end up staying at the farm for some time. The woman cooks for them and they help around the house and play with the children. Otto reflects on this event, saying:

I believe that my experiences on this farm were decisive. When I arrived there I was full of hate and had the intention to kill. To kill all the people, not only those who had tortured us in the camp. ... We were still far too weak, you see, to harm anybody, even though the thought was there. But with time this thought had changed. ... We could have put them to death, you see, and nothing would have happened to us. We could have just walked on. When I left them I had become a different person. Even though I was still not quite normal. I still was a little bit barmy. (Rosenberg, 116–117)

In the last days of the siege of Budapest, Magda Dénes's brother and cousin disappear from their hiding place. Frozen inside, Magda feels that they won't be back. Their mothers, nevertheless, refuse to accept the facts, even when they meet some eyewitnesses who tell them about the circumstances of the boys' deaths. The war is over, but the surviving family members—the grandmother, her two daughters, and Magda—sink into utter despair.

No one made a fire, or coffee, or conversation. In the apartment's shuttered twilight, I gnawed on dry bread until my gums bled again, and then I went to sleep. I woke to silence and slept again. "We are waiting for the boys," they said. Stupid, stupid woman. I hated them. And I hated to hate them, because they were my only loves left. Fine, fine, I told myself between nightmares. If they want me to die, I will.

Then one morning I woke murderously angry. "No!" I yelled, standing up on my bed. "No! Life is for the living. I am alive. You have to keep me alive. I am the child. You have to take care of me. I am not Ivan, I am not Ervin, I am not dead!"

“Shema Yisrael,” my grandmother said, and covered her ears. “The child has lost her mind.”

“No!” I screamed. “The child has not lost her mind. All of you have gone insane. And I’m not going with you.” I was beside myself. ... When I recovered a little, I looked at them. Whom was I accusing, and from whom was I expecting help? Three specters. Thin, sad, broken, mute. What have I done? I started to sob.

“No,” Rózsi said. “Don’t cry. You are right. About everything. But most of all about our duty to you. Go get the wood for the fire. I will cook some food.”

I began to weep again, but now I wept the tender tears of the understood. “Cruel and insolent as always,” my mother said. “I’m used to it. From Gyula to her in a straight line.”

“Margit,” my aunt said hoarsely, “keep your mouth shut. Just peel those potatoes.”

“Both?” my mother asked.

“Yes,” said Rózsi. “We are celebrating.” (Dénes, 244–245).

After her unhappy return to what should have been home, Madeleine Kahn feels estranged from her family and the world. However, one beautiful spring afternoon something happens that helps bring her back to life:

My father turns the French broadcaster’s button on the radio that is fixed on the wall on a wooden stand. We hear inviting, voluptuous music. My father says: “Come my daughter, I will teach you how to dance.” ... I approached my father, he stretched out his arms and took my hands and made a few steps. I observed the position of his feet, repeated his movements and let myself be carried by the music and his precise guidance. A couple of mistaken steps rapidly corrected and I waltzed and waltzed and discovered the outside world bursting with zest, thrill and life. “You are the daughter of your father.” This was the first time my father complimented me. I was proud, but dancing was more important for me than his compliments. With these couple of dance-steps I became hungry for life, hungry for everything. (Kahn, 109–110)

Dancing also helps Joseph Bialot. Sometime after his homecoming, his cousins, who survived the war in occupied France, take him to a dance-hall. He finds himself in the middle of relatively well-fed, properly dressed young people, eager to have fun. An unknown girl invites him to dance:

Everything seemed to me completely unreal, these men, these women, these couples who, dancing, imitated the gestures of love-making, this orchestra that kept the rhythm of the pleasure of encounters. My head was full of explosive images, with the German military marches the orchestra played when the work commandos left and arrived and I asked myself what the hell I was doing in this den. And there as well, I had to learn to be able to appreciate the sweetness of peacetime. ... I stepped on my partner's feet. She smiled at me. A smile...Yes, the war was over. (Bialot, 2002, 272–233)

Becoming an adult—love and sex

Love and sex were no longer taboos for the child and young adolescent survivors, nor were they ideals wrapped in romantic dreams as they were before the war. The mourning of their beloved ones, the traumas they experienced during their hiding or captivity, the many forms of sexual violence they witnessed or were victims of left them profoundly scarred. Many were able to process this damage and enjoy happy private lives afterwards, but many had difficulties in building more or less harmonious relationships later in life. Some refused to have children and some killed themselves years or decades after the war.

After returning from the camp, Joseph Bialot quickly went to a brothel to lose his virginity; an act that had more to do with the need of putting a symbolic end to the war than with lust. Raymond Federman had been introduced to sex in a brutal way during the war. After liberation, for a time he also sought the company of prostitutes until he found love and created a happy family. In the months after his return home, Tomáš Radil got involved with a woman without any emotional attachment or even any particular sexual attraction. He just wanted to lose his virginity, to “get it over with,” and be a man like everyone else. The joyless copulations had nothing to do with the overwhelming romantic love he had for one of his schoolmates which filled his pre-war life or with the attraction he felt for the beautiful prostitute who was deported with him. Both girls were killed in the camps.

In a dreamlike, painful short story of the *Miracle Worker*, András Mezei describes his expeditions in search of food in devastated Budapest during the first days after liberation. One of the trips ends in a makeshift brothel. He gives away the potatoes he managed to acquire with great difficulty for a visit to one of the prostitutes. She is very rude and treats the skinny, traumatized boy with utter contempt. This humiliating, unsatisfactory encounter adds to

the long series of disappointments the end of the war brings to the young boy (Mezei 1984, 267–293).

At the end of Jiří Pick's book, after the liberation of Terezín, when most of the camp has already been evacuated, the emaciated, traumatized survivors cling to each other as if they were afraid to leave the camp and confront the outside world. One of the nurses, who had been the lover of several of his deported friends, wants to have some intimacy with Toni. He is over fourteen now. He knows a great deal about the world, including sexuality, much more than many adults do. However, he hides behind his—non-existent—childhood innocence and pretends not to understand the young woman's intentions, as if he wanted to refuse to enter into the adults' world that betrayed him so badly. (185–193)

After quitting Auschwitz and enduring several days of marching in the cold, Joseph Bialot and a friend arrive in Kraków. It is early morning, the two hungry, ragged young men walk in the deserted streets of the city. Suddenly, a shadow appears. As they get closer, they see that it is a well-dressed, delicately made up, exquisite woman:

When she passes us by, she smiles at us. A woman who smiles at two walking spectres! A genuine woman, flesh and blood, flesh above all, a mother, a lover, a sister, a spouse, a friend, a confident, a whore, a saint. Unforgettable moment, illumination. It is there, seven days after the arrival of the Russians that I finally left the camp in my mind, when I saw this girl, who unconsciously offered me a magnificent gift, one of the most beautiful erections of my life. I was alive. (Bialot, 2002, 233)

On his way home after the end of the war, anxious and traumatized, György Konrád had a stopover at a farm. To his surprise a young servant girl cuddled up to him in the middle of the night. This unexpected gift filled him with warmth and hope (Konrád, 116). Aharon Appelfeld recalls the prostitutes who hovered around the survivors' camp on the shores of Naples that brought the "secret pleasures", "the taste of ...astonishing love in the soft sand" to the young survivors (Appelfeld 2017, 170; 233–234).

József Gáli relates his sexual coming of age in some bitter-sweet episodes. After his return to his home town his only surviving relative, an uncle, pays an old tailor to house and take care of him. The elderly gentleman feels it's also his duty to provide for József's passage to manhood, but "without moonlight and syphilis. I'll take care of it. Moonlight is harmful for your studies and syphilis

is not healthy.” One evening, when the boy returns home, he finds in his room “a well-fed specimen of non-defined age of the other sex ... a bucket of clean water and a ready-made bed.” Next morning the tailor finds the specimen of the other sex alone in the bed. The window is wide open, on the blanket a piece of paper torn out of an exercise book, saying: “Fuck her yourself!” (Gáli, 72–73).

Sometime later, József goes to a party in the nearest town with two of his classmates. After a frustrating night, they wait for the early train to take them home. Suddenly they notice a young girl, who walks towards the tracks. Eager to make up for the failed evening, József’s companions immediately jump up and begin to chase her. He remains sitting on the bench. The two youngsters fail to catch the girl, and they return to the bench even more irritated and take the next train. In the last moment before boarding, József suddenly decides to stay. He has a vague sentiment of a promise floating in the air. When the train leaves, he looks around in search of the girl. She is waiting for him among the bushes. As the train passes, they embrace each other leaning on an old door with a sign: “Bomb-shelter.” (74–75).

After the war, Elli, in Elżbieta Ettinger’s *Quicksand*, throws herself wildly into life. But her war-time memories remain deeply imprinted in her and surface in the most unexpected moments, day and night. She never feels genuinely free and relaxed; not even in her dreams or while making love. At one stage Elli gets involved with a man from England:

Before she met him she had never slept with a man whose face was calm in his sleep. ... Leigh didn’t cling to her. His body was relaxed, his embrace firm. He made love to her, because he wanted her, not because he wanted her help. She had never known this kind of love. Until she met Leigh she didn’t even know it existed. He didn’t make love to escape reality but to feel it. (Ettinger 1989, 229–230)

Discovering or re-discovering genuine love and sex is often the survivors’ first step in the long process of recreating their lives. Marceline Loridan-Ivens speaks about her horror of seeing naked bodies that accompanied her for a long time after the end of the war. After the camps she threw herself into relationships with a desperate rage, but was unable to believe that she could ever love and be loved, until she met the filmmaker Joris Ivens, with whom she was able to build a new life. Several authors thank their life companions for helping them to find hope and beauty, like Zdena Berger, who begins her book thanking her husband for teaching her to laugh again.

Rediscovering arts and books and creativity

Waiting for a means of transport to take him home, Gerhard Durlacher, still sick and weak, wanders around Prague after liberation.

Like fairy-tale magic, the Moldava is suddenly in front of me. Hradčany castle, gleaming like gold in the full sunlight, towers tall and majestic on the other side of the river. I stand transfixed in front of the bridge with the apostles. Its beauty brings tears to my eyes, touches me the first time in years and gives me a taste of freedom. (Durlacher 1991, 86)

When Anita, the protagonist of Edith Bruck's *How Many Stars*, manages to escape from her abusive family, she also walks around in Prague in a delightful trance, moved to tears discovering the beauty of the city (Bruck 2018, 231; 257–258). These moments of bliss remind the young survivors that humanity is able to produce beauty and harmony as well.

For George Perec, books provided the path of return to life after the war. It was as if the void left by the disappearance of his parents and many of his relatives, and his whole floating existence were anchored by the safety of words. He could trust that books would always be there for him; they became his family and home:

the words were where they should be, and the books told a story you could follow; you could re-read, and, on re-reading, re-encounter, enhanced by the certainty that you would encounter those words again. ...I re-read the books I love and I love the books I re-read, and each time it is the same enjoyment, ... an enjoyment of complicity, of collusion, or more especially, and in addition, of having in the end found kin again. (Perec, 143)

Books also helped Norman Manea to attach his insecure life in post-war Romania to a solid and eternal world. Books accompanied him during the lonely years after his return from deportation and provided a precious refuge during the years of Communist oppression and in exile: “literature opened a dialogue with invisible friends, rescuing me from the disfiguring grip of authority” (Manea, 2003, 136).

András Juda Garai recalls a concert that made him feel human again for the first time after his deportation (Garai, 141). Anita Lobel, meanwhile, evokes singing Mozart's *Requiem* with her school choir with helping her to express

her sorrows and feel that more elevated dimensions of human life existed. She was able to embark on a process of mourning and recovery. She eventually became a popular illustrator of children's books who creates a world of exquisite images (Lobel, 226–227; 215–219).

Culture also helped Magda Dénes to see a brighter side of life again. During the first traumatic months after the war, mourning her losses, confined again to a flat, she read a lot, among others *The Prince and the Pauper*. Her only entertainments were her Sunday (“deadheart Sunday”) trips to the cinema with her only surviving great-uncle, Dávid, who returned from Mauthausen. They watch the films of Laurel and Hardy, Latabar—a fabulous Hungarian comic actor—and the *Thief of Baghdad*.

Dávid and I watched and laughed with equal fervour. ... “I never thought this could happen to me again,” Uncle Dávid said on our way out. “To watch a child laugh. Don’t mind me,” he said. “Did you have a good time?”

Too good, I wanted to say. Too good because it makes me forget what I think I should remember every minute of my life. “Yes,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Uncle Dávid said, as if he read my mind. “It’s all right to build on the ruins. It’s all right to hope. In fact, it is essential. There will be no world otherwise.” (Dénes, 274–275)

Inventing imaginary worlds and hiding in books were the most precious supports that helped Alona Frankel to struggle through the first insecure and sorrowful post-war years. She spent her time in her “reading chair”: “I used to curl up in it and read, read and read until I lost consciousness.” “The stories I told myself and the books I read were my real life in those days.” To avoid hearing what people who came back from the camps said about her parents, she escaped again to her internal world: “Magic tricks and miracles hid in the lacquered design that covered the colossal structure of the wardrobe” (Frankel, 67; 84; 222–223).

In her unhappy post-war life, her love for her aunt’s baby boy and her capacity to daydream are the only resources that prevent Anita in *How Many Stars* from sinking into utter despair: “To daydream so much, in fact, to daydream incessantly despite the unimaginable indifference with which the world received our return from the concentration camps, probably was as strong a need for me, as faith was for my mother” (Bruck 2018, 185). Being able to imagine a different life helped Anita to free herself from her family, leave the country, and begin a new life.

A crucial stage in the children's lengthy and difficult healing process arrived when creativity regained its place in their world; when they were able to set free their imagination and creative energies and start to paint, play music, or write once again. Slowly, cautiously, like convalescents, they began to rebuild their inner world. And eventually they were able to evoke their experiences, express their emotions, and recall their dead ones as well.

After her return from the camp, Marceline Loridan-Ivens followed her uncle's advice and did not talk about what she went through. Decades later she felt the need to make a film about her experience, but doubted whether she was able to do it. To get closer to an answer, she returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 1991, accompanied by a friend. They wander around for hours, when

suddenly, the link between the humidity of the air, the rain that has arrived, the lightning, and the earth's warmth lifted the vapours coming out of the torn open crematoriums, as if the dead were talking to us. Then, an unusually violent detonation—thunder? lightning?—tore up the horizon and literally encircled us. Nature was talking to us. A breath came out of the depths of the earth, of all these dead, burned, and gassed, these children, these old people, these women, these men who pleaded with me: "Only you can make this film, you have to do it, don't give up." (Loridan-Ivens 2018, 219)

Ten years later Marceline made a film, *The Birch-Tree Meadow*, about her deportation. Years after the film she started to put into words what she went through and published her memoirs.

When she returned to Auschwitz fifty-five years after the end of the war, Ceija Stojka had a dream. She was in the camp talking with the dead. The dead have to remain in the place where they were killed.

Suddenly the people emerge from the ground with their piece of land and they form the body of a bird. Other graves arrive flying, entire graves with people made of earth and they say: "Yes, we are coming as well." And they become the wings. And yet others create the head and the beak. And I say: "Now you look like a bird. But you still can't fly! You miss the back. There is a little tail, but with that you cannot fly!" And then the Russian graves arrive and join the back. Now everything is there: the beak and the eyes and the feet. And in the beak of the bird a Nazi was hanging. When I go to Bergen-Belsen, it's always like a feast! The dead are flying around with a swish of wings. They come out, they move around, I feel them, they sing and the sky is full of birds. (Stojka 2016, 76)

Thanks to the living presence of the survivors who remember them, the dead people's souls turn into birds and are liberated. They fly far away, high up, singing, filling the sky—as if the bird that froze motionless on the last pages of *Battlefields* became resuscitated in Ceija's imagination.

Breaking the silence—writing

Since words had such a crucial importance before and during the war, the silence that follows the return from the camps or hiding places is particularly heavy for the young survivors. There is no more salvation in words. It takes years, sometimes decades, to break the silence and begin to talk again. Slowly, gradually, with great efforts, words again become magic tools that reconstruct a lost world, revive long-dead family members and friends, and bring back the lost child the authors once were.

George Perec's *W. or the Memory of Childhood* is an apparently distant book, devoid of emotions. In some passages, however, the author talks passionately about the importance of words, which provide his only path of returning to his lost parents:

I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies; I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing: their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life. (Perec, 42)

Loss, absence, and void are permanently returning motifs in Raymond Federman's writings as well. He keeps interrogating the silence of the dead, filling the void they left with words. One of his alter-egos explains his drive to write:

And no matter what, you are unable to get out of this horror nor talk about anything else, that constitutes a regrettable constraint for a novelist...What I call the Unforgivable Enormity that occurred during the war and caused a chasm in me by the erasure of those I loved and who loved me. It is that absence, that emptiness, that gap in me that controls my work and gives it its urgency. ...And sometimes I wonder if one day I'll be able to free myself from those sad stories, if telling them will help me get rid of them for good, or if on the contrary, it will be disgust and lassitude that will free me. (Federman 2001, 98–99)

Thanks to the magic of words the survivors can reconstruct their lost childhood and bring back to life their families and friends. Grigory Kanovich was twelve when he and his parents fled their native Lithuania. His nuclear family survived, but most of their relatives and friends, together with the majority of Lithuanian Jewry, were exterminated. When he decided to become a writer, he chose as a vocation to recall that lost world, recollect the traces of the dead, and deposit them in the memory of the living: “Memories, memories! Are they not the most long-lasting cemetery in the world? Though it is protected by no one, that burial place is indestructible and imperishable. No one will desecrate it, or pilfer its stones to build a house for himself” (Kanovich 2017, 229).

In the epilogue of Chava Rosenfarb’s *The Tree of Life* one of the few surviving protagonists settles in Brussels after the war. From her window she has a view onto a blossoming cherry tree and the railway tracks leading to the nearby train station. The two images transport her back to the ghetto. She wants to liberate herself from the past, see her memories fall from her “like the blossoms from the tree.” One day, however, she realizes that instead of pushing it away, the only way she can learn to live with the pain of her past is to write about it. In the last scene of the novel she begins to write the first sentences of *The Tree of Life* (Rosenfarb, III. 370–371). Writing about the deportation is a way of coping with the trauma for Ana Novac as well. Recalling how vital it was for her to keep her journal in the camps, she states: “I am convinced that the journal was what allowed me to survive. For the rest of my life, it has also been a way to survive that survival, which is a less obvious problem” (Novac, 1997, 9).

After the war Jacov Lind was free to write again. He had the feeling that through writing he was able to reconstruct himself and understand what had happened to him during the war years: “My ‘essential existence’ ... is my writing. The spoken word is a prayer, the written word a sacrifice” (Lind, 171). In his imaginary conversation with the famous psychologist Mary Stone, Bronsky, Edgar Hilsenrath’s alter-ego in *Fuck America*, relates how writing helped him to reconstruct his life.

And suddenly, I was healed. I don’t know if you are able to understand this, Mary Stone. When I finished the first chapter of my book about the ghetto, I was healed. Everything that has been accumulating in me, burst out. The more I wrote, the more liberated I felt. I started to speak again, I gave the impression of a reasonable person, all of a sudden I was able to make jokes, my sense of humor returned. And something else. ... My sexual appetite woke up. I noticed:

look here, Bronsky. It works again. ... Jakob Bronsky was not finished any longer. (Hilsenrath, 274–275)

After her liberation, Edith Bruck first went back to Hungary and was placed in a Jewish orphanage. Later one of her distant relatives came to fetch her and accompanied her to southern Czechoslovakia where her sister lived. The young man, himself a survivor, became Edith's abusive lover and when she became pregnant, he forced her to abort. Some months after the abortion, he wounded her with a revolver in an accident or murder attempt. Trying to escape her calamitous situation, Edith married a man she did not like and left with him to Palestine where she found further difficulties and unhappiness. Years later she immigrated to Italy where she was finally able to build a new life.

Edith first recounted her story in a literary memoir, *Who Loves You Like This*, in 1959. Fifty years later she published *How Many Stars in the Sky*, a fictionalized version of this chapter of her life, where her literary alter-ego, Anita, is also trapped in a very unhappy family situation. She becomes pregnant and her violent and manipulative lover arranges an abortion against her will. In the last moment, however, thanks to the empathy of the elderly Jewish doctor who is supposed to carry out the intervention, she decides to keep the child. She escapes her abusive family and leaves alone for Palestine. She reconquers her freedom, rediscovers the beauty of the world, and heads towards a promising future, carrying a new life. In this case literary creation offered a positive recounting of life's distressing events, providing symbolic redemption.

Writing seems to help the authors to handle their traumas better and to move forward. In some cases this also means that the child who experienced the hardships of the war years has to vanish symbolically. At the end of Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies*, Maciek, the author's alter-ego, disappears, together with his onerous history: "Where is Maciek today? He became a source of embarrassment, he gradually died. There is a man in his place who has one of the names Maciek used to use. Does this man have something of Maciek? No: Maciek was a child and this man had a childhood that he can't bear to recall. He had to invent a childhood for himself" (263).

In Hanna Krall's *The Subtenant*, once the story is told, the protagonist is supposed to fade away as well:

And when you finally and absolutely get everything out, we shall banish that little girl once for all. My dear, we will have to tell her one day, I gave you a lot didn't I? ... Now we shall say goodbye like civilized people, and not a day longer

shall we stay together, do you understand what I am saying? If she still does not want to leave and tries to push her sweaty little paw into your hand, one should pause for a moment and say—now piss off, and right away, do I make myself clear? (Krall, 112–113)

In Aharon Appelfeld's *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, the protagonist, Erwin/Aharon, is locked for a long time in the silence of the survivors. He finds it impossible to tell what he went through, because those who could listen are unable or unwilling to understand and also because he can't find the proper words. Sometimes he also has the sensation that by talking about his dead he betrays them. At the same time he feels a burning need to rescue the past that seems to have disappeared without a trace; he needs to prove that it existed. He is convinced that writing is his only chance to survive and to save some vestiges of the past. He makes great efforts to learn a new language, Hebrew, copying long passages from the Bible, the only text he is able to read, trying to restore the value of words: "The more I copied, the more I felt the power of the exposed sentences. ...They were carved out of a whole world, and I had only fragments" (Appelfeld 2017, 173). After a while Erwin/Aharon begins to write, sensing the encouragement of his ancestors and his fellow survivors. His decision to become a writer makes him feel that "I had left the channel of random events and shifted over to the path of fate" (234). In a dream talking to his dead uncle, he is able to confirm it: "I've already left the path of chance, and I'm striving toward a goal" (242). He took his life in his hands; he is not *fateless* any longer. This profoundly optimistic message closes Aharon Appelfeld's profoundly sad book.

C H A P T E R

5

THE NEXT GENERATION

Never again?

In Jiří Pick's *The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* there is a conversation between the prisoners assigned to work in the cemetery of the Terezín camp. While his co-workers still nourish the illusion that the trains take their fellow prisoners to work, Engineer Karpfen is convinced that they are going to be killed. He is an engineer with a methodical mind and has been wondering about the technical solutions the Germans would invent to annihilate Europe's 15 million Jews. He finally comes up with an efficient and inexpensive solution, assuming that the Nazis would not want to spend too much money on the undertaking. Jews will be drowned in the continent's lakes. Toni, the last remaining member of the Society, intervenes anxiously: "But what about the fish? Wouldn't it bother them?"

Their fellow grave-digger, Doctor Neugeboren, expresses his doubts about Engineer Karpfen's hypothesis: 'You forget,' said Dr. Neugeboren, 'that luckily there's such a thing as world opinion.' 'I'm not forgetting,' said Karpfen. 'But it seems to me, Doctor, we're rather removed from world opinion' (Pick, 137–148).

The world's public opinion, the 'international community,' and its institutions were indeed very far away during World War II, when millions were murdered due to their origins. They have been equally far away since the end of the war, when deadly racist ideologies flared up and were put into practice, exterminating further millions of innocent people in Cambodia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia.

Joseph Bialot explains with unsettling lucidity how the Holocaust created a toxic precedent that can be repeated again and again, in different modes and under different circumstances.

Auschwitz is only the beginning. ... The triumph of the Black Order consists above all in the fact that it has relativized murder, converted assassination into a statistical fact, banalised torture and collective crime, and invented global death, the death of a people and of their culture. And this, people will not forget, they like it! They like it too much! Very very much! Just have a look at the day's news... (Bialot 2002, 276–277)

Shlomo Breznitz shares this view. When he writes about the “manquake” whose “aftershocks are still troubling our planet,” he states that one of its major “casualties was human innocence, finally and irrevocably erased from the dealings of men and nations” (Breznitz, ix).

Some years after the war, Warsaw ghetto survivor Elli, Elżbieta Ettinger’s protagonist in *Quicksand*, is sent on an assignment to Vietnam. It gradually dawns on her that what happened in war-torn Europe was not an anomaly; mass murder is part of everyday reality throughout the world:

Neat reports were typed by neat secretaries in their neat offices; statesmen “exchanged opinions,” diplomatic channels “stood open.” But who really cared? ... How many Vietnamese were there to kill? Thirty million? Forty million? Somebody once told her, “Six millions of Jews? What’s all the fuss about?” Indeed. Big deal. The six million shrank long ago, unable to stand the competition of ten million here, twenty million there, and several hundred million waiting in line. (Ettinger 1989, 229)

The dark premonitions of these authors proved tragically right. Mary Berg, one of the first authors seeking to alert the world to the ongoing annihilation of the Jews in 1944, retreated from public life when she realized that her message made no difference. In 1995, when an editor who intended to re-publish her book, managed to locate her, her reaction was categorical: “Instead of continuing to milk the Jewish Holocaust to its limits, do go and make a difference in all those Holocausts taking place right now in Bosnia or Chechnya.... Don’t tell me this is different” (Berg article, 2008). Decades later, when Zdena Berger was asked why she chose a fictional form to tell her story, she answered: “I was searching for the universality of it, because this is happening somewhere today, not in the same fashion, but the core inhumanity of it is happening” (Berger interview, 2008).

In May 1994, fifty years after Mary Berg’s book was first published, the genocide against the Tutsis was going on with full speed in Rwanda and the

international ‘community’ did not intervene to stop it. Scholastique Mukasonga, a child survivor of earlier mass massacres in her country, was following the events in exile in France. Watching D-Day celebrations in the port of Caen, she noticed a beautiful white boat, which, she thought, brought the Queen of England to Normandy:

I had the wild idea to rush to the boat and throw myself at the foot of the Queen and beg her to convince the heads of state who came together to celebrate the liberation of Europe from the horrors of Nazism and proclaim “never again,” to do something to save those who could still be saved in Gitagata, in Nyamata, in Rwanda. The next morning the Queen’s yacht raised anchor taking away my crazy hopes. (Mukasonga 2018/b, 154)

Révérien Rurangwa, another child survivor of the Rwandan genocide, also highlights the passivity and complicity of the outside world that let the genocide continue for three months while celebrating the victory over fascism:

The massacre of ninety percent of the Tutsis—that is every seventh Rwandan—have been taking place in a deafening silence at the same time when the Holocaust museum was opened in Washington D.C., and the leaders of the major Western powers celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied landing in Normandy, repeating in unison: “Never again!” ... “Never again,” what a joke! (Rurangwa, 14–15; 156)

Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia

The message of Holocaust survivors, including those who were children during the war, was in fact painfully dismissed. The genocides that have taken place since 1945 followed a chillingly similar pattern and employed very similar methods. Racism, prejudice, demagogic manipulation of social grievances, authoritarianism, indoctrination, and the suppression of critical thinking; all ingredients were present to launch the systematic discrimination, exclusion, and annihilation of whole segments of these countries’ populations.

The unfolding of the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Bosnian genocides and their historical, political, and social contexts were very different. Each had its specific features, but the key motives and mechanisms were distressingly alike. In all three countries, on the basis of existing or artificially created social and political tensions, the representatives of a specific power group orches-

trated a murderous propaganda machine to “justify” the “punishment,” “re-education,” or sheer elimination of the targeted groups. The state apparatus, including the armed forces, the police, and an all-invasive brain-washing campaign, prepared and organized the mass killings. Large groups of the population were armed and encouraged to kill, loot, rape, and humiliate; the rest remained passive and allowed it to happen.

After they took power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge manipulated the resentment of certain sections of the population vis-a-vis city dwellers who enjoyed higher living standards than those of the countryside. They whipped up xenophobic sentiment and used the pretext of the ongoing civil war among warring political fractions, as well as the Vietnam War, with its frequent overflows into the country’s territory, to justify their massive reshaping of society. The urban population, educated people, members of previous official structures, and ethnic and religious minorities were labelled “new people” who poisoned society and therefore had to be suppressed or re-educated to avoid the “contamination” of the “race of old people.”

In Rwanda the Belgian colonialists introduced a cleavage in society, designating Tutsis and Hutus as separate ethnic groups. In fact the differences stemmed from a long-established division of labor and social hierarchy; they spoke the same language, and shared the same culture and traditions on a common territory for centuries. After 1959, and particularly after the country gained independence in 1962, several waves of anti-Tutsi persecution and pogroms took place, culminating in the 1994 genocide. Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia were largely secular and peacefully co-existed with the country’s other ethnic groups for centuries. Under the Communist system, in principle, all were equal and the political elite consisted principally of ethnic Serbians and Croats, so Bosnians could hardly be accused of being exploiters and oppressors. Nevertheless, from the early 1990s they were singled out and persecuted for being Muslims.

In Rwanda and Bosnia, “genocides of proximity” took place, in which friends, neighbors, schoolmates, and acquaintances became the butchers of people they intimately knew. Murders took place in people’s homes and their environs, in a space previously shared by the victims and the perpetrators. In this sense they resembled the Holocaust by bullet, the large-scale massacres committed, sometimes with the active participation of the local population, in occupied Eastern Europe during World War II. There were also assigned killing sites; in Bosnia schools, warehouses, and industrial premises were turned into detention, torture, and extermination centers, like the notorious Omar-

ska camp near Prijedor; in Rwanda churches, schools, and storage buildings similarly became scenes of mass massacres. In Cambodia, mass annihilation took place in forced labor camps and specific extermination sites, like Tuol Sleng, Security Prison 21 in Phnom Penh. Like Belzec or Sobibor, few came out of there alive.

The next generation

Rithy Panh was thirteen years old when he was deported from Phnom Penh with his family. In the following years, which he spent in forced labor camps and villages, he lost his parents and most of his siblings. Loung Ung was five when her family was chased out of the Cambodian capital and settled in the countryside to work in forced labor camps. She lost her parents and several siblings. Chanrithy Him was four when her family had to flee their home due to the Vietnamese invasion and nine when they were deported by the Khmer Rouge. During the years of captivity she lost her parents, three siblings, and twenty eight members of her extended family. Sor Sisavang was eleven when his family was expelled from their home in Battambang. In the course of the four years spent in various villages and labor camps in the countryside he lost his parents and two of his siblings. Navy Soth was three when her family was deported to a forced labor camp, where her father and several siblings were killed. Malay Phcar was nine when he was sent with his family to the killing fields. Only he and one of his brothers survived. Vaddey Ratner was five when the Khmer Rouge took over and her whole family was banished to various forced labor camps from which only she and her mother survived.

Scholastique Mukasonga was three years old when armed Hutu gangs assaulted their house with the intention of killing her family. They survived but were soon deported to a remote, inhospitable region of Rwanda. In the 1994 genocide, thirty-seven members of her family were killed, including her parents and most of her siblings. Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse was fifteen when most of her family members were massacred in the genocide of the Tutsis. Révérien Rurangwa was fifteen years old when forty three members of his extended family, including his parents and siblings, were massacred and he was left for dead. Annick Kayitesi-Jozan was fourteen when her mother, siblings, and most of her extended family were slaughtered. Charles Habonimana was twelve years old when the genocide started, in which his parents, six siblings, and the majority of his extended family were massacred. Gilbert Gatore was thirteen at the time of the genocide in which he lost the major-

ity of his family members. Berthe Kayitesi was fifteen when her parents and many of her relatives, friends, and acquaintances were killed in Giseny. Clemantine Wamariya was six when most of her family were massacred in the genocide. She spent the next six years as a refugee migrating through different African countries.

Saša Stanišić was fourteen when Serb forces occupied his hometown Višegrad, in the former Yugoslavia, and launched a systemic ethnic cleansing. Emir Suljagić was seventeen when he fled his hometown, Bratunac, to take refuge in Srebrenica. Kenan Trebinčević was twelve when he was forced to hide and later flee his hometown, Brčko, in the north of Bosnia. Ismet Prcic was fifteen when the war broke out and his native Tuzla was attacked by Serbian forces. Vesna Maric was fifteen when her hometown, Mostar, was assaulted, forcing her to flee. All of them lost numerous family members, friends, and acquaintances.

The family background and the experience of the authors are varied, but less so than that of the Holocaust survivor children whose work has been presented above. The Cambodian children came from comfortable urban middle-class families, except for Vaddey Ratner, who is related to the former governing elite. When the Khmer Rouge seized power, all children and their families were deported and spent years in perilous conditions in labor camps and villages. They suffered privations, hunger, and brutal oppression. When the genocide was over, they had to continue to struggle for everyday survival, because they had lost everything. After a certain period they escaped from their home country and went into exile.

The authors from Bosnia also came from urban middle class families. After the outbreak of the war Vesna Maric and Saša Stanišić managed to flee relatively early; the others spent years in their besieged home towns before they succeeded to escape. With the exception of Clemantine Wamariya, who grew up in a well-to-do household in Kigali, the authors from Rwanda come from villages or small towns, from families of cultivators and pastoralists. They went to school, but they also worked in the household and in the fields. Scholastique Mukasonga survived violence and deportation at an early age and was sent to study abroad at the age of seventeen. During the 1994 genocide Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse, Clemantine Wamariya, and Gilbert Gatore were able to hide and eventually escape relatively early; the other children lived through the persecution and carnage.

All but two of the authors of the next generation live in exile today. Emir Suljagić stayed in Bosnia and Charles Habonimana remained in Rwanda. The

others chose to build a new life far from the scene of the crimes. They all had to cope with the difficulties of being up-rooted, becoming a stranger, and having to change language and often identities. Years, sometimes decades, after their respective traumas, they decided to tell their stories. They all wrote their books in the language of their adopted country. Charles Habonimana wrote his book with the help of a French writer in French. Only Emir Suljagić wrote his book in his mother tongue.

The works explored here are mostly literary memoirs, with a few exceptions where the authors opted for a fictionalized rendering of their personal experience. Most of Scholastique Mukasonga's works focusing on the genocide are literary memoirs, except for *Our Lady of the Nile*, a novel based on her years spent in a high school in pre-genocide Rwanda, and her collections of short stories. Annick Kayitesi-Jozan first told her story in a memoir; fourteen years later she returned to it in a literary form. Based on her experience in Rwanda and in exile, Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse creates fictional stories from before and after the genocide, showing both its build-up and its long-lasting impact. Gilbert Gatore's novel, *The Past Ahead* transforms the author's experience into a symbolic fable about crime, punishment, victimhood, and survival. Vaddey Ratner distils her memories in poetic novels. Ismet Prcic's *Shards* and Saša Stanišić's *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* are singular combinations of memoir and fiction, in which the borders of reality and imagination are permanently shifting. Thirteen years after his first book, Saša Stanišić explored further questions of identity, war, and exile in a literary memoir, *Where You Come From*.

When they decided to write about their experiences, the authors of the next generation also tried to trace the boundaries of the real and imaginary, like the child Holocaust survivor authors decades earlier. Following the suggestion of a doctor who tried to treat his ever worsening mental condition in exile, Ismet Prcic's protagonist, the writer's alter-ego, initially started to write down his wartime memories for therapeutic reasons. The project gradually morphed into a literary creation:

At first it worked; I wrote about my escape, about my childhood, trying to keep to the facts. But as I kept at it, things—little fictions—started to sneak in. I agonized over them, tried to eradicate them from the manuscript, but it made the narrative somehow less true. When I put them back in, it became truer but it didn't exactly fit what I remembered, not in every little detail. (Prcic, 22)

Clemantine Wamariya also defines the connection between real-life events and the way they are rendered: “There is a difference between story and experience. Experience is the whole mess, all that actually happened; a story is the pieces you string together, what you make of it, a guide to your own existence. Experience is the scars on my legs. My story is that they’re proof that I’m alive. Your story, the meaning you choose to take when you listen to me, might be different” (Wamariya, 240). In an interview Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse talks about the survivors’ difficulties when they try to share their experience. “I think I started to write so people don’t have to listen to me; whenever I tried to tell I met with uneasy or turned-away glances. I don’t think that the experience of survival is impossible to tell, as Semprun explains it ...words can tell everything; the problem is on the side of listening.” She decided to write fiction to reach people who think that the genocide of the Tutsis is “too tough, incomprehensible, discouraging, faraway” (Umubyeyi interview 2018).

