

Introducing Holocaust Literature to Children*

Rachel Meir

Canadian Zionist Federation
Montreal, Quebec

Problems of Writing on the Holocaust

Children's literature about the Holocaust seems to represent a contradiction in terms. The Holocaust is the term we use in order to give a name to the unnameable to describe that which is indescribable: the murder of a third of the Jewish people by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II in Europe.

Very little of what happened during that period in Europe would be deemed by any of us suitable story material for children. As a matter of fact, the mere idea of a work of art dealing with the Auschwitz experience seems not only impossible, but sacrilegious as well.

The ability of any literature to faithfully render the Holocaust experience has been discussed by a large number of authors and critics. Most agree that any literary attempts will either be inadequate or worse, a betrayal of the victims; however, the general feeling among those who hold these opinions is that silence constitutes an even worse betrayal.

The question of writing about the Holocaust presents another series of problems that are beyond the ethical consideration of whether one should or should not write about it.

There are difficulties that both author and reader have to face when dealing with a subject that defeats human imagination and vocabulary. Here is where caution is called for. Are we carelessly using clichés? Why do we say that the Holocaust is beyond human imagination? Is it not true that it was considered by a human's imagination long before it became reality? Was the idea of a concentration camp not thought out, planned and executed by humans? We all know that the reality of the concentration camps was created by human beings. It became part of our twentieth-century experience, and therefore ways have to be found to give it proper expression in literature.

However, when this new and unprecedented theme is to be included within the framework of an existing body of literature, standard rules of writing do not apply. When an author writes, he builds on and refers to what has already been written—a style, a genre, a well-known story or author. There

Very little of what happened during that period in Europe would be deemed by any of us suitable story material for children.

is a whole background of literature, symbolism and analogy to rely on. Our everyday language is filled with analogies; we say "crystal-clear" and "bright as the sun." But were we asked to describe how clear crystal is, or how bright the sun is, we would be at a loss for an analogy—because they are the extremes and thus they are the analogy. So, too, with the Holocaust. It is an extreme. What analogy can explain it? Auschwitz is like what? Auschwitz is only like Auschwitz.

The next problem is one of language. A child coming home from school says he is "starved." After a hard day's work, we might

say we're "exhausted" or "dead." If these are the words we use to describe these everyday regular events, what vocabulary is left for the author of the Holocaust to use? What words will describe hunger or fear or exhaustion in the extreme situation of a concentration camp? Nothing in the reader's experience is comparable to what the author will be trying to convey.

The problem of the lack of proper vocabulary is so acute that some of the most frequent expressions one finds in a book about the Holocaust are "Words cannot describe" and "I cannot tell you. . . ."

In some cases, we even use Nazi terminology to describe a phenomenon that has no other name; one example would be the often-used term "medical experiments." This is a Nazi term for an unthinkable form of torture—torture that contributed nothing to medicine, that yielded no worthwhile knowledge from its experiments. Yet we deliberately use the above-mentioned term for lack of any proper words to describe what really happened.

There is an even larger problem—beyond those of the lack of analogy and vocabulary. We not only do not have the tools to communicate the Holocaust experience, but we may not have the capacity to relate to it. Other authors have dealt with horrors in their literature, but the horrors were something of the imagination—probable, but not real. In the Holocaust experience, on the other hand, we are dealing with something inconceivable—improbable, but real.

Why should a human being believe such a thing? Are we trained, educated, or brought up to believe such possibilities? We are not. Up until the last moment, the victims did not believe.

If writing about the Holocaust for adults is difficult, it is even more so when writing for children. There are certain constraints placed upon authors by specialists in children's literature. Authors are cautioned that if they want to write about real danger, they cannot have children as their main characters (Fisher, 1962). If you want children as the central characters, the plot must fit them, otherwise you get an awful compromise that suits nobody. Paul Hazard (1960) says to be brief, because the capacity of

*Based on a panel discussion held at the 21st Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries in Montreal, June 17, 1986.

children for emotion is considerable, but they do not like sad emotions. After some vicissitude, a happy ending is important.

Can this general advice apply to Holocaust literature for children? Do we have any situation in the Holocaust when children were not in real danger? Do we have happy endings? Very rarely. So here we are, dealing with a seemingly impossible situation, yet we feel very strongly and advocate: "Well, it has to be done!" The story has to be told.

Conveying the Holocaust to Children

What is the message that we want to convey to children? How much should be revealed? How much should be told? At what age? At what level? And through what method of imagery?

Victor Frankl (1963) tells of an episode in Auschwitz in which his inmate neighbor was having a nightmare. Automatically, his hand moved to grab him by the shoulder to wake him up. Then he says: "My hands froze, because I realized that whatever his nightmare is, it cannot be as bad as the reality I wanted to bring him back to."

