

Ever After? History, Healing, And 'Holocaust Fiction' In The Third Generation

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More than ten million men were inducted into United States military service during World War II. The highest number of inductions came in 1943, when 3,323,970 entered service.¹

My grandfather was one of them.

Between July 1st, 1940, and June 30th, 1945, a total of 306,298 foreign born individuals were enlisted or inducted into the United States Army. Nearly 30,000 noncitizen servicemen came from seven principal enemy countries. The plurality – more than 14,000 – were native Germans.²

My grandfather was one of them.

550,000 Jews served in the American Armed Forces during the Second World War.³

And my grandfather was one of them.

In preparing this paper for the London Conference I thought about the designated theme quite seriously: 'Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution.' Survivors of *Nazi Persecution*.

My grandfather's story isn't just 'a soldier's story', or an 'alien-in-America' soldier's story, or even an 'enemy alien' soldier's story. And it isn't 'merely' a story of a Jew in the American Armed Forces, facing Nazism during the Second World War.

The story of Pfc Sam S. Dreifus is one he never articulated, the story of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who was already wearing his U.S. Army uniform by the time he sat for the photograph that appears on his Certificate of Naturalization. The story of a refugee-survivor⁴ (to borrow and perhaps bend some terminology from Dorothy Seidman Bilik) who fled his home country in 1937 and was drafted to serve his adopted one six years later. The story of a baker, assigned not to the European or Pacific fronts, but to domestic battle in the kitchens of the prisoner-of-war camp in Clarinda, Iowa, where Pfc Dreifus supervised Germans captured at Normandy while he and his wife awaited the birth of their first child.⁵

It is a story that I, with the historian's tools and the creative writer's craft, have extracted from primary documents and secondary sources, and woven into fact-based fiction. It is one of my many war and Holocaust-related writings – works that include an article on my re-acquisition of German citizenship, and a novel manuscript that developed from archival documents I found while searching for a dissertation topic, and book reviews. These writings seem to expand and deepen with every paper proposal and short story sketch. This story, set in Clarinda, is titled 'Lebensraum', one in a collection of stories that has become my MFA thesis.

At times I've considered naming the entire collection, '*Lebensraum*'. The more I write, the more I discern the ways in which so many of my characters (or their parents and grandparents), having been chased from their original 'living space', still search for psychic and physical territory, still don't feel safe, still cannot fully 'live' their lives. The shadows of Nazi persecution remain, whether the main characters are refugee-survivors, people who managed to survive the extermination camps, or children *and grandchildren* of either of those first two groups.

Lots of flashbacks. Lots of pain. Freud might identify quite a bit of 'remembering and repeating' in my pages. He might even agree with my hypothesis: The historical research and the creative writing, the (re)constructing of the past in my own excruciatingly informed ways, help me in the process of 'working through'.⁶

Working through? Working through what? What do I have to work through? As my grandmother remarked on one occasion, 'When I was your age, Erika, I had much more serious things to worry about.' When she was my age (at that time, 23), she had just left her home. Left her parents. Boarded a ship, alone, in Hamburg, in the very last days before her visa was to expire. On the dock, men with swastikas demanded to see her papers. An American passenger intervened: 'What are you doing to that poor girl?'

It was April 1938.

In the citizenship article, published five years ago,⁷ I wrote about hearing adults mention the name 'Hitler' when I was a young child living in a predominantly Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood and about reading Anne Frank's diary when I was in the third grade. It was also about that time that the *Holocaust* miniseries aired on television, and visual images of everything from the prewar persecution to the gas chambers confronted me for the first time. I wrote about the books I read after my family moved to a mostly non-Jewish New Jersey suburb, the Holocaust memoirs and poetry, and especially William Heyen's work that describes the camp at Belsen:

You will see that the graves are covered, as is the whole area, with Erika. Erika, bell-heather, *heide*, a heath plant, wild and strong. Wild, and strong, and beautiful. When not in bloom Erika is green, a deep green. [...] In December, Belsen is green, a dark green. But in early fall, I am told, Erika blooms a reddish blue or bluish red, and then Belsen must be very beautiful, the sun perhaps occasionally breaking through the cloud cover. [...] It must be very beautiful and very terrible at Belsen when each fall the Erika blossoms.⁸

I wrote about the reasons my grandparents emigrated, and the people they left behind, and the relatives who suffered and died in places called Gurs and Dachau and Auschwitz. I wrote about the fears I hadn't expressed back then, the troubling questions I hadn't articulated. I recounted the recurring nightmare I hadn't shared, of the SS soldiers storming into my suburban classroom, tearing me from my desk and isolating me – the only Jewish student – to be taken away in a big, black truck. Not until reading Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On's 1995 *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust*, did I realize that mine were not the only third-generation nightmares.⁹ Not until then did I begin to reflect seriously on the

possibility of a heritage handed to the third generation that required healing. Working through.

But as Julia Chaitin has recently remarked, for a long time much of the research ‘examined the psychological scars that were discernable in survivors [...] and in their children’.¹⁰ Survivors and their children. A large group, indeed. But a group that was bound to expand.