Saša Stanišić recounts how the redeeming power of imagination helped him to transport his experience to a sphere where he was able to deal with it: “For instance, during the war, I witnessed a horse being slain. It was awful. But ever since I put this scene into the ‘Soldier.’ the invented scene has covered up the memory: I still remember that this horse was killed, but no longer carry the image of it with me, only the images I imagined in the book. They cover up that painful memory. Sometimes, fiction can make reality more bearable” (Stanišić interview 2019). Malay Phcar opens his book with a Hannah Arendt quote: “Every tragedy becomes bearable if one recounts it or turns it into a tale.”

Whatever form the authors chose to tell their stories, what they convey is alarmingly similar to the message Holocaust survivor children intended to transmit to us. They relate the steps that lead to mass murder: the introduction of discriminatory measures, a language of humiliation and hatred, the division of society between “us” and “them,” and the isolation of the condemned groups in order to facilitate their expropriation and extermination. They also recount how they managed to survive by finding escape routes and sources of hope similar to those that Holocaust survivor children had found decades earlier, and how they reconstructed their lives afterwards. They continue the internal conversation of their predecessors, addressing the same topics, asking similar questions and coming to comparable conclusions, which underpin the disheartening parallels between their experiences.

The prism of senses

Like their predecessors, the child survivor authors of most recent genocides often describe their experiences via primary sensory impressions. The torments of persecution and captivity in Bosnia, the horrors of the Cambodian exodus and labor camps, and the hounding and massacres of Tutsi in Rwanda are frequently depicted through smells, sounds, or colorful images: vivid descriptions of the aches and pains and rare pleasures of the body, and the impact of scorching heat or debilitating cold, hunger, and fear.

When the murderers approach her home south of Kigali, their grandmother prompts six-year-old Clemantine Wamariya and her sister to run away. The girls crawl out of the house, run through the fields, and continue walking, trying to get as far away as possible:

We walked for hours, until everything hurt, not toward anything, just away. We rubbed the red-brown mud and eucalyptus leaves on our bodies so we could disappear. Prickers grated my ankles. ... We heard laughing and screaming and pleading and crying and the cruel laughing again. I did not know how to name the noises. They were human and not human. ... It was cold and green and wet and then bushes and my legs were shaking and eyes, so many eyes. My thoughts and senses became jumbled. Time felt hot. Silence was dizzying. My fear was bright blue. (Wamariya, 25)

Four-year-old Navy Soth witnesses the brutal killing of their neighbor in the village where they are held in slavery in the Cambodian countryside. The scene is described through her physical sensations: the noises she hears in the frozen silence of the witnesses, the smells, the fear that makes her unable to move, her urine flowing down on her naked legs. Navy's book, *Forbidden Tears (Les larmes interdites)*, frequently evokes the power of smells: the repulsive odors of decaying and dead bodies or rotting food and the soothing, pleasant odors of nature or the people she loves. When her mother is away, the little girl hugs her T-shirt and inhales her smell to comfort herself. Once, when she is badly beaten up by a Khmer Rouge guard, she buries her face in her father's T-shirt back in their hut. His smell reassures her and helps her believe that she'll survive (Soth, 3–9; 152; 194).

When her father is taken away, Chanrithy Him also goes to sleep hugging his shirt: "I hug him in my mind as I inhale his odour from his shirt. I inhale it deeply and hungrily. I love Pa—words I've never actually uttered" (Him, 91).

When Malay Phcar feels particularly lost or unhappy, he also seeks his parents' smell as a consolation. After his mother's death he manages to save a piece of her sarong which solaces and reassures him throughout his captivity (Phcar, 33; 110)

Raami, the protagonist of Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, often describes events through her sensory impressions. Subjected to hunger, abusive treatment, and exhausting work in a forced labor camp, one day she unexpectedly challenges her superior. This spontaneous act of defiance makes her feel strong and serene; feelings she has not experienced for a long time. She is severely punished, but she is able to retreat into her internal sensory world, focusing on the taste of blood in her mouth, the warmth of the urine trickling down her thigh, the protruding eyes of a tiny crab on the muddy bank of the paddy, and her murdered father's voice that echoes in her mind (Ratner, 294–297).

Sensory memories engraved in the body can also bring temporary relief for the children in the middle of their tribulations. One day Navy Soth has a flickering image of the white tiles of their kitchen back home. The image recalls the long-forgotten taste of sugar cane she munched on as a small child. She recalls that taste with such intensity that for a short while she has the sensation of being satiated. Another day, in early spring, when she is working in the fields collecting dried cow dung, she suddenly notices the fine fragrances of awakened nature. The sensation is so overwhelming that for a brief moment she forgets her surroundings, travels back to happy times, and begins to hope that liberation is forthcoming (Soth, 42; 187).

In Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's *All Your Children, Scattered*, a mother and daughter meet again some years after the genocide. The mother stayed in Rwanda during the events, but managed to send her daughter away with one of the humanitarian convoys. The young girl grows up in Europe and establishes her own family. Some years later she returns to visit her mother, but there is hardly any exchange between the two. One afternoon they sit together in silence on the porch of their house. They light their cigarettes and the smell unexpectedly ushers them back to their common peaceful memories:

The white wreaths of smoke that escaped from your hand, or came from my half-open mouth, yours Impala, mine Intore, two cigarette brands from before, the only ones we still wanted to smoke, as if to ward off the killing time—unless it was just a way to suffocate slowly on the effluvia of the past—our wreaths met and enfolded us in a reassuring cloud. (Umubyeyi 2022, ch. Blanche)

A genocide in the making—discrimination and persecution

The Cambodian people were completely unprepared for the introduction of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. During the break-up of Yugoslavia, people in Bosnia watched with increasing anxiety and incredulity the violent nationalist rhetoric, the multiplying armed assaults, and the outbreak of an open war in neighboring Croatia, but the majority could not envisage that the fighting would reach them as well. The Tutsi genocide had a longer period of gestation in Rwanda. From the 1950s they were subjected to discrimination, exclusion, regular acts of violence, and humiliation; still they could not be prepared for a systematic, well-planned extermination campaign that aimed to wipe them off their land.

The books of Scholastique Mukasonga and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse which evoke the times before the genocide highlight some key factors of a germinating conflict: significant social inequalities, poverty, a young generation growing up without attractive future perspectives, tensions between social groups, and the alliance of wealth and political control that made possible the emergence of a violent power group, advocating toxic racist and totalitarian ideologies.

Scholastique depicts a childhood marked by ever-present fear and regular aggressions. The Tutsis are marginalized, mistreated, and excluded from society; their lands and animals are confiscated and they are subject to a numerus clausus restricting their entry into the higher echelons of the society, including education, where only a very restricted group has access to secondary school. She describes how even in times of relative peace soldiers enjoy total impunity to harass and eventually kill innocent people; irregular armed gangs are formed (often of street kids) to control and terrorize the Tutsis.

For Scholastique and her companions, to venture out of their village and cross a bridge where a check-point has been set up is “to leave the realm of humans and enter a world where you were nothing but a cockroach” (Mukasonga 2018/b, 155). She grows up with the knowledge that one day, sooner or later, they will be killed; they can’t escape. She talks about “the implacable destiny we’d been condemned to because we were Tutsis.” Her mother keeps inventing hiding places and escape routes finding “the strength and courage she’d need to face our misfortunes, to replenish the energy she unstintingly expended to save her children from a death that an incomprehensible fate had planned out for them” (Mukasonga 2018/a, 20; 30).

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Scholastique presents the microcosm of an all-girls high school, where the future elite of the country is instructed in the

basics of general culture, languages, and household chores. For most students, getting an education is just one step on the way to becoming the wife of an important man, but for the few Tutsi girls who are accepted, the certificate is seen as their unique opportunity for upward social mobility, and, eventually, survival. Despite usually being diligent and excellent students, the Tutsi youngsters are openly discriminated against and frequently humiliated. Disguised as a promotion of social development and equality, a vicious racist ideology is spread in the school and the country; manipulation, misinformation, prejudice, and fear of the “other” are fomented. The road from officially fueled virulent racism to murder is extremely short; one day the systematic mistreatment of the Tutsi girls turns into an organized campaign of violence, turning people into victims, murderers, accomplices, or silent witnesses.

Describing her childhood years Scholastique writes about the “ordinary fear” and the “great fear,” evoking Otto Dov Kulka’s notions of “Small Death” and “Great Death.” Ordinary fear is part of the Tutsi children’s everyday life. They know that Hutu militia, soldiers, or gangs can always harass or attack them, on their way to school or on their return, while they work in the fields or fetch water in the lake. In the school they often see their teacher looking out the window to check for signs of approaching danger. “And until he finally went back to his podium, it seemed to us that fear had taken the teacher’s place.” Ordinary fear is more or less manageable, because by being alert and fast, one has a chance to escape death. Great fear, however, is paralyzing. People know from earlier experiences that once an organized onslaught starts, there is no way to get away. On the days of the great fear, life stops. No one dares to go to work or to school, the whole settlement is seized by panic; waiting to be executed, people reunite and hide together in the huts considered to be the most secure (Mukasonga 2020, Ch. ‘Fear’).

Révérien Rurangwa did not grow up with this fear in his stomach. He is a generation younger than Scholastique and was spared personal experiences of violence:

I was just a carefree child. It’s true that some neighbors called us “dirty Tutsi,” and Jeanne, my teacher in sixth grade, seated the Tutsis in the back of the class and the Hutus in the front and clearly favored the latter, but I did not perceive in these injustices the first signs of a planned massacre. Above all, I played soccer with the Hutu, I went to explore the swamp with the Hutu, I fished with the Hutu, I took care of our cows with the Hutu. Can a kid with whom you play

football twice a week and with whom you catch tilapia become your enemy?
This seemed to me impossible. (Rurangwa, 46)

Yet, later on, while their adult relatives carried out the meticulous slaughter of the Tutsis, Révérien's schoolmates and playmates watched them giggling. Many participated in the looting and denounced those who managed to hide. Scholastique also mentions that when the massacres began, on some occasions her own schoolmates led the murderers to their victims' hiding places.

Charles Habonimana also grew up in a community where people lived together in harmony. Despite the commencement of the slaughters and the circulation of news about murdered family members and acquaintances, the arrival of masses of refugees from neighboring hills and other regions describing terrible experiences and urging people to flee immediately, and the incessant hate-propaganda and open calls for murder pouring out of the radio, the adults kept repeating that their village would be spared: "In Mayunzwe they will not kill us! Papa keeps repeating. It's impossible even to think about it. Our Hutu neighbors are on our side. They share our days and our fears. They support us and show their solidarity." The fact that many adults had survived previous pogroms helped foment this "strange blindness" (Habonimana, 22–23; 33).

Sinister forebodings

Clemantine Wamariya was six when she noticed the world beginning to shrink around her. First her beloved nanny had to quit their house. "I asked adults to explain, but their faces turned to concrete, and they nudged me back to my childish concerns." Then the next nanny quits the house as well and Clemantine can no longer go to kindergarten. "Some days the world felt green, some days it felt yellow, but never a happy yellow. All the girls who lived with my family returned to their hometowns." Then she is forbidden to play in the garden and later she is forbidden to play with her oldest playmate. In her neighborhood, houses are raided and the attackers leave behind threatening notes or grenades that explode.

Our curtains, which my mother has always thrown open at five each morning, suddenly remained closed. The drumming started up again, loud and far away. Then the car horns. My father stopped working after dark. My mother ... stopped going to church. Instead she prayed in my room, where my siblings slept sometimes, because it had the smallest window. No one came over for

dinner any more. ... Nobody in my family went to the market anymore. The electricity flickered on and off. The water stopped working. There was shushing, so much shushing, so much pressure to be quiet and still. ... There were more nights than days. ... I heard conversations I didn't understand about them coming. Them—always them, plural, spoken with a hiss. ... My parents' faces turned into faces I had never seen. I heard noises I did not understand—not screaming, worse. (Wamariya, 17–23)

In Cambodia warning signs of the approaching catastrophe could be discerned by some lucid people who were apprehensive of the Khmer Rouge, but children were usually not told about such dangers. However, as soon as they saw the armed soldiers marching into their hometowns, in what was presented as liberation, the end of the war, they could sense that something threatening was in the making. Thirteen-year-old Rithy Panh watched the army's arrival with increasing unease:

Many books declare that Phnom Penh joyously celebrated the arrival of the revolutionaries. I recall instead feverishness, disquiet, a sort of anguished fear of the unknown. And I don't remember any scenes of fraternization. What surprised us was that the revolutionaries didn't smile. They kept us at a distance, coldly. I quickly noticed the looks in their eyes, their clenched jaws, their fingers on their triggers. I was frightened by that first encounter, by the entire absence of feeling. (Panh, 2013. 29)

Four-year-old Navy Soth also witnessed the Khmer Rouge march into the city. She saw a multitude of uniformed men and women, all alike, identically dressed, with the same haircut, walking in unison like an enormous black caterpillar. The little girl was impressed and frightened by this impressive black parade, like decades earlier when Gerhard Durlacher watched with awe and dread the night march of the Nazis in his city (Soth, 28–29).

City-dwellers were ordered to leave their homes “for three days, in order to escape American bombings.” After several days of marching, Malay Phcar and his family arrived at an untouched land in the jungle and were ordered to clear the area to build a makeshift camp. They were exhausted and anguished, with no idea what was awaiting them, but the beauty of the nature captivated them. As they were admiring the landscape, a magnificent deer appeared at the edge of the forest, like a magic vision. Malay and his companions stared at it mesmerized, holding their breath. The moment of enchantment was abruptly bro-

ken by the arrival of Khmer Rouge soldiers who were chasing the animal. They threatened to kill the little group if they didn't indicate which way it escaped. The prisoners reluctantly obeyed and the soldiers caught and killed the deer. One of the soldiers gave a big piece of meat to the family as a reward for their help and happy to be able to eat after several days of starving, they devoured it. Nevertheless, the scene profoundly shook Malay and filled him with dark premonitions (Phcar, 39).

In the early 1990s in Yugoslavia, people watched the news about the mounting political tensions with growing anxiety, but hardly anyone believed that it would come to war. In *Shards* Ismet and his family were also following events in front of their TV set in Tuzla.

It had begun with politicians fighting on television, talking about their nationalities, their constitutional rights, each claiming that his people were in danger. "I thought we were all Yugoslavs," I said to my mother, although at fifteen I knew better. You had to live under a rock not to see that the shit was about to hit the fan. ... My mother said: "There is going to be war." On TV some suited fathead behind a podium yelled into the microphone and shook his sausage finger in the air. The crowd in front of him roared, sporting his framed photographs and holding lit candles. My mother repeated her sentence absentmindedly, staring into the corner of the coffee table on which mezze was served. My father, chewing on smoked beef, laughed and said that it was all just talk, that people were not stupid. He poured himself another shot of slivovitz. (Prcic, 44)

In Saša Stanišić's *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, Aleksandar is equally unprepared for the abrupt end of his happy, quiet childhood. He is eleven when history makes its violent entry into his world. During a festive family gathering one of his uncle's drunken friends assaults the musicians because they play traditional Bosnian music which he calls "*Turkish Gypsy filth*." The little boy does not understand what the fuss is about, but he has the uneasy sensation that something is going wrong. Later he overhears people talking about tensions, skirmishes, and war. He sees disturbing images on TV:

I knew about Osijek from TV. Osijek was burning, and there were things you saw there and couldn't understand, you saw them again and again, lying under blankets or sheets in the street, in farmyards. Boots. Forearms. Grandpa Slavko wasn't there to confirm that what I saw was what I was afraid of. My parents said it was a long way off. (Stanišić, 2008. 33–38; 81)

The collapse of a world

Despite these sinister forebodings, the children were profoundly shaken when war in fact broke out and persecution and massacres started. From one day to the next their world fell apart and they became enemies destined to be annihilated. Their life, their families, their communities were in danger; the values, the order of things, relationships, and worldviews they grew up with suddenly became irrelevant. These dramatic changes unsettled the very basis of their existence, inducing a profound feeling of loss and, at the same time, incredulity. Vesna Maric describes the first moments of the war: “On my way home from school, a tremendous explosion shook the city. Windows shattered around me, people screamed, the ground trembled, and everyone ran in random directions. The war had started literally with a bang, and our world ended with the same noise that had started the world zillions of years ago” (Maric, 5).

Berthe Kayitesi recounts how her entire world collapsed in a couple of months: “Between April and July of 1994, everything stopped forever. Our loved ones disappeared, taking with them the familial, social, and material landmarks that characterized our existence before. No more houses, no more cows on the hills where I spent the best moments of my childhood” (B. Kayitesi, 61). Loung Ung describes a similarly drastic change: “Yesterday I was playing hopscotch with my friends. Today we are running from soldiers with guns” (Ung 2007, 41). One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s protagonists talks about “the time before the end of the world” (Umubyeyi 2017, 127). Clemantine Wamariya recalls “the world I’d lived in before the universe fell apart” (Wamariya, 251).

Rithy Panh also depicts the speed and brutality of the transformations: “Overnight I become “new people,” or (according to an even more horrible expression) an “April 17.” Millions of us are so designated. That date becomes my registration number, the date of my birth into the proletarian revolution. The history of my childhood is abolished. Forbidden. From that day on, I, Rithy Panh, thirteen years old, have no more history, no more family, no more emotions, no more thoughts, no more unconscious. Was there a name? Was there an individual? There’s nothing anymore” (Panh, 2013, 23).

The collapse of their world meant that what the children knew and loved was abruptly taken away from them and destroyed or changed beyond recognition. In addition to their personal losses, they also witnessed the dramatic transformation of their whole environment, including sudden changes in people’s behavior and a depreciation of the fundamental values they were taught to respect. Emir Suljagić was a young teenager when he fled his hometown

and found refuge in Srebrenica. “We had lost everything overnight as if we had woken up in some other world” (Suljagić, 13).

In front of our scared, boyish eyes a world was falling apart and from its ugly remains a new one was emerging. We were watching in order to get slowly used to it, to accept it as the only possible reality... People were stunned by the fact that they had become so worthless overnight and found this difficult to accept. Those people did not understand that their survival depended on how quickly they grasped that it was not possible to bring anything from the old world into the new. The old world was irreversibly lost and the new one was ruled by scum, criminals, former prisoners, corrupt policemen... (Suljagić, 27–29)

When her family was forced to leave their home, Navy Soth was stunned to see a Khmer Rouge soldier hit her mother when she was about to lift her baby-sister. She was even more shocked when her mother anxiously whispered to her not to react (Soth, 38–39). During their forced exodus, Loung Ung had to go to the woods to relieve herself. Having grown up in a house with a WC, she was quite taken aback. Her mother detained her for a moment:

“Wait, I’ll get you some toilet paper.” Ma goes away and comes back with a bunch of paper sheets in her hand. My eyes widen in disbelief. “Ma! It’s money. I can’t use money!” “Use it, it is of no use to us anymore,” she replies, pushing the crisp sheets into my hand. I don’t understand this. I know that we must be in really big trouble. (Ung 2007, 38)

The scene evokes Joseph Bialot’s first encounter with the latrine in Auschwitz. Five-year-old Loung is too young to possess Joseph’s bitter laughter.

Unreal reality

The children of the next generation also contemplate the world through the lens of their particular worldview, a unique mixture of precise, down-to-earth observations and a floating sense of fantasy. On the one hand, they adjust to their brutally changed life conditions very rapidly, with a matter-of-fact pragmatism; on the other hand, they have a feeling that what is happening to them is completely unreal; it belongs to the realm of imagination and nightmares.

Vesna Maric describes the way she felt during the first summer of the war, when she was waiting on the Croatian seaside for the buses that would evac-

uate them from Bosnia: “Although the prospect of returning home seemed further and further away, the war didn’t feel real and I couldn’t take it seriously. Surely, I thought, come September I would be starting school again and everything would be back to normal. Even the death toll, regular and increasing, broadcast on the radio news in a monotone, poetry-reading voice like T.S. Eliot’s, seemed unreal.” Vesna wakes up to the reality of war when her uncle calls to announce that her beloved aunt was badly hurt when she was trying to flee their encircled town: “While I listened, I wound the curly cord around my index finger until it was blue and slightly painful, to check the reality of the moment and to imprint it into my memory. ... For months after her death, I kept convincing myself that my aunt was still alive and well, in her one-bedroom flat in eastern Bosnia, sitting at her sewing machine, cheerful and chatty, squinting through her half-moon glasses. ... When she died the whole world seemed to change” (Maric, 14–17).

“The unreality of the war which had become reality” shakes Saša Stanišić’s worldview as well and he keeps trying to adjust it ever since. (Stanišić 2021, 119). The protagonist of *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, eleven-year-old Aleksandar, grows up in slow-paced, multicultural Višegrad, immortalized by Ivo Andrić’s *The Bridge over the Drina*. His idyllic childhood and his sense of reality are brutally shattered when the war reaches the town. He moves around in a dreamlike haze among the chunks of a disintegrating world, between his memories and imagination and the violent events taking place around him. He both knows and does not want to know what is happening, trying to retreat into his half-magical, half-pragmatic internal world, telling his own story as if it were a strange fairy tale:

My father will give the signal for everything that was unimaginable before we woke up, both through what he says and through the nervous state he’s in. Father’s uncertainty and the first shells make everything that was good before the unimaginable happened retreat into the distance. ...What’s going to happen is so improbable that there’ll be no improbability left for a made-up story” (Stanišić, 2008, 188).

The contours of reality become even more blurred after the family’s escape to Belgrade. The Serb propaganda machine is at full steam; what Aleksandar sees and hears on TV and what people declare aloud on the streets does not correspond at all to his experience back home in Bosnia.

Emir Suljagić describes a similar feeling of incredulity at the beginning of the war. When Serbian armed groups attack his hometown, Bratunac, people flee in panic and take refuge in the nearby hills. They watch from there as the settlements are set on fire and people are chased out of their houses and shot: “We watched, for the first time we watched with our own eyes how other people’s houses burn, just as we would later see our own houses burning. And we did not want to believe it. Or rather, we did not dare to believe it, because it meant that a point of no return had been reached” (Suljagić, 18–19).

The first split of reality in the mind of seven-year-old Raami in the book *In the Shadow of the Banyan* occurs when she fails to understand why the Khmer Rouge are called Red Khmers: “Who had ever heard that? We were all Cambodians—or Khmers, as we called ourselves. I imagined people with their bodies painted bright red, invading the city, scurrying about the streets like throngs of stinging red ants. I laughed out loud, almost choking on my basil-seed drink” (Ratner, 14). Raami is even more astonished when she discovers that the soldiers are dressed in black. After their expulsion from Phnom Penh, staying in a makeshift camp, Raami witnesses a baby dying. This is the first death she sees and she finds it difficult to believe. She glances at her aunt and reads her own feelings on her face: “Tata watched the whole scene with wide-eyed dismay, as if death, like a stranger uprooted and misplaced, had appeared out of nowhere and taken up residence with us, competing for its shared space in this refuge already haunted by so many ghosts. ‘This can’t be real,’ she murmured to herself. ‘I can’t be here’” (124).

Later, after years spent in improvised camps in the countryside faraway from urban civilization, Raami and her mother are transported to a small town. She had been a city girl, but when she unexpectedly finds herself in a proper little settlement with streets, a temple, and a school building, she finds it utterly surrealistic: “I thought maybe we’d slipped through some invisible crack during our journey and entered another world. I resisted the urge to close my eyes, afraid that when I open them again these signs of civilization would have disappeared and we’d find ourselves back in the forest” (239).

Exclusion

In Cambodia and Bosnia, children were genuinely perplexed when they and their families were abruptly declared to be enemies. When the Khmer Rouge seized power, people who had some connection to the previous political system were understandably worried, and some tried to hide their identity to avoid

troubles. But Rithy Panh's father was a devoted teacher, Malay Phcar's a car mechanic, and Chanrithy Him's a trade inspector. No one could foresee that having gone to school, wearing glasses, or knowing foreign languages would suddenly be declared a crime. And no one could foresee that this "crime" could be punished by death.

The absurdly arbitrary nature of the ideology of "ethnic purity" in the former Yugoslavia was equally evident. Vesna Maric's father came from a Serbian, her mother from a Croatian family. She grew up an atheist in a family of Catholics, Muslims, and Communists in Mostar, a town that had been a vibrant multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city before the war. They had a strong Bosnian identity and when the war reached them, they did not want to leave for one of the split entities of disintegrating Yugoslavia: "We stayed behind and demonstrated for peace, like chickens waiting for someone to come and axe our heads off" (Maric, 7). Those who remained, like in Sarajevo, were labelled Bosnians, therefore an enemy, and were collectively punished. In the different stages of the war, the city was shelled by both Serbian and Croatian forces.

Emir Suljagić was fourteen when a boy from his class "cursed my 'Turkish mother' during a lesson. I realized then for the first time that, for reasons beyond my understanding, I was somehow different from some of my classmates" (Suljagić, 18). Emir and a Serbian friend waited for the boy after school and beat him up, the friend cursing his "Chetnik mother." Some years later Emir learned that his former friend who helped him to defend his "Turkish honor" had joined armed Serbian groups and participated in the persecution of Bosnian Muslims.

Sometime after the war reached their hometown, the family of Aleksandar, Saša Stanišić's protagonist in *How the Soldier Repairs*, managed to escape to Belgrade, where they had relatives. Aleksandar's father was a Serb, his mother was Bosnian. On their way, "I was ashamed of the earth itself for carrying the tanks that came to meet us on the road to Belgrade. My father hooted at every tank, every jeep and every truck. If you don't hoot, they stop you. They did stop us at the Serbian border. A soldier with a crooked nose asked if we had any weapons in the car. Father said: yes, gasoline and matches. The two of them laughed and we were allowed to drive on. I didn't see what was so funny about that, and my mother said: I'm the weapon they're looking for. I asked: why are we driving into the enemy's arms? and then I had to promise not to ask any more questions for the next ten years." Once in Belgrade, "A boy in the street called me a bastard. My Serbian blood was contaminated by my Bosniak mother, he said. I didn't know whether to hit him for that or be defi-

ant and proud. I was neither defiant nor proud, and I was the one who got hit” (Stanišić 2008, 113–115).

Kenan Trebinčević also relates how the world turned against him from one day to the next. Growing up in a completely mixed society, with friends from all ethnic groups, he was shocked when, after Milošević came to power and armed conflicts broke out in neighboring Croatia, his sports group was divided according to ethnicity. His friends refused to play with him: “That week, Igor put Huso and me on the same side as our Croat neighbor, insisting, ‘Only Serbs in our team.’ Over the weekend they were playing tag without me.” Later, after an attack in a nearby town where Arkan’s paramilitary unit murdered several civilians on the last day of Ramadan, his former friends came up to him:

Dalibor came up to me. “Did you hear what happened to those Muslims on their holiday?” He smirked. “They all died.” “Fuck their mothers,” Igor added. They knew I was Muslim. What would they say about my mother? I debated whether to swear back, retaliate, fight or walk away. I wound up ambling alone to the corner store to buy myself a chocolate bar, kicking stones on the road. My friendships with Dalibor and Igor were over. It felt as if someone had pressed a button that turned the world lonelier, like everyone I thought I knew I didn’t know anymore. (Trebinčević, 27, 38–39)

When the war reached Bosnia, the situation of Kenan’s family dramatically worsened. His father and older brother were arrested and taken to a camp, but were miraculously released and could return home. They didn’t risk going out to the street any longer, so eleven-year-old Kenan had to go shopping for the most indispensable items. One day he went to buy bread and was nearly struck by a bullet. In the store the cashier, who knew his parents and had always been friendly with him, announced: “Tell your mom you Turks won’t need to eat much longer (...) You are not welcome here anymore.” Sprinting back home, Kenan met his favourite teacher:

“Hey teacher,” I called, relieved to see someone I trusted. I was about to blurt out that a bullet just almost hit me, hoping to hide behind his back. “Balije don’t need bread,” he spat, knocking it out of my hand. He leaned his rifle barrel against my head. I froze. My favourite teacher was about to kill me in the street like a dog. His AK-47 jammed. I jumped, tugged away, swept up the bread for my family, and sprinted home so fast I couldn’t breathe. I turned back to catch Milutin’s three-finger salute at me, sure what it meant: he wanted me

dead. Everything he'd ever taught me about brotherhood and unity was a lie. (Trebinčević, 44-47).

Next day Kenan's revered karate trainer showed up in their building, leading a Serbian armed group with a list of Bosnian families who were told to leave the town within an hour if they didn't want to be killed.

Loung Ung also evokes an eerie feeling of loneliness that fell upon her after they were chased away from their home in Phnom Penh. For a while they stayed in a village, pretending to be country people. She tried to adjust as best as she could, but she felt she had become a condemned outcast: "It is hard to make friends because I am afraid to speak, afraid I will blurt out secrets about our family. ... If I run into other children and speak to them, I have to watch what I say and what language I use" (Ung 2007, 59). Loung rapidly loses one of the basic feelings that dominated her childhood: trust. "Not only am I never to talk to anyone about our former lives, but I'm never to trust anyone either. It is best if I just stop talking completely... At five years old, I am beginning to know what loneliness feels like, silent and alone and suspecting that everyone wants to hurt me" (65).

The incitement of hatred of the "other" was so strong that it could undermine even family bonds, which had primary importance in all three, rather traditional societies. In Khmer Rouge Cambodia children were encouraged to report on their own family members, including their parents, if they didn't follow the rules of Angkar. Before the genocide, both in Bosnia and Rwanda, marriages between members of different communities had been rather widespread. Mixed families began to face serious difficulties when racist ideologies became predominant.

One of the characters in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Our Lady of the Nile* is a girl whose father is Hutu and mother is Tutsi. She is eager to prove to her Hutu schoolmates, representatives of the "people of the majority," that she is one of them; however, she furtively unburdens her heart to the few Tutsi girls. She recounts that her family has split as a result of the increasingly violent discrimination policies: "My older brothers hate their mother, it's because of her they're not like everyone else, that people call them mulattos or Hutsi. Jean-Damascène, who's a soldier, says it's because of her that he'll always remain a lieutenant, because they'll never trust him. I'm the only one who still speaks to her, kind of in secret, like with you. As far as I'm concerned, she's neither Hutu nor Tutsi, she's my mother" (Mukasonga 2014, 99). When violence erupts in the school, this girl is one of its first victims.

In one of Beata Umubyeyi's stories, in a similar family constellation, the beloved first-born son leaves the household and moves in with his deceased Hutu father's relatives. He only comes home to take things and terrorize his Tutsi mother. When he leaves after humiliating and hurting her on one occasion, the mother reflects: "If he could kill me ... he'd do it certainly. Would he dare to do it? This way he would certainly erase his Tutsi part that he does not assume in front of his companions. But I'm his mother. No, he would not do anything like that" (Umubyeyi 2015, 18). In Gilbert Gatore's *The Past Ahead*, the young male protagonist is dragged into a band of Hutu executioners and ends up killing his own Tutsi father (Gatore, 82-83).

Poisonous language

Like the Holocaust, the subsequent genocides start with poisonous words. Language plays a key role in preparing and accomplishing the massacres. The propaganda machine labels the future victims with denigrating words that gradually enter into everyday speech and people's mind-set. This makes it easier to discriminate, marginalize, and dehumanize the targeted groups. The children are called names they often don't even understand at first. In Bosnia secular Bosnians are labelled "strangers," "Turks," "Muslim fundamentalists," "Alija's falangists," "mujahedin," and "Arabs" (Suljagić, 91) who have to be eliminated. A derogatory term, "balije," is used frequently to humiliate them. From one day to the next, Cambodia's city dwellers are called "new people," who have to be "re-educated" to be worthy to exist side by side with the "old people," the population of the countryside.

Scholastique Mukasonga evokes the language of hatred propagated by official propaganda fuelling everyday abuse and preparing the terrain for genocide. Tutsis are called "Inyenzi," cockroaches, and the word is often used together with another expression, "gutsembatsemba," which means to eradicate parasites and dogs with rabies (Mukasonga 2016; 2020, Ch. 'Grief'). Charles Habonimana also underlines the decisive role of words before and during the genocide: "Still, maybe just a speech and a song is enough to make all our Hutu companions turn their backs on us between the 19th and 20th of April. To transform me into prey, a child to be killed" (Habonimana, 46-47). The indoctrination is so efficient that often even the Tutsis are afraid of the militants of the FPR, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the military organization of the children of Tutsis who were forced into exile after 1959 and who launched their campaign to return by force in 1990. Influenced by the images of the government-

led brain-washing, Charles looks for a tail and other signs that reveal monsters when he meets the first FPR soldiers (100; 105–106).

The genocidal systems often use brutally twisted language to hide horrid realities. During the genocide against the Tutsis the massacres are called “work” and people are summoned to participate and “finish the job” of cleaning the country of the “traitors and infiltrated enemies.” In Cambodia, the mass killings start with lies; city dwellers are told they have to be evacuated to escape US bombings; people are uprooted and enslaved in order to be “re-educated” and build a “new, free and egalitarian society.” The distortion of language reaches striking heights under the Khmer Rouge. In the murderous mechanism of oppression and annihilation, people are deprived of the simplest references of their previous lives and their individual existence. Their personal belongings, names, and even their past are confiscated, as well as their mother tongue. As Rithy Panh puts it: “Our words had been taken away, and our hearts had left with them” (Panh 2013, 145).

The void is filled with a continuous stream of propaganda, “a language without dialogue, without exchange: a derivative, violent language. ...Organize. Forge. Fight. Such were the words—a steady stream of slogans—that irrigated the country, the language, our brains. ... ‘Off to the front! Let’s join the battle to cultivate the rice field!’... Had we not lived in fear, we would have found the discrepancy absurd” (221). At the beginning of his imprisonment, Rithy is told that his name must be discarded as a bourgeois given name. He becomes Comrade Thy, later, when his head is shaved, Comrade Bald, after a serious foot injury Comrade Tractor, when he irritates his guards, Councilor’s Son. “Until the liberation I remained “Comrade Bald,” and a good thing too; it meant I no longer bore my father’s name, which was too well known. I had no family. I had no name. I had no face. And so, because I was nothing anymore, I was still alive” (78–79).

Children can’t speak to their parents or each other as before; traditional, respectful forms of address are abolished. Everyone is a “comrade.” As Luong Ung notes, “The new Khmer have better words for eating, sleeping, working, stranger; all designed to make us equal” (Ung 2007, 79). Chanrithy Him recounts that the deformation of language makes communication awkward in the camps. In her family, when they are among themselves and sure that no one is spying on them, they make fun of the new linguistic formulas:

Every day the Khmer Rouge set new rules. Now they want to control the words out of our mouths. We have to use the rural terms of address, calling our moth-

ers Mae, and our fathers Pok. Our other option is to call our parents ‘comrade,’ a strange, detached word that, by the sound of it, makes me laugh. ... Suddenly our very language has changed without our consent. (Him, 100–101).

The system’s twisted rhetoric proves useful for “justifying” the looting that accompanies genocide. *Fateless’s* Gyuri Köves remarked that the neighborhood baker used patriotic language to “legitimise” cheating his Jewish customers; Kenan Trebinčević notices that the people who empty the flats of the Bosnian families that were killed, deported, or forced to flee talk about “rendering justice” by “redistributing” goods the Bosnians “herded together.” In Rwanda the massacres are also accompanied by meticulous robbery that is presented as “just redistribution.” The murderers and their accomplices share their victims’ crops, animals, family jewels, and their clothing, often undressing the dead. The vacated cities of Cambodia are free hunting grounds for the Khmer Rouge. During the evacuation and imprisonment, the deportees are systematically robbed of their remaining possessions. The soldiers confiscate watches, jewellery, radios, and other valuable items in the name of Angkar, pretending that these objects represent decadent Western civilization and corrupt people. The guards, however, are seemingly exempted from this danger—and eagerly accumulate these articles.

Confiscated time

Children who went into hiding or were imprisoned during the Holocaust often evoke their impression that time came to an end and was lost forever. Scholastique Mukasonga depicts similar feelings. One day, when the village was taken by the “big fear” the children and their teachers left the school and hid in the church hoping to escape the murderers: “I don’t know how long we sat that way, not moving, not speaking. It was as if time had stopped. Somewhere between life and death” (Mukasonga 2020, Ch. ‘Fear’). After having escaped from the massacres in Rwanda, Clemantine Wamariya and her sister fled from one country to the next. In the improvised refugee camps where they stay “nobody spoke of the past or the future. Time balled up into a knot” (Wamariya, 27). Emir Suljagić also recalls a feeling of timelessness that underlines people’s utter vulnerability in Srebrenica: “The Serbs around the enclave were the masters of our future. We were taken way back into the past and we knew that the future was not ours, that even if we survived we would live lives which had nothing in common with us. ... We lived on borrowed time” (Suljagić, 29).