"Nightmare" is a word we have used for centuries to express something that is worse than reality. We are dealing now with a reality that is worse than a nightmare. And we are dealing with children. How do we protect them while informing them? Any book that you open, for or about children, will immediately show you that this concern is not only ours; it is also the writer's as well as the general public's.

Why is *Anne Frank's Diary* read by so many children? I believe one of the reasons might be the built-in protection the book has in its structure. Anne Frank did not know what she was going to write about. In a certain awkward, terrible way, a reader of *Anne Frank's Diary* nowadays, knows more about the Holocaust than she did. The most quoted paragraph of her beautiful diary—where she affirms her belief in human goodness—appears in the diary at the moment when the door opens and she is on the way to Bergen-Belsen. But Anne Frank did not know what was there, beyond the lorry and the door. When she expressed her hopes, her fears, her concerns, there was something that protected her, as all children should be protected from knowing the full truth of the Holocaust.

The total experience of Anne's reality, with all the privations and suffering imposed on her family, did not include the possibility of a Bergen-Belsen. There is a sense of the need for such protection in the works of most authors who write about the Holocaust for children.

**. . . we are
dealing with
children.
How do we
protect
them while
informing
them?**

This protection can take different shapes. One possibility is to isolate an event that deals with a partial aspect of the Holocaust, such as escape from Nazi-ruled territory or hiding in a sheltered place. Both *The Devil in Vienna* (Orgel, 1978) and *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (Kerr, 1971) deal with a limited experience—that of having to leave one's country when the Nazis come to power. There is the notion and the realization that once you get beyond the border, it's O.K.; it is not a no-end situation such as a train going to Auschwitz, or to Birkenau. The trains in these books are going to Paris or London or Switzerland. There is a solution, and there is a happy ending—albeit not a brightly colored or chocolate-coated happy ending. It is still problematic. One has to adjust to a new place, etc. but there is something to look forward to. There is hope, and the families are together—a basic principle of this type of Holocaust book written for children. One of the hardest experiences to deal with, in children's literature is the breaking up of families—the children being left alone, children abandoning their mother's hand, separation at "selectzias," and the like.

Some of the more horrible experiences do enter into this literature, but indirectly—by way of a story told by somebody, a letter

from Uncle Hans or letters that stop coming. But whenever the children hear about it, somehow it is with a curtain in between. They hear an adult's conversation and do not exactly understand everything; the parents may be discussing something while a child is ill, and she thought she heard, but she's not sure; or Father is having a nightmare and words escape, not very clearly, and there is a prayer for Father to stop having nightmares. It is as if the author feels the need to leave out as much as possible, while still telling the story, relating the difficult reality. I feel authors should use this type of protection, bearing in mind that as long as families functioned in the Holocaust, parents tried to protect their children from knowing, as long as possible. In the Jewish schools of the ghettos, the curriculum included biblical passages about the protection of G-d. To keep hope alive, the teachers emphasized that G-d would always be there to protect the children.

Janusz Korczak kept up the pretense of a school outing with his orphans when they boarded the train to Treblinka. There is no need to disclose everything, since we know well that even as adults we cannot and many times do not want to be exposed to the memories of survivors.

Another way of creating relative protection against extreme horror for young readers can be found in some of the stories that have appeared in recent years in Israel. Sarah Gluzman and Irene Libman wrote a number of short stories and novels for children that have similar structures. The Holocaust theme is introduced from the vantage point of a child now living in Israel who finds a picture or an old *siddur*; he or she might wonder at an uncommon name given to a neighbor; or, there might be a parent who disappears on certain days of the year. There is some sort of a mystery that brings forth a question and a request to reveal the story behind it—the story, of course, has to do with the Holocaust. Here, the structure is the protection. Since the person is there to tell the story, it has to have a relatively happy ending, at least for the storyteller. The distinctive elements here are that the central character is a child who is alive and well, and that there is a mystery to be solved. In many cases, the story also has to do with the coming-of-age, e.g., Bar-Mitzvah—"Well, I never told you, but now you are old enough to hear this story"; sometimes there is a delay, some sort of ritual, or a ceremony—"Wait until Grandpa comes home and then he will tell you the story."

I have found this approach very helpful in dealing with the reluctance of children to hear about the Holocaust. They know there is something there. They are curious, but

reluctant. By identifying with the character in the story, the children—and I—found it easier. Using the books, I could ask—“Well, what do you think she is going to hear? What do you think the story of Grandpa is going to be? Do you think it is going to be a sad story? It probably will be. It has to be.” These questions prepare the ground.

Other authors will choose different ways: in Claire Huchet Bishop's *Twenty and Ten*, the situation is an adventure similar in structure to that of children's novels that deal with a group of youths solving a detective or spy problem. Only this time, the threat is very real and cannot be confused with make-believe adventures. Children are extending help to persecuted Jewish children in a world where adults failed the test of humanity.