Aaron Hass, for one, anticipated some ‘future’-oriented issues, some ‘Third Generation’ concerns, in his 1990 work on the children of survivors, particularly in the context of *that* generation’s experience of child-raising and the dilemmas of how to incorporate family and collective history into the fabric of *its* children’s identities: ‘How steeped do I wish my son or daughter to be in the Holocaust? How should I present the material? At what age should I expose them to which details? The second generation can exert more regulation over the transmission process than did their parents.’¹¹ This is certainly a start. In literary scholarship, one finds even less written about the third generation than in the psychological literature, although works by and about second-generation authors provide extraordinarily thought-provoking material, and one cannot doubt that these writers are themselves aware of the subjects Hass has raised.¹²

One has only to see the example of Thane Rosenbaum. Like the character of Adam Posner who appears (in some form) in each of the nine stories in the 1996 debut collection, *Elijah Visible*, Rosenbaum is the son of Holocaust survivors; the cover of *Elijah Visible* bears a (perhaps somewhat unsettling) endorsement from Elie Wiesel stating that Rosenbaum ‘is totally obsessed with the Holocaust. His stories reflect that obsession. They are written with sensitivity and pain.’

Sensitivity and pain, yes. As in, for example, ‘An Act of Defiance’. The Adam Posner of that story immerses himself in Holocaust Studies. This Adam Posner tells the reader: ‘I wasn’t there, in Poland, among the true martyrs. Everything about my rage was borrowed. My imagination had done all the work – invented suffering, without the physical scars, the incontestable proof.’¹³ This second generation child’s ‘descent into darkness’ (the reader learns that this is the title of Adam’s doctoral thesis, ‘an academic title, a personal mantra’) contrasts with the nearly frenetic *carpe diem* lifestyle of his elderly Uncle Haskell, a camp survivor, whose first visit to Adam in New York shapes the story.

But Rosenbaum wishes a different, lighter future for his young daughter: ‘The outrage can’t be cancelled in one generation. OK, then two. Just leave her alone. [...] Let her write romance novels. Let her do something else.’¹⁴

Little Basia Tess Rosenbaum may, very well, ‘do something else’. For that matter, in Rosenbaum’s most recent novel, *The Golems of Gotham*, the third generation representative, teenage Ariel Levin, serves to redeem and liberate the ghosts of her grandparents’ generation – effectively giving them space to live again (from an attic) – while freeing her father from the prison of his present. Ariel has certainly not been able to escape completely her Holocaust legacy (and her life contains other complications), but she has confronted it more vigorously, and with a more evident intent to go beyond physical ‘survival’, than either of the preceding generations.¹⁵

But Erika Dreifus, who, with a 1969 birthdate is among the elders of the third generation, has not been able to fully separate from her grandparents’ past. My

preliminary sense is that a connection exists between the writing processes of descendants of the persecuted and what was termed in an article by Harvey A. Barocas and Carol R. Barocas more than twenty years ago an 'adaptive solution' in the next generation, a 'keen interest in history and social studies' combined with a 'strong commitment to teach courses on the Holocaust'. The authors further argued that by situating the Holocaust:

[...] in its proper historical perspective and making the lessons of the Holocaust a part of the human experience, the children are able to separate themselves. [...] [T]hey come to feel it is their moral obligation to explain the Holocaust for themselves and the world.¹⁶

For me, doctoral dissertation in wartime history in hand, writing fiction has become the best way to 'explain the Holocaust' – and its after-effects – for myself and for the world. To find my own space.

Some may disagree with much, if not everything, that I've articulated here. The brilliant Melvin Jules Bukiet, for instance, might challenge my very right to speak with any authority on these topics. In compiling his extraordinary anthology, *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, Bukiet explains his terms, including 'Survivor':

This may be the most complicated word here. We live in an age in which victimization carries a special weight and is therefore deliberately adopted. So who is a survivor? Obviously, anyone who spent any time in a German extermination, concentration, or labor camp qualifies. Also obviously, anyone in hiding for their lives in the woods of Poland or in an attic in Amsterdam qualifies. But what if you fled eastward, into Russia? Is there a line on the map [...] that, when crossed, makes you a refugee rather than a survivor? I believe so. Certainly such people survived the catastrophe of the war, but they were fortunate enough to avoid the catastrophe of the [Holocaust].¹⁷

This raises at least two interrelated and perhaps contradictory points. First, Bukiet asserts primacy for writer-descendants of 'true' survivors:

To be shabbily proprietary, we own it. Our parents owned it, and they gave it to us. [...] I'd like to tell everyone from the Bellows and the Ozicks to the Styrons and the Wilkomirskis, "Bug off. Find your own bad news," but no one can legislate artistic temperament, and perhaps no one should.¹⁸

But I don't think it's fair to group the 'Bellows' and the 'Ozicks' and the 'Styrons' with what Bukiet, himself, calls the 'grotesque fraud' of Binyamin Wilkomirski. I don't know if these implied categories work. The sharp distinctions Bukiet draws certainly seem to leave no place for me, and this may be the (selfish) heart of the second point from which I cannot 'escape': If my grandparents were not 'survivors', then how can I have remained so affected? So tied to this territory? Has there