In their effort to control every possible segment of people's lives, the Khmer Rouge seized watches and changed the measures that mark time. "In taking our timepieces, the Khmer Rouge are deliberately stealing the last remnants of our connection to the outside world. Increasingly, the atmosphere in our camp is one of unreality" (Him, 109). Hours lost their meaning; the workday lasted from dawn to late evening, often followed by compulsory meetings until late into the night. The week lasted 10 days, after which a day of rest was usually granted. The prisoners of the killing fields lost their sense of time: "Now time becomes hard to measure. We mark its passage in terms of who has died and who is still alive. Time is distilled and recalled by death. Before Vin died... After Pa was executed... This is how we talk" (120).

Rithy Panh also evokes the loss of the notion of time, and the emergence of a short-term survival mode, like in the Nazi concentration camps, where one concentrates all one's energy to make it until the next meal or the next day: "My bare feet grew hard; they too were transformed by politics. Then dates stopped having any importance for me. Or maybe, after that dreadful year, I just detached myself from them. The past plunged me into death. I thought only of staying alive until tomorrow. *Of not being killed*" (Panh, 2013, 173).

Erasing the past

This imposed timelessness had a larger, historic dimension as well. By destroying and forbidding the objects and advances of modern civilization, including tools and machines that would have lightened work and medicines that could have saved tens of thousands of lives, the Khmer Rouge expelled their prisoners from the twentieth century. They pushed them back to the Middle Ages, or, as Malay Phcar puts it, to prehistoric times, to the age of hunters and gatherers (Phcar, 60–61). Tortured by constant hunger, prisoners in the camps eat whatever they can find, pick up, gather, and hunt, including rodents and insects. Despite the strict interdictions, they often venture out of the camp's territory hoping to locate something edible, even if these outings frequently end tragically.

The genocidal systems also aim to erase the past in which their victims and their communities had a place. They demolish the objects, buildings, and other material traces that recall their presence and delete them from the country's rewritten history. When Serb forces occupied a Bosnian settlement during the Yugoslav wars, they rapidly destroyed the mosques and other buildings that evoked the country's Muslim heritage. The Khmer Rouge demolished centu-

ries-old Buddhist monuments; traditions related to the Tutsis were declared obsolete and harmful in Rwanda.

During the germination of the Rwandan genocide a rewritten version of the country's history was propagated in the official propaganda, including in the schools. The new political narrative was quickly translated into acts. In *Our Lady of the Nile*, one day the photos of the former Tutsi students and visiting Tutsi dignitaries disappeared from the corridors where the school's history was displayed: "the chiefs' photos have suffered the social revolution," said Gloriosa, laughing. 'A dash of ink, a slash of machete, that's all it takes... and no more Tutsi.' ...Veronica wondered when she, too, would be crossed out with red ink, on the annual class photograph taken at the start of the school year" (Mukasonga 2014, 14).

Under the Khmer Rouge regime evoking the past or preserving personal souvenirs was considered a major crime. The only safe place to guard memories of the past was in the children's internal world. Recalling their previous lives, sometimes in the form of a possible future, often helped them to endure their difficulties. Navy Soth writes:

Everything is confused in my head. My body became a burden difficult to carry around. I don't want to grow up anymore. I want to become again the small frog that was jumping around in the house never too far from my papa. I don't want to grow up, because the days erase the sweetness of my happy memories and replace them with today's sufferings. (Soth, 50)

Recalling his previous life also helps Malay Phcar to cope with hardship. Braving the interdiction of the Khmer Rouge, Malay's parents saved and hid a few personal objects; clothes, tools, utensils, and some of his mother's jewels. After his mother's death Malay clings to the sarong she was wearing in the camp: "The blue fabric, that's all I have left of mama. I have nothing else of my family" (Phcar, 110). One day there is a fire in the camp and the wooden hut where the remaining family members live burns down. In the evening, when Malay arrives from work in the fields, he can only find some kitchen tools and a small pile of scorched corn among the ruins; the few remaining cherished family objects all vanished. The neighbor tells him that he found their hidden family photo albums among the vestiges and burned them. Under the Khmer Rouge to possess such objects was considered a serious offense that could be punished by immediate execution:

I felt I was torn apart, from my throat down to my stomach. All our previous life has just disappeared. ... From Phnom Penh, from our family outings, images of our house, the brick factory, the yearly photos of the school class, from us all, nothing has remained. Just images in the head, like dreams. Did all this ever exist? (225–226)

Recalling the past often helped the children survive, not only in psychological, but in practical terms as well. Malay, Navy, Chanrithy, and Rithy recount that in the absence of modern medicine and drugs, secretly preserved ancient traditions saved their lives. Although the traditional treatments were banned, a few persons still remembered them and were able to heal the children in the forced labor camps and ruined villages.

Recalling the past is both bliss and pain in Vaddey Ratner's book. Memories provide emotional strength and a sense of belonging; they help to preserve the enslaved peoples' identity and values. Raami's mother keeps reminding the little girl that even though they have to hide who they are, deep inside she has to safeguard her roots and the memory of her lost family members. At the same time, in the world of the Khmer Rouge "memory is sickness." As the repression becomes more violent and their life conditions worsen, the mother prompts Raami to bury the past and never mention it again. This change of attitude creates painful clashes between mother and daughter (Ratner, 248; 187–194).

Yet erasing the past and changing one's identity might also become a path of survival. Several of the Cambodian authors relate that their educated urban families pretended to be simple peasants or rural workers and tried to blend into the village communities where they were sent to work. When they escaped to Belgrade, Saša Stanišić's family kept silent about his mother's Bosnian origins. In Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's *All Your Children, Scattered*, at the beginning of the genocide the mother manages to get her mixed-blood daughter into a convoy that evacuates Westerners from the country. She bids her farewell, urging her to change her identity—like David's grandfather in Bogdan Wojdowski's novel: "With every militia or soldier or Black man you meet between here and the border, be true to your name, whiter than ever. Forget my language, where you're headed, it will be nothing more than a useless burden. Go, become French, my child" (Umubyeyi 2022, ch. Stokely).

The end of childhood

Aharon Appelfeld summed up what his generation went through during World War II: “Children were like the straw on which everyone trod” (Appelfeld, 2004, 47). The beginning of their respective ordeals meant the brutal end of childhood for Cambodian, Bosnian, and Rwandan children as well. Beata Umubyeyi describes the experience in these terms:

In times of war, the child does not have the opportunity to get upset gradually ... to discover step by step that he is out of luck and has a sad destiny. When the war is rumbling, the child has to cope on his own and manage to absorb rapidly “the truth about life.” No one asks what he thinks about it and too bad if he is about to suffocate and if this experience will mark him forever in form of a lump in his throat. His papa kills his mother in front of his eyes, then he goes to prison or escapes to another country, and his grandfather, well, he also dies just like that, bang! and welcome the orphanage. At least, if there is one. (Umubyeyi 2017, 10–11)

Three-year-old Navy Soth’s childhood ended when they were deported from Phnom Penh. Before they left, her beloved father took her in his arms and told her that she had to become a big girl in order to be able to cope with the difficulties awaiting them (Soth, 38). The day when the moderate Hutu Prime Minister of Rwanda, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, was killed, the father of twelve-year-old Charles Habonimana took him to their field. When they stopped to rest after hours of hard work, he told him that things would radically change and he had to assume adult responsibilities: “This time, this is the end of the Tutsi history” (Habonimana, 16). Soon afterwards his father was killed and Charles had to struggle alone to stay alive.

Kenan Trebinčević was eleven when his home town Brčko was bombed for the first time. His father returned home profoundly shaken and told Kenan what he saw: “He was speaking to me the way he spoke to Eldin and Mom. I somehow knew he would no longer talk to me like a kid” (Trebinčević, 41). Some months into the war Kenan contemplated his life with the eyes of a bitter adult: “I turned twelve on December 9, 1992. I had no friends, no party, no cake. I didn’t even know if my beloved grandma or favorite cousin were alive. When Mom wished me happy birthday, I said, ‘Who cares? The dead Muslims are better off than we are’” (170).

In the village where he was sent for forced labor, torn away from his family, nine-year-old Malay Phcar meditated: “No one sees that in fact I am no longer a child, that I understand everything like everyone else and that I’m braver than many adults” (Phcar, 50–51). By the time the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed, Malay’s parents had perished and he became the head of the family for his younger brothers: “I’m in complete disarray. ... I’m just twelve and some months old and I have the responsibilities of an adult, of a father! I’m lost. This responsibility is too heavy for me” (190).

Emir Suljagić was seventeen years old when the war in Bosnia erupted. His father was killed and Emir took refuge in Srebrenica with his mother and younger sister. After months of living in precarious conditions and omnipresent danger, he was eager to get his family members out of town. One day he managed to put them on a truck leaving the enclave. He returned to the ruined house where he stayed, crying, “I am on my own for the first time in my life, this is the first day of my adult life” (Suljagić, 71). Fifteen-year-old Vesna Maric and her mother escaped from Mostar and were waiting in her grandmother’s house in Croatia to get in a convoy that evacuated women and children from war-torn Bosnia:

My mother and I had a rat for a companion and a broken black and white TV for entertainment. The TV poured soap operas from its screen and I immersed myself in their foam, followed their meaningless affairs to get away from the knowledge that I was leaving and kissing my childhood goodbye. I wanted to fool the feeling that my life would never be the same again. (Maric, 26).

The children became painfully aware that in the conditions of persecution, war, and massacres, they were forced to grow up rapidly and their former references of time and age had become irrelevant. During the flight from the bloodshed in Rwanda, Clemantine Wamariya felt that time had become elastic and impossible to grasp: “Days were for hiding, nights for walking. I thought I was one hundred years old. I thought I was the thunder’s child. I had always wanted to be Claire’s age or my mother’s. I knew I was six. Age made no sense anymore” (Wamariya, 30). On another continent, in a forced labor camp in the Cambodian countryside, twelve-year-old Malay Phcar noted: “Sometimes I have a feeling that I’m a hundred-year-old old man” (Phcar, 169). On yet another continent, twelve-year-old Kenan Trebinčević was confined in his family’s apartment in Brcko, in permanent fear of being denounced and killed: “I played miniature cars, on edge and fidgety, my stomach aching all the time. I felt like an anxious old man with an ulcer” (Trebinčević, 86).

There is a scene in Ismet Prcic's book which marks the end of innocent childhood, when playgrounds turn into battlefields. Ismet's family passes happy summer holidays in a modest weekend house in the countryside. The two boys and their cousins spend most of their time playing with the village children. One day Ismet, deep in his ninja phase, comes up with a silly idea to scare their girl playmates:

When I conjured this plan I expected Marija and Ostojka to buy into it the way kids buy into plays written for them. I never anticipated the hysteria that would take over their faces and minds, or those shrill and elaborate curses that no child can come up with on their own but have to overhear from adults to remember, curses against Adi's mother (they're always against the mother, aren't they?) speckled with words I did not quite expect to be uttered there, words like *fundamentalist*, *Turks* and *terrorist*. ... Amid all that panic the woods suddenly felt perilous and dark, and Mehmed and I felt compelled to run for our lives, too. It was like we'd awakened something big, something ancient. ... The Stojkovićs came out yelling, cursing malicious extremist Muslim elements who were sent to burn our forests, threaten our children, set neighbor against neighbor, and destroy our whole country. They cursed their Turkish mothers, their dirty prayer rugs, and their whole lineage all the way back to Muhamed. ...

"How could you do that?" Grandma yelled at us that night as the three of us stood lined up in the middle of the room with our hands on our throbbing asses and tears on our cheeks. "These are very dangerous times to play those kinds of games," said my uncle. "Don't you know that?" But we didn't. Not really. We knew that politicians were fighting on TV a lot, that there was a lot of talk about what religion everyone was, about tensions between different nationalities, their constitutional rights—all foreign words to Adi and me, who were on the verge of crossing the border from the world of ninjas, marbles, and comic books into the world of new, curly hairs, cracked voices, and minds crammed with pussy, let alone Mehmed, who was only eleven. "There'll be a war," my mother said, her lit cigarette as though forgotten in front of her face. ... The war would come just as prophesized, and for years a part of me would believe that by coming up with that bit of mischief, I had somehow caused it all, and I would feel guilty for all the dead and dead-to-be, and sitting in the basement with my town groaning with destruction above my head, I would wish for a time machine and another go at that day. (Prcic, 52–58)

Charles Habonimana also had a sobering experience about the end of innocent playing. Between 1990 and 1994, in the short years of multipartyism in Rwanda, people enthusiastically established political parties and organizations. Caught in the fever of pluralism, twelve-year-old Charles organized his friends to form the CEPGL, “The economic organization of the Big Lake countries.” They fabricated a flag and proudly marched around on the hills. In the evening they put the flag to rest in Charles’s courtyard. The local authorities who considered Charles’s father unreliable quickly concluded that the flag represented the FPR. No one ever saw a sign or the flag of the FPR in the village, but the verdict was pronounced and Charles’s father was imprisoned. When he was released some months later, he gave his son an exemplary public punishment to prove that he had nothing to do with his irresponsible behavior (Habonimana, 56–59).

Lost trust

The loss of childhood often implied losing trust in people, particularly in the adults who were supposed to guide and protect children. The adults’ world clearly collapsed. Navy Soth states: “The grown-ups harmed the trust I had in them. They make me think of children who are forced to play a game in which they all will be losers” (Soth, 45). After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, Navy flees the advancing Vietnamese forces as part of a chaotic mass where victims and perpetrators mix together. She is around seven now and she declares: “I have no trust in anyone, except my own family” (238).

Malay Phcar also can no longer confide in grown-ups: “For a long while the adults behave in an incomprehensible way and by now I’ve got used to it” (Phcar, 138). Malay becomes distrustful and fears everybody, except the people with whom she went through his ordeals. Unfortunately even some of them betray him. He can’t rely on his own family members either. After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, Malay and his only surviving brother locate some distant relatives who agree to take them in. The two young orphans are pleased to join their surviving family members, but instead of helping, the latter regularly humiliate them because they come from a poor branch of the family. They also shamelessly exploit and rob them. At the end the brothers escape to Thailand. Sor Sisavang and his surviving siblings have similarly painful experiences with some family members, who chase away or ill-treat them when the exhausted, penniless orphans seek their help. Savang is shocked to discover that the privations and cruelty that the Khmer Rouge regime produced

managed to corrode the once-strong bonds that had united his extended family (Sisavang, 170; 184; 269, 291-296).

Throughout their tribulations children also discover the basic injustices of the adult world, the deficiencies of their institutions adding to their disillusionment. In the Cambodian camps and villages they discern the strict hierarchy inside the Khmer Rouge units, the levels of submission of the “old people” and “new people,” and understand that one’s position inside this system can decide chances of life and death. The Rwandan children are shocked to see that institutions they had always trusted, like the church or foreign missions, abandon them, and that their life counts less than the life of foreigners who claimed to have come to their country to help them. Emir Suljagić describes bitterly the mechanisms of power and business inside the Srebrenica enclave. As in the ghettos and camps during World War II, two logics existed side by side in this “open-air concentration camp”: selflessness and solidarity on the one side, and greed, profiteering, and manipulation on the other. The picture is dishearteningly akin to the depiction of “ghettocracy” in several books by Holocaust survivors. The attitude of the UN contingent stationed in the vicinity, which was assigned the task of helping and protecting the town’s inhabitants, was equally deplorable (Suljagić, 29–33; 51).

Dehumanization—alienation

Since bodily sensations are so crucial to the way children experience and express the world, the rapid deterioration of their physical condition was particularly frightening for them. They lost control over their life and environment as well as their own body. As Chanrithy Him puts it: “Each day revolves around what we can find to eat for the following day. And until it comes, we think about food. All day. All night. Hunger owns us” (Him, 122). She describes how permanent hunger dominated life in the camps: “We operate on a cycle of endless longing. A yearning for the lunch ration pulls us through the morning. The desire for a dinner ration tugs us through the remainder of the day. It’s a circle of hunger. It obliterates everything—the heat, the exhaustion, the loneliness. Every day we slave for the Khmer Rouge. ... But we’re also slaves to our own hunger” (143).

The children experience with horror that their own bodies, previously a realm of their own and a source of pleasant sensations, have become an alien and insupportable burden. Suffering from malnutrition in the camp, Navy Soth’s body starts to swell. Her father tells her that without medicines and

food, her only remedy is to talk to her body and plead with it to recover. She finds this task very difficult, because she feels completely alienated from herself: “My body terrorizes me. It does not feel anything anymore. It is a terrible weight, a prison whose exit I do not find” (Soth, 145). In the chaos that follows the downfall of the Khmer Rouge, former captives and their guards flee together across the devastated country. Navy and her remaining family members are carried along by the crowd. Like the children in the death marches at the end of World War II, she walks without thinking, completely lost, alien to everything, including her own body: “One foot after the other, and never stop. I’m hot and thirsty. ... I have to move forward. I don’t ask questions, I feel no one would listen to me. Further away, on the rice fields, there are explosions. Sometimes they are approaching. My head down, I watch my naked feet walking. Right foot, left foot. In front, behind. Each in its turn” (228).

Rithy Panh also describes the process of increasing deprivation and alienation throughout the time he spent in the forced labor camps.

Nothing belonged to me, not even my nakedness. Or, if I may say so, not even our nakedness, for I don’t remember ever seeing a bare, living body. Neither do I remember seeing my own face, except for reflections in water. Only an individual has a body. Only an individual can look out from inside his body, which he can hide, offer, share, wound, bring to orgasm. Control of bodies, control of minds: the program was clear. I was without a place, without a face, without a name, without a family. I’d been subsumed into the big, black tunic of the organization. (Panh 2013, 186–187)

Decades earlier Maurice Cling and Imre Kertész recognized with horror the signs of their own approaching death on the faces of their fellow prisoners in Auschwitz. Similarly, the rapidly deteriorating state of their companions sends the prisoners in Cambodia an unmistakable message of their forthcoming annihilation. Observing the agony of one of his companions in a hospital Rithy Panh notes: “I have the sensation that I’m watching the unfolding fate in store for me” (Panh 2013, 126). Chanrithy Him describes her mother’s suffering in similar terms: “her starving body mirrors what the rest of us look like” (Him, 111). Sor Sisavang also talks about the frightening mirror images his decaying companions show him in the camps: “Despite my extreme weakness, I preferred to go to work instead of staying with my sick companions. Feeling the horrid smell of death and seeing it painted on their faces, filled me with an abominable despair and made me shiver” (Sisavang, 222).

In another closed hell, in the starving enclave of Srebrenica, Emir Suljagić experiences a comparable sensation, reading his companions' fate on their faces: "Everyone pretended not to notice that each day the others looked thinner than the previous day. They became darker, their faces were losing their natural colour, and everyone simply started to look like everyone else, bloodless and almost featureless. In the end they all became the same: the same wrinkled skin, the dark circles around the eyes, the tired gaze" (Suljagić, 33).

In the Nazi concentration camps humans were referred to as "Stücke," that is, "things" or "pieces." The prisoners of the Cambodian killing fields were also considered pieces of human flesh that had to be thoroughly exploited before being disposed of. In one of Rithy Panh's documentaries a prison guard calls the detainees "pieces of wood." Another adds: "Prisoners have no rights. They're half human and half corpse. They're not humans, and they're not corpses. They're soulless, like animals. You're not afraid to hurt them" (Panh 2013, 2).

Subjected to systematic brutal treatment and living in a rudimentary physical environment, the children often had the feeling that they in fact no longer belonged to mankind. One evening, during one of the never-ending "political education" sessions after work, Malay Phcar observes a beetle: "I would love to be this insect, quiet like him, living on very little, not knowing anything" (Phcar, 77). "It is true that the Khmer Rouge managed to turn us into animals. We practically only think of how to survive, we lost all sense of decency of the past" (119). During the long march back to his home town after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Malay keeps asking people whether they have seen some of his missing family members. One day he suddenly finds his very question ridiculous: "We are ants, who knows if ants recognize each other when they meet? (156).

In order to defend themselves from the atrocities of the outside world, the children instinctively sought to build a protective layer around themselves, like their predecessors during the Holocaust. Raami, Vaddey Ratner's protagonist, takes some time to understand and accept that she has to freeze her feelings if she wants to stay alive: "It was clear that while food fed our bodies, gave us the strength to work and breathe another day, silence kept us alive and would be the key of our survival. Anything else, any other emotion—grief, regret, longing—was extraneous, a private, hidden luxury" (Ratner, 194).

After her family was taken away, Annick Kayitesi was left in the school compound where they had lived, as a servant of the caretaker couple who had denounced her family and some of their friends. She was completely at the mercy of these people, who fully took advantage of the situation. If she wanted

to live, she was forced to hide her emotions (A. Kayitesi 2004, 111–123). Rithy Panh also recounts that he had to suppress his sentiments to be able to survive. He became a nameless, faceless, past-less being, eager to endure the day, a simple instrument that registered what happened around him while striving not to take it in.

The silence and complicity of the outside world

Many child survivors recall with bitterness that the outside world passively allowed the genocides to continue for long months or years. The inaction or complicity of their fellow citizens and the passivity of the outside world made them feel even more condemned and humiliated. It reinforced the sensation the perpetrators had tried to inculcate, that their lives and deaths were utterly insignificant. As Emir Suljagić puts it: “We were quite irrelevant to everyone” (Suljagić, 29). This feeling of human and cosmic abandonment exacerbated the victims’ suffering.

During the massacres that took place in her town, Berthe Kayitesi found refuge in a religious centre, together with many other fugitives. Armed Hutu groups discovered their hiding place and made them board a bus that drove them to the cemetery, where mass executions took place. Berthe was shocked to see that in the center of the city life went on as if nothing unusual were happening. People walked around, did their shopping, stopped for a little chat. Some stood by the road watching the buses that took their neighbors to be killed. When the bus arrived at the cemetery and people were ordered to get off, a large group of bystanders gathered there “as if they went to the cinema or to watch an interesting performance” (B. Kayitesi, 118–119).

In *Our Lady of the Nile*, Scholastique Mukasonga depicts the ways teachers and employees reacted to the violence unleashed in the school. No one intervened; the adults left the way free for the explosion of violence and several of them joined in. The foreign instructors did not lift a finger to protect their persecuted students. Their behavior is a metaphor of the outside world’s reaction to the Rwandan genocide:

Mother Superior’s already shut herself away in her office, so she can’t see anything. The Belgian teachers will keep on teaching, unperturbed. Even though the French teachers have some affection for us, seemingly because of our physique, they’ll obey the instructions from their embassy: no interference, no interference! (Mukasonga 2014, 225).

Révérien Rurangwa recounts that shortly before the genocide started, the foreign priests and missionaries rushed to quit the country, leaving behind their Rwandan communities to be massacred:

Our pastors left their troop. They did not even take a child. I could never understand or accept this abandonment. Before hurrying into the mini-vans, they shouted to whoever would listen: “Love each other,” “Forgive your enemies.” Fitting words, when one is about to be killed by one’s neighbor” (Rurangwa, 45)

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan also describes how the Blue Helmets departed a few days before the onset of the killings in their town. The children watched them leave and did not understand anything. The question kept hunting Annick, even decades afterwards. Years later, during a visit to a genocide memorial, she had the impression of hearing the voice of one of the victims: “Don’t bother asking any more why they killed us. I’m here to do that. Ask the others why they turned away from us instead” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 65–66).

Emir Suljagić also underlines the responsibility of the outside world that let the killings continue for years in Bosnia. Foreign governments were reluctant to intervene; politicians and representatives of the “international community” were absorbed in endless futile negotiations. Journalists visited and left Srebrenica; the war became just one of the events to be reported on: “The routine of our horror had become commonplace. ... Something dreadful had to happen for the world outside the enclave to understand that anything was happening at all” (Suljagić, 139). Mourning her beloved sister while in a forced labor camp in Cambodia, Chanrithy Him also asked why no one interfered to stop the destruction: “Part of me was angry and I wondered why the world didn’t care? Why didn’t the world do something to help us?” (Him, Holocaust Memorial Day Trust presentation n.d.).

Rithy Panh, while contemplating the dark night sky in another forced labor camp, noticed the light of an aircraft. This unexpected sign of modern civilization was so unreal that he had a vision of a special, extra-terrestrial helping force, coming to their rescue: “I had a waking dream: a benevolent power was sending me a camera. This is for you, Rithy, so that you can capture what you see, so that nothing escapes you. So that later you can show what was. So you can show this nightmare.” As the plane disappeared, Rithy realized that life continued outside the camp, outside the country, as if nothing particular were happening in Cambodia. He was bewildered, like Gerhard Durlacher and his companions were decades earlier, when they saw the stripes on the air-

craft in the sky above Auschwitz and were unable to understand why the Allied forces did not intervene to stop the genocide. Rithy asked the same question: “I didn’t understand why no one came to our aid. Why we were abandoned. It was unbearable: the suffering, the hunger, the death everywhere. And everybody remained silent. We were alone” (Panh 2013, 204).

One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s protagonists summarizes the feeling of total abandonment people felt at the onset of the genocide:

God knew what was coming and he didn’t stop it. The foreign powers had been told of the existence of lists of weapons caches and of people to be killed. They did nothing to prevent our extermination. We heard the thinly veiled venom in the speeches on the radio, and yet for a long time, we clung to the hope that they would never act on their threats. Not with the whole world watching, not after all these years of progress. God and the world witnessed our elimination with their eyes firmly closed. (Umubyeyi 2022, ch. Immaculata)

In one of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s short stories, each time armed conflicts and bloodbaths take place somewhere in the world, Maria, daughter of refugees from the Spanish civil war in France, buys a jigsaw puzzle with the image of the place. Beirut, Bagdad, Sarajevo. With the help of her magnifying glass for visually impaired people, Maria carefully assembles the puzzles. It takes time. However, “I always finish the puzzle of several hundred pieces before the United Nations passes a resolution condemning the massacres of civilians and all the other bullshit the military goes in for” (Umubyeyi 2015, 106).

Feeling abandoned by God

The Bosnian authors quoted in this book come from secular families. A few have grandparents who maintain a religious practice or some vestiges of it. The children feel a self-evident cultural and emotional identification with their community and place of origin, without the need to articulate it further. Like many assimilated Jews during World War II, they are bewildered when all of a sudden they become an enemy on the basis of their religion, name, or birthplace. With the exception of Malay Phcar, who grows up in a deeply Catholic household, Buddhism is a philosophy and a way of life for the Cambodian children. They can’t comprehend why the Khmer Rouge, who grew up in the same culture, fiercely attack their common heritage.

The colonization of Rwanda was accompanied by the radical imposition of Catholicism and the banishing of earlier systems of beliefs. The authors quoted in this book grew up in practicing Catholic families. Thanks to their grandparents or other village elders, they occasionally witnessed some manifestations of the ancient traditions, but they were not at all familiar with them. Unlike in Cambodia and Bosnia, where perpetrators could pretend that their victims represented different, “harmful” ideologies and cultures, Tutsis and Hutus shared the same religion and the same traditions. Survivors of the 1994 genocide point out that during the previous waves of massacres, churches and other religious institutions were still safe refuges, but in 1994 they were no longer respected; often they became the sites of major massacres. Instead of trying to stop the bloodshed, many in the clergy were passive and some of its representatives became perpetrators. These factors profoundly shook the survivors’ faith, contributing to the loss of their points of reference.

Révérien Rurangwa describes how he lost his belief in God, when his praying mother was massacred in front of his eyes in the church shed where they hid. When his grandmother asked the killers to let her finish her prayer, she was told: “That won’t help you! Even God abandoned you!” (45–55). After the genocide Annick Kayitesi-Jozan fully accepted her dead grandfather’s wisdom: “If God wanted to get involved in our unhappiness, he would not have stayed so high up” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 56–57).

Scholastique Mukasonga recounts that after the killings stopped and the village church was thoroughly cleaned from the blood and rubble, the regional religious authorities arrived to consecrate it again. The survivors resisted. They said: “Where was your God when they were killing us? The white soldiers came to take the priests away, and he went off with them. He won’t be back. Now the church belongs to our dead” (Mukasonga 2020, ch. ‘Grief’).

During the genocide and their subsequent flight through various countries, Clemantine Wamariya and her fourteen-year-old sister, Claire, also lost the faith they grew up with:

For a while I could hear Claire asking God why this needed to be happening, why he was testing us this way. But then she stopped. Our mother had told us that hell was a fire that never ends, and that this hellfire was fed by the wood and charcoal of each of our sins. This was hell, clearly, but the wrong hell. Claire stopped speaking aloud to God. (Wamariya, 27)

Ten years later, sixteen-year-old Clemantine read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. She was greatly impressed, among others by the way Wiesel queried God.

I was fascinated, perhaps most of all, by his willingness to question the existence of God. No one in my life did that. Not my mother, not Claire. ... The Thomases, the Beckers, the Beasleys, they did not question God either. They praised him daily. They never doubted his wisdom. Yet how could God exist? Wiesel had the only possible answer: God was cruel. (100)

Malay Phcar grew up in a devout Catholic family. However, during their excruciating life under the Khmer Rouge, he started to have serious doubts about the existence of God: “We did not deserve this unhappiness. ... Nobody did. What an injustice! How can one say that there is a God who loves us? All this is a lie. It is not true, not true” (Phcar, 221–222). After an agitated night, Malay wakes up with a sign from the sky: there are drops of dew on his face. He feels the presence of his dead mother, as if she were there, right by his side. He makes peace with God and goes on struggling with renewed energy.

In the quiet of the night in their temporary shelter, Raami overhears her mother and uncle, who both lost their most cherished family members, talking to each other: “She was no longer bleeding, she’d told Big Uncle one night when they stayed up to talk, thinking Grandmother Queen and I were asleep. *Because I couldn’t keep a child alive, it seems the gods have taken away my ability to bear one. There are no gods*, Big Uncle had responded. *If they were the ones who gave life, created it, they’d know its value. There are no gods. Only senselessness*” (Ratner, 254).

Even though his family is not at all religious, Kenan Trebinčević is also distressed by a feeling of being abandoned by God. When the Serb forces enter his hometown, they immediately blow up the old mosque. People stand around and cheer. Kenan and his mother observe the scene: “‘Why don’t they fear God’s wrath?’ Mom asked. ‘Don’t they know he’s watching?’” Twelve-year-old Kenan replies: “‘What God? He left us a long time ago’” (Trebinčević, 95–96). Forsaken by people and God, Emir Suljagić is overwhelmed by the futility of human existence. He feels that people’s life or death in the Srebrenica enclave does not matter at all; completely indifferent, the outside world has left them alone, defenseless, at the mercy of hostile forces: “What we all had in common was a feeling of cosmic solitude, such as only those sentenced to death can feel. We observed each other, convinced that it was highly probable we would not see each other the next day and defeated by the feeling that this would not change anything” (Suljagić, 12).

SURVIVING

Despite the different social, political, and cultural contexts, the experience of the persecuted Cambodian, Bosnian, and Rwandan children was very similar to that of the Holocaust's child survivors. Trying to cope with their dire situation they discovered similar refuges and escape routes. They were able to find solace in their families and friendships, solidarity, and mutual support; in their creativity that made it possible to imagine alternative realities or just forget about their conditions; and in their ability to admire nature and whatever other forms of beauty they could find.

Love

Love and solidarity in families, between friends, and within communities were crucial factors of survival. Family bonds were particularly strong in all three societies and throughout exclusion, persecution, and genocide families tried to keep together and support each other. The majority of the authors were separated from their parents and most of their siblings and had to cope on their own under extremely difficult circumstances. However, the memory of their beloved ones or the hope of finding them again gave them strength to continue.

At one stage of his ordeal, Malay Phcar was separated from his family members and had to struggle alone in a labor camp. In order to endure the strenuous work, he invented a little ritual:

When I put the clumps of dirt that I extracted from the bottom of the water, I think of the ones I love and want to see again. This is the only idea that gives me some strength. Like when I was little and my grandmother made me eat, saying, "one bite for papa, one for mama, another for Marianne, one for Luc..."

One load of dirt for papa, one shovelful for mama, one for my big sister, this one for Vany... Even though I know that down here I will never see again my parents, nor Vany... (Phcar, 126–127).

Vaddey Ratner's Raami grows up in a loving, closely-knit family. She is very attached to her father. When he is taken away by the Khmer Rouge soldiers, Raami is devastated: "Without Papa, I was suspended in numbness, drifting to and fro, as if this sorrow, which was like no other I have known, had weight and mass exceeding my body. It was a complete entity, a shadow-like presence that sat and walked beside me, assuming its place as my new and abiding companion" (Ratner, 141–142). After the first shock of separation, Raami strives to reconstruct her father in her memories and imagination, evoking the times they spent together, recalling his words, which, as she understands later, were meant to guide and help her even after his death.

Navy Soth is equally close to her parents, particularly her father. Their presence and later their memory is a precious resource for her: "Without Papa and Mama I could not survive. What for?" "I lose my courage. I miss Mama and Papa terribly. Without them I am nobody. ... With mama on my side I feel like living again" (Soth, 194). Navy adores her father and tries to spend as much time with him as possible, even in the camps. After he is taken away and killed, the little girl keeps recalling his gestures and words that encourage and comfort her (157–159; 168).

Love often proves to be stronger than death. Even if their parents, siblings, or friends die, their love accompanies the surviving children. Loung Ung is devastated when she loses her parents, but she keeps evoking and praying to them, asking for their protection and guidance. Her dead father's words accompany and help her throughout her ordeals (Ung 2007, 217). Chanrithy Him also calls upon the souls of her dead parents, often asking them to protect her when she is in danger or in difficulty (Him, 215).

Emir Suljagić describes how in encircled, systematically shelled, starving Srebrenica people wait for hours to get their turn for a five-minute conversation with their loved ones outside the enclave through a decrepit old radio system. Sometimes they have to wait for days, even weeks, to get on the lists. If they are lucky enough and the connection works and their family members are waiting at the other end of the line, they can have a short exchange:

Questions mostly concerned their whereabouts and how they were doing, how the children were doing, parents, family, close and distant relatives. No one

ever said: “I love you.” Never did an open love declaration pass through those wires, aerials, and cables. And yet nowhere and never had there been more love concentrated on one spot than in that half-dark, grey room with bars on the windows. (Suljagić, 48)

The children’s need for love and caring often manifests itself in strong attachments to animals. When Navy Soth is left alone, she catches crickets and puts them into a hand-made receptacle to enjoy some company on her long lonely nights filled with anxiety. One day she discovers a family of new-born mice. People are starving in the camp; the mice family would be a delicious meal, but Navy prefers to make them her friends. She takes care of the tiny living beings, overwhelmed by tenderness, forgetting (momentarily) her hunger and misery (Soth, 134–135; 87–89). For Sor Sisavang as well, the love of his family, the memory and words of his beloved parents who died during their imprisonment remain an inexhaustible source of support. After the death of his parents and two older siblings, he becomes the head of the family. The responsibility he feels for his surviving siblings motivates him to keep struggling, to be active and resourceful. His need of affection is so strong that on one occasion he saves a couple of turtles in a forest fire and instead of eating them, he takes care of them. On several other occasions he spares the life of the animals that he and his companions catch to quench their hunger; he talks to them, caresses them, and sets them free (Sisavang, 138; 164–165).

Solidarity

Understanding the importance of human relationships and belonging, the Khmer Rouge regime aimed to break family and community ties by systematically separating families and villagers and permanently shifting people between different camps and settlements. Everybody was supposed to be a member of the “comrade family”; the traditional family was considered an obsolete, shameful institution of the previous corrupt, individualistic society. In the system of tight surveillance and ubiquitous spying, fear reigned. Gestures of love, attachment, and solidarity were deemed a major crime and brutally punished. Several books describe painful scenes when people, trying to protect themselves, turned away when their companions were harassed, tortured, or killed. Under these conditions the expressions of solidarity were all the more heroic and remarkable. To find a fragile balance between survival and solidarity was an extremely perilous exercise. The authors recall with grat-

itude the precious gestures of support they experienced during their ordeal that helped them to survive.

Immediately after their expulsion from Battambang, Sor Sisavang was separated from his family and sent to work in various children's brigades. Torn from his warm, loving home, he was lonely and helpless. He fondly recalls his first work companions, the village boys who taught him the basics of cultivating, tending animals, and finding edible plants; valuable skills that were indispensable to his survival. In the various camps and work-sites he was later sent to, he regularly befriended and helped others, often because he could not offer anything else just by talking to them (Sisavang, 34; 192–194). Rithy Panh was also separated from his family and had to fend for himself in various labor camps. He recounts several occasions when solidarity saved his life. His occasional work-mates, neighbors in the camps, and occasionally even complete strangers helped him to get through.