There are no easy answers to the question of how to introduce this painful subject to children. Different aspects of it can be treated with different age groups. Our choice of a book should depend on the message we want to convey. If we are to remain faithful to the idea of educating towards positive values rather than hate and distrust of any group of human beings, we have to keep looking for the books that have this

message—the ones that remain faithful to the event they are describing, yet bear in mind the reader's sensibilities and his ability to deal with a given experience.

When placing a book about the Holocaust in the hands of a young reader, we have to be prepared.

The hardest role is that of the parent, teacher or librarian who has to answer the difficult questions our young readers often put to us after reading the book we recom-

mended. On the subject of the Holocaust in particular, an educator cannot trust any given work to do the job; the best novels will not answer all the questions. When placing a book about the Holocaust in the hands of a young reader, we have to be prepared.

References

- Bishop, Clair Huchet. *Twenty and Ten*. New York: Viking, 1964.
- Fisher, Margery. *Intent Upon Reading. A Critical Appraisal of Modern Fiction for Children*. New York: Watts, 1962.
- Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Pocket Books, 1963.
- Hazard, Paul. *Men, Children and Books*. Boston, MA: Horn Book, 1944.
- Kerr, Judith. *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. London: Collins, 1971.
- Orgel, Doris. *The Devil in Vienna*. New York: Dial Press, 1978.

Rachel Meir is National Education Consultant for the Canadian Zionist Federation as a Representative of the World Zionist Organization, Department of Education and Culture in the Diaspora.

Appendix: Bibliography of Holocaust Literature for Children

Marcia W. Posner

JWB Jewish Book Council and
UJA-Federation
New York, NY

As Mrs. Meir is primarily acquainted with Israeli children's literature, a list of American children's books on the Holocaust has been prepared as a supplement to her article. The works listed below comply with the theme of Mrs. Meir's article—that is—to use less specific and therefore less frightening books about the Holocaust with children. I have taken the liberty of including stories of children who successfully outwitted Nazis, and biographies of heroes and heroines of the Holocaust. Many excellent books have been omitted, however, because they do not fit Mrs. Meir's criteria. The starred books are mentioned in Mrs. Meir's article. Age levels are given in parentheses.

A recently revised list of children's books about the Holocaust is now available from the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Fiction

- Aaron, Chester. *Gideon*. New York: Lippincott, 1982. (10-14)
- Firer, Benzion. *The Twins*. Spring Valley, New York: Feldheim, 1981. (11 up)
- Forman, James. *The Survivor*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976. (10-14)
- Ginsburg, Marvell. *The Tattooed Torah*. Illus. by Jo Gershman. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1983. (6-10)
- Herman, Erwin and Herman, Agnes. *The Yanov Torah*. Illus. by Katherine Janus Kahn. Rockville, Md.: Kar-Ben Copies, 1985. (8-12)
- *Kerr, Judith. *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. New York: Coward, 1972; Dell/Yearling pb, 1972. (8-12)
- Levitin, Sonia. *Journey to America*. Illus. by Charles Robinson. New York: Atheneum, 1970; Aladdin/Macmillan Children's Book Group, pb, 1987. (8-12)
- *Orgel, Doris. *The Devil in Vienna*. New York: Dial, 1978.
- Orlev, Uri. *The Island on Bird Street*. Translated from the Hebrew by Hillel Halkin. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, 1984. (10-14)
- *Sachs, Marilyn. *A Pocket Full of Seeds*. Illus. by Ben Stahl. New York: Doubleday, 1973. (10-14)
- Suhl, Yuri. *On the Other Side of the Gate*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1975. (10-14)
- Suhl, Yuri. *Uncle Misha's Partisans*. New York: Four Winds, 1973; Shapolsky, pb, 1987. (10-14)

Non-Fiction

- Atkinson, Linda. *In Kindling Flame: The Story of Hannah Senesh, 1921-1944*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1985. (12-16)
- Finkelstein, Norman. *Remember Not to Forget: A Memory of the Holocaust*. Illus. by Lois and Lars Hokanson. New York: Franklin Watts, 1985. (8-12)
- *Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. revised ed. Transl. by B.M. Mooyart. New York: Doubleday, 1967. (10-14)
- Niemark, Anne. *Leo Baeck and the Holocaust*. New York: Dutton/Lodestar, 1985. (11 up)
- Reiss, Johanna. *The Upstairs Room*. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1972; Harper Junior Books Group, 1987. (10-14)
- Schur, Maxine. *Hannah Szenes—a song of light*. Illus. by Donna Ruff. Phila, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1986.
- Volavkova, Hana, ed. *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*. New York: Schocken, 1978. (8 up)
- Weissman-Klein, Gerda. *Promise of a New Spring: The Holocaust and Renewal*. Illus. by Vincent Tartaro. Chappaqua, New York: Rossell, 1981. (7-10)
- Zar, Rose and Kimmel, Eric. *In the Mouth of the Wolf*. Phila, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1983. (12 up)