At one stage of her ordeal, Chanrithy Him was sent to a particularly tough labor camp. Her mental and physical state was rapidly deteriorating. One day, during a strenuous march towards a new workplace, wounded and exhausted, she was separated from her group and lost her way. Cheng, a little girl from her brigade, went back to fetch her and helped her to catch up with the others. The two girls became inseparable friends, supporting each other, sharing their thoughts, fears and meagre meals. This friendship significantly improved their life, even bringing some fleeting moments of carefree wellbeing. Cheng was convinced that their only chance to survive was to escape from the camp, where they would sooner or later die of hunger, exhaustion, or ill treatment. Chanrithy was too afraid, but her friend finally managed to convince her and they fled. During the long, risky way back to the village where their families were held, they helped and encouraged each other. When they arrived, Chanrithy realized that the sheer possibility of reuniting with her mother and siblings gave her a new spell of life. Cheng was also thrilled to be able to join her family. Her joy was nevertheless short-lived; sometime after their return she became sick and died (Him, 128–132, 140–42, 147–151).

Acts of solidarity or open defiance of the Khmer Rouge were rare and were usually punished by immediate execution. However, whenever it happened, it had a significant positive impact on both those who dared and those who witnessed it. At one stage of her imprisonment, Raami, Vaddey Ratner's protagonist, was alone in a forced labor camp. She was lonely, exhausted, and weary of the unending harassment by their work-group leader, another child, who was related to an influential Khmer Rouge soldier, which gave her special pow-

ers. One day Raami had enough. She challenged the girl “Leave me alone. ... You’re not doing much either—’ *What?*’ She cut me off, teeth clenching. I didn’t answer. The others paused in their work. They knew what I meant. That was enough for me. It gave me strength, even if only to smile to myself.” Raami was nearly killed on the spot and was threatened with further punishments. This act of revolt, however, had a liberating impact on her. She retreated into herself, wrapped in silence, surrounded by the memories of her beloved ones; she became untouchable (Ratner, 295–297).

Displaying solidarity or resisting the murderers was extremely dangerous during the genocide in Rwanda as well. Hutus who tried to keep away from the massacres or save their Tutsi neighbors were often killed together with them; Tutsis who tried to fight back or escape were even more savagely tortured and murdered than the rest. Still, there were remarkable acts of solidarity and resistance during the months of massacres. Berthe Kayitesi pays homage to her childhood friend, Félicité, who was a Hutu colonel’s sister. Félicité joined her Tutsi friends when they took shelter in the convent school and remained with them when they were discovered and driven to a cemetery to be executed. She might have hoped that her presence would restrain the murderers or perhaps she just could not let them go to their deaths on their own. She was among the first to be shot dead (B. Kayitesi, 118–122).

Charles Habonimana recalls that weeks into the bloodshed, the smell of decomposing bodies began to irritate even the executioners. They ordered the village people to go to the killing sites and bury the bodies: “There is one peasant who refuses to join the cortege. ‘Those who killed them should put them in the ground as well.’ Watching you, grown-ups, I learn that there is always one exception; a woman or a man who refuses to go along; often, all alone.” (Habonimana, 92–93). Charles describes another scene, where a gesture of solidarity becomes self-sacrifice. One evening, before sunset, when the day’s murders are about to stop, a group of executioners discovers one of his uncles hiding in the fields. They start to chase him; he runs away and manages to distance himself from the persecutors. He is not aware that he runs in the direction of the trees where Charles and some girls and women are hiding. When he realizes that other fugitives are hiding among the branches, he abruptly changes direction and slows down. He lets himself be caught and massacred—with a smile on his face (69–70).

Good enemies

The rare acts of solidarity and help sometimes came from the “other side.” The children were often taken aback by these unexpected gestures that made them ponder the mechanisms of persecution and personal responsibility. They often came to question a binary worldview in which the “others” were all enemies, inhuman racists, and murderers and “we” were noble and innocent victims. Like their older sisters and brothers during the Holocaust, the persecuted Cambodian, Bosnian, and Rwandan children underline that it is human integrity and strong moral values that guide people’s behavior, not their ethnic or religious background.

Berthe Kayitesi and a two-year-old child were saved by Thomas, the bus-driver, who drove the group of Tutsis to the execution ground in the cemetery of a small Rwandan town. In the chaos of the killing, he hid them in the bus and later took them to his home. Incredulous and grateful, Berthe was unable to understand what prompted him to act like this. He could have obeyed orders, as he did previously, and could have participated in the bloodshed in complete impunity. This experience made Berthe meditate upon people’s behavior and prevented her from having an all-encompassing negative image of the Hutus (B. Kayitesi, 118–122). Annick Kayitesi’s life was also saved thanks to the intervention of a Hutu soldier, who forbid his men to rape and kill her. Annick relates another episode when another soldier saved a baby and took him to an orphanage. She too does not understand the motives behind these acts, but finds it important to point them out (A. Kayitesi 2004, 114–15; 124).

Kenan Trebinčević had many difficulties elucidating his own experience of decent acts by some of their Serbian acquaintances during the war. He was unable to understand what made Ranko, a Serb known for killing and torturing Muslims and Catholics, spare his family. Another young Serbian man, “good Pero,” intervened for the release of his father and brother from prison camp and later helped the family to flee the country. Some others were also helpful, like Zorica, their new Serbian neighbor, who occupied the flat of their Bosnian friends who were chased away. On the bus in which Kenan and his family tried to escape Bosnia in the middle of the war, the driver and the passengers also showed their solidarity and contributed to their ultimately successful flight. Kenan kept pondering these situations and was unable to find satisfying explanations for many years. It was only when decades after the end of the war, he finally returned to his hometown,

met people, and asked difficult questions that he started to understand the complexities of human behavior and the mechanisms of persecution and was finally able to settle these issues.

Chanrithy Him was equally stunned when she encountered a young Khmer Rouge doctor who treated her gently and took good care of her injured foot:

Her kindness begins to reshape my view of the Khmer Rouge. Not everyone has a heart of stone, only living to serve Angkar. Not all thrive on the power and cruelty. Some retain a seed of human goodness. ... I see them through different eyes. Is their cruelty a mask, hiding humanity deep within? The world is no longer as black as their uniforms, as white as rice. (Him, 166–169)

Chanrithy was also very grateful to a man and his colleagues who worked for the Khmer Rouge in another section of the labor camp and regularly gave food to her and her sister, risking their own life.

Navy Soth evokes a Khmer Rouge soldier, who, in the chaos of the evacuation of Phnom Penh, warned her mother to dismiss the official announcement about a three-day-long temporary retreat and urged her to prepare for very difficult circumstances. Thanks to his alert, the family took considerable reserves and useful objects with them, making it easier for them to cope in the first stage of their deportation (Soth, 31). Rithy Panh also recalls some cases when Khmer Rouge guards helped him. In one occasion an official caught him reading the French instructions on a box; a major offense in the camp. Instead of betraying him, the man warned him to pay more attention in the future. Later, when Rithy was hospitalized and had no strength to move, a Khmer Rouge doctor furtively helped him to stand up and take a shower (Panh 2013, 177; 126).

Imagination

In *Fateless* Imre Kertész enumerates the possibilities of liberation in a concentration camp: sleep, imagination, evasion, and death. A few decades later, meditating about his options of escaping his dismal situation in a forced labor camp in the prison Cambodia had become under the Khmer Rouge, Malay Phcar lists exactly the same options (Phcar, 113). Several other authors evoke the same routes of deliverance.

Sleeping is a precious refuge for Loung Ung. Particularly at the beginning of their ordeal, her dreams take her back to their former happy family life: “I lie back down and leave the world of the Khmer Rouge soldiers behind” (Ung 2007, 48–49). Sleeping and occasionally dreaming is a treasured retreat for

Navy Soth as well: “Every morning it’s the same pain: I am torn away from my sleep that I would like to last eternally, because it brings me such intense sweetness, colours and odours that I have the feeling they are real. Sleeping is a refuge where the Khmer Rouge still have difficulty to break into” (Soth, 185).

Imagination is an extremely powerful means that helps the children escape their dreadful reality and recreate a world of harmony. In Saša Stanišić’s *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, Aleksandar frequently repeats a formula: “if only I were a magician who could make things possible” followed by his wishes. Having suddenly lost his points of reference and his grandfather who was able to explain everything, his imagination becomes the most reliable support for the little boy. In his magic spells he often has extraordinary powers that help to prevent catastrophes and roll back time to avert deaths and reconstruct his former, intact world.

Clemantine Wamariya recounts how a traditional Rwandan fable about a girl who smiles beads helped her during the hardships of flight, migration, and exile. In former, peaceful times, when her beloved nanny related the story, she always asked Clemantine to choose the next turn of events. This simple game taught the little girl to create her own internal universe, a precious hidden resource that helped her enormously later on:

The girl who smiled beads became the answer to all puzzles, a way to give shape to a world my parents would not explain and later Claire would not explain, a means to bend and mold reality that I could grasp and accept. I thought I was the girl. ... In my version of the story ... she is truly special, undeniably strong and brave—a dream, a superstar, a goddess of sorts. ... The world told me I was nothing. The plot provided by the universe was filled with starvation, war and rape. I would not—I could not—live in that tale. Instead, I would be the girl who smiled beads, one who had power and agency over her life, one who did not get caught. (Wamariya, 208–210)

During the long years of imprisonment and suffering, imagination provides an exquisite escape route for Navy Soth as well: “I find in my imagination the remedies to treat the pain of my body and my heart” (Soth, 51). In her rare moments of free time after work in the camp, she often sits on the ground drawing with her fingers or a twig:

I admire the wonderful life that takes shape on the ground. With the help of leaves, pebbles, and twigs I manage to draw plenty of small persons. Sitting

behind our hut, where no one can see me, I sketch the life I dream about, that I will have one day. A life that no one can take away from me, because I can erase it, draw it again, erase it again, seeing it in my sleep or daydreams during work. I can see it everywhere: in the mud, in the water, on the ground.

One evening, walking back to their hut, Navy notices swirling lights; she discovers the magic world of fireflies. She imagines that they are special pixies, her extraordinary, supernatural companions who came to help and accompany her. The adventures she imagines with them help her to carry on for months. (122–124)

Navy also tries to conjure up freedom, something her father used to talk about with shining eyes. Freedom is a radiant fairy that emerges from the big evening star in her glittering dress and takes Navy's family to her planet where they can live in peace, harmony, and abundance. Freedom is like the moon, Navy thinks, faraway, pure, and luminous—and it is made of rice. No one will go hungry again; one can just scratch the earth to have plenty of rice (177). Sometimes, when she is particularly hurt by the cruelty of the Khmer Rouge soldiers, she also plays out scenes of liberation and vengeance in her imagination.

Her imaginary world and creativity help Navy cope with her dismal life in captivity in remote villages and labor camps. After several years, however, she feels she is drained of her creative energy:

I don't think of anything any longer. I can't find the strength to play, to create small objects of clay to exchange them with my little companions. I am exhausted. ... I don't have the force to dream either. My imagination is locked in my depleted body. Nothing gives me pleasure any longer, except the feeling of peace that overwhelms me when I put my hand on the heart of Papa or Mama to feel how it beats. (202)

Chanrithy Him also writes about how the mind's freedom helped people endure the dangers and harsh conditions during their captivity. Her intimate thoughts and her fantasy world created a precious internal shelter for her: "I tried to hide inside the magic. It was a refuge against the surreal realities of war. My friends and I would pretend we had the power to raise the dead. I would talk to imaginary friends in the orchard behind our house" (22). She also discovers that the realm of the mind is able to remain free even in the worst captivity. One day the soldiers interrogate her father about the whereabouts of his

missing brother. Chanrithy's uncle fled immediately after the victory of the Khmer Rouge, convinced that they would only bring terror and devastation. The father makes up a story about losing track of him during the chaotic evacuation of Phnom Penh. Clutching his hand, the little girl listens to him both frightened and impressed: "This is the delicious power of the mind—they can't stop me from my silent thoughts. They can't interrogate my memories" (86).

On another occasion, when her sister engages in an—extremely dangerous—French conversation with a temporary neighbor, Chanrithy states again: "Though the Khmer Rouge can control every other aspect of our lives, they cannot scrub out our minds, polish away our intellect like an empty brass pot. In the midst of the daily fear of Khmer Rouge village life, it is a delicious secret" (109–110).

Sor Sisavang also enlists the scant spaces where he can still feel free. He is enslaved; his every movement, his time, his environment are strictly controlled, but he is free in his thoughts, in his dreams, in his imagination and sometimes even in his sensory feelings. One night, when his work brigade arrives to a new place, not far from his hometown, Savang sneaks out of their sleeping quarters and goes to the pagoda he used to visit with his father when he was a child: "The air had a strong smell of frangipani blossoms that escaped the campaigns of destruction of the flowers. For the first time since the Khmer Rouge took power, I could freely inhale this fragrance. Lately I was able to reconnect with several elements of my past. Maybe this was a good omen!" (Sisavang, 197).

In the Shadow of the Banyan Raami learns from her father that imagination can help her to cope with unhappy events. All she needs is "to find a crack in the wall and pretend it was the entryway into another world, a world where all that was lost—yourself included—would again be found" (22). Raami grows up with legends and stories her father tells her. One night, after their deportation from Phnom Penh, probably feeling that his arrest is imminent, he gives her some final advice: "I told you stories to give you wings, Raami, so that you would never be trapped by anything—your name, your title, the limits of your body, this world's suffering" (78). Her father's words accompany Raami even after he disappears: "Papa was right, I thought, dream and reality were one and the same. What existed in one could well be replicated in the other" (85).

In the writings of the new generation of child genocide survivors imagination frequently appears as a refuge or consolation, rather than an escape route. It often helps them to invent a more bearable version of their realities, as if they implicitly acknowledged the impossibility of running away from it.

After her beautiful older sister dies of starvation, the only solace Loung Ung can find is to imagine a better death for her:

The reality of Keav's death is too sad, so I create a fantasy world to live in. In my mind, she is granted her last wish. Pa gets there in time to hear Keav tell him how much she loves him and he gives her our messages of love. He holds her in his arms as she dies peacefully, feeling love, not fear. Pa then brings Keav's body home to be buried, to be forever with us, instead of being lost. (Ung 2007, 125)

Rithy Panh's father, a dignified, highly respected person, dies of starvation, because in a final gesture of resistance, he refuses to eat in the camp. He is hastily buried without any ceremony. That night Rithy's mother recounts to her children an imaginary funeral of their father. She describes every minor detail of the traditional ceremony, the people who come to honor the memory of the deceased, the humanity and majesty of a genuine farewell. "Our funeral-in-words lasted the whole night. We drifted in the frail vessel my mother conjured up, and while we did, my father's passing seemed less painful" (Panh 2013, 99–100). Looking back, Rithy is convinced that faith in the power of the image was planted in him during that evening.

After several years spent in captivity, Malay Phcar's mother became seriously ill. One morning, however, she gathered all her strength and got up early to prepare food for her children. Malay woke up to the familiar noises of his happy past when everything was still in place. He didn't move, hoping to prolong the moment to last till eternity. Nonetheless soon afterwards his mother's state deteriorated and she died. Relating her death and the following events, Malay's narrative suddenly changes: he describes the events through an outsider's eye, as if he was telling a stranger's story and he were not one of its protagonists. As if he wanted to delegate the happenings to the realm of fiction, chasing the grief away with words (Phcar, 103–105).

Play and laughter

Playing represents a precious refuge for the children caught up in the most recent genocides. And like their older sisters and brothers during the Holocaust, they grab every possible occasion to play, even in the most desperate situations.

In *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, when the war reaches their hometown, Aleksandar's family moves into his grandmother's house that has a basement. Neighbors and several refugees from nearby villages destroyed by

the advancing Serbian forces also shelter there. The house is soon occupied by Serbian paramilitary units which loot, assault, rape, and kill those who have the “wrong sort of name.” Aleksandar has a little friend, Asija, with a “wrong sort of name”. They hide in the attic, but a Serbian soldier finds them and tells them to wait in the corridor while their fate is decided. Every couple of minutes the light in the stairwell goes off. In this situation of extreme tension and vulnerability, the children start to play with the light and darkness. When the light goes off, they count the seconds of darkness and if they manage to whisper the same number at the same time, their secret wishes will be fulfilled (Stanišić 2008, 94–98).

In the midst of the war, during a ceasefire, there is a soccer match between Bosnians and their Serb attackers. The situation in itself is absurd: the players know each other; they grew up together, they call each other by their first names while they shoot at each other. When their leaders negotiate a truce, the young men are happy to stop fighting and play. The outcome of the game, however, is not at all innocuous. The scene recalls Icchokas Meras’s *Stalemate*, where the result of the chess match between the young Jewish boy and the Nazi commander decides life and death in the ghetto. At the soccer match in Višegrad, not even the rules of fair-play are respected. The game ends with the death of one Bosnian player and the display of violence (Stanišić 2008, 207–221).

For four months Kenan Trebinčević and his family hide in their flat in their occupied town. Kenan’s father and older brother can’t go out on to the streets, because they’d risk immediate deportation or execution. Eleven-year-old Kenan runs the indispensable errands for the household. He has no one to play with, except his brother, who is much older than him: “Instead of soccer cards, I collected shrapnel and bullets I pulled from building walls. I had ninety-nine sharp pieces. When Eldin and I played poker, we used the ammo pellets as chips” (Trebinčević, 91). The motif of collecting and playing with shrapnel appears in Ismet Prcić’s book as well:

Every time a shelling dies down, out come these children to hunt for shrapnel. It’s like a collecting deal... like children collecting marbles and things. So they are walking around with these... sacks of shrapnel, comparing and trading, whathaveya. But this Donut kid is fanatical. He thinks he can recreate a shell by putting together all the shards. Insane! (Prcić, 357)

In the children’s minds everything can turn into a game. When they have nothing else to play with, they play with death, like their counterparts in the

ghettos and concentration camps some decades earlier. Malay Phcar describes how, during their deportation from the Cambodian capital, he and his young companions start “collecting the dead.” At first they are horrified when they see dead people on the road, but horror is so omnipresent that after a while it becomes a source of diversion. The children begin to keep scores of corpses or body parts and compete to see who notices the most (Phcar, 18). During one stage of their journey to the labor camp Malay and his family board a truck. The driver speeds up, zigzagging to avoid the potholes on the road. Malay is about to burst out laughing, enjoying the mad race. Then he suddenly realizes that the time for having fun is over: “Since we lost Léa and her family I understood that everything that is happening to us is not a game the grown-ups organized to amuse us” (31). Nevertheless, later in the camps, whenever he has an occasion, he tries to find opportunities for some amusement. On his rare days off work he plays with his younger brother. Forgetting their dire conditions, they chase an empty can, play darts with sticks, build constructions from pieces of wood, catch crickets, and organize fighting matches between them (71; 161–162).

In one of the refugee camps where they stay after fleeing Rwanda, Clemantine Wamariya and her sister share household chores. Clemantine is in charge of doing the laundry. When she goes to the river to wash their clothes, she has a rare opportunity to relax:

Along the shores stood giant boulders and large pine trees, odd envoys of permanence in a crumbling world. ... On really hot days, while the clothes soaked, I swam and watched the heat rise off the hills. In the distance, the valleys looked like water. I wanted to play. ... I asked the older women, “Can you see it? Can you see the ocean?” They had no energy for my games. (Wamariya, 67)

Playing hide and seek with death that was described by many Holocaust survivor children, can also turn into a last, final game: “I wasn’t afraid of death anymore. *Death is a hideout*, I thought. *When you’re there, no one can catch you*,” writes Rithy Panh (Panh 2013, 149). Playing literally saves the life of a little Rwandan girl in one of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s stories, “Ready or Not.” Before the genocide the little girl’s favorite game was hide and seek. She was so good at it that her parents often got exasperated because they were unable to find her. When they finally did, frequently after she generously gave them a sign, the infinite relief she saw in their eyes was her highest reward. When the killings start, her father tells the little girl that this time the whole fam-

ily will play together and she should find the best possible hiding place. She does. All other members of her family are discovered and killed, but she survives (Umubyeyi 2017, 97–105).

Laughter, making fun of the utter absurdity of their desperate situation, is less present in the writings of the authors of the next generation than it was in the case of Holocaust survivor children. Cultural traditions might play a role here; a humorous streak characterises most of the works of the Eastern European authors. The books of Ismet Prcic and Saša Stanišić are imbued with melancholic irony that creates a certain detachment and helps to take the edge off of some particularly tough events. There are a few episodes when laughter provides momentary relief for the children in the other books as well. A sudden outburst of laughter helps to ease the extreme tension when Sor Sisavang and his companions march towards the border hoping to escape from Cambodia, braving a series of dangers and difficulties (Sisavang, 329). Clemantine Wamariya also evokes how dark humor helped them to relax in utterly desperate and violent situations on several occasions (Wamariya, 172–173).

Chanrithy Him describes the rare moments of amusement that eased their bleak captivity in the Cambodian countryside. She evokes a scene when she and her friends discreetly make fun of a girl who is spying on them: “It is hard not to mock people you don’t respect. The trick is not to get caught. ... We laugh quietly to ourselves. For a moment I feel as if we’re back in school, laughing our girlish laughter” (Him, 135–136). On some days Chanrithy’s job is to scare away the birds from the rice fields. She and her companions discover that they can turn their chore into fun: “Laughter erupts in the air as the birds fly from rice paddy to rice paddy. Now it is like a game of land-and-chase. They chirp, we laugh. Beads of sweat roll down my forehead. Our laughter is food for my soul. It has been a long time since I had some. I feel revived—like a little girl again, the thirteen-year-old that I am” (217).

Nature

Several authors write about their love of nature already before the atrocities started. Nature becomes an extraordinary source of comfort and consolation for the children during their persecution and/or internment. In the book *In the Shadow of the Banyan Tree*, Raami recalls her grandmother’s words before their deportation from Phnom Penh: “‘There will remain only so many of us as rest in the shadow of a banyan tree,’ again Grandmother Queen murmured,

and I didn't understand why crazy people always feel the need to say the same thing twice. "The fighting will continue. The only safe place is here . . . under the banyan" (Ratner, 19). During their exodus and captivity in various camps, the closeness to nature helps Raami to cope with her difficulties and discover signs of hope. By the end, she realizes that instead of nonsense, her grandmother's words were prophetic; in their extended family only she and her mother survived. The banyan tree becomes the symbol of continuity and peace.

There is also a tree of life in Gilbert Gatore's *The Past Ahead*. After escaping from his village where he participated in the massacres, the young man, Niko, wanders around in the wilderness in a semi-conscious state. In a dream-like scene he encounters a young girl who leads him to a sumptuous tree of vertiginous height with roots that seem to descend to hell. The girl explains:

"Each leaf represents a person, and every time a human being is born a new leaf grows, and every time a human being dies one falls off. Every time a new work generates progress in respect between humans or between humans, animals, and nature, a new fruit grows." ...There is very little fruit. "Soon the tree will be almost bare," the girl adds. Niko can see that she's right. (Gatore, 74-75)

The genocide of the Tutsis took place during the rainy season in 1994. "The rain kills. Even the rain kills. Who is completely innocent?" asks Charles Habonimana. The heavy, icy "white rain" in fact may kill and add to the victims' suffering, but it also helps them. It washes away their traces and hides them; rakes out the fire the persecutors set on the fields to discover the last fugitives, sweeps away the check points and tunes out the ferocious songs and whistles of the murderers.

This majestic rain makes the beans grow prodigiously. You could never completely hide in the bean fields before. Now there are several of us there. And we are not starving. We are no longer tortured by thirst either. It is an extraordinary rainy season. It saved my life several times this end of April and I know that those who are still alive managed thanks to this by now legendary rain. (Habonimana, 72-75)

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan recalls the pristine blue sky of the day her mother was killed. The image of this untouched, indifferent beauty remains imprinted in her mind, like the vision of cerulean sky above Auschwitz that accompanies Otto Dov Kulka since his childhood:

The 30th of April was a Saturday and it was a beautiful day. The sky of this day is engraved in my memory because its immaculate blue contrasted with the black, spiteful looks of the militiamen who extricated us from our hiding place. It is engraved forever, because I stared at it intensely, trying to drown myself in it turning my gaze away... (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 98)

On the first night after their deportation from Phnom Penh, Loung Ung, who grew up in the city, is fascinated with the beauty of the night sky in the fields. She forgets her anxiety and the pain of leaving her home, like Grigory Kanovich, who decades earlier found consolation in the vast beauty of the sky after fleeing his native Jonava. Loung is stunned by nature's majestic serenity: "Chou, the sky is so big! 'Shhh. I am trying to sleep.' ... 'Look at the stars. They are so beautiful and they are winking at us. ... You know the stars are candles in the sky. Every evening, the angels come out and light them for us, so if we lose our way we can still see'" (Ung 2007, 39–40).

Later, in the various labor camps where she is sent, Loung is always able to find beauty despite the rudimentary conditions and the ugliness of her surroundings. In the evenings, after a hard day's work, she and her siblings often rest outside their hut, contemplating the sky:

Sitting with Kim outside on the steps of our hut, I think of how the world is still somehow beautiful even when I feel no joy at being alive within it. It is still dark and the shimmering sunset of red, gold, and purple over the horizon makes the sky look magical. Maybe there are gods living up there after all. When are they going to come down and bring peace to our land? (Ung 2007, 127–130)

Chanrithy Him and her little friend, Cheng, often try to steal out of the camp grounds to find some food in the surroundings. One afternoon they escape to catch fish in the nearby river: "For the first time, I'm happy—just to be here, to enjoy the proximity of nature and Cheng's friendship. I feel like a kid again—a rare privilege" (Him, 140).

Malay Phcar also finds consolation and, occasionally, something edible in nature. One day during a lunch break in the fields, he and his brother sneak away from their group to search for food. As they ramble around, they unexpectedly find themselves in an untouched corner of nature: "It's Paradise. The luminous rectangles of the rice fields, under a sky of precious-stone-blue, deserted by the clouds, move forward towards the mountain, which forms a small green alcove seen from here. The jungle is mirrored in the water, its emerald and yellow

shades blend together with the young water shoots. There is absolute silence. I look around in awe, speechless. There is virgin nature all around.” Once he comes to his senses, Malay starts to look for his brother. He finds him lying in the shallow water, completely absorbed by nature’s beauty as well. They greet each other with a big smile in a solemn silence: “I think we never smiled like this, none of us. It is like a great yes. Life should be this yes, always.”

After a while, the two brothers pull themselves together and rush back to their work group. Malay observes with regret: “As we leave the rice fields, getting further away from this part of the mountain, the traces of the Khmer Rouge gradually reappear. ... Then my tears start to flow down on my face. I have been sad so often during these months, I saw dead people, people in agony, my adored sister being pulled away on the Tonlé Sap, but I rarely cried. Now I cry stupidly at the thought that I’d never again return to this beautiful, small, quiet corner of Paradise” (Phcar, 52–53).

Navy Soth also evokes a day when she and two other little girls slip away from their work group during a break in search of something edible. They stumble upon a plot of gorgeous, full-grown melons. The beauty of the colors, the fertility of the cultivated land, the fragrance and bounty of ripe fruits that seem to smile at them, enchants them so much that they don’t notice the approaching Khmer Rouge guards. The punishment is terrible. Navy’s small companions are killed and she barely survives the beating (Soth, 187–197).

In the various camps and villages where Sor Sisavang is sent, he always finds consolation in nature. Amidst hunger, fear, exhausting work, and unceasing harassment, he is able to immerse himself in the beauty of a landscape, a plant, or the sky and forget about his surroundings. Nature is a domain of freedom and hope for him. One day his work team arrives to a beautiful spot, “a lush green prairie with many small lakes, above it the blue sky with myriads of birds. This magnificent view made us forget for a moment the hunger and thirst of the day.” The children’s task is to cut down and burn the trees and level the plain to make it ready for planting rice. After weeks of arduous work Savang looks again at the landscape: “There is an image that I will never be able to forget: on this prairie of ashes these burnt and cut trees that still had new buds growing on their remaining branches. This image was like the mirror of my life: even though it was ravaged, bitter, and sometimes unbearable, the hope I had deep inside grew like a bud and made it possible for me to live trusting that there was a future” (Sisavang, 162–165). In another work-site the children first have to clear the ground to create a place for their make-shift huts. Savang finds again an unexpected source of solace in nature: “This

took place at the bottom of a densely forested mountain, close to a clear brook that was babbling day and night. I will never forget this murmur that I took as a sound of freedom that I heard all day along” (203).

Nature is a unique refuge for Navy Soth as well. During their painful exodus from Phnom Penh, concentrating on the minuscule details of nature’s beauty helps her to distance herself from the surrounding horror and fear:

The leaves ruffle under our feet. The insects launch a cheerful cacophony. They welcome us on their territory. I would like to slow down and stop on my way, lie down on the ground and inhale the delicious perfume of this bunch of yellow flowers. To introduce myself to these infinitely small creatures, to greet them. But the interdictions stop my impulse. With the Black Pyjamas everything is forbidden. (Soth, 43)

Later, in a labor camp, early morning before work starts, she always stops for a while to take in nature’s gifts:

My pleasure during these work days are the few minutes when I admire the emerald green of the rice fields that are still not stained by the dark uniforms of the workers. I can’t have enough of discovering untouched nature, the plants that are waking up This stolen moment is a treasure. I store it in my memory like a precious key that would help me escape during the day. (52).

When Navy’s little brother and sister die and are buried next to the woods, nature manifests itself in all its magnificence to console the little girl. However, when her father is taken away, the whole world becomes hostile and dangerous and nature can no longer comfort her (60–61; 221). Loung Ung feels very much the same when her father is arrested. In the evening, after they return from work in the fields, the children sit outside their hut, waiting for their father to come back “When night comes, the gods again taunt us with a radiant sunset. ‘Nothing should be this beautiful,’ I quietly say to Chou. ‘The gods are playing tricks on us. How could they be so cruel and still make the sky so lovely? ... I want to destroy all the beautiful things’” (Ung 2007, 127–130). Malay Phcar also wonders why nature does not reflect their sufferings: “The setting sun, a huge precious ruby inserted between the trees, is as superb as always, as if the changing world had no importance at all. Nature is so indifferent to our unhappiness. Maybe this is why it is said to be beautiful” (Phcar, 147).

Waddey Ratner's Raami and her father keep admiring nature's wonders, even during their deportation and captivity. After an evening walk enchanted by the splendor of the night landscape illuminated by a bright moon, they return to their improvised camp and witness the death of a little boy. Raami looks around and is unable to understand how such horrors can take place in a world of so much beauty. She asks her father: "Is it even the same moon?" (Ratner, 128). Several months later, alone in an enormous work-site, she feels crushed by the ever-present devastation. Nature can no longer console her. In fact, even nature is damaged: "It was a sick sky. A sky burning with welts. Angry and red. The colors of rotting flesh, of dying and death, of one heaving last breath. Of rains that hadn't come, and rains that came a long time ago. ... Around me the ground was broken and scarred, with holes and ditches that resembled half-dug graves" (273).

Before they abandoned their village, fleeing the advance of armed Serbian groups, Emir Suljagić looked back at the Drina on whose banks he grew up. Cold and hungry, in mortal danger, he could not resist stopping for a minute to admire the landscape. He was unable to take his eyes off the river that was "more beautiful than ever" (Suljagić, 19). Locked in besieged Srebrenica, people had very restricted access to nature. In the ever worsening conditions of privation and constant assaults they often had the impression that nature had joined in the violence unleashed on them as well. Even the sky became a hostile element, bringing death and destruction to the prisoners of the enclave (46). Describing a scene when the Khmer Rouge fiercely attacked defenseless persons, Navy Soth also talks about "the wind, an accomplice, echoes the shouts of the enraged people" (Soth, 221).

The power of words

The future authors of the books presented here grew up with stories and proverbs. They were acquainted with the magic of words. Words gained further importance during their ordeals. Words could entertain them, help them forget their suffering, heal and occasionally save them. In addition to the power of spoken words, written words offered extraordinary support to the children when they could access books.

Confined in the besieged town of Srebrenica, Emir Suljagić and his friends found solace in reading. They devoured the books they discovered in the bombed-out building of their school or in empty apartments. Reading was also a way of cheating their hunger and retreating from their sinister situ-

ation. During a particularly violent shelling, Emir took refuge in the cellar. He dived into Macchiavelli's *The Prince* and was able to switch off the outside world. Emir underlines the power of words in everyday conversations as well. In July 1992 hunger became generalised in the town. Most people could only afford one pathetic meal a day "We were sticking to the habit of calling it lunch, refusing to yield to the new circumstances, as if we wanted to hang on to what our recent lives had been, even if only through the language we used" (Suljagić, 32).

In addition to books, people appreciated every possible form of entertainment or cultural activity in confined Srebrenica. They provided precious opportunities to escape the gloomy reality and recalled different, more dignified and human worlds. People "went to the cinema": to rooms with TV sets connected to a VCR, to watch films of the pre-war stock of the city's video stores. The entry ticket was two cigarettes or two tobacco leaves. "Imitating life, we queued in front of these cinemas as if it were nothing out of the ordinary" (129). A small group started a local newspaper on often stolen paper. "Thanks to that newspaper a very limited number of people maintained the illusion of some kind of intellectual life. It was an attempt ... to give sense to the insanity in which we found ourselves" (136–137). In the summer of 1994, during the World Cup in the US, people improvised all kinds of devices to be able to watch the matches.

During the years of his internment, Rithy Panh often found solace in his mother's words. Even after her death, her advice and wisdom, often concentrated in proverbs and stories she had told him, accompanied Rithy and helped him to survive. On one occasion, searching for something to eat in the jungle, he stumbled upon a cobra. He was paralyzed with dread. He was convinced that he wouldn't be able to escape, when suddenly his dead mother's words started to echo in his mind, telling him what to do. He followed her instructions and managed to get away. On another occasion Rithy became very sick. On the edge of total despair, he recalled advice his mother had given him years earlier about the type of illness he seemed to have. Mobilizing his last morsels of energy, he went to the forest and found the leaves of a guava tree that his mother had suggested for a traditional remedy. His companions prepared a mixture to drink and soon his state began to improve: "I thanked the guava tree. (The tree of words in the French original. YK) I thanked my mother, who had already rescued me from the cobra. The stomachache, the blood—they were finished; death was finished. I was saved" (Panh 2013, 176).

On one stage of their exodus from Phnom Penh, Malay Phcar and his family were packed into cattle cars. The children were horrified. Once they were

locked in the wagons, their father made them sit and started to recite a long, soothing fairy tale that managed to distract and calm them along the journey (Phcar, 33–35). Later, Malay was torn away from his family and sent alone to various boys' labor camps. During the nights after curfew, even though it was strictly forbidden, the children entertained each other telling stories. When his talent for recitation was revealed, Malay's status significantly improved; he had access to more food and was sent to less strenuous jobs (112). Rithy Panh, who was also alone in several labor camps, proved to be a skilled entertainer as well. His ghost stories were particularly popular among the children. Thanks to his gift of narration, Rithy was promoted to work in the kitchen, which helped him to regain some strength. One night he told the story of man's setting foot on the Moon. His little companions were dumbfounded. The next day, however, one of them denounced him, because the protagonist of his tale was an American. Rithy was punished and sent back to hard work in the fields (Panh 2013, 86–88).

Sor Sisavang asserts that one of the cruellest tortures the Khmer Rouge inflicted on their victims was forbidding them to communicate. Being able to share, to talk about their lives, their pasts, their sufferings and dreams brought some relief to the prisoners, but when they were caught, they were ferociously punished. Several of Savang's friends with whom he was able to furtively exchange stories disappeared. Hungry to communicate, but afraid of punishment, Savang often talked to the animals he was taking care of or to the rice that he was planting. One day, when his group was working in the rice fields, one of his companions began to sing a popular song. The guards immediately came over and tied him up: "You know that it's forbidden to talk," they said. 'How dare you sing this imperialist song?' 'If I don't sing I'm going to die,' answered Khum. 'It makes more sense that I live and work than to die stupidly. I didn't harm you by singing this song that makes me feel good and gives me strength'" (Sisavang, 138). Khum was killed for singing. Savang recalled another prisoner, a young student girl who was singing and reciting poems when they went to sleep in their huts. One day she was taken away and never returned to the camp.

Savang also writes about the extraordinary support books offered him during the years of deportation and captivity. When his family was expelled from Battambang, they were still able to take some of their personal objects and valuables, including a few books. First they hid them, but when they saw how dangerous it was to be caught having books, they buried them in the courtyard. Whenever Savang was able to return to his family, they secretly dug up some books, he hid and read fervently:

When I went to school, I liked reading very much, but I didn't feel the same pleasure as now, when reading is forbidden. Each time I have the occasion to read I enjoy it more and more. I also started to realize how important and precious reading was in the conditions of oppression and isolation we were held. I felt like a prisoner who managed to escape and was hungry and thirsty; books offered me drops of water mixed with honey. (Sisavang, 63)

Savang lost both his parents under the Khmer Rouge. When his father felt his death approaching, he asked Savang to unearth some of the books they hid. He spent his last hours looking at them (153–156).

Scholastique Mukasonga grew up in extreme poverty. Her father pushed her to study, convinced that her only chance of survival was education and a degree. After having escaped the wave of violence and massacres, Scholastique was placed for a time in a religious institution with other surviving adolescents. Alone one evening, she discovered a book left on a desk in a classroom. She could not resist the temptation of “borrowing” it. She grew up without books; books had an almost sacred value for her. The one she accidentally stumbled upon was *The Count of Monte-Cristo*. It became her most cherished treasure that she carefully hid under her mattress. The adventures of Edmond Dantes accompanied her and confirmed her hope that even in the worst possible situation, there was always a chance to escape and survive (Mukasonga 2018/b, 18).

After fleeing Bosnia, Ismet, the protagonist in *Shards*, found temporary refuge in England, but had to return to Croatia to get his papers to apply for immigration to the US. He had a short-term permit to stay, but the wheels of bureaucracy turned so slowly that his permit expired. He had no other solution than to remain in Zagreb illegally, risking to be sent back to Bosnia where the war kept raging, if he was caught. Locked up in a flat, hardly venturing out to the streets, he was lost, confused, and anguished. His only solace was reading. After devouring the books he found in the apartment, he took the risk of going to a library just to get more books: “I like that in books the world is solid and the characters' lives move from chapter 1 to chapter 2 and so on. I like that” (Prcic, 290).

Ismet's thoughts echo George Perec's words about books that reassured him after the war with their solid, orderly world that he could trust and return to at any time. One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's protagonists in *All Your Children, Scattered* also draws encouragement and a sense of belonging thanks to books that have the potential to reconstruct lost worlds and create new ones. She quotes George Perec's words about “an enjoyment of complicity, of collusion, or more especially, and in addition, of having in the end found kin again” (Umubyeyi 2022, ch. Stokely; Perec, 143).

Art saving life

Art and creativity were key elements that helped children to cope and occasionally to survive. Rithy Panh often recalls Nath the painter, one of the few survivors of the S21 torture center in Cambodia, who managed to stay alive thanks to his paintings for the Khmer Rouge. After the collapse of the regime, he worked relentlessly to create a visual memory of the genocide.

Chanrithy Him evokes an episode when her sister was seriously injured. In the labor camps injury or illness was often considered an act of sabotage and was ruthlessly penalized. Chanrithy's sister was so afraid of the punishment that she was unable to sleep at night, feverishly trying to find an escape route. Finally she had the idea of composing a song to her superior, praising the beauty of Cambodian landscapes and the pride one felt working hard for the Angkar. Thanks to her creation and flattering words, she was not punished; she could even enjoy slightly better treatment afterwards (Him, 183).

An unexpected encounter with art brought considerable improvement in the life of Loung Ung as well. One of the regular meetings in the child soldiers' camp she was sent to ended with a music and dance rehearsal. A small group of selected children were preparing a program to entertain soldiers. It was all propaganda, but Loung was taken by the charm of the performance:

Watching the girls sing and dance, a strange feeling comes over me. Though the words they sing describe images of blood and war, the girls smile. Their hands move gracefully in unison, their bodies sway and twirl to the rhythm of the music. After the dance, they hold hands and giggle as if they have had fun. This thought warms me, bringing a smile to my lips. Laughter has become a distant memory and I cherish the echo of a different time. ... After the performance, all of us are invited to dance. ... I have always loved music and dancing. For a few minutes, my feet move to the beat of the drums, my arms sway to the rhythm of the song, and my heart is light and joyful. (Ung 2007, 160–162).

Loung is so gifted that she is invited to join the group. She enjoys dancing and singing and she also appreciates the advantages that come with this privileged position. Soon, however, she is accused of infringing the camp's rules; she is excluded from the group and sent back to work in the fields again.

Art literally saves the life of Ismet, the author and protagonist of *Shards*. Fifteen-year-old Ismet is drifting around in besieged Tuzla, aimless, hopeless,

and hungry, without any perspective of improving his situation or getting out of the city. One day he comes across a theatre group with a gifted and devoted director. His whole life changes. He becomes part of a motivated group, learns hard work and commitment, discovers creative frenzy, and finds a meaningful goal to pursue. The group wants to show the world that it is possible to remain human despite the ever-present lethal danger and bleak life conditions that push people to apathy or a rude and soulless struggle for survival. The youngsters work enthusiastically, without official support or encouragement, happy to have a miserable place to rehearse even if it is full of useless rubbish and exposed to mortar fire.

The carpet was the colour of decomposing cigarette filters with a fragrance to match. My God, everything happened on that carpet, from shit to divine intervention, from trivial drudgery to magic. Everything. It was on that carpet, in the moist, sweltering air and pungent dust, barefoot and aching from theatre and life, that I was the happiest. ... We had one of those amazing rehearsals of Asmir's play when everything was awesome and meaningful and you felt like a real artist. Afterward we went out to celebrate, lugging that huge wooden frame. We ... ended up in the park, on a bench, leaning the frame on a nearby poplar. We watched people go by, scared people, miserable people, masks of suffering on stick figures. ... We became a painting, staring out through the frame into the real world. And soon the real people stopped to stare at us, the painting, forgetting for a moment about the war, the oppressive psychosis that permeated everything. People have to look at art, no matter what. (Prcic, 110–11)

Liberation—becoming a child again

One afternoon sometime in late 1978 Chanrithy Him was working in the rice fields with her companions, when they noticed that the Khmer Rouge guards had received news that made them extremely agitated. They rushed to each other, had brief exchanges and hastily left the grounds. Soon the news about the regime's collapse reached the prisoners as well:

For the first time in a long time, I see happiness again. All of us smile at the thought of no more Khmer Rouge. My heart dances in my chest, my mind sings the word "freedom" repeatedly. ... The heavy weight on my soul, my body, suddenly lifts. The scenery around me changes. The golden fields, the clouds, the

blue skies are beautiful. We run to our remaining families, racing each other across the reservoir. We giggle as we splash water at each other. The sound of laughter is soothing: I feel like a child again. The little girl in me returns, and my curiosity soars: “Are they really gone?” (Him, 249)

For Navy Soth as well, liberation brings back laughter. After the flight of the Khmer Rouge soldiers, Navy and her remaining family members undertake a long, perilous march back to their home. When they finally arrive at ruined Phnom Penh, they stumble upon a destroyed deposit of old sandals. They have been marching barefoot, so they are thrilled to get some footwear. Navy is in such a hurry to find a pair of sandals that she chooses a much larger size than her feet. When her brother sees her arriving like a duck, he bursts out laughing. When Navy realizes how funny she must look, she also starts to roar with laughter, the first time in years (Soth, 247).

After liberation, Malay Phcar and his brother also return to Phnom Penh together with a family they had met in one of the camps that is ready to take them in for a while. Staying at their place Malay discovers again the long forgotten sensation of being a child:

Walking in the small garden I find again the feeling that we had in our life before, when nothing was genuinely grave, when we played without asking ourselves what we were going to eat, where we were going to sleep or if we will still be alive tomorrow. ... We get to know the boys of the neighborhood. We follow them on the streets, we play war and marbles. For how long? I play. You play. They play. You play. We play. (Phcar, 242–243)

Wandering around liberated Phnom Penh, Malay and his friends come across a street theatre performance. The piece recounts the Khmer Rouge period in comic form. First, scenes of the old times, the traditional way of life are shown. Then the Khmer Rouge arrive. They speak an incomprehensible gibberish that makes people roll over with laughter. Finally the collapse and inglorious flight of the soldiers is presented. The performance has a cathartic impact on the public. Between tears and heartfelt laughter people are able to expunge some of the weight of their recent nightmarish experience. The public leaves the venue in high spirits. As they disperse, some spectators come across the actors who played the Khmer Rouge and attack them. It takes some time to convince them that it was all theatre; there is no dividing line between life and art (256–257).

Ismet's theatre group is invited to a festival in England. They miraculously obtain the necessary authorizations and manage to get out of besieged Bosnia. When after a long, anxious bus ride they reach the coast of Croatia, the passengers' joy erupts.

The first sighting of the Adriatic was cheered like a victory. There were enthusiasts even in the back of the bus, hooting and singing with the children. (...) We stopped in the first town, at the first beach next to a long dock that cut a block of white into the blue, and when the doors opened we run out screaming—the younger half of the bus, anyway. (...) I was the first one up there in my tightie-whities, screaming giddily, staring one moment at the blue sky, the next at my white feet slapping the hard surface of the white cement, until the whiteness ended abruptly in a horizontal line and I found myself airborne above the blue, beneath the blue, in the blue and going up, up, up. I swear to God I would have been the first human to really fly had I not remembered, going up into the blue like that, that all my money was rolled up in a tobacco pouch hanging next to a pouch of another kind in my underwear. (Prcic, 225–226)

AFTERMATHS

Following the euphoria of liberation, the aftermath of genocides proves to be a more painful experience than imagined during the period of persecution and mass murders. The child survivors face the extent of their losses, the indifference or hostility of the outside world, and the difficulties of reconstructing a life from scratch, often in a foreign country.

Return home

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime people wander around in complete confusion in war-torn Cambodia. There are still clashes between various armed groups; bands of Khmer Rouge attack the convoys of people that try to return to their homes and find surviving relatives and vestiges of their previous life. Malay Phcar is marching with one such convoy, confused, exhausted, bereft of any notion of time, direction, or meaning: “I have no idea how long we have been rambling around like this, like a herd of wild animals. In the camps there was a rhythm, with one day of rest every ten days. Here, time flies, but at the same time, it seems to be immobile. Sorl says that at least we are free. I don’t think so. It is as if the whole landscape were our prison” (Phcar, 224).

Navy Soth and her remaining family members also spend a long time on the road on their way back home. When they finally arrive, they are shocked to discover that their house has been taken over by a rich criminal, seemingly unscratched by the genocide. He violently chases them away. They have nothing and have no place to go. For a time they live on the street, struggling to find something to eat, a place to sleep. They regularly suffer abuse, because they are poor, homeless, and lack influential connections. Navy notices that differences between rich and poor, ethnic discrimination, and the abuse of

power persist even after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. There is no explanation for the crimes committed; no justice, no law, or any kind of compensation for the victims' losses. Other Cambodian survivor children also describe the extremely difficult circumstances in which they had to cope after surviving the genocide. They struggled hard to establish a new existence and usually failed; at the end they all decided to leave their homeland and go into exile.

The return home and eventual encounter with other survivors was also a painful confrontation with the scope of the destruction. In one of Beata Umubyeyi's short stories, "Euphrasie—Opération Biscuit," a little girl escapes the genocide and flees the country. When the massacres are over, she is eager to return home and locate her only surviving brother who left Rwanda before the genocide, became a child soldier, and returned to the country with the Tutsi liberating army. After many difficulties she finds him in a camp for demobilized child fighters:

When he saw me standing in front of him, Placide did not say anything. He opened his mouth and then wiped it as if he wanted to chase away a smile that would have given away a forgotten feeling. Then he took my hand and led me to a pile of bricks in the shade of a jacaranda tree. We were sitting there side by side for a long while, without uttering a word. He occasionally coughed and spat on the side, he seemed to be sick. I was waving away the flies that were swirling around my swollen feet. I think by that time I could not cry anymore. After a long while he said in a voice that I did not recognize: "Is it really you?" I bent my head and counted the chigoe fleas incrustated in my toes—by then I did not even have a safety pin to take them out—and answered: "It's me." He let out a long sigh of relief, he put his other hand on my knee and whispered: "Are the others?" My voice turned to a high pitch as I said: "Yes, all." (Umubyeyi 2015, 121)

When Emir Suljagić returned to Srebrenica for the first time in 1999, he had the feeling that it was a journey "through time, a time-leap backwards, a trip to the last enclave of Balkan Nazism. ... And at one moment as I was crossing the main town square, engaged in a struggle with the emotions flooding over me, I caught myself tiptoeing. The feeling that I was walking over the corpses of my loved ones was so strong that I could physically feel it" (Suljagić, 109).

The return home was similarly tough for those children who went abroad after the genocide. During the massacres of 1994, Révérien Rurangwa was badly injured and mutilated; according to the original French title of his book,

he was “genocided.” He miraculously survived. Being an extremely grave case, he was treated in various hospitals in Switzerland. A year later he returned to Rwanda. He was shocked to find that many people pretended that nothing had happened. He was destabilized and traumatized, and soon his life was threatened again by the executioners, his neighbors, who were ready “to finish their job.” Révérien finally had to return to Switzerland, where he eventually settled. It took him a long time to be able to build a new life and feel safe. He recounts his shock when, during a voyage to Belgium, Hutu youngsters attacked him in the metro. His adjustment to his host country was complicated as well. A young, severely handicapped black person living in the Swiss mountains, he had to face prejudice and isolation, in addition to many administrative and bureaucratic hurdles.

The first time Annick Kayitesi-Jozan returned to Rwanda, three years after the genocide, she revisited the scenes of the crimes and encountered several murderers. She tried to confront the killers of her mother’s colleague, whom she personally saw in action, and wanted to learn where her mother’s body was dumped. After a while she sensed that she was in danger, like many other survivors who returned to the country. She left heartbroken and frustrated (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 111–113). When she returned again eight years later, the traces of the genocide had been even further erased. This time she met the murderers of her uncle and aunt, who pretended they had nothing to do with the killings. They all performed an awkward, hurtful theatre that upset Annick enormously and she left once again frustrated and with unanswered questions (132–139). In 2002 she returned to participate in a session of “gacaca,” the popular tribunals that were set up to shed light on the facts of the genocide in which victims or their families could confront perpetrators. During this visit, Annick found again the sky of her childhood: “I have been dreaming about it for so long. It was still so blue, so immaculate. The air was as soft, the ambiance as peaceful as in my childhood” (188). The process ended with the falsified version of the murderers, whose entourage threatened her again (188–191).

In Gilbert Gatore’s book the people who remained in the village after the genocide pretended that nothing had happened:

Erasure followed by oblivion promptly became a reality. No one spoke of, or alluded to, the massacres. In a way, those who had died had never existed, their belongings had never been theirs, and those who didn’t respect the obligation to forget had to go elsewhere, someplace where their memories wouldn’t bother

anyone. To complete the work, several words that had a more or less obvious connection to the slaughter were banned from the language. (Gatore, 86)

Paraphrasing the much quoted “devoir de memoire,” “duty to remember,” Gilbert talks about the “devoir d’oubli,” the “duty to forget,” which the world adheres to in order to eliminate the traces of the genocide.

The return to a former home that had become the scene of a crime is upsetting for Saša Stanišić as well. It is extremely painful to accept that the idyllic childhood landscapes have lost their innocence. In *Where You Come From*, Saša revisits the key places of his early years and is confronted with both his personal losses and the profound destruction of a society that experienced genocide and was unable to process the trauma afterwards:

Višegrad is hardly a happy, carefree place for me anymore. Hardly any memory is just personal; almost every one comes with a postscript, a footnote, of perpetrators and victims and atrocities that took place there. What I once felt has had what I now know about the place mixed into it. (Stanišić, 2021, 195)

The first time Malay Phcar returned to Cambodia was in 2002, when he accompanied a friend who was making a documentary about the after-effects of the Khmer Rouge period. It left him profoundly troubled. He spent almost two weeks without sleeping, experienced panic attacks, and was overwhelmed by the onslaught of memories he had suppressed for decades. Time disintegrated; images, smells, sounds, and situations came back to him with a threatening intensity. He felt endangered and defenseless again; the soldiers’ uniform, the city’s noise, the reddish water that gushed out of the shower seemed to threaten his existence. Fortunately there were some positive moments as well. He discovered that his younger brother, whose traces he had lost during their chaotic return to Phnom Penh, was alive. He was also able to plunge into his mother tongue that he hardly used in exile, which had a soothing effect and helped him to connect again with his origins and people (Phcar interview 2007).

As the case of Malay shows, however distressing it might be, the return is also an opportunity for the survivors to connect their past with their “new” life, instead of living with a split self, in which the world before and after are hermetically separated. One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s protagonists also has an extremely painful voyage back home, which, at the same time, becomes an opportunity for her to “stitch a comma between yesterday and tomorrow, and pick up the thread of my life” (Umubyeyi 2022, ch. Blanche).

Bitter peace

Liberation brings enormous relief and joy, but survivors soon have to confront harsh realities that have not changed with the end of the conflicts or the defeat of the perpetrators. The conditions that prepared the way for the explosion of violence often remain in place in the absence of strong political will to eradicate them and bring about genuine social changes. Reckoning with the facts and their consequences is crucial to the reconstruction process. When it fails the path to a healthier future is blocked. Unfortunately, in Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia the genocide was never properly explored and confronted, apart from belated, limited efforts to bring a small number of the perpetrators to trial. In Rwanda the effort was far more comprehensive and thorough, via both the official juridical system and the gacaca process. But given the extent of mass participation in the genocide the results were inevitably incomplete.

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan underlines that the outside world, including the former colonial powers, Belgium and France, were not particularly keen on participating in the process of post-genocide justice-making either. They were eager to close the Rwanda chapter, forget about their own responsibility and move on. In one of her visits home, when she is looking for the vestiges of her massacred family members in a mass burial site, she meditates: “In an American film the police would be here to find their DNA. This is what is done when there is an air crash or a serious accident. But no one would come here to find our DNA. What for? The DNA test is for humans, it’s time we understand that we don’t qualify” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 84).

Kenan Trebinčević writes about the painful and shameful lack of post-war justice and acknowledgement of the crimes committed in Bosnia which made reconstruction and future co-existence extremely difficult:

After World War II, Germany apologized to Jewish victims of the Nazis, offering billions in reparations. Yet the German militia who invaded Poland and Russia had no intimate connection to the Jews they persecuted. In the Balkans, it was a classmate or co-worker holding a gun to your head, and now they were sitting in your local bar, wanting to share a drink. (181)

The aftermath of the genocide was particularly painful in Rwanda, where survivors had to live side by side with the assassins. In 1994 Berthe Kayitesi managed to flee the massacres and cross the border to the Congo. In the refugee camp she and other Tutsi survivors stayed together with many perpetra-

tors; they never felt safe, knowing that the murderers would try to liquidate them even in exile. Berthe eventually returned to Rwanda to take care of her surviving siblings. Everyday confrontations with the presence of yesterday's perpetrators caused her profound suffering:

Before the tragedy, it was discrimination and exclusion, and afterwards it was our people's abnegation that made it possible to accept the obligation to work together and share with our murderers. It's an enormous challenge. ... The crime is so immense that in principle it would be completely impossible to live together. I think that only the Rwandan proximity, the vast number of those who were involved makes it possible, makes it necessary. What made it possible for the Interahamwe to kill one million Tutsis in three months makes it possible for them to remain neighbors today. This fact shows the genuine success of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. They do not have anywhere else to escape to. (B. Kayitesi, 244-245)

In 2004 Berthe moved to Canada. She completed her training, started her own family, and died of a brain hemorrhage a decade later, at the age of 37.

Révérien Rurangwa also highlights the complexities of reconciliation:

The Tutsi genocide was a genocide of proximity. This also explains the extraordinary difficulties of forgiving. You are the most hurt when you are hurt by someone close. ... It is much harder to forgive a neighbor, the local bar owner, your priest, or your baker with whom you have built a friendly relationship than an unknown and nameless murderer. The trauma becomes more profound due to the closeness. (Rurangwa, 157)

The difficulties of reconstruction in post-genocide Rwanda, where the few survivors have to live together with the murderers of their family members, friends, and acquaintances, are underlined by Charles Habonimana as well. However, he also recounts cases that inspire hope, showing that it is possible to learn from the past's traumas. In the years following the genocide there were still armed Hutu gangs carrying out bloody raids on communities and villages to "finish their work" of extermination. In 1997 a group attacked a school in Nyange where in 1994 2,000 Tutsis were murdered in the church. They ordered the Tutsi students to stand apart. The Hutu children refused to separate and let their comrades be killed. Despite the threats of finishing them

all, the children resisted together and when the men finally attacked, six were murdered, but forty managed to escape.

The young protagonist of Mária Ember's *Hairpin Bend* hoped to see such an act of resistance when the village Jews were herded together in a transit camp before the deportation.

Charles evokes another case in his own village. In 1998 about thirty armed Hutu men entered the house of Anastase, one of the villagers, preparing to attack the few surviving Tutsis. During the night Anastase sneaked away and alerted the authorities, who managed to neutralize the assailants. Charles remembered that back in 1994, during the massacres in the village, Anastase was present, enthusiastically chanting and dancing with the murderers. He went to see him and asked what made him resist this time, risking his own life, when some years earlier he supported the carnage: "He answered that in 1994 he saw everything and lost everything, his friends, his bosses, his village, and at this stage he could not accept to lose even more" (Habonimana, 123–124).

Becoming a refugee

In post-independence Rwanda it was a common practice in Tutsi families to send at least one of their children to study abroad in order to avoid the strict quota system that restricted their access to higher-level studies and to give at least one family member a chance to survive possible future massacres. Scholastique Mukasonga was seventeen when she and her brother were sent clandestinely to Burundi, where they were able to continue their studies. She was pleased to be able to study, but had many difficulties in her everyday life, because although Rwanda and Burundi are close ethnically and culturally, as a refugee she often became the target of discrimination and insults (Mukasonga 2018/b). In 1992 she moved to France.

Several Cambodian survivor children fled to Thailand after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. The journey was extremely dangerous; they had to avoid armed groups and criminals who controlled different parts of the country, killing, robbing, raping, and harassing people. At the border crossings, the fugitives usually had to use their last reserves to pay the smugglers who took them over the mined and heavily controlled border regions. Once they managed to reach a refugee camp in Thailand, they had to struggle to find food and shelter; even when they received some provisions, it was never sufficient. In most cases they lived in utter misery, exposed to all sorts of abuse, until they obtained permission to emigrate to a third country.

Sor Sisavang and his siblings first escaped from Cambodia in 1979, soon after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge. After some months spent in miserable conditions in a Thai refugee camp, in June, together with approximately 42,000 refugees who were repatriated by force, they were taken to the border and pushed to walk back, under blows and gunfire, through mined fields. Savang, his sister, and his brothers were lucky to survive this massacre, in which hundreds (maybe thousands) were killed. They returned to their hometown and after many difficulties managed to establish a precarious existence. Two years later they fled again. This time they ended up in another camp where they spent nearly two years in difficult conditions before being able to leave for France (Sisavang, 255–282; 315–330).

After their escape from war-torn Bosnia, Kenan Trebinčević and his family first arrived in Vienna, where they were well taken care of by the Austrian government: “We were protected here. But while miraculously far from the war’s crossfire, I was a twelve-year-old boy with no school to attend, no sports to play, no teammates to practice with, no friends to talk to. It still felt like I was waiting out a prison sentence” (Trebinčević, 215). After some months spent in the Austrian capital, the family received permission to immigrate to the US. Kenan was thirteen when they arrived in Connecticut. They had to build a new life from scratch: “We were nobodies in our new home” (4-6).

To become a refugee, particularly at a young age, profoundly shakes one’s sense of identity and belonging. Clemantine Wamariya describes the process of alienation and privation she went through after she and her sister managed to escape the genocide and joined the wave of fugitives. “We walked, this mass of desperation, no longer distinct people” (Wamariya, 30). Once they left their home country, they were out of immediate danger, but became outcasts.

I felt ripped out of the ground—not ready to be transplanted, just destroyed. ... It’s strange, how you go from being a person who is away from home to a person with no home at all. The place that is supposed to want you has pushed you out. No other place takes you in. You are unwanted by everyone. You are a refugee. (Wamariya, 28–29)

When the two girls arrived at the first organized refugee camp, “a woman grabbed my hand and pushed it deep into a bucket of purple ink. The dye on my hand meant that I was counted. Nobody asked my name—too many people for names. Nobody cared that I was six” (40).

The two children stayed in various refugee camps in several countries. “I lost track of who I was. I’d become a negative, a receptacle of need. I was hungry, I was thirsty, I needed a bathroom, I needed a place to sleep. I was so confused. I just kept spinning. *How did I get here, where I am nobody? We walked all this way, for this?*” (42). In the precarious conditions of the camps, Clemantine had to fight to survive, both physically and psychologically.

Staying alive was so much work. ... You had to try to hang on to your name, though nobody cared about your name. You had to try to stay a person. You had to try not to become invisible. If you let go and fell back into the chaos, you were gone, just a number in a unit, which also was a number. If you died, no one knew. If you got lost, no one knew. If you gave up and disintegrated inside, no one knew. I started telling people, “*I’m Clemantine, I’m Clemantine! I don’t want to be lost. I’m Clemantine!*” I thought if I stated my name enough times, my identity would fall back into place. I wrote my name in the dirt. I wrote my name in the dust. ... Every surface, every body part was a battleground in the struggle to remain a person. (43–45)

After six years of drifting, Clemantine and her sister finally arrived in the US. They were picked up at the airport and driven to the home of their host family. During the journey Clemantine had an overwhelming sensation that everything, including herself, was completely unreal. She stared at her hand, trying to find a solid point of reference in the confused universe: “The moving car, my hands—it all felt weird and weightless, like we were still in the air, drifting, no obvious flight path. Just thirty hours before, we had been living in a slum in Zambia” (35). When Ismet Prcic arrived in the United States, he was similarly astounded. He also gaped at his hands to convince himself that what he experienced was real and not a delusion: “I looked at my hand, this thing I’d been living with all my life, and it felt like I was seeing it for the first time. It seemed only vaguely familiar, yet I was somehow in control of it; it was my hand to use” (Prcic, 16–17).

Vesna Maric evokes a similar feeling of losing her identity and her reference points when she arrived in Britain as a refugee: “I had spent my entire life being just me, belonging to a family, judged mainly by my freckly face or dodgy relatives. But I had never been pitied before, until the word ‘refugee’ was uttered. I was only sixteen and without preconceptions of what being a refugee meant. But here I was, about to become a ‘foreigner’” (Maric, 28). At the Immigration Office the refugees receive their new official documents: “Under-

neath our photos stood our names, already foreign and bald without the diacritics, and beneath were the dates and our near-incinerated places of birth, followed by a country that ceased to exist” (54).

Nine months after her arrival in Britain, her mother joined Vesna:

The thought of seeing my mother again was life-affirming, as if her mere presence would deliver me into existence once again. As the time since my arrival in Penrith grew and my life became increasingly different from what it had been in Bosnia, combined with my not speaking Serbo-Croat that much and the absence of any old friends, I started to doubt the reality of my memories, and my identity. I sometimes laid in bed in my makeshift bedroom in the vicarage, imagining my Mostar apartment, going over the titles on the bookshelves, the pictures on the walls, the smell of my bed and the sounds I remembered from outside. I tried to recall a different detail each time, so that my present life wouldn't blot everything out. (130–131)

Vesna talks about being a refugee, “that half-pitied, half-feared thing.” Clemantine adds yet another dimension: “To be a refugee was to be a victim—it was tautological. And not just a victim due to external forces like politics or war. You were a victim due to some inherent, irrevocable weakness in you. You were a victim because you were less worthy, less good and less strong than all the non-victims of the world” (Wamariya, 118).

The hardships of exile

The surviving children and young adults who immigrated to foreign countries, occasionally on other continents, tried their best to learn fast and integrate as much as possible. They were relieved to be out of danger and taken care of by adoptive families or humanitarian agencies, but their situation was not easy and their trials were far from over. Exile was the prolongation of their efforts to survive. They settled in Western countries with large immigrant populations that were often marginalized and discriminated against; their status as survivor or refugee was mingled together with the status of migrant which often made things more difficult to handle. Usually, after a first wave of solidarity, they were left to fend for themselves, coping with the multiple obstacles of everyday racism, economic survival, social integration, and psychological difficulties. In addition, they also had to come to terms with the fact that their host country was not the dreamland they imagined before their arrival.

After the genocide Annick Kayitesi-Jozan and her sister were placed in foster families in France. Annick was shocked to encounter various forms of everyday racism in people's behavior, remarks, and glances. In one French family that took them in, she and her sister were not allowed to speak their mother tongue. In another family the husband abused her (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 143–146; A. Kayitesi 2004, 146). After escaping the genocide, Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse also settled in France. Her short stories evoke numerous manifestations of ordinary racism vis-a-vis migrants and refugees. Often the only person who is able to understand the survivors is another outsider, a person with similarly traumatic experiences. In the short story “Bazilisa,” only a grandmother-in-law, a refugee from the Spanish civil war, is able to understand and heal the young survivor girl. In “Agripine,” it is an abused, marginalized French girl who shows empathy and can help her Rwandan friend.

The latter recounts:

When I first arrived and mentioned where I came from, the old ladies, horrified, questioned me about my story. But as soon as I started to talk, they interrupted me and started to tell about their own experiences of the war, the German occupation, exile, bombing, hunger. I found myself feeling sorry for them. When they came back to the topic of Rwanda, they served me a nice dish of racist clichés “in your country, my poor little thing, there are those barbarians who keep killing each other for so long that one does not know any longer who is good and who is evil.” Only the old ladies asked me questions. The youngsters were either completely indifferent or too politically correct to ask anything. It seems that the white people have downright forgotten how to speak about death in everyday conversations. (Umubyeyi 2015, 90)

In Gilbert Gatore's *The Past Ahead*, the female protagonist, a Tutsi survivor, is also hurt by the way people in France react when the genocide is mentioned.

The world's obscenity, not in the display of horror and injustice but in the attitude of those who could find nothing else to say in reaction but “It's terrible, but what can you do...,” who could do nothing about it except allude to it between a sip of coffee and a little joke, as they'd invariably become indignant over it before moving on to something else, to normal life. (Gatore, 22)

Like the child survivors of the Holocaust, the children of the next generation often have difficulty adjusting afterward to a “normal” everyday life. They fre-

quently suffer sleeping or eating disorders and find it hard to concentrate on their studies, keep a regular job, or build stable relationships. One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's protagonists has to learn to walk again, instead of always running (Umubyeyi 2017, 143).

The survivors' world is painfully split; they strive to establish an ordinary existence in their host countries, but snapshots of their past keep returning in their mind. Sometimes the smallest, seemingly anodyne detail can trigger strong reactions. Like Norman Manea's young hero who panicked when he heard the word "fritters", Annick Kayitesi-Jozan is troubled in school when she has to paint a nature morte, a still life: "I had difficulties in some subjects. Drawing, for example. I was unable to get what still life meant. For me dead nature evoked something completely different than what the teacher imagined" (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 144). Clemantine Wamariya also writes about tiny, often harmless events that can easily destabilize her: "Say something happens—say a bird hits this window right here. You and I, we are strangers in our strange costumes. We've come to this moment from different places. I might be terrified of the smash and the carnage, recoil as if the bird were a bomb. You might think I'm overreacting and say, 'It's just a bird'" (218).

One of the most serious obstacles to integration in their host country is that many survivor children had lost their trust in the adult world and in people in general. They make considerable efforts to reconstruct or at least to manage it, but the rupture is often too profound for reason or willpower to mend it.

Révérien Rurangwa describes his complete disappointment in the grown-ups' world, including their institutions:

I did not catch cholera or Aids due to the infected machete blades, but a chronic mistrust. "The first blow received destroys one's trust in the world," writes Jean Améry, who was deported to Auschwitz as a Jew, after being tortured as a resister. Mistrust is a pernicious virus that I caught and I don't see how I could be cured of it. No trust in the adults I said. Some adults did help me to stand up, but how could I trust the rest of the "grown-ups"? If men and women can kill like this, in an almost civilized savagery, I do not want to grow up; I want by all means to hide in an eternal childhood. (155–156)

Révérien also doubts the credibility of the adults' institutional systems. "Mistrust and scepticism vis-a-vis every state apparatus, every political organization, every official declaration, every solemn promise" (156).

During their peregrinations from one African country to the next, Cleman-tine Wamariya's older sister instructs her: "You can't trust anyone" (Wamariya, 28). When they finally land in America and are placed in foster families, Clem-antine finds it difficult to relate to people, despite the attention and help she receives. She has a comfortable life, she is able to continue her studies, most people she meets are supportive, yet still she feels wary and estranged: "Claire and I had lived in seven different countries since leaving Rwanda. The United States was our eighth. I was callous and cynical. I didn't trust kindness; I believed it came with a price. ... Everyone was so nice, awash in a sense of pur-pose. But I was so bruised and so mistrustful of others that I didn't understand why." "I did not want to bond. ... I thought: We can have this moment, but we will never be best friends. I've seen this before. This is just how it starts: all cute and adorable and they're buying you soda and candy and the next thing you know, they want to kill you" (35-36; 64).

Buried past

Many survivors in exile bury their traumatic past both in order to protect themselves and to facilitate their assimilation in their new country. This understandable effort at self-protection, however, accentuates their feeling of alienation and loss of identity.

Kenan Trebinčević recalls that after their arrival in the US, they stopped talking about what happened during the war, not only outside, but inside the family as well. Their past, nevertheless, was a key element of their identity; pushing it aside destabilized the children and created a painful void (4-6). After many difficulties in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, Loung Ung managed to immigrate to the United States. Once there, she strove to seal off her child-hood experiences, to assimilate completely, to become an average American teenager. Her past only surfaced when she was off guard, for example, when she saw images of the 1984 Ethiopian famine that evoked her own suppressed memories of starving and ubiquitous death (Ung 2007, 275).

When Chanrithy Him received her permit to immigrate to the US, she left Thailand, her first country of exile, crying. She was pleased to be able to move on, but she realized that she would be separated from her dead and her land. Looking back years later she interpreted her exile like a new birth:

In Cambodia the term for childbirth is *chlong tonlé*. Literally translated, it means "to cross a large river," to weather the storm. Looking back, I have

crossed the river on my own, without my mother. I have started a new life in a new country. I have learned a new language and lived in a new culture. I have been reincarnated with a new body, but with an old soul. It lives symbiotically inside me. (Him, 294)

Chanrithy also recounts that in America Cambodian refugees hardly talked about their past, not even among themselves. She tried to put aside her childhood memories as well and concentrated on building an academic career. One day, in the framework of preparing a new research project, she and her colleagues were invited to watch films about Cambodia, including the feature film *The Killing Fields*: “After a few minutes, I stormed out. I remember taking refuge in the women’s rest room, leaning against the wall and weeping. For the first time in years, I had allowed myself to feel the pain that was buried in my soul” (15–17).

After several years of separation, the parents of Clemantine and Claire Wamariya were able to leave Rwanda and join their daughters in the US. The family reunion, however, was not at all smooth. They were unable to share their experiences and try to process them together. The past remained a painful, sealed domain, hindering communication and increasing the distance among family members:

Like Claire, my parents didn’t talk about before, or what had happened between before and now. They existed in a never-ending present, not asking too many questions, not allowing themselves to feel, moving forward within the confines of a small, tidy life. ... The one time I tried to ask my mother what had happened to her during the war had not gone well. She had been cleaning my sister’s apartment, which I thought would provide good distraction. She could keep her eyes on the cupboards she was wiping down, and tell me about her life without the unbearable intimacy of me seeing her face. But as soon as I said, “What happened...,” I felt ashamed. The cabinet door started shaking, my mother’s hands frantic and trapped, a bird flown through a window who can’t escape. Now I see I should have known better. (Wamariya, 144–145)

A stranger everywhere

Ismet Prcic titles his book *Shards*. It is a collage put together from splinters of a broken universe; past and present, reality and imagination. In her memoir, *When Broken Glass Floats*, Chanrithy Him also uses the metaphor of a dis-

integrating world whose segments float in the flow of time. The title refers to a Cambodian proverb according to which when broken glass floats, evil is triumphing over good. One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's books is titled *Lézardes* (*Cracks*). The authors of the next generation are definitely the heirs of a broken world. Several write explicitly about their difficulties in recreating wholeness after the collapse of their previous world, both within and around themselves. Clemantine Wamariya appears to be an exceptionally successful, resilient survivor, but deep inside she frequently feels that she is unable to put together the fragments: "Often, still, my own life story feels fragmented, like beads unstrung" (Wamariya, 5) As if echoing Hamlet's words, she writes: "The world had torn and I thought I was bringing the pieces together, but they just lay there, unsutured" (185).

Some authors also remark that despite their efforts to build a "normal" life and to integrate, they feel like strangers in their host country. There are too many aspects of their past that they can't share with others and they often fail to understand the patterns of individual behavior and social mechanisms in their new environment. This feeling of insecurity and strangeness, coupled with the impression of losing their identity in exile, makes many of them feel rootless and excluded; condemned to being strangers forever and everywhere. Their often bitter journeys back to what used to be their home reinforce this feeling. They don't belong to their previous home any longer, but are not part of their host country either.

In her effort to fully integrate and become a genuine American girl, Loung Ung tried to forget the past. She radically curtailed the connections with her home country and did not even write to her beloved sister, Chou, left behind in Cambodia. The past, however, haunted her in her nightmares and she realized that sooner or later she had to confront her memories. It took her fifteen years to gather enough strength to return to her birthplace:

As the trip grew near and my anxiety increased, my terrible nightmares returned. In one dream, I'd board a plane in America as an adult woman only to step off in Cambodia as a child. The child was lost in a crowd of people, desperately looking for her family, calling the names of her siblings, calling out to her parents. I woke up every morning increasingly panicked about this homecoming.

The day of the trip, my anxiety transformed into excitement. As I boarded the plane in Los Angeles, I fantasized about how it would feel to return to where I belong. A place where everyone speaks my language, looks like me, and shares

the same history. I envisaged myself getting off the plane and walking into the open arms of my family. ... I spotted my family right away. They were all there. ... I watched my aunts' and uncles' eyes frown as they continued to study me. My comfortable, practical, stain-resistant loose-fitting black trousers, brown T-shirt, and black Teva sandals drew quizzical looks from Chou and Khouy. Then I realized my mistake. I looked like the Khmer Rouge. All my fantasies of instant connection were crushed. My family and I reacted awkwardly to each other and they kept their many warm arms at their sides. (Ung 2007, 277–278)

After the first moments of bewilderment, Chou reaches out to her and takes her in her arms. She can arrive at last.

Ismet Prcic also describes the feeling of being a stranger both in exile and at home. The two life experiences seem to be too different and nearly impossible to share. He recalls what his paternal grandmother used to tell him about her uncles who had emigrated to the US decades before the 1990s. Whenever they “returned to Bosnia to visit, they had seemed to her like different people. Unrecognizable. She had blamed this on America.” When his flight lands at New York airport, Ismet’s protagonist is divided between relief and a disturbing sensation that part of him is left behind in his country. Waiting for the connecting flight, he feels the split in his personality almost physically:

I sat there mesmerized, telling myself again that I had made it, wishing I had a dog or something warm to touch, to look in the eye. It was then that the morning sun sliced through the clouds, its light hitting the window in such a way that suddenly I saw my reflection. I saw a young man sitting alone on a plastic chair, white-knuckled and wide-eyed and zit-faced, happy and perplexed, and I knew why my grandmother couldn’t recognize her own son, why I was wielding a stranger’s hand. I knew that someone new would get off this plastic chair and board a plane for Los Angeles and all the while an eighteen-year-old Ismet would remain forever in a city under siege, in the midst of a war that would never end. (Prcic, 18)

Throughout the book, the protagonist has various alter-egos, each of them playing out alternative destinies Ismet could have had, had he remained home.

Once he settles in the US, Ismet, or his alter-ego, Izzy, makes enormous efforts to blend in and be an authentic American boy. He avoids contacts with fellow expatriate Bosnians and rarely visits his family back in Bosnia. However, his past and his homeland with all its problems keep catching up with

him and make it ever more difficult for him to assimilate and be “normal.” He gradually becomes alienated from both the world of his origins and that of his exile. While his family back home is falling apart, he slowly slides down into a spiral of self-destruction that ends with his suicide.

Time out of joint

The genocide creates a rupture in the survivors’ minds and radically changes the way they perceive the world. Their experience of “frozen time” during the persecution and massacres lingers on even after the end of their tribulations. Time became out of joint forever and there is no way of adjusting it.

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan describes how her entire self froze during the genocide. The image of the kitchen where she witnessed the murder of her mother and the capture of her siblings keeps haunting her: “I am in this kitchen. Each time when I come back here, I feel I never left it. I see the cardboard paper on which I slept, tucked underneath the sink. I hear the words that I have been repeating for days: ‘Try your best to survive the day’” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 22). Annick has built a plentiful new life in exile, but part of her self is stuck at the scene of the massacres. “In March I’m still thirty four, in May I’ll be thirty five. But in April I’m always fourteen, my heart returns home. It wants to find its loved ones” (59). Révérien Rurangwa also feels that time fatally derailed in April 1994: “I often have the impression that a part of me became forever petrified at the age of fifteen, like a clock’s hand that gets stopped during an earthquake; and another part of my self became old too rapidly and too early. I live in a permanent discrepancy with myself” (Rurangwa, 114).

The experience of genocide brutally terminated the survivors’ childhood and confused their process of coming of age. They are extremely premature and, at the same time, carry inside the child they had been before their life was wrecked; they lack important stages of personal development that build a solid adulthood. After she settles in the US, Clemantine Wamariya feels unable to join the world of children again: “Everyone wanted me to relax ... to behave at long last, like a child and start making up for all I’d lost. I was twelve years old but felt instead three years old and fifty years old, yet I knew I had to fit in. The other girls my age wore short shorts, so I wore short shorts too. But I could not be like them, languid and carefree” (Wamariya, 38).

The sensation of agelessness, of being both a child, whose growth had stopped with the massacres, and a very old person, of being lost in the chaos of a broken genealogy, is a returning motif in the books, particularly the ones writ-

ten by orphans: “A survivor is ageless” states Révérien Rurangwa (Rurangwa, 152). Charles Habonimana, who witnessed the killing of his both parents, asks himself: “How do I look at the child I was? I’m the father of that young boy” (Habonimana, 128). Rithy Panh addresses his murdered parents: “Where are you now? Did you find peace? Today I am older than you. You are like my children” (Panh 2020, 7-8).

Living in a no man’s land between life and death

Like many Holocaust survivors before them, the child survivors of the more recent genocides often talk about having the sensation of living in a grey zone between life and death and not being properly part of either. Révérien Rurangwa begins his book saying: “They killed me, me and my whole family on a hill of Rwanda in April 1994, but I am not dead. Good luck or miracle, I don’t know” (Rurangwa, 11). Rithy Panh formulates similar feelings: “I’m alive, but I’m afraid of not being alive anymore. Of not breathing anymore. The bloodbath has drowned part of me” (Panh 2020, 33). Describing his state in the in-between-world, Rithy also describes a life where death is permanently present: “There is no book, no screen, no love, no mirror, no new innocence to which a survivor could hand over death. No way to put it somewhere else. Death floats around in unthinkable forms, always changing; it appears in a gesture, a sound, an image, and then it lets us live again” (104).

Emir Suljagić depicts the same sensations. The very coordinates of the universe change after the genocide. “I survived and many did not; I lived on in the same way that they died. There is no difference between their death and my survival, for I remained to live in a world that has been permanently and irreversibly marked by their death” (Suljagić, 11). The survivors continue to live in a particular state: “We were destroyed in more than one way, scattered, completely lonely wherever we were, not ready for feelings because since the fall of Srebrenica all feelings were somehow half-hearted, almost burdensome. Ever since, I cheat on the men and women in my life. I cheat on them with the dead. And for some reason only there—among memories, among shadows—do I feel better” (122). Annick Kayitesi-Jozan’s words express a comparable feeling: “The dead live among the living ones and the living ones among the dead.” “I cheat. With the dead, with the living ones, how can one accommodate all this?” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 218; 221). In an interview Annick talks about the “solitude that inhabits each survivor” who “pretends to have a normal life. ... I get up, have my breakfast but I am not completely there. A

part of me refuses to be there. This cleavage will always be there. I am here, and I'm somewhere else" (A. Kayitesi-Jozan interview 2017).

Charles Habonimana describes the chaos of July 1994, when he was fleeing together with an immense flow of survivors in the midst of ongoing massacres, FPR military victories, and rumors of French bombings in defence of the genocidal government "This crowd of widows and orphans wandered around in silence and without shedding a tear. To cry for your dead you have to be sure of being alive. And this time didn't come yet" (Habonimana, 121). In a later section Charles uses the words of another survivor, Antoine Mugasera, to depict the condition of the survivors: "The survivors' world is invisible to the naked eye. Nonetheless it's very real. It's inside and it is unfathomable. The universe in which they float and keep existing is intangible ... They are too easily lost between the world of the living and the dead ones" (146).

In Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's short story about the little girl who manages to find her former child soldier brother, the children evoke their childhood before the genocide. She talks about the time "when we were still alive." The camp's commanders let her stay with her brother for some time, until they find a place for her: "I'll be the only girl among the boys, like I was the only Tutsi among hundreds of Hutu children who fled and the only one alive among the lifeless bodies of my loved ones. This otherness, or the feeling it left in me, became part of me, like a second identity" (Umubyeyi 2015, 122–123).

In another piece, Beata writes about a young survivor girl who lives in exile in France. She strives to forget the past and to fit in as much as possible. She befriends a marginalized young girl who was badly abused in her childhood: "Finally Lea helped me a lot. ... I managed to assume the feeling of being too much, of not having my place anywhere among the living ones. Having it less and less. ... Her own mother tried to drown her when she was small; she knows what is the melancholy of existence, the violent feeling that one day the whole world was looking away when you were about to be massacred" (Umubyeyi 2015, 91).

Marked for life

Otto Dov Kulka wrote that the camps constituted his childhood universe, his primary place of reference. Joseph Bialot talked about being brought up by Auschwitz. Navy Soth recounts in an interview that the experiences of her early childhood in the Cambodian killing fields shaped her whole life afterwards:

“I am almost a virgin of the past, of the happy years in Phnom Penh. I grew up with the genocide, it was my education” (Soth interview 2011).

Ruth Klüger wrote about the way Auschwitz became her place of origin; Emir Suljagić states that Srebrenica turned into his place of origin that defines his entire existence:

I come from Srebrenica. As a matter of fact, I come from somewhere else, but I chose to be from Srebrenica. Srebrenica is the only place I dare to come from and it was only to Srebrenica that I dared to set off, at a time when I dared to go nowhere else. That is the precise reason I believe that the place of birth is irrelevant compared to the place of death. The former does not say anything about us—it is a mere geographical fact; the place of death tells everything about our convictions, beliefs, the choices we made and stood by right until the end, until death caught up with us. (Suljagić, 11)

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan describes as well how genocide defined her identity “When we were children and met people we did not know, we told them who our parents were. I am Kayonga’s daughter. So people knew where to put us. Today, I say ‘genocide survivor’ and people know where to place me.” “Survivor,’ it’s almost like a family name by now” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 111; 212).

Clemantine Wamariya recounts how the experience of the genocide shook completely her vision of the world and how she has been trying to rebuild it ever since.

I had been so absorbed, as a young child, in knowing the world, and then I’d lost the whole world I knew. In the years that followed I wanted to piece that world back together, but the idea of one group of people killing another group of people—people they lived with, people they knew—that chunk of knowledge could never fit itself in my mind. It was categorically, dimensionally, fundamentally wrong. It was like trying to store a tornado in a chest of drawers. That was not how the universe worked. (Wamariya, 96–97).

The sequels of this cataclysm remain omnipresent in the survivors’ life. In Imre Kertész’s *Fiasco*, the protagonist, middle-aged Köves, describes how he has become soiled in Auschwitz in a way he can never cleanse afterwards. Rithy Panh also has the sensation that the years he spent in forced labor camps have left him eternally filthy: “And so violence abides. The evil done to me is inside me. Present and powerful. Lying in wait” (Panh 2013, 6).

Gilbert Gatore also shows how the genocide caused an irreparable trauma in the whole society, both for the survivors and the perpetrators. *The Past Ahead* tells the parallel stories of a little girl, whose entire family was exterminated, and a young man who, due to inertia and fear, participated in the massacres. After the bloodshed the young man runs away from his village, the scene of the crime. He tries to escape his past, but he can't escape his memories and guilt. He wanders around aimlessly, unable to pull his life together. "Does taking another person's life forbid you to use your own as you see fit?" he asks himself (Gatore, 89).

After having survived the genocide, the little girl is adopted by a French couple and grows up far away from home, in a different environment, surrounded by different people, places, and objects. Nevertheless, the traumatic experience is ubiquitous in her everyday life, even though she tries to put it behind her:

the events certainly belonged to the past from a chronological viewpoint, but they were still present—past, but not surpassed. As young as she was, even she was still marked by them. Instead of growing blurry, of being erased with the years, and even though she'd been raised in a milieu that hardly brought them to mind, the memory of those events had been implanted and had simply grown. ... deep inside her the wound had never stopped bleeding and becoming infected until the moment when she could no longer ignore it. (Gatore, 44)

The painful memories engraved in their bodies keep haunting the survivor children long after the events. In one of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's short stories, *Béatrice*, the young survivor girl who lives in exile in France often returns to the past in her dreams:

Some days I woke up with painful arms, my fingers scratched by the plaster of the wall of my small room in the university accommodation. I knew I tried again. Bring over the dead ones who were so alive in my dreams, to my side of the mirror: it was a childish and futile idea to try to pull on their ochre-coloured clothes with one energetic movement. Early morning nothing else remained, just the white plaster on my hands and an after-taste of failure. (Umubyeyi 2015, 110)

One morning the young girl wakes up hearing classical music broadcast on the radio. Panic-stricken, she jumps out of the bed, packs her bag in a frenzy, and is about to sprint out of her tiny studio to catch the next train to escape,

when the music stops and the speaker announces the next item on the program. She realizes that the night before she was so tired and nervous about her forthcoming exams that she forgot to change the radio station she usually programmed for her early morning wake-up:

The tension that seized my body the minute I woke up was released all of a sudden. My hand remained in the air and I stood there petrified and thought of that woman in the Bible—her name only came back to me two days later—who turned into a pillar of salt because she looked back. ... I was vacillating between bursting out in a crazy laughter and sobbing. In a couple of minutes I collapsed on my unmade bed, completely exhausted. ... I have forgotten that it was no longer 87, 93, or 94, when classical music or military marches broadcast early morning on the—Rwandan or Burundi—radio meant a coup d'état. I have forgotten that I was in France, and here there were no more coups and that the Interahamwe militiamen who lived here in total impunity were not able to kill me as if I were a fly. (113)

Ismet Prcic's protagonist in *Shards* grows up in war-torn Bosnia. His worldview and his very senses are formatted by this experience. Ismet and his theatre group manage to get out of their beleaguered town to participate in a theatre festival in Edinburgh. After their arrival they stroll around the city in a state of incredulous euphoria. All of a sudden, they hear explosions. The group's younger members, including Ismet, take cover right away.

Then I saw Asmir and the other musicians laughing at us. "What is it, peasants? Never seen fireworks?" I climbed from under the bus. A hugging couple avoided me in a semi-circle. I dusted off and looked for my bag. No, I had never before that day seen fireworks. Neither had Ramona, nor Omar, nor Boro. Asmir and the musicians were older. They remembered life before the war with fully formed adult bodies and minds. Before chaos, they'd known order, before senselessness, sense. They were really out of Bosnia because leaving chaos to them felt like returning to normalcy. But if you were forged in the chaos, then there was no return. There was no escape. To you chaos was normalcy. And normalcy was proving to be an unnatural, brittle state. (Prcic, 240)

Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse relates the story of a young girl, Agripine, who lives in France, has a job, and seems to have a quiet, orderly life. However, the mem-

ories of the genocide keep haunting her. She has a profound aversion towards her own body, particularly when she has her period:

The memory that flows, first clear and continuous, then heavy and slimy between my thighs is not a simple organic manifestation. ... Every month when my womb rejects the unfertilized ovule, I re-live my mother's agony. My regular cycle that lasts exactly four days reproduces precisely the last stage of our ordeal in May 1994. First there were the different hiding places, the gathering of the herd on the Save, the resigned waiting, guarded day and night by people who became dogs and dogs that fed on humans. Then the assault, mama's inert body that I dragged to a distant hole where the murderers did not follow us to finish us off. And these four days when I saw all the blood leaving her body, unable to do anything else than wet her lips with a bit of rainwater. Water, that's all I could do for her. I cling to the water when I feel myself going crazy. Animals don't take showers or perfumed baths. To prove to myself that I'm still a human, I wash myself relentlessly. (Umubyeyi 2015, 89)

Having seen so many suffering, deformed, and dead bodies during her childhood under the Khmer Rouge, Loung Ung also feels alienated from her own body. When she has her first period, in times of peace in faraway America, she is traumatized as well: "As I stare at the blood, my mind takes me back to the other times I've seen so much blood coming out of a human body. Suddenly, my head feels light and the room begins to spin and fade out. For in all those instances, the person was either dying or already dead. ... 'I don't want to die,' I whimper" (Ung 2008, 180–181).

Survivor guilt

Most survivors struggle with guilt feelings vis-a-vis their massacred family members, friends, and acquaintances. The question of "why me" and the doubts whether they "deserved" to survive keeps troubling the authors evoked here. One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's heroines talks about "the shame of being alive" (Umubyeyi 2015, 90). When, at the age of sixteen, Chanrithy Him arrived in the US, she was overwhelmed by contradictory feelings: "I couldn't believe that I had arrived in America. It was like a dream and I felt guilty that my parents and siblings didn't survive" (Him presentation, Holocaust Memorial Day Trust; n.d.). Clemantine Wamariya recounts that there were periods in her life when she felt so guilty for surviving that she mistreated her-

self—and others: “I’d been drinking two cans (of Coca) a day for the caffeine. I was punishing myself, assuaging my guilt over surviving, with lack of sleep” (Wamariya, 186).

Emir Suljagić keeps returning to the moment when his life was spared, trying to understand what happened. That ominous day at the checkpoint of the camp where Srebrenica’s inhabitants were held, Emir met Ratko Mladić, the uncontested master of people’s destiny in the enclave. Unexpectedly, Mladić decided to let him go:

I survived because Mladić felt like God that day: he had absolute power to decide over life and death. I used to dream about him for months, reliving the encounter all over again... I awoke in front of his bloodshot eyes, his bad breath made me feel sick, the stench of alcohol that spread from him remained in my nostrils. I feared that I would go mad trying to explain to myself why he spared me, who was just as insignificant to him as my friends must have been whose execution he ordered, must have been. I never found an answer. (Suljagić, 157)

The guilt is even more difficult to handle when survivors meet the relatives of their murdered relatives and friends. Emir was unable to visit the mother of his best school friend who was killed during the war, even though she lived close-by:

I could never bring myself to do that, because I knew I should feel guilty in her presence. After all, Mujo and I were the same and I should not be able to explain, above all to myself, what gave me the right to come out alive from that school desk, second from the door, when he did not. We had had the same doubts, the same desires, the same fears, and also the same rare things that used to make us happy then. And nevertheless it was me who escaped. (29)

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan also felt guilty for being a survivor and a happy mother, when she returned to Rwanda after the genocide and met people who had lost their family members, including their children: “Suddenly my life seems unjustified. My daughter is a gift that I don’t deserve, unless it’s the other way around, I’m a burden that she does not deserve” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 75). Berthe Kayitesi describes an encounter with a Tutsi man she met while she was traveling on a bus with her uncle after the genocide. When the uncle introduced her as one of the rare survivors of their extended family, the man, embittered by the loss of his loved ones, interrogated her: “How did you survive?”

Before I could open my mouth, he added, laughing ‘did you sleep with them?’ I did not utter a word to the end of the trip” (B. Kayitesi, 206).

The shadow of the Holocaust

Most authors of the next generation discovered the Holocaust after their respective genocides with a mixture of recognition, incredulity, and horror. On the one hand, it was reassuring to find that other people had undergone similar traumas; that what they went through was not their fault, nor the fruit of their disturbed imagination. It often helped them to understand better what happened to them and mentally share memories that are so difficult to share with people who didn’t experience similar shocks. On the other hand, they were stunned by the scale of the Holocaust’s destruction and the emptiness of the solemn promises of “never again.” If some of the Holocaust’s child survivors could hope that what happened during World War II was one particular historical aberration, those of the next generation understood that this was not the case.

Most of these authors feel a strong identification with the victims of the Shoah. They quote their works or borrow their imagery to underline similarities. Some have met survivors personally and have participated in joint events commemorating genocides hoping to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and exclusion. They often have the impression that they are listened to politely and then the public’s attention switches off—until the next catastrophe. As Clemantine Wamariya comments in one of her many public presentations: “The world cared deeply about refugees, for those thirty seconds” (Wamariya, 242).

Rithy Panh describes his shock when he first learned about the Shoah: “At the age of eighteen, I discovered Alain Resnais’s film *Night and Fog*. I was surprised. It was the same thing. It happened elsewhere. Before us. But they were us” (Panh 2013, 200). Like their predecessors, several authors of the next generation are haunted by the idea that even though they managed to survive, sooner or later their death sentence would be executed—occasionally by their own participation. Rythi Panh is particularly haunted by the suicide of Primo Levi: “It’s as if his tormentors finally succeeded, in spite of love, in spite of his books. Their hands reached across time to complete the work of destruction, which never ends” (21).

The parallels between the two events are evident for Beata Umubyeyi Mairresse as well. In her interviews she evokes how much the books of Aharon Appel-

feld and Imre Kertész helped her to understand and handle her own experience (Umubyeyi interview 2015 & 2018). Vaddey Ratner talks about the impact Elie Wiesel's *Night* had on her. It "was the first holocaust writing I encountered. It changed my life. It gave voice to my loss and tragedy at a time when I was still struggling to express the mundane in a new language. Reading that book, I felt I was not alone in my despair. An experience, I've since learned, can be both deeply personal and universal" (Ratner B&N interview n.d.).

Clemantine Wamariya read Elie Wiesel's *Night* when she was sixteen:

The book alarmed and comforted me. I wanted to consume it whole. The main character was not a curiosity, not a member of that strange category—"martyr." Wiesel was white, European, male, and Jewish. Wiesel was me. He expressed thoughts I was ashamed to think, truths I was afraid to acknowledge. He described walking in the snow—the cold, the mouthfuls of bread and the spoonfuls of snow, an injured frozen foot that felt like it was no longer his I had walked in the heat but it was the same walk—desperate, disembodied, surreal. (...) Wiesel was—I was—nothing, reduced to nothing, and yet still contained a galaxy of horrors. ...This is exactly what happened to us. (Wamariya, 95, 100–101)

Révérien Rurangwa discovered the Holocaust during his exile in Switzerland. He recounts his trip to Auschwitz in the company of other survivors of other genocides; they had an immediate connection and needed no introductions and explanations. Révérien starts his book with a quote from Primo Levi. When he explains what urged him to write down his own experience, he cites the Polish historian Ignacy Schiper, who was killed in Majdanek: "Even if we survive to write the history of these times of tears and blood ... who will believe us? Nobody will want to believe us, because this disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world. We'll have the thankless task of proving to the world, which would not want to hear us, that we are Abel, the murdered brother" (Rurangwa, 149).

Scholastique Mukasonga also draws parallels between the extermination of the Jews and the Tutsis. Describing life after the genocide, she writes: "I'm not sure if it was someone who'd lived through the Shoah or the Tutsi massacres who said that a genocide survivor is in reality a 'sub-vivor'" (Mukasonga 2016, 124). In *Our Lady of the Nile*, she mentions the legends according to which the Tutsis are in fact the descendants of the lost Jewish tribe or of the Falashas of Ethiopia (164). Annick Kayitesi ironically talks about "the final solution of the 'Tutsi problem'" (A. Kayitesi 204, 98).

Gilbert Gatore relates in an interview that he was eight when he read Anne Frank's diary. When the armed conflict began in Rwanda, he was at first enthusiastic that he would also have a great adventure to write about, but he understood very quickly that the "adventure" might cost him his life and wipe out his whole community. For a period of four years he kept a diary to document the events, but in 1994, when his family was escaping to Zaire, all his belongings, including his precious notebooks, were confiscated (Gatore interview, 2018). Gilbert titles his novel *Le passé devant soi* (*The Past Ahead*), associating his work with that of Emile Ajar (Romain Gary), *La vie devant soi* (*The Life Before Us*). Ajar's novel recounts the friendship of an old Jewish woman and an Arab child. The woman is an Auschwitz survivor who became a prostitute after the war and lives in a run-down council-house in a poor immigrant neighborhood of Paris (where Joseph Bialot grew up). In her old age she takes care of the prostitutes' children, among them the young boy, who was abandoned by his mother. In Ajar's book love and hope prove to be stronger than the hardships of life. Gatore's book, in contrast, ends with a complete loss of hope: "Dear stranger, welcome to this narrative, whose only survivor will be you" (Gatore, 2).

Vesna Maric quotes from one of his father's letters written in besieged Mostar: "There are stories of concentration camps. Strange how far away in time the Second World War seems, yet here we are, doing all the same beastly things" (Maric, 95). Kenan Trebinčević evokes the Holocaust several times in his book. He sees it as a dark precedent that was repeated in Bosnia. In an interview he recalls his late mother who watched *Schindler's List* numerous times: "My mother used to rent the movie at Blockbuster for a dollar and cry watching it, over and over, and say 'That's exactly what happened to us.' I was a resentful fifteen-year-old who asked her, 'What do Jews in World War II have to do with our Muslim family in 1992?'" (Trebinčević interview 2014).

In Saša Stanišić's *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* there is a scene that takes place during a crazed bus-trip during the chaos of war. One of the passengers is a strange old man, who keeps muttering to himself "in his own three-dot elliptical language": "To think we always have to settle things by violence ...we always have to ... it upsets me ... it upsets me ... weapons ...fighting ...even with words ...fighting ...vulgar abuse ... spitting ... cursing ...like the old days ...again and again...[...] it never stops ...it never ends..." It turns out that the man was once a rabbi in a nearby village. During World War II he lost his family, his name, his home, his synagogue, and his ability to finish his sentences. When the driver loses control of the bus and they crash-land on a fro-

zen lake that resembles the place where the Nazi soldiers left him to die alone during the war, he puts on his skates and disappears into the darkness (78–80).

There are other forms of transmission between the two generations of survivors as well. During his studies in the United States, Ismet Prcic took a Beckett seminar taught by Raymond Federman. This experience significantly shaped his views on literature, including his own writing (Prcic interview 2012). Rithy Panh had a very strong personal bond with Marceline Loridan-Ivens. Their friendship was unique and precious for both of them. As he recounts:

There was a lot of talk about who we, survivors are. There are these dead people with us all the time. ... In terms of suffering, trauma, loss of self, I do not see the difference between myself and Marceline Loridan. ... She has a number tattooed on her arm and I have a foot injury, which is also a form of tattoo. We all have a mark. It looks like she's been in the same place as me, or me with her. (Panh interview 2018)

Fully acknowledging the importance of the Holocaust in understanding later genocides, Clemantine Wamariya warns against amalgamating these unique historical events. There is a tendency to label them superficially, shovel them into a mental drawer, and forget about them. Clemantine first heard the word genocide in school, as a young adolescent:

I hated it immediately. I did not understand the point of the word genocide then. I resent and revile it now. ... The word genocide cannot articulate the individual experience—the real experience of each of the millions it purports to describe. The experience of the child playing dead in a pool of his father's blood. The experience of a mother forever wailing on her knees. The word genocide cannot explain the never-ending pain, even if you live. ... The word genocide is clinical, overly general, bloodless and dehumanizing. “Oh, it's like the Holocaust?” people would say to me—say to me still. To this day I do not know how to respond and be polite. No, I want to scream, it is not like the Holocaust. Or the killing fields of Cambodia. Or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. There is no catch-all term that proves you understand. There is no label to peel and stick that absolves you, shows you've done your duty, you've completed the moral project of remembering. (Wamariya, 93–95)

Annick Kayitesi-Jozan also describes her concern about putting labels on events people are too afraid to explore and understand:

Genocide-Trauma. During the last three years these words accompany me everywhere. They speak for me. No one listens to me. The sisters don't listen to me, the friends don't listen to me, they rather think: Genocide-Trauma. ... I don't like this word. It's a word that is used to hide thousands of histories that no one wants to listen to. You say genocide and people say: oh, I see. But no, you don't see anything. So I insist, I think I survived so I can tell what happened, to talk on behalf of those who are not here anymore. Talk about them, for them. (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 111).

Suffering as spectacle

Both during and after World War II, people could still pretend that they “did not know” about the extermination of Europe's Jews. In the case of the genocides that took place afterwards, this became impossible. The outside world could not take shelter behind the smokescreen of ignorance; there was reporting even from Cambodia, whereas the Bosnian and the Rwandan massacres were practically broadcast live. Unfortunately, the bulk of media coverage often simplified and distorted the facts. This allowed politicians and the wider public resort to the cheap “explanations” of “incomprehensible, ancient hatreds,” “never-ending ethnic clashes,” and the like to justify their failure to protect the victims.

Several books evoke the shock of survivor children when they encountered the media images or artistic reconstructions of the genocide they had survived. These renderings put their individual experience into a wider context that made them assess the full dimensions of the catastrophe they experienced. However, very often the images, news, or art works had a narrative survivors could not identify with. Even well-intentioned people who were eager to help them were often unable to sense what they might have felt, not to mention those who lacked even basic understanding or empathy.

Vesna Maric recounts that on the long bus ride that took the Bosnian refugees from Croatia to Britain, the British volunteers who accompanied them tried to entertain the passengers by continuously showing the only video available on board, a children's film, *The Snowman*:

One day the organizers decided to surprise us by playing a different video. We were delighted. It started with pictures of a city with a green river, green trees, smiling people. I recognized my home town. A voiceover began: “Once, Mostar was a beautiful, peaceful city. Its inhabitants lived happily alongside

each other, regardless of their different ethnicities and religions. But then, the hatred that simmered for centuries once again rose to destroy brother and neighbour.” Reels of shelling followed, houses crumbling like plaster models, trees screaming in the flames, people running, the city swallowed by fire, by hatred, by doom. It was a perfect action movie. I half expected John Rambo to appear on the screen. (Maric, 39–41)

In one of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s stories, “The taste of cherries,” Alice, a little orphaned Rwandan girl, is adopted by a French family. One night she wakes up and enters the salon where her foster parents are watching a TV program about the Rwandan genocide. They don’t notice her:

There are images one after the other, masses of miserable-looking people, with mattresses on their heads, with sacks of burlap cloth filled with improbable things on their back. The commentator says that these people are fleeing and that the humanitarians are overwhelmed. Who are these people? She does not recognize herself in them. Are they her people? ... Her stepmother sighs. Her stepfather says: “What a mess, it’s impossible to understand.” The stepmother shakes her head and adds: “Thinking of it, what luck Alice had.” Alice takes off her slippers and holds her breath so she can return upstairs without being heard. (Umubyeyi 2017, 18)

Fifteen-year-old Annick Kayitesi-Jozan had a similar, real-life encounter with the media coverage of the Rwandan genocide. It was a shattering experience. The images she saw on the recorded news in her foster family’s house made her realize that her own experience was just a drop in the ocean of mass murder. At the same time, watching what happened in her country through the eyes of outsiders, whose perspective, perhaps unintentionally, supported the executioners’ narrative, made her extremely upset:

I recognized the hills, recognized the corpses scattered around here and there by the road. I recognized the pleading looks of those who were about to die. They were filmed, but they were not saved. ... The camera showed the white families surrounded by white soldiers who made them enter the planes. There were white men, white women, some black wives of white men, the children of the whites and their dogs as well. The white people’s dogs were running to save themselves. The dogs. In the previous shot there were people left to die by the road. Black human beings, women, children, men imploring to be

saved. Were they less precious than the dogs? Why were they filmed as they were left to the hands of the murderers? Are we worth less than the dogs? The Hutus called us cockroaches. They must have been rolling with laughter seeing these scenes. They were not wrong. Maybe the world was grateful to them. The cockroaches. What can be lower in the chain of humanity? The white people saved their dogs and left the cockroaches to the mercy of exterminators. (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 125–126)

Annick Kayitesi, Beata Umubyeyi, and Clemantine Wamariya also write about their ambiguous feelings concerning the mediatization of the genocide. On the one hand, they agree that it is crucially important to let the world know what happened. It is important to regularly evoke and commemorate the events, in order to inform, teach, make people understand, and, eventually, help the victims heal. On the other hand, memorial ceremonies and visits to the killing sites often become formal rituals. Evoking the genocide can become a hollowed-out gesture; just one more item on the news or in some socio-cultural program. This contributes to the banalization of the experience and makes it easier for people to distance themselves from it and treat it as part of “normal” everyday life or as an “incomprehensible” event.

Once their story becomes an external, “tradable” object made “usable” by the media and other institutions, survivors often have an uneasy feeling of losing their grip on their own experiences and feelings. Sometimes they even start to doubt the validity of their memories. Clemantine Wamariya reflects at length about the impact of mediatization and the implications of being instrumentalized—even for a good cause. She opens her book relating the surreal encounter with her parents and surviving siblings organized for an Oprah Winfrey show broadcast live. After settling in the US, Clemantine goes to school and tries to live the ordinary life of an American schoolgirl. She participates in a writing contest for high-school students about Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and becomes one of the winners. She is invited to the famous talk-show and when it is her turn to speak, Oprah asks if she ever saw her parents again after their flight from Rwanda.

I had a mike cord tucked under my black TV blazer and a battery pack clipped to my black TV pants, so I should have suspected something like this was coming. “No,” I said. “We tried UNICEF... we tried everywhere, walking around, searching and searching and searching.” “So when was the last time you saw them?” she asked. “It was 1994,” I said, “when I had no idea what was going

on.” “Well, I have a letter from your parents,” Oprah said, as though we won a game show. “Clemantine and Claire, come on up here!”

After producing the letter, Oprah announces that the girls don’t even have to read it right away, because their parents and siblings are there in the studio. The doors—with images of barbed wire—open and the family flown over for the show from Rwanda enters the scene: “The cameras were so far away that I forgot I was participating in a million-viewer spectacle, that my experience, my joy and pain, were being consumed by the masses, though I was aware enough to realize that everybody in the audience was crying.”

After the show a black limousine drives the family to Clemantine’s sister’s apartment in a public housing unit:

Nobody talked in the car. In the apartment, nobody knew what to do either. My mother, in her long blue dress, kept sitting down and standing up and touching everything—the living room walls, the TV remote—and singing about how God protected us and now we must serve and love him. My father kept smiling, as though someone he mistrusted were taking pictures of him. Claire remained nearly catatonic: rocking, stone-faced. I thought she’d finally gone crazy, for real. ... The next day was Friday. Of course, I didn’t go to school. We needed to start making up for so much lost time. Yet I couldn’t look at my parents—they were ghosts. I felt gratitude, yes. Oprah had brought my parents to me. But I also felt kicked in the stomach, as though my life were some psychologist’s perverse experiment: “Let’s see how far we can take a person down, and then how far we can raise her up, and then let’s see what happens!” ... My father kept smiling his fake, pained smile. Mine probably looked the same: a smile covering a scream. Claire barely said a word. Then, Monday morning, my parents and new siblings left on the flight back to Rwanda that Oprah’s people had booked for them. (Wamariya, 1–8)

After this first, unsettling experience, Clemantine participates in countless commemorative events. She feels that she has a moral obligation to remind the world of what happened. Nevertheless, she often has the uncomfortable sensation that she has become a “genocide princess,” merely part of a spectacle, over which, even though she can occasionally adjust her personae to the specifics of each event or her own needs, she has no control.

Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse also addresses the question of turning suffering into a spectacle. In an interview she talks about the unease she had during a

visit to Auschwitz as a “participant” in a mass exercise of “memorial tourism” with all its banalization. Afterwards, she felt guilty for having such thoughts. Years later, when she read the passages about the externalization and alienation of the trauma in Imre Kertész’s *Liquidation*, she recognized her own feelings during that visit and was able to interpret her reaction and dissolve her pangs of conscience (Umubyeyi interview 2015).

In “Black and White”, one of Beata’s short stories, eleven years after the genocide someone alerts a foreign journalist that children playing soccer in an empty plot in Kigali had found remnants of massacred people. The journalist arrives to the scene and takes a myriad of pictures of the spot—the children, the bones, the fragments of clothes, and the onlookers. The photos are black and white, as suits such a dramatic event. The journalist is shocked to see how matter of fact the children are. They only seem to be upset when he shows them the images he took of them. After finishing his session, the journalist leaves the scene. He will probably produce a brilliant article for his Western readers, but he is unable to grasp the deeper layers of the encounter. He does not understand that the children were taken aback because they saw themselves in frozen black and white images, reminiscent of the photos that remained of the people who were murdered in 1994. His pictures conveyed them to the domain of the dead. The story delicately reveals the reverse side of mediatizing genocide; the profound gap between the realities of the children who live with the consequences, the image the outside world is able and willing to create of this reality, and the hierarchic relationship between the two (Umubyeyi 2017, 117–124).

Laughter

The surviving children of the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Bosnian genocide found very much the same supports that helped the Holocaust’s survivors to reconstruct their life. Friendships, solidarity, love, nature’s and culture’s treasures, studies, and a new purpose in life assisted them on their slow and painful road. As with their predecessors, laughter was extremely beneficial for them. During the period of persecutions and massacres, they had very few occasions to laugh. Laughter often returned with the liberation and afterwards, helping them to release their pain and tensions and to obtain a more distant perspective on their experience and how to live with it.

When Annick Kayitesi-Jozan returned to Rwanda for the first time, she went with her aunt to a mass grave to look for traces of their murdered fam-

ily members. Accompanied by a municipal employee, the two women entered the building and started to look through piles of human remains and clothes, mixed with earth.

I screamed. My aunt and the agent of the municipality rushed to me, not because they thought that I had found the shorts of my little brother, but because they expected me to lose my mind.

“I have found it. Look. It’s brown.”

“Ouf. You scared us.”

They laughed. Me too.

“What, did you think that I lost it?” I asked.

“You would not be the first or the last one,” answered my aunt and we burst out in a loud, wild laughter.

... Then a bone, a tibia or a femur fell out of the shorts. I cried out.

“Don’t worry, he won’t do anything to you, he is dead.”

I dropped the stick; in fact the shorts seemed to be too large anyway. I dropped everything. I laughed and cried at the same time. I think I mostly cried, hard to tell. All three of us had this attack of crazy laughter. Our mixed tears and laughter saved me from going mad this day. (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 85–86)

Laughter also helps Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s protagonists to cope with their difficulties after the genocide. In one of her stories, a young survivor girl moves into a new apartment bloc in a Paris suburb:

On our floor lives a strange old Flemish woman, who paints her hair orange and pretends she doesn’t understand French. Some days after I moved in I stepped out to take the garbage down and met her on the corridor, shouting “Tutsi, Tutsi!” When she saw me, she burst into a lengthy speech in her language in a super-high-pitched voice. Her face was shaking, and it looked paler than usual in the neon light filtered by her orange hair. As she spoke she was spraying me with her saliva. It was an ugly scene and her apparent panic seized me as well. I told her: “I don’t understand why you call the Tutsis?” The elevator door opened and she dashed in. How did she know that I was Tutsi, what was happening? I locked myself in my flat and waited for Lea to return. As soon as I heard her key turn in the door, I rushed out and told her this strange affair. “The old girl lost one of her cats again. She is called Tootsie, it has nothing to do with you, it is a character in a film.” Since I found this difficult to believe,

she showed it to me on the internet. The old lady found her cat. Nevertheless, for some days, I kept eavesdropping on her, to be sure that she did not call her other cat “Hootou.” (Umubyeyi 2015, 94)

Lea finds this story irresistibly funny. She suggests her friend write a book about her experiences in Rwanda. Surprised at first, the young girl enters the game:

“Yes, that’s it, I’ll write a book of jokes with the title ‘Machete Blues’ or something like that and the subtitle will be: ‘100 days of laughter with a Rwandan genocide survivor, unwilling heir of the Jewish sense of humor.’” “The worst is that they are capable of suggesting a title of this sort,” sighed Lea. “Anyway, whatever you happen to write, if you have the word Rwanda on the cover, it will sell. If you put together the words Rwanda and genocide, you reach an even higher level. They would find you a ghost-writer to write it in a language and style they like. All you’ll have to do is to tell your tragic life in front of the cameras, to show them what a fighter you are and bla-bla-bla. You’ll also have to talk enthusiastically and full of hope about reconciliation in the making. Because listening to you they should still be able to finish their steak.” (Umubyeyi 2015, 94–95)

Healing words

The power of words was another precious resource that helped the persecuted and enslaved children during their ordeals. Words remained crucial after the massacres were over and the slow reconstruction of their life began. Words could bring relief and consolation in their daily lives. When they decided to write about their experiences for a wider public, the process of writing helped them to come to terms with their own experience, honor the dead, and reach out to the living.

In Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s story that narrates the encounter of brother and sister after the genocide, the siblings spend days sitting under the blossoming jacaranda tree telling each other what they went through:

I jerked when a dry twig fell from the jacaranda. My heart was not very strong any more. He finally took me in his arms to calm down this irrational fear that made my whole body shake and he said “humura maama,” “don’t worry.” This word made me feel that I had arrived home after all. We were thin, we wore

rags, we did not have a roof or a family apart from ourselves, but this comforting word, “humura,” which I had been waiting for in vain for more than a year, took me back to the times when Placide took my hand to accompany me to the outhouse at night. Then I felt protected by the thousands of stars that reflected in the grass with the complicity of the fireflies. (Umubyeyi 2015, 122)

Written words help many of the next generation’s members to understand and manage better what they went through. Clemantine Wamariya described how crucial it was to read Elie Wiesel’s *Night* during her efforts to come to terms with her experience. Later she discovered other books that also helped her reconstruct her life: “My survival plan in high school was shoddy, a sheet of plywood nailed over a broken window. This worked well enough for a little while: I shut out my family, kept up my routine, worked hard at school. When I needed a bit more help, I escaped to Toni Morrison” (Wamariya, 136). During her later studies W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* became “my flashlight, my looking glass, my everything” (223). Charles Habonimana read Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* decades after the genocide. The case of Gregor K. made a huge impact on him. He felt that the story of the innocent young man who was excluded, rejected, and killed by his own family was a poignant metaphor of his own history (Habonimana, 73).

With the exception of Emir Suljagić, all authors of the next generation wrote their books in the language of their adopted countries. Writing about such a sensitive personal experience in a foreign language might have accentuated their feeling of loss of identity, but at the same time it helped them to distance themselves from the events and enjoy a creative freedom evoking them. Navy Soth felt that her mother tongue was too much burdened with painful memories. She recounts in an interview that she is still unable to listen to Cambodian music because of its heavy emotional charge. She wrote her book in French, the language of her studies, of her reconstructed life (Soth interview 2011). Ismet Prcic also opted for the language of his adopted country. When he was asked if writing in English made it easier for him to recall his childhood in Bosnia, he responded: “Oh, yeah. I couldn’t write anything like this in Bosnian, because I knew the language so well that it actually stifled me. Writing in English opens me up” (Prcic interview 2012).

In the last stage of her captivity, during their escape and the time spent in refugee camps, Vaddey Ratner was unable to speak. When she and her mother arrived in the US, she was still mute. She started to learn English and years later she wrote her books in English. In an interview she talks about how adopt-

ing a new language helped her to move on and start rebuilding her life: “The language was a sanctuary. It occupied a different space from Khmer, at first enclosed safely in picture books, so it wasn’t threatening my silence. By the time I arrived in America, I felt it was safe to try to pick up this language because it felt so new, and it didn’t require me to speak of what was lost. It was about practical things” (Ratner, Punch interview 2017).

Rithy Panh was also numbed at first after surviving the genocide and its aftermath. It took him years to find ways of expressing himself, in a slow process of opening up: “When I arrived in France, at the age of seventeen, I was mute and empty. Exhausted from having lost my beloved ones. Exhausted from surviving. Today I shoot films, I recount, I even force myself to talk” (Panh 2020, 16). Today he uses both images and words to bring back the memory of the murdered people and his martyred homeland.

Writing to become living memory

Like their predecessors who survived the Holocaust, the child survivors of the Cambodian, Bosnian, and Rwandan genocides decided to write about their experiences in order to keep alive the memory of their massacred families, friends, and communities. They also wanted to alert the world to the dangers of racism, discrimination, social injustice, and the lack of critical thinking. Writing is a mission and also a therapy, both for the authors and their readers, which helps them to come to terms with their own experiences and losses. It is, at the same time, a perilous exercise, because it opens unhealed wounds. Rithy Panh sums it up: “It is insupportable to talk about it, but if you don’t do it, you help negation” (Panh, 2020, 103). Writing often seems impossible; what happened is beyond words, one cannot even name it. Like Raymond Federman, who tried to avoid describing “the Unforgivable Enormity,” Gilbert Gatore refers to “the unmentionable events” in an allegorical, abstract way (Gatore, 111).

In Gilbert’s *The Past Ahead*, the little girl survivor who is adopted by her murdered parents’ friends grows up in Paris. She has a quiet, comfortable life, but her past troubles her to the point that one day she suddenly decides to drop everything and return to Rwanda. She has an ambitious project: she wants to collect the testimonies of everyone affected by the genocide, survivors, murderers, accomplices, witnesses, and soldiers from all sides. “It is my dream that, thus acknowledged, each person’s suffering will be appeased and transformed into a new cohesion” (46). Her work eventually morphs into a fiction-

alized story, in which she weaves together her findings and her own experience. She often has to remind herself: “Don’t add any verbal violence to that of the facts.” After telling her story, she commits suicide. “She has unleashed the flow of words and the thoughts they express, like bloodletting.” As if, decades later, when she was ready to recount it, genocide finally caught up with her, another *chance survivor*, to finish her off (1–2).

Gilbert’s heroine was unable to accomplish her undertaking, but in real life Rithy Panh succeeded in creating a similar project. He set up in Phnom Penh the *Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre*—named after one of the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime—with the purpose of saving and resuscitating Cambodia’s historical memories, including the genocide. The Centre became a precious resource that helps people, principally the young generation, to learn about their painful past. Rithy’s own films and books contribute to keeping alive the memory of the dead:

And so, after thirty years, the Khmer Rouge remain victorious: The dead are dead, and they’ve been erased from the face of the earth. Their commemorative stele is us. But there’s another stele: the work of research, of understanding, of explication. ... It’s a struggle against elimination. Of course such work doesn’t raise the dead.... But it gives us back our humanity, our intelligence, our history. Sometimes it even ennobles us. It makes us alive. (Panh, 2013, 162)

One of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s protagonists also sees the survivors as tombstones of the murdered: “As long as the two of us survived, we were able to preserve the past. As long as he tirelessly murmured his memories into my quivering ears, invisible steles were erected to the bodies that were snatched away, the family survived through us, he and me” (Umubyeyi 2017, 145). Annick Kayitesi-Jozan dedicates her first book to her massacred family members, “So their names don’t fall into oblivion.” In her second book she quotes several times a song by the murdered Rwandan poet and singer, Cyprien Rugamba: “to survive means I keep him/her in my memory.”

The imperative to tell their story and to commemorate the dead is a powerful incentive which pushes the survivors to write, despite the hardships writing brings. Malay Phcar says in an interview that he wrote his book “to honour the memory of the victims, not to seek vengeance” (Phcar Libération interview 2010). Berthe Kayitesi makes a point of naming murdered people, including several of her family members, friends, schoolmates, and neighbors, in order to keep their memory alive (B. Kayitesi, 60–61). Vaddey Ratner

confides: “My duty among the living is to ensure that those lost are not forgotten” (Ratner Punch interview 2017).

Révérien Rurangwa also writes about “the duty of transmission,” the obligation he felt to share his experiences in order to fight against oblivion and misinterpretations:

I have to live together with this tragedy.... I have to recall it without shaking, even if I will never be able to describe all its horrors. But I have to tell it so I don't die. This is one way to fight against what could finish me off: hatred and silence. ... The only dignified vengeance I can have is that the murderer, who wanted to kill me after having cut my people into pieces, discovers these lines. And says: “I did all this in vain. He is alive! He has straightened up! He is going to live! And his people live in him!” (Rurangwa, 11–12; 161–162)

Chanrithy Him shares similar feelings. She was reluctant and unable to talk about her own experience for many years after the genocide. However, working with trauma survivors she realised that sharing her personal memories was a way to avenge the Khmer Rouge and oppose governments that have inflicted suffering on innocent children during the Khmer Rouge era, the Nazi era, the Chinese Cultural revolution, and the bloodshed in Bosnia and Rwanda:

Throughout a childhood dominated by war, I learned to survive. ... I mentally resisted forces I could only recognize as evil by being a human recorder, quietly observing my surroundings, making mental notes of the things around me. There would come a day to share them, giving my voice to children who can't speak for themselves. Giving voice, as well, to my deceased parents, sisters, brothers, and extended family members, and to those whose remains are in unmarked mass graves scattered throughout Cambodia, the once-gentle land. (Him, 21)

After finishing her studies, Loung Ung became a spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World. In her case as well, it was through her work that she first became able to talk about the Cambodian genocide and her personal story: “As I tell people about the genocide, I get the opportunity to redeem myself. I've had the chance to do something that's worth my being alive. It is empowering, it feels right” (Ung 2007, 277). Loung remarks that her immediate family members who lived through the Khmer Rouge period, found it very hard to evoke it, even decades later. They were only able to read some sec-

tions of her book, *First They Killed My Father*, while the younger generation, her nieces, nephews, and cousins, read and discussed it and were eager to learn more (Ung 2008, 280).

Navy Soth mentions in an interview that her mother and only surviving brother did not support her decision to write about their experience, both because the past was too painful to remember and because they feared retaliation. Nonetheless, she went ahead because she felt that the experience had to be told, among others, to contribute to the forthcoming trials of some Khmer Rouge officials. The process of writing eventually helped her to commence a mourning process that she had been pushing aside for decades:

I'm pleased that my father, whose body we never found—and a part of me still hopes that he'll come back one day—and my sister Mitchen, whose dead body was taken away and thrown into a mass grave, are alive through this book. They died alone and we could not bury them in a proper place; this is as if I have found a place to be their tomb. (Navy interview 2011)

One of the painful dimensions of the loss of beloved ones during the genocide was that the victims were deprived of a dignified death, a proper farewell, and a sepulchre. As Annick Kayitesi-Jozan puts it: “The dead deprived of a grave are still living” (A. Kayitesi-Jozan 2017, 31). After many years of searching in vain, Annick understood that she would never learn where the remains of her mother were:

I accept that mama will never have a tomb and I understand that I will never be in peace. Mama knew that she was going to die. But she did not know that she'd be thrown to the vultures. I have to become her grave as long as her bones are scattered somewhere on these hills. When she was alive, she carried me in her womb, she breastfed me, she carried me around on her back, she loved me. Dead, I'll carry her around, in my womb, on my back. Everywhere, always. (113)

When Scholastique Mukasonga returned to her village ten years after the genocide, she found that the memory of the victims was completely erased. Their houses were destroyed, their lands were abandoned, even their names were forgotten. Scholastique began to write to become the “living memory” of her massacred people. She named her dead family members, friends, neighbours, and teachers, evoking their life, creating traces of their existence. Writing

became an “offering”; her books are tombs made of paper that aim to preserve their memory (Mukasonga 2018/b 151; 179). In “The barefoot woman” Scholastique recounts that her mother asked her and her sisters to cover her body after her death. She was killed, together with her daughters, during the 1994 genocide. Only Scholastique survived in exile:

Mama, I wasn't there to cover your body, and all I have left is words—words in a language you didn't understand—to do as you asked. And I'm all alone with my feeble words, and on the pages of my notebook, over and over, my sentences weave a shroud for your missing body. (2018/a, 8-9)

Epilogue

“I am three years old and will have to grow up with the hostility of others. I am already an outlaw in my own country, an outlaw in the world. I am three years old, and don’t yet know that I am stateless. A tyrant leant over my cradle and traced a destiny for me that will be hard to avoid: I will either be a fugitive or I won’t exist at all” (Habiburahman 2019, 1-2)

These are the opening words of *First, They Erased Our Name*, a book written by Habiburahman, a young man of Rohingya origins, born in west Burma (now Myanmar) in 1979. In 1982 the Burmese military regime passed a new citizenship law under which more than a million Rohingya Muslims were excluded from the recognized minorities of the country. They were deprived of citizenship and their fundamental rights, including freedom of movement and access to higher education.

Son of a modest shopkeeper, Habib grows up enduring everyday racism, systemic harassment, and humiliation. Children and adults belonging to the dominant ethnic groups refuse to call him by his name and address him by a derogatory term, “kalar,” usually said in a spiteful way, “as if they were spitting into our faces” (14). Rohingyas are also described as the “vermin.” “parasites of the nation,” and “black infidels” that need to be eliminated. Habib grows up with the intimate knowledge that his origins carry a death sentence that can be executed at any time: “I am 13 years old and I live in a world full of anguish. ... Fear has become our daily lot.” “I am 15 years old and wonder if I’ll ever reach adulthood or if I’ll be murdered first” (71, 83).

He is passionate about football, but being Muslim and dark-skinned, he is excluded from playing in a team or participating in competitions. On a few

occasions some of his well-intentioned teachers let him join trainings, offering him rare moments of joy: “During these sessions, nothing else matters. ... These moments united us through a shared language that ignored our skin color, religion, and origins: the universal language of sport” (27). Later, living in another city, he is aware that he would never play again: “I’m longing to kick the ball, but no Rohingya plays football in Sittwe” (96).

Like many other persecuted children, Habib finds consolation in the love of his family, in a few precious friendships, in nature, and in reading. He is a voracious reader: “This is my escape” (123). In his village, during his scarce free moments when he is not busy working or studying, he goes to the woods with a friend. They race around, play, laugh, and let their imaginations run free, forgetting about their life’s realities. Later, wherever he lives, he always seeks to escape to nature, the only environment where he feels safe and calm.

His father is aware that Habib’s only chance to survive and eventually improve his social status is to study, so he pushes him to excel in school. He is an intelligent and hardworking boy and is always among the best students; yet he still has to put up with the permanent bullying of his schoolmates and many of his teachers. The more he sees and understands, the more he realizes that he is unable to change his situation. He also realizes that the outside world is both unaware and/or undisturbed by the inhuman conditions his people are forced to live in. After a new wave of violence against the Rohingya, he asks bitterly: “What is the point of having witnesses and people to tell our story? Is there anyone who really cares about changing our fate?” (98).

Habib finally concludes that the only way out of his hopeless situation is to escape from his native Arakan, his “prison-region,” change his identity, and enroll in a school in the north of the country. The night when he leaves his home, alone and anxious, his only companion is the moon: “Our home may be destroyed, our hills and mountainsides may be forbidden territory, but no one can take the moon away from us—pure, serene, reassuring, and loyal. It makes the darkness more bearable” (86).

He buys false identity papers and succeeds in getting accepted to a high school in the town of Sittwe. One of his professors notices his talent and commitment and invites him to join a group of youngsters of various ethnic and social origins who are preparing a survey on the state of the country. When the authorities learn about this unauthorized work, the group’s members are arrested and tortured. In prison Habib bitterly questions his desire to be free and live a human life: “Can the cyclical nature of history be broken? Can I hope for a destiny other than the one that was laid down for me?” (198).

Thanks to his professor and the rampant corruption of the system, he manages to escape and flees to Thailand and later Malaysia. He spends nine years as a clandestine migrant, suffering racism, exploitation, and persecution both in his daily encounters and at an institutional level. When he can no longer endure it, he escapes to Australia by boat. Upon arrival he is arrested: “We are human debris washed up on the Australian coast, a long way from regaining our dignity. In this cage where we are being assessed, we lose faith in justice. For us, democracy is a mirage” (229–230). He spends 32 months in various migrant detention centers.

In 2016 the “slow genocide” (221) that Habib has experienced his entire life, became a state-orchestrated full-scale assault on the Rohingya. In 2016 and 2017 the military and their collaborators launched two major assaults against the group, leading to the death of approximately 25,000 and the forced exile of at least 700,000 people. Habib witnesses the campaign of extermination in a detention center in faraway Australia, unable to help and unable to make his voice heard: “Only we know what is happening in Arakan and only we are calling this massacre by its real name: genocide. The world is unwilling to use the term, because then it would be forced to act” (232).

After several protest actions and hunger strikes he is eventually recognized as a political refugee and released. He is still stateless and lives precariously from odd jobs.

Habiburahman’s experience is—yet again—strikingly reminiscent of the experiences of child survivors of the Holocaust and the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Bosnian genocides. He describes similar mechanisms of exclusion, marginalization, and expropriation at all levels of society, from the primary school to the country’s administrative organization and political system; the singling out of his ethnic group as strangers and usurpers, later as enemies of the nation, whose harassment or killing is encouraged; and the increasingly violent language of discrimination turning into calls for mass murder. Thanks to his persistence, Habib manages to survive, but thousands of his fellow Rohingyas perish during the years of abuse and waves of massacres. His memoir joins the books written by child survivors of earlier genocides, testifying to the dire state of our world.

My primary motivation for writing this book was to rescue from oblivion the voices of child survivors of the Holocaust and add the testimony of child survivors of subsequent genocides to highlight their timely and vital message about the imminent dangers of new genocides. Genocides are major—and preventable—man-made catastrophes, whose impact lasts for decades and

deforms the development potentials of both individuals—victims, witnesses, and perpetrators—and their entire societies. No one escapes them unharmed. Few people today repeat the ill-fated slogan “Never again!” as if this type of destruction has become part of “normal” everyday life. The voices collected here speak eloquently to the dangers of this “normalization.”

THE CHILDREN
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Holocaust survivors

AHARON APPELFELD

Ervin Appelfeld was born to a well-to-do family in 1932 in Jadova, near Czernowitz, in Romania (today Ukraine). His father owned a mill. He was eight years old when his mother and grandmother were killed by Romanian officers. He managed to escape, but soon was taken to the city ghetto together with his father. During a forced march he managed to escape and spent two years hiding, eventually joining a group of partisans. In 1946 he immigrated to Palestine, where he first worked in agricultural cooperatives, and later became a professor of literature and a prolific writer. He died in 2015.

ALDO ZARGANI

Aldo Zargani was born in 1933 in Turin, Italy. His father was a well-known violinist. Aldo was five years old, when, due to the anti-Jewish laws, his father lost his job and he was banned from school. When he was six, the family went into hiding; later he and his younger brother were placed in a Catholic boarding school. His parents were arrested, but they managed to escape from prison and the family sheltered together once again. They survived the war, unlike most of their family members. After liberation Aldo worked for the Italian Radio and Television and became a writer. He died in 2020.

ALONA FRANKEL

Ilona Goldman was born in 1937 in Krakow, Poland to a middle-class family. Her father was an accountant. She was two when the war broke out and they fled to Lvov (now Lviv in Ukraine). When the town was occupied, they

were imprisoned in the ghetto. In 1942, before the ghetto was liquidated, she was sent to shelter in the countryside. About half a year later, when her parents could no longer pay for her, she was taken back to the city and hid with her parents until the war ended. In 1949 the family immigrated to Israel. She became a popular author and illustrator of children's books.

ANA NOVAC

Zimra Harsányi was born in 1929 to a poor Hungarian family in Dés, northern Transylvania. She was fifteen when her family was deported to Auschwitz. Later she was transferred to Płaszów and to Chrastava (Kratzau). Her parents, younger brother, and most family members were killed. After the war Ana returned to Romania and studied psychology. To escape the harassment of Romanian authorities, in 1965 she moved to Budapest, later to Berlin, and in 1969 she settled in Paris. She became a writer. She died in 2010.

ANDRÁS JUDA GARAI

András Garai was born in 1928 to a middle-class family in Pécs, in the south of Hungary. His father was a chemical engineer. He was three when his mother died; his father later married a non-Jewish woman and converted to Catholicism. He was sixteen when he was interned in the ghetto and later deported to Auschwitz and then to Kaufering, one of the Dachau sub-camps. Except for his father and step-mother all his family members and friends were murdered. After the war he returned to his hometown; in 1949 he escaped from Hungary and settled in Israel. He became a doctor and therapist. In 2014 he committed suicide.

ANDRÁS MEZEI

András Mezei was born in 1930 to a poor Budapest family. He was fourteen when they had to move to the ghetto. He escaped execution several times and was finally saved thanks to the documents issued by Raoul Wallenberg. His father was deported to Auschwitz, where he hanged himself the day after the liberation. After the war, András worked as a locksmith and in 1949 immigrated to Israel. He returned to Hungary two years later and worked as a technician, while he completed his studies. He became a major poet, journalist, writer, and editor. He died in 2008.

ANDREW KÁRPÁTI KENNEDY

Andor Ödön Kárpáti was born in 1931 in Győr but grew up in Debrecen, in north-east Hungary. His father was a bank director; the family converted

to Protestantism long before the war. Andor was thirteen when they were interned in the ghetto, from where they were sent to the Strasshof camp near Vienna. His father and most of their family perished, but he, his mother, and sister survived. They returned to Hungary and in 1947 he was sent to England to continue his studies. He settled there and became a writer, teacher, and professor of British literature. He died in 2016.

ANITA LASKER-WALLFISCH

Anita Lasker was born in 1925 in Breslau (Germany at the time) to a comfortable middle class family. Her father was a lawyer, her mother a violinist. She was eight when the systematic persecution of Jews started. In 1942 her family was deported, but she and her older sister were exempted because they worked in a paper factory. Later they were arrested when they tried to flee Germany and were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Anita became a member of the camp's Women's Orchestra. In 1944 she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen. After the war she moved to England. Most of her family members were murdered. Anita became an accomplished musician.

ANITA LOBEL

Anita Kempler was born in 1934 to a well-to-do, assimilated Krakow family. Her father owned a chocolate factory. She was five when the war broke out. She spent the following five years hiding with her younger brother and Catholic nanny in various hiding places. Eventually they were denounced and the children were deported to Płaszów, then to Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. They both managed to survive and were sent to Sweden to recover. In 1947 their parents joined them and in 1952 the family moved to the United States. Anita became a highly acclaimed illustrator of children's books.

ARANKA SIEGAL

Aranka Meizlik was born in 1930 in Beregszász (then Czechoslovakia, today Ukraine). Her grandparents were farmers; her parents owned a small shop. She was twelve when she was forbidden to attend school and thirteen when she was locked in the ghetto with her mother and several siblings. In May 1944 they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In January 1945 they were sent on a death march to Bergen-Belsen. After the war she and her only surviving sister were taken to Sweden to be rehabilitated. In 1948 she immigrated to the US. After raising her children, she resumed her studies, got a degree in social anthropology, and became a teacher and lecturer.

ARNOŠT LUSTIG

Arnošt Lustig was born in 1926 to a lower middle-class family in Prague. He was thirteen when Nazi Germany occupied Czechoslovakia and he was excluded from school. A month before his sixteenth birthday he was sent to Terezín (Theresienstadt). Later he was transported to Auschwitz and Buchenwald. In 1945, during a transfer to Dachau, he managed to escape and returned to Prague, where he participated in the May 1945 uprising against the German occupation. His father and most family members died in Terezín, but his mother and sister survived. After the war he became a journalist and scriptwriter and worked for Radio Prague. In 1968 he moved to Israel and in 1970 to the United States. He became a writer and lecturer. He died in 2011.

BOGDAN WOJDOWSKI

David Wojdowski was born in 1930 to a poor Warsaw family. His father was a carpenter-upholsterer. David was ten when the family was locked in the ghetto. In late 1942 their parents managed to smuggle him and his younger sister out of the ghetto. The person who was supposed to take care of them took their money and abandoned the children. David hid in the woods and villages outside Warsaw with fake identity papers. After the war he became a well-known journalist. On 19 April 1994, the day of the anniversary of the Ghetto uprising, he killed himself.

CEIJA STOJKA

Ceija Stojka was born in 1933 in Kraubath an der Mur, in Styria, southern Austria. Her parents were Romani horse traders. She was eight when her father was arrested and deported to Dachau; he was later murdered in the Hartheim Castle Euthanasia Centre. Ceija was ten when her whole family was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Later she was transferred to Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen. Out of two hundred members of her extended family, only she, her mother, and four siblings survived. After the war they returned to Austria. Ceija made a living by selling carpets at open markets; she also became a painter and writer. She died in 2013.

CHAVA ROSENFARB

Chava Rosenfarb was born in 1923 in Łódź. Her father was a waiter. She was sixteen when the war broke out and her native city was occupied. She was seventeen when the family was imprisoned in the ghetto. In August 1944 they were deported to Auschwitz; later she was transferred to a camp at Sasel, a

sub-camp of the Neuengamme camp in Germany, and to Bergen-Belsen. Her father and most of her family members were killed, but her mother and sister survived. After the war she spent five years as a displaced person in Belgium. In 1950 she immigrated to Canada, where she worked as a teacher and writer. She died in 2011.

CORDELIA EDVARDSON

Cordelia Heller was born in 1929 in Berlin, the illegitimate child of a writer and a jurist. She was twelve when she was excluded from school and obliged to wear the yellow star. In 1943 she was deported to Terezín and in 1944 to Auschwitz. After the war, seriously ill, she was taken by the Red Cross to Sweden. After her recovery, she remained in Sweden and became a journalist. In 1974 she moved to Israel and continued to work as a journalist, until she had to move back to Sweden due to health reasons in 2006. She died in 2012.

EDGAR HILSEN RATH

Edgar Hilsenrath was born in 1926 in Liepzig. His father was a furrier. He was twelve when, before Kristallnacht, his father left for France and sent his wife, Edgar and his brother to join their grandparents in Siret, Bukovina. In 1941, after the region was occupied by German-allied Romanian troops, the family was deported to the Mogilev-Podolsky ghetto in Transnistria. In 1944, after the Russian army liberated the ghetto, Edgar fled to avoid being drafted. He was later arrested and interned for two months. After his liberation he immigrated to Palestine. In 1947 he joined his family in France and in 1951 they left together for the United States. Edgar had odd manual jobs as a waiter and porter. He became a prolific writer. In 1975 he returned to his native Germany. He died in 2018.

EDITH BRUCK

Edit Steinschreiber was born in 1932 to a poor family in Tiszakarád, eastern Hungary. Her father was a butcher who struggled to make a living. Edith was twelve when she and her family were deported to Auschwitz. Later she was transferred to Dachau, Christianstadt, Landsberg, and finally Bergen-Belsen. Her parents and one of her brothers died in the camps. After liberation Edit returned to Hungary; soon afterwards she moved to Czechoslovakia, where one of her sisters lived. Some years later she immigrated to Israel. In 1954 she settled in Italy and became a writer, and film and theatre director.

ELISABETH GILLE

Elisabeth Epstein was born in Paris in 1937 to a well-to-do family of Russian immigrants. Her mother was the writer Irene Némirovsky and her father a banker. She was two when the war broke out and their parents took her and her sister to the countryside. She was five in 1942 when her mother was arrested and deported; later the father and children were also arrested, but released. The father entrusted his daughters to friends before he was caught and sent to Auschwitz. During the following two years the girls hid under fake identities in various convents in Bordeaux. Both parents were killed. After the war Elisabeth became a translator, literary editor, and a writer. She died of cancer in 1996.

ELIE WIESEL

Eliezer Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, Transylvania, in northern Romania. His father was a shopkeeper. Some months before his fifteenth birthday his whole family was taken to the ghetto and later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Later there they were transferred to the Buna camp and in January 1945 they were sent on a death march to Buchenwald. Elie's parents and younger sister were murdered, but her two older sisters survived the war. After the war he was first taken to a rehabilitation center in France. In 1955 he moved to the United States. He became a well-known writer, journalist, professor, and political activist. In 1986 he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work against violence and racism. He died in 2016.

ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

Elżbieta Ettinger was born in 1924 in Łódź. She was fifteen when Nazi Germany occupied Poland. Her father and uncles tried to cross into the Soviet Union, but they were killed. The rest of the family moved to Warsaw. In 1939 they were locked in the ghetto. In 1942 she managed to escape and lived in Warsaw with forged identity papers, participating in the resistance movement. Most of her family members were murdered during the war; her only surviving sister died later in a mental hospital. After the war she became a journalist, translator, and researcher. In 1967 she immigrated to the US and became a University lecturer. She died in 2005.

ÉVA FAHIDI

Éva Fahidi was born in 1925 to an affluent family of merchants and farmers in Debrecen, in eastern Hungary. She was thirteen when her family's marginal-

ization started and her relatives in Austria and in Slovakia were deported. Her family was imprisoned in the ghetto in 1944 and some weeks later deported to Auschwitz. Later she was transferred to the Münchmühle camp in Allendorf, Germany. In March 1945, during the camp's evacuation, she escaped and hid until the arrival of the US army. She returned to Hungary. All her family members were killed, except one aunt, who later committed suicide. After several odd jobs, including working at construction sites, she worked for a foreign trade company. She has been an amateur dancer all her life and since 1990 has also given public performances.

FRANCINE CHRISTOPHE

Francine Christophe was born in 1933 to a well-to-do, assimilated family in Paris. At the beginning of the war her father became a prisoner of war. Francine was eight when she was arrested with her mother. They were held in various prisons and later interned in camps at Poitiers, Drancy, Pithiviers, and Beaune-la-Rolande. In May 1944 they were deported to Bergen-Belsen, but were held in a separate camp, the "Star Camp," as "exchange Jews." They were evacuated from the camp in April 1945 and later liberated by British troops. Francine's parents and two grandmothers survived the war. She became an interior decorator, and later a poet and writer.

GEORGE PEREC

George Perec was born in 1936 in Paris to a family of poor Polish immigrants. His mother was a hairdresser; his father did odd manual work. When the war broke out, his father volunteered to fight against Nazi Germany and was killed soon after. George was six when his mother sent him with a Red Cross train to join family members in Vichy France. In the following two years he was placed in various homes and schools. After the war ended, he returned to Paris and was adopted by his aunt. His mother and most family members were deported and killed. George became a successful writer. He died of cancer in 1982.

GERHARD DURLACHER

Gerhard Durlacher was born in 1928 in Baden-Baden, Germany. His family owned a furniture store. Having suffered several anti-Semitic attacks since the Nazi take-over, in 1937 they moved to the Netherlands, where they survived the bombing of Rotterdam. In 1942 they were deported to Westerbork, later transferred to Terezin, and finally to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Gerhard survived because he was one of 89 young boys selected by Mengele and kept in a

separate group in the camp. His parents were killed. After the war he returned to Holland and became a professor of sociology. He died in 1996.

GRIGORY KANOVICH

Grigorijus Kanovičius was born in 1929 in Jonava, Lithuania. His father was a tailor, his mother a household aide at better-off families. He was twelve when the German army invaded Lithuania and the family fled through Latvia to Russia. Grigory's father was called up to the Soviet army and his mother and he spent the war in different locations in Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. All three survived, but the rest of their family and community was annihilated. After the end of the war the family returned to Vilnius in Soviet Lithuania. Grigory became a writer. In 1993 he moved to Israel.

GYÖRGY KONRÁD

György Konrád was born in 1933 in Debrecen in northeast Hungary to a rural middle-class family. His father owned a hardware store. He was eleven when his parents and other family members were deported, but he, his older sister, and two cousins managed to escape to Budapest. They survived the war in a safe house under Swiss protection. His parents survived deportation as well, unlike the rest of their family. György finished his studies, but due to his participation in the 1956 uprising, he was blacklisted and could only find ad hoc jobs. Later he worked as a social worker and a sociologist and became a writer. From 1973 he became one of the leading figures of the political opposition, which brought marginalization and occasional publication bans. After the 1989 system change he was active as a writer and political personality. He died in 2019.

GYÖRGY MOLDOVA

György Reif was born in 1934 to a poor family in Budapest. His grandfather was a coachman; his father had occasional, temporary jobs. He was ten years old when they were interned in the Budapest ghetto. They survived unlike most of their extended family. After the war he studied theatre. He participated in the 1956 revolution, after which he was black-listed. He had a range of odd jobs, including unskilled worker, miner, and gardener. He eventually became a highly prolific writer; in addition to literary works, he wrote a series of sociographic books. He died in 2022.

HANNA KRALL

Hanna Krall was born in 1935 in Warsaw to an assimilated lower middle-class family. Both her parents worked as clerks. She was four when the war began. She spent the war years hiding in various flats in Warsaw and its surroundings. All her close family members were killed in Majdanek. After the war she became a journalist and spent several years as a correspondent in Moscow. After the introduction of martial law in 1981 she left the paper she wrote for and became a freelance writer. For a time she also worked in the film industry. She also wrote reportage books and novels. She lives in Warsaw.

HENRYK GRYNBERG

Henryk Grynberg was born in 1936 in Warsaw. He was three when the war started and his family went into hiding in the countryside. In 1944 his father was killed by one of their Polish neighbors. Henryk and his mother lived under assumed identities in various hiding places and managed to survive the war; they were the only survivors of their family. After the war, Henryk became an actor with the Jewish State Theater in Warsaw and began to publish prose and poetry. In 1967 he travelled to the US on a tour with the theatre company and refused to return to Poland. He obtained a degree in Russian literature and worked for the US Information Agency.

ICCHOKAS MERAS

Ichchokas Meras was born in 1934 in Kelme, in northwestern Lithuania. He was seven when the occupying German army and local Nazi associates undertook the systematic liquidation of the region's Jews. He was saved from execution at the last minute and sheltered by a local peasant family. His parents and most of his family members were murdered. After the war he became a radio electronics engineer, but soon abandoned his profession for the sake of writing. He immigrated to Israel in 1972. He died in 2014.

ILONA KARMEL

Ilona Karmel was born to a middle-class family in 1925 in Krakow, Poland. She was seventeen when she was imprisoned in the Krakow ghetto with her family. Later, together with her mother and older sister, they were deported to the Płaszów labor camp, then to Skarżysko-Kamienna, and later to Buchenwald. Some days before liberation, a German military vehicle ran them over, killing her mother and crushing Ilona's and her sister's legs. After two years

recovering in Sweden, she immigrated to the US in 1948. She became a writer and professor. She died in 2000 from leukemia.

ILSE AICHINGER

Ilse Aichinger was born in 1921 in Vienna into a middle class family. Her mother was a doctor, her father a teacher. She spent her early childhood in Linz, but after her parents' divorce at age seven she joined her mother and sister in Vienna. As a child she suffered discrimination, but after the Anschluss she was banned from school and had to work in a button factory. Many of her maternal family members were deported and killed, but, probably thanks to her father's intervention, she was able to remain in Vienna working in the army's health service. She even managed to hide her mother. After the war she became a writer and poet. She died in 2016.

IMRE KERTÉSZ

Imre Kertész was born in Budapest in 1929 into a lower middle-class family. His father was a furniture merchant. His parents divorced when he was five. He was fourteen when he was deported to Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald. After liberation he returned to Budapest. He lost many family members, including his father, but his mother and step-mother survived. He became a journalist, occasionally writing screenplays, and a translator of German. In the early 2000s he moved to Berlin. In 2002 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his life's work. He died in Budapest in 2016.

INGE AUERBACHER

Inge Auerbacher was born in 1934 in Kippenheim, in southwestern Germany. Her father, a World War I veteran, was a textile merchant. She was four when, with her mother and grandmother, she escaped the mob that vandalized their house and the village synagogue during the Kristallnacht. Her father and grandfather were caught and sent to Dachau, but were eventually released. Her grandfather died of a heart attack some months later. At the age of six Inge was excluded from school and had to wear the yellow star; at the age of seven she was deported to Terezín with her parents. After liberation the family returned to Germany and in 1946 immigrated to the US. Inge spent two years in hospital fighting tuberculosis contracted in the camp. She became a chemist and later a writer.

JAKOV LIND

Heinz Jakov Landwirth was born in 1927 in Vienna. He was eleven at the time of the Anschluss. His father was arrested and the family was obliged to abandon their flat. The mother managed to put Jacov and his two sisters on a Kindertransport to the Netherlands. He was separated from his sisters and stayed in various foster families until Nazi Germany occupied Holland. He escaped deportation, obtained false identity papers, and worked as a Dutch laborer, first in the Netherlands and later in Germany. After liberation he immigrated to Palestine; some years later he moved to Vienna and in 1954 he settled in London, where he died in 2007.

JANINA BAUMAN

Janina Lewinson was born in 1926 in Warsaw. When the German army invaded Poland, her father joined his army unit and was later massacred in the Katyn forest. Janina was thirteen when she was interned in the Warsaw ghetto with her sister and mother. In early 1943 they managed to escape and hide with false papers in Warsaw and the countryside. All three managed to survive the war, unlike the bulk of their relatives. Janina worked in the film industry until 1968 when she was forced into exile with her family. They moved first to Israel and three years later to England. She became a librarian. She died in 2009.

JÁNOS NYÍRI

János Nyíri was born in 1929 in Budapest. His father was a minor writer, his mother had odd jobs. He, his mother, and brother survived the war hiding in Budapest with fake documents. His father survived a forced labor camp, but most of their family members were murdered. After the war János became a playwright and theatre director. He participated in the 1956 revolution and left Hungary after it was suppressed. After some years in France, he settled in England and became a writer. He died of cancer on 23 October 2002, the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 uprising.

JERZY KOSIŃSKI

Józef Lewinkopf was born in Łódź, Poland in 1933. After the war broke out, Jerzy and his parents moved to the Polish countryside and lived there with forged identity papers, sheltered by local villagers. All three survived the war, unlike the majority of their family members. After the war he became a teaching assistant and photographer. He immigrated to the United States in 1957.

After working at odd jobs, he resumed his studies and became a university lecturer and writer. He committed suicide in 1991.

JIŘÍ ROBERT PICK

Jiří Robert Pick was born in Prague in 1925 to a comfortable middle-class family. His father managed the family's chemical factory. After the German occupation of Czechoslovakia fourteen-year-old Jiří was banned from school and from 1941 was forced to wear a yellow star. In 1943 his family was deported to the Terezín concentration camp. His father was later deported to Auschwitz and killed. Jiří, his sister, and mother survived; the latter immigrated to Argentina and later to the US. Jiří became a writer, editor, and theater director. Following the crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring his works were banned. He died in 1983.

JOHANNA REISS

Johanna de Leeuw was born in 1932 in Winterswijk in Holland. Her father was a cattle-merchant. Johanna was ten when the Germans occupied the country and started to round up Jews. The family members went into hiding separately; Johanna and one of her older sisters hid in a farmhouse in the countryside. After the war Johanna became a primary school teacher. In 1955 she went to study to the US where later she married and started a family. She had odd jobs while raising her children; later she became a writer and public speaker.

JONA OBERSKI

Jona Oberski was born in Amsterdam in 1938. His parents had moved from Germany to the Netherlands a year earlier to escape the Nazis. After the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, four-year-old Jona was obliged to wear the yellow star and was excluded from public places. The family was deported to Westerbork and later to Bergen-Belsen, where his father died. Jona and his mother were sent on a death train to the camp of Tröbitz. Jona's mother died soon after liberation. He was taken back to Amsterdam and adopted by his parents' friends. He became a nuclear physicist.

JOSEPH BIALOT

Joseph Bialobroda was born in 1923 in Warsaw to a poor family of tailors. In 1930, to escape mounting anti-Semitism, the family moved to Paris. After the German occupation the family had to move out of their home and seventeen-year-old Joseph went into hiding under fake identities in the south of France.

He joined the Resistance movement, was arrested in 1944 and sent to Auschwitz with the last French convoy. After liberation he returned to Paris and found his parents who survived the war. He had odd manual jobs and studied psychology. In his late 50s he became a successful author of crime fiction. He died in 2012.

JÓZSEF GÁLI

József Gáli was born in 1930 in Gyula, southern Hungary. His father was a doctor, his mother worked as his assistant. József was fourteen when the family was deported to Auschwitz; his older brother had earlier been sent to a forced labor camp. Only József survived the war. He studied theatre at the Theatre and Film School; in 1949 he was expelled as a “class alien,” but was later taken back. For his participation in the 1956 revolution he was condemned to death, but was saved thanks to a massive protest campaign abroad, with the voices of, among others, Bertrand Russel, Albert Camus, Pablo Picasso, and Arthur Koestler. He was re-judged and convicted to fifteen years in prison. Due to his poor health he was released and amnestied in 1960. He worked as a free-lance translator of German. He died in 1981.

JUDITH MAGYAR ISAAKSON

Judit Magyar was born in 1925 in Kaposvár, in southern Hungary, to a middle-class family. She was thirteen when she was first violently attacked for being Jewish. From the outbreak of the war her family suffered increasing discrimination and privation; shortly before Judit’s eighteenth birthday they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some months later she was transferred to a forced labor camp serving a munitions plant in Hessisch Lichtenau, Germany. She, her mother, and aunt survived, but the bulk of their family members were killed. After the war she moved to the United States and became a university lecturer of mathematics. She died in 2015.

JUREK BECKER

Jerzy Bekker was born in 1937 in Łódź into a middle-class family. He was two when they were imprisoned in the ghetto and five when he was deported with his mother to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Later they were transferred to Königs Wusterhausen and Sachsenhausen, where his mother died. After the end of the war, his father, who survived Auschwitz, found Jerzy in a hospital and they moved to East Berlin. He studied philosophy, but was expelled from school due to his non-conformist views. He became a screen-writer, but

due to his political views he was marginalized and pushed to leave the country in 1977. He lived in West Berlin until his death in 1997.

KRYSTYNA CHIGER

Krystyna Chiger was born in 1935 in Lvov, then Poland (today Lviv, Ukraine) to a well-to-do family of textile merchants. She was four when the war started and the town was placed under Soviet control. Her family's properties were confiscated, her father became a baker, and they had to move out of their flat to a shared apartment. When the German army occupied the town, the family went into hiding, eventually moving to the ghetto. Before the liquidation of the ghetto they hid in the city's underground sewer system. With the help of a Polish sewer worker and his colleagues they managed to survive until liberation. In 1957 the family moved to Israel. Krysha became a dentist and in 1968 she moved to the United States.

LIVIA BITTON-JACKSON

Elvira Friedman was born in 1931 in Šamorín, (then Czechoslovakia, between 1938-1945 Somorja, Hungary; today Šamorín, Slovakia). Her father owned a grocery shop. She was thirteen when her family was interned in a ghetto and later sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After some months Elvira and her mother were transferred to Płaszów, then back to Auschwitz, to a forced labor camp in Augsburg, and later to Waldlager in Muhldorf. Her mother and brother survived, but her father and most of their relatives were killed. They returned to Šamorín and in 1951 they immigrated to the United States. She became a university professor of Hebrew Culture and Jewish history. In 1977 she moved to Israel.

LOUIS BEGLEY

Ludwik Begleiter was born in 1933 in Stryj, in eastern Poland (now Ukraine), to an affluent family of doctors and landowners. When the war broke out, his father joined the Polish army and his unit was incorporated into the Red Army. Ludwik was nine when his paternal grandparents were killed; he and his mother escaped their home town and hid under fake identities in Lwów, Warsaw, and Krakow. After the war, his father returned from the Soviet Union and the family settled in Krakow. In 1946 they emigrated to Paris and a year later to New York. Louis became a successful lawyer and fiction writer.

MADELEINE KAHN

Madeleine Woloch was born in 1933 in Paris to a family of shopkeepers of Romanian origin. In June 1939 she was in Stănești-de-Jos, Bucovina, (then) Romania, with her maternal grandmother, when the borders became sealed and she could not return home. Soon Antonescu's fascist regime came to power and in June 1941 Madeleine, her grandmother, aunt, and one-year-old cousin were taken to the ghetto of Czernovitz. Later they were forced to march to a camp in Transnistria. In 1943, her aunt was able to get Madeleine out of the camp. She was transferred to a Catholic nunnery and later to another Catholic order in Bucharest where she stayed hidden for three years. She returned to France in April 1946. Her parents and little brother survived the war, but nearly all their relatives were killed. Madeleine became a doctor; later she got a degree in history and became a writer of historical novels.

MAGDA DÉNES

Magda Dénes was born into an affluent Budapest family in 1934. Her father was a well-known journalist and author, who lost his job due to the anti-Jewish laws and in 1939 fled to the US, abandoning his family. Magda, her mother, and older brother moved into the very modest household of their maternal grandparents. Magda was ten when the Hungarian fascists took power and the family members went into hiding. Their last refuge was the "glass-house," a building protected by the Swiss consulate, thanks to the efforts of Carl Lutz. Magda's brother and cousin were killed in the last days of the siege of Budapest. Their relatives in the countryside were deported and murdered. Magda, her mother, and aunt fled the country in 1946; after some time spent in Germany and France, they immigrated to Cuba and later to the US. Magda became a professor of psychotherapy. She died in 1996.

MARCELINE LORIDAN-IVENS

Marceline Rosenberg was born in 1928 in Épinal, France, in a family of Polish immigrants. She was fifteen when she was arrested together with her father for their resistance activity. After some time spent in prisons and the Drancy camp in France, they were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Several months later, she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, and from there to Raguhn to a work in a factory that produced motors for the German air force. Later she was sent to Terezín, where she was finally liberated. Her father was killed in the camp. After returning to France, Marceline had odd jobs, later she became a journalist and documentary film-maker. She died in 2018.

MÁRIA EMBER

Mária Elsner was born in 1931 in Abádszalók, in eastern Hungary. Her father was a lawyer, who was arrested and deported early in the war. In 1944 the rest of the family was deported. Mária's grandmother was beaten to death in the ghetto; she, her mother, and younger sister were sent by accident to the Strasshof camp, near Vienna. They survived, but the rest of their family was annihilated. After the war Mária became a journalist. Due to her and her husband's involvement in the 1956 uprising, she was banned from publishing and made a living as a German teacher. Following the relative liberalization of the system, she was able to publish again. She died in 2002.

MARY BERG

Miriam Wattenberg was born in 1924 in Łódź to a well-to-do family. Her father was an art dealer and her mother, who lived in Poland, came from an affluent US family. Mary was fifteen when the German army invaded Poland. The family fled to Warsaw, where later they were imprisoned in the ghetto. In July 1942 thanks to their US citizenship, Mary's family was sent to Pawiak prison, where they witnessed the ghetto's liquidation. In January 1943 they were transferred to the Vittel internment camp in France and in March 1944 they were able to leave for the United States. Some years after the publication of her book, Mary retired from public life. She died in 2013.

MAURICE CLING

Maurice Cling was born in 1929 in Paris to a family of Romanian immigrants. His father had a tailor-furrier workshop. Maurice was fourteen when the family was arrested and taken to the transit camp of Drancy and later to Auschwitz. After several months in Auschwitz, he was sent on a death march to Dachau. When Dachau was evacuated, he was sent on another death march when he was finally liberated. All his immediate family members were killed, but his grandparents and some other relatives who managed to escape deportation survived. He became a teacher and linguist. He died in 2020.

MENYHÉRT LAKATOS

Menyhért Lakatos was born in 1926 in Vésztő, Hungary, into a Roma family. His father was a horse merchant, his mother traded in feathers and household items. Thanks to an accident in which he was nearly killed by a local dignitary out hunting, Menyhért was granted access to secondary school, a rare privilege for a Gypsy child. After the Nazi takeover he was expelled. In 1944 his whole

family was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He and his brothers became the victims of Mengele's experiments. Many of his relatives were murdered during the war. After liberation Menyhért was able to continue his studies and became an engineer. Later he also worked in a research institute of sociology (together with György Konrád) and was active politically on behalf of the Gypsy community. He started to write from 1970. He died in 2007.

MICHAŁ GŁOWIŃSKI

Michał Głowiński was born in 1934 in Pruszków to a middle-class assimilated Jewish family. He was six when the family was imprisoned in the Pruszków ghetto and later transferred to the Warsaw ghetto. In 1943 Irena Sender's group managed to smuggle him and his mother out of the ghetto and for a while they lived under a false identity in Warsaw. Later he was separated from his mother and was taken to Turkowice, in eastern Poland, to an orphanage run by Catholic nuns, where he stayed until liberation. His father survived a German forced labor camp; his mother survived in hiding. Most of their family members were murdered. After the war Michał became a literary scholar.

MIRIAM AKAVIA

Matylda Weinfeld was born in 1927 in Krakow to a well-to-do family. Her father was a prosperous timber merchant. Miriam was fourteen years old when the family was imprisoned in the Krakow ghetto. In November 1942 Miriam and her brother were smuggled out and sent to Lwów with false identity papers. The brother joined the resistance movement, was arrested, and disappeared. Miriam returned to the Krakow ghetto and after it was liquidated, she was sent to the Płaszów forced labor camp. Later, with her mother and sister she was sent to Auschwitz and in January 1945 to the death march to Bergen-Belsen. Miriam's mother died a few days before the camp was liberated; her father died in Mauthausen. After liberation, Miriam was hospitalized in Sweden. In 1946 she immigrated to Palestine and became a nurse. Later she finished her studies and became a writer. She died in 2015.

NADINE HEFTLER

Nadine Heftler was born in 1928 to an assimilated, prosperous family in Paris. She was sixteen when her family was arrested and taken to Drancy and later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nadine worked in several forced labor camps, including in Buna for IG Farben and in Rajsko. In November 1944, she miraculously escaped a selection and was sent to the children's block of Birkenau. She

was later transferred to Auschwitz and sent on a death march to Ravensbrück. She was liberated on the road. Both her parents and the bulk of her family were murdered. After the war she became a doctor. She died in 2016.

NORMAN MANEA

Norman Manea was born in 1936 in Suceava, Bukovina. His father was an accountant. He was five when the Romanian fascist authorities deported his family to a concentration camp in Transnistria. Both his grandparents died there. After the camp's liberation his father was enlisted in the Red Army and sent to the front. The surviving family members returned to their hometown in 1945. Norman's father returned from the war and worked at a state-owned company; he was later imprisoned after a mock trial in one of the purges of the Communist régime. Norman worked as a hydroelectric engineer and started to write. Due to his critical political views he was forced into exile in 1986. He went first to Berlin and in 1988 moved to the United States, where he became a professor of literature.

OTTO DOV KULKA

Otto Deutelbaum was born in 1933, in Nový Hrozenkov, Czechoslovakia, to a well-off family of land-owners and businessmen. His parents divorced and later his mother married his biological father. Otto was nine when he and his mother were deported to Terezín. A year later they were transferred to the family camp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. His father, who was deported earlier as a resistant, was able to join them there. When the family camp was liquidated, Otto's mother was sent to the Stutthof concentration camp, where she died shortly before liberation. Otto's legal father, his new wife, and Otto's half-sister were killed in Treblinka. After the war, to commemorate Otto's mother, both Otto and his father changed their name to Kulka. Otto immigrated to Israel in 1949. He became a professor of history, working on, among other subjects, the Holocaust. He died in 2021.

OTTO ROSENBERG

Otto Rosenberg was born in 1927 in Draugupönen, in Germany into a family of poor Sintis. He grew up in Berlin with his grandmother and several siblings. He was nine when, before the Berlin Olympic Games, they were expelled from the Gypsy settlement where they lived and sent to the Berlin-Marzahn internment camp. Otto had to work in an ammunition factory; he was imprisoned and later deported to the Gypsy camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Later he

was transferred to Buchenwald, then to Mittelbau-Dora, and finally to Bergen-Belsen, from where he was liberated. His mother and aunt survived, but his father, grandmother, ten siblings, and many other relatives were killed during the war. After the war he worked as a construction worker and occasional musician. In 1970 he founded the first Sinti Association in Berlin that later became the Berlin-Brandenburg State Association of German Sinti and Roma which he headed until his death in 2001.

RAYMOND FEDERMAN

Raymond Federman was born in 1928 in Paris to a poor family. His mother was a cleaning lady, his father had occasional jobs. Raymond was fourteen when his parents and sisters were deported; he escaped and spent the remaining war years with false identity papers working as a laborer in a farm in the south of France. All his close family and many of his extended family's members were killed. In 1947 he immigrated to the US. After a series of odd jobs, he went to university and became a literary expert and writer. He died in 2009.

RUTH KLÜGER

Ruth Klüger was born in 1931 in Vienna into a well-to-do family of doctors. She was six at the time of the Anschluss. Her half-brother had to return to his father in Czechoslovakia, was interned in Terezín, transferred to Riga, and murdered. Ruth's father was imprisoned for breaching restrictions on Jewish doctors, fled Austria after his release, but was caught in France, imprisoned in Drancy, deported, and killed. Ruth was eleven when she and her mother were deported to Terezín. Later they were sent to Auschwitz, then to Christianstadt, a satellite camp of Groß-Rosen in Silesia. When the camp was evacuated, they escaped from the death march. After the end of the war they settled in Straubing, Bavaria, and in 1947 they immigrated to the United States. She became a scholar of German literature. She died in 2020.

SARAH KOFMAN

Sarah Kofman was born in 1934 in Paris. In 1929 her parents moved to France from Poland hoping to escape poverty and discrimination. Her father was a rabbi. Sarah was eight when her father was arrested and deported. The rest of the family went into hiding in Paris and the provinces. They managed to survive the war, unlike their father and most of their extended family. Sarah became a professor of philosophy. In 1994 she committed suicide.

SAUL FRIEDLÄNDER

Pavel Friedländer was born in 1932 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in an assimilated, well-to-do family. His father headed an insurance company. After the German occupation of the country, his parents took seven-year-old Pavel to a Catholic boarding school in France, where he survived the war. The parents intended to flee to Switzerland; they were sent back to France, arrested, deported, and killed in Auschwitz. In 1948 Pavel immigrated to Israel; in the early 1950s he returned to Paris and later to Geneva to study. For a while he was also active in Israeli politics. He became a historian and an expert on the Holocaust.

SHLOMO BREZNITZ

Shlomo Breznitz was born in 1936 in Bratislava (then Czechoslovakia) to a middle class family. He was six when most of his extended family members were deported, but his nuclear family succeeded in hiding, until they were caught and imprisoned in a transit camp in Žilina. Shlomo's father was the chief engineer of the Slovak electric company and was temporarily exempted from deportation. He managed to get his family released and they went into hiding until late summer of 1944, when, learning of their imminent deportation, the parents took Shlomo and his older sister to a Catholic orphanage. The parents were deported to Auschwitz, where the father was killed. Most of their extended family was also annihilated. Shlomo, his mother, and sister survived and moved to Israel in 1949. He became a psychologist and author, an expert on stress and later on brain fitness.

TOMÁŠ RADIL

Tomáš Radil was born in 1930 in Bratislava (then Czechoslovakia). He grew up in Párkány (today Štúrovo, Slovakia) on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border. His grandfather was a butcher; his father managed a nobleman's farm estate. Tomáš was thirteen when the family was taken to the Levice collection camp and later sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He spent six months in camp BIIe in the block for young boys, and was then sent to the main camp. His mother and much of their family were killed in various camps, but his father survived Dachau. Tomáš became a doctor, a specialist in neurophysiology. He died in 2021.

URI ORLEV

Jerzy Henryk Orłowski was born in 1931 in Warsaw, Poland. His father was a physician and his mother worked as his assistant. When the war broke out, his

father was drafted into the Polish army and was later captured by the Russians. Nine-year-old Yurik and his family were forced to move to the ghetto. After his mother was killed, Yurik and his younger brother lived with their aunt, who eventually arranged to have them smuggled out of the ghetto. They lived hiding in town until 1943, when their aunt obtained Palestinian passports for them and they were sent to a special section of the Bergen-Belsen camp reserved for foreign passport holders who were destined to be exchanged for German prisoners of war. After liberation the brothers moved to Israel. Their father survived and moved to Israel later. Uri became a writer and translator of Polish literature into Hebrew.

WILHELM DICHTER

Wilhelm Dichter was born in Borysław (now in Ukraine) in 1935. He was four when the war broke out. After the German invasion, many of his family members were deported or imprisoned in the ghetto. Wilhelm and his parents went into hiding, frequently changing their hiding places. Wilhelm's father committed suicide during this period. Soon after liberation Wilhelm's mother remarried and the family settled in Poland. Wilhelm became a mechanical engineer, later a university professor, specializing in ballistics. He also wrote popular science pieces and ran science programs on radio and TV. In 1968 he was forced to leave Poland and settled in the US. He worked as a ballistic expert and later as a computer specialist.

ZDENA BERGER

Zdena Berger was born in 1925 in Prague. Her father had a small shoe business. She was fourteen when Czechoslovakia was occupied by the German army. She was deported with her family to Terezín and later to Auschwitz, where her parents and brother were killed. She was transferred to a labor camp in Hamburg and then sent on a death march to Bergen-Belsen, where she was liberated. She returned to Prague and found only one surviving member of her extended family, a non-Jewish aunt. She resumed her studies, had office jobs, and in 1947 she left for Paris. In 1955 she immigrated to the US. She became a psychologist.

The next generation**ANNICK KAYITESI-JOZAN**

Annick Kayitesi was born in 1979 in Rwanda. Her father was a doctor who died in an accidental fire when Annick was nine. She was fifteen when the genocide began. The family hid in the school compound where her mother worked, but they were denounced; the mother was murdered there and Annick's siblings were taken away to be killed. She was spared and spent some months in the same building as the servant of a couple who were accomplices in the murders. One of her sisters, severely injured, miraculously survived; the two girls eventually managed to escape to Burundi. Their other two siblings and most members of their extended family were massacred. Annick and her sister immigrated to France, where she obtained a degree in political science and later in psychology.

BEATA UMUBYEYI MAIRESSE

Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse was born in 1979 in Butara, Rwanda. Her mother is Rwandan, her father was Polish. She was fifteen when the genocide of the Tutsis began. After hiding several months in a cave, she and her mother succeeded in fleeing to Burundi, from where they moved to France. Beata studied political science and international relations. She worked for various humanitarian NGOs and spent time in Canada as a university research assistant. She became a writer and cultural organizer.

BERTHE KAYITESI

Berthe Kayitesi was born in 1978 in Gisenyi, Rwanda. She was fifteen when the genocide took place and her parents and many other family members were massacred. She succeeded in escaping to the Congo and lived in various refugee camps. Upon her return to Rwanda she found six surviving siblings. First they lived in orphanages and foster families, later they were able to move into a settlement designed for orphans in Kigali. After some years Berthe was able to continue her studies and graduated in psycho-pedagogy. In 2004 she moved to Canada, where she completed her studies and founded a family. She died of a brain hemorrhage in 2015.

CHANRITHY HIM

Chanrithy Him was born in 1965 in Takeo Province, Cambodia, to a middle-class family. Her father worked as a trade inspector and owned a small busi-

ness. Chanrithy was four when her family was forced to leave their home due to the spill-over of the Vietnam War. During the years of internal displacement, two of her brothers died of illness and malnutrition. She was ten when the Khmer Rouge came to power and the family was sent to a work camp in the countryside. Her father was executed shortly after their arrival. During the following four years in various camps, she lost her mother and three more siblings. After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge she and her surviving siblings fled to Thailand. She was able to immigrate to the US at the age of sixteen. She has a degree in biochemistry; during her studies she joined the Khmer Adolescence Project to help young people dealing with war trauma. She became an author, international speaker, and classic Khmer dancer.

CHARLES HABONIMANA

Karoli Habonimana was born in 1982 in Mayunzwe, southern Rwanda, to a family of cultivators. His father kept a popular local store-bistro. Karoli was twelve when the genocide started. His parents, six siblings, and most of his close family members were murdered. He survived because the local leader of the executioners chose him to be “*the last Tutsi*” to be killed and preserved to show future generations what Tutsis looked like. After the genocide Charles continued his studies and headed the Students’ Genocide Survivors’ Association. He worked in managerial positions and in June 2020 he was named Managing Director of the Rwanda airport company.

CLEMANTINE WAMARIYA

Clemantine Wamariya was born in 1988 in Kigali. Her father had a successful car service. She was six when the genocide started. She and her sister took refuge at their grandmother’s in the south of the country; when the massacres reached that region as well, they fled again. They managed to escape and spent the following six years in various refugee camps and temporary homes in Burundi, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, and South Africa. In 2000 the two sisters immigrated to the United States. Their parents and siblings miraculously survived, but many members of their extended family were massacred. Clemantine became an author, a public speaker, and a human rights activist.

EMIR SULJAGIĆ

Emir Suljagić was born in 1975 in Ljubovija, Yugoslavia and grew up in Bratunac. He was seventeen when the town was attacked by Serb military forces

and his family took refuge in Srebrenica. He learned English and became an interpreter for the UN forces deployed there. He was able to leave Srebrenica after its fall and escape the genocide. He has worked as a journalist, editor, and university lecturer. For several years he was actively involved in Bosnian politics, holding various high-level posts. He has also been fighting for the political rights of the Bosnian minority in Srebrenica and of Bosnian refugees. In 2019 he became the director of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center.

GILBERT GATORE

Gilbert Gatore was born in 1981 in Rwanda. He was thirteen when the genocide started. His family managed to escape to Zaire. In 1997 Gilbert settled in France. He studied political science and later business management. He is a senior manager at a digital marketing company.

HABIBURAHMAN

Habiburahman was born in west Burma (now Myanmar) in 1979. In 1982 his ethnic group, more than a million Rohingyas, was excluded from the recognized minorities of the country. Subjected to systemic discrimination and privations, Habib was only able to continue his studies after he left his birthplace and family and took an assumed identity. For his participation in an unauthorized study on the state of the country, he was arrested and tortured. He managed to escape to Thailand and later to Malaysia. After nine years of living there as an undocumented migrant, he fled to Australia by boat. Upon arrival he was arrested and locked in various immigration detention centers for thirty two months. He eventually received political refugee status, but is still stateless and lives precariously from odd jobs.

ISMET PRČIĆ

Ismet Prčić was born in Tuzla, Yugoslavia in 1977. He was fifteen when the war in the former Yugoslavia began. He lived through years of siege and warfare in his hometown until 1995, when his theatre group was invited to a festival in Edinburgh. He decided to remain in the UK and in 1996 was able to immigrate to the US. He became a writer and screenwriter and teaches theatre in a college.

KENAN TREBINČEVIĆ

Kenan Trebinčević was born in 1980 in Brčko, Yugoslavia. His father was the owner of the only fitness center in northeast Bosnia, his mother was a clerk.

Kenan was twelve when the war reached his hometown. His father and older brother were arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp, but were later released. The family lived besieged in their flat. Their first attempt to leave the country was thwarted. In 1993 they managed to escape and after a stay in Vienna, they moved to the US. His parents worked in factories to assure an education for Kenan and his older brother. He became a physiotherapist.

LOUNG UNG

Loung Ung was born in 1970 to a well-to-do family in Phnom Penh. Her father was a military police captain. Loung was five when the Khmer Rouge took over and the family was deported. During the years spent in different villages and forced labor camps Loung lost her parents, two sisters, and twenty members of her extended family. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge she fled to Vietnam with one of her surviving brothers. In 1980 they managed to reach Thailand and later immigrated to the US. She became a human-rights activist and lecturer and worked for years as the US spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World.

MALAY PHCAR

Malay Phcar was born in 1964 in Phnom Penh to a comfortable middle-class family. His father was a car mechanic, who also owned a brickyard. The family was practicing Catholic, his paternal grandmother, hence his father, were French citizens, and his mother had Vietnamese origins. Malay was nine when the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh and the family was deported. During the years in various forced labor camps both parents and four of Malay's siblings died. After the Vietnamese army overthrew the Khmer Rouge, Malay and his surviving younger brother returned to Phnom Penh and lived in misery. Finally they managed to escape to Thailand and immigrate to France in 1980. Malay became a designer and teaches literature, art, and computer science.

NAVY SOTH

Shrey Mav Soth was born in 1973 in Phnom Penh. She was two when the Khmer Rouge seized power and deported the city's inhabitants. In the following four years, living in forced labor camps and villages, she lost her father and four siblings. After the Khmer Rouge régime collapsed, she, her mother, and surviving four siblings fled to Thailand. They lived in refugee camps until 1982, when they obtained permission to leave for France. For the immigration papers her mother changed her name to Navy.

RÉVÉRIEN RURANGWA

Révérien Rurangwa was born in 1978 in Mugina, Gitarama, Rwanda. He was fifteen when the genocide against the Tutsis took place and forty three of his close family members, including his parents and siblings were massacred. Révérien was mutilated, but survived. He was taken to Switzerland where he underwent seventeen operations and long treatments. In 1996 he returned to Rwanda, but he was not safe and after a year had to leave again. He returned to Switzerland, where he worked and continued his studies. After eighteen years of waiting, he was granted authorization to settle.

RYTHI PANH

Rythi Panh was born in Phnom Penh in 1964. His father was a teacher and later a school inspector. Rythi was eleven when the family was chased from their home after the Khmer Rouge takeover. During the four years spent in villages and work camps, he lost his parents and several siblings. In 1979, when the régime collapsed, he miraculously found his only surviving sister and they escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. He was seventeen when he was able to move to France. He became a filmmaker, film producer, and author.

SAŠA STANIŠIĆ

Saša Stanišić was born in 1978 in Višegrad, Yugoslavia. His mother, a teacher of political science, came from a Bosnian, his father, an economist, from a Serb family. He was fourteen when the war started in Yugoslavia. Some months later the family fled to Germany. When the war ended, Saša's parents had to leave the country and immigrated to the United States, but he was able to remain to continue his studies. He became a writer.

SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA

Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Gikongoro Province, Rwanda, in 1956. Her parents were poor farmers. She was three when her home was attacked in a wave of violence against the Tutsi. The family managed to escape, but soon they were deported to Nyamata, Bugesera, a faraway, inhospitable region in the south of the country. Thanks to a very restricted quota for Tutsi students, Scholastique was accepted to the prestigious Lycée Notre-Dame-de-Citeaux in Kigali. When she was 17 a new wave of massacres began and she was driven away from the school. Her family sent her and one of her older brothers to Burundi, where they both finished their studies. She worked in various African countries and in 1992 she moved to France with her French spouse. In

the 1994 genocide 37 members of her family were massacred, including her parents and siblings with their families. She is a writer and social worker.

SOR SISAVANG

Sor Sisavang was born in 1963 in Battambang to a well-to-do family of landowners and professionals. He was eleven when the Khmer Rouge took power and his family was deported. During the four years of forced labor and privations, he lost his parents, a brother and a sister. In 1979, after the collapse of the régime, he and his remaining siblings escaped to Thailand. After some months of precarious existence in a refugee camp they were forcibly repatriated. Savang became a primary school teacher. In 1981 the siblings fled Cambodia again and managed to get to another Thai refugee camp. In 1983 they were able to immigrate to France.

VADDEY RATNER

Vaddey Ratner was born in 1970 in Phnom Penh. Her father was related to the royal family, her mother came from a family of rich landowners. She was five when her family was deported to the countryside. Shortly afterwards her father was arrested and killed. During four years of captivity Vaddey and her mother worked in various villages and labor camps. Most of their extended family members were killed or perished during these years. In 1979, after the fall of the regime, they fled to Thailand. In 1981 they immigrated to the USA. Vaddey is a public speaker and author.

VESNA MARIC

Vesna Marić was born in Mostar, Yugoslavia, in 1976. Her father was an engineer, her mother worked in a retail shop. She was sixteen when the war reached her hometown. After some months she and her sister were able to travel to Croatia and some months later she left with a humanitarian convoy to the UK. She worked for the BBC World Service and later became a free-lance journalist and travel writer.

Acknowledgements

At the beginning of this book there was a young man in Budapest who kept pestering me to read János Nyíri's *Battlefields and Playgrounds*. I was reluctant. I don't like to read books about the Holocaust; they make me anxious and despaired. Still, after a couple of years, I gave in and took the battered old copy he lent to me. I read it and had a pleasant surprise; the book was alive, full of humor and depth. I was astonished to find that it was practically unknown in Hungary and, after an enthusiastic reception in the early 1990s, completely forgotten abroad. I received a modest grant from the British Society of Authors to write a piece about Nyíri's life and oeuvre (which I gratefully acknowledge) and while I was researching the subject, another friend told me about Magda Dénes's book. I read it and I was condemned. During the years that followed, I was immersed in a subject I never wanted to work on.

I discovered a huge body of literature written by child Holocaust survivors that were either unknown or forgotten. I increasingly felt that I owed them an effort to make their voices heard. Exploring these books and the reasons they were written evidently led me to the books of child survivors of later genocides.

Despite my initial reluctance I am very grateful to the series of accidents that made me discover the works of these authors, because they have a unique richness and a precious, urgent message to pass on. While I was working on the book, the genocide against the Yazidis took place and mass murders continued in Sudan and Myanmar, among other places. I am very sorry to say that there is a lot of future work for people who would venture to explore this field further.

In a documentary film about his life and struggle against oblivion, Maurice Kling, one of the protagonists of this book, recounts that after a meeting with high-school students in Paris, one of them went up to him to say: "Thank you for surviving." First and foremost, I would like to thank all the authors

who are presented in this book, dead or alive, for surviving and having the strength to write about their experiences. And thanks to all who encouraged and supported them in their perilous undertaking.

I am very grateful to Eva Hoffman and Anthony Rudolf who read the very first, very rudimentary version of this book and encouraged me to continue.

I would like to thank Peter Rossman for his careful reading of the manuscript and his very useful comments. Thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Thanks to CEU Press for the courage to accept this manuscript. Special thanks to Linda Kunos for her editorial guidance and John Puckett for his thorough language editing.

During the long lonely years while I was working on this book the support of my family and friends who believed in this project was a very precious support. Special thanks to my dear friends Margherita Frankel and Gabi Fekete and to my mother, all of whom saw the beginnings of this project and were eager to see it accomplished, but didn't live to see it published.

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MORE NIGHTS THAN DAYS

More Nights Than Days is a unique exploration of the experience of children who survived the Holocaust—including Roma and Sinti victims—and the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Children are among the principal victims of armed conflicts and slaughters; nonetheless, they perceive events through the prism of their unique perspective and have a range of coping techniques adults don't possess.

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Naomi B. Sokoloff, Professor of Hebrew and modern Jewish literature
at the University of Washington in Seattle

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yudit Kiss is an economic researcher and has worked in various research institutes and universities in Hungary, Mexico, Britain and Switzerland. Since 1992 she lives in Geneva and works as an independent researcher.



CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY PRESS
BUDAPEST • VIENNA • NEW YORK

Sales and information: ceupress@press.ceu.edu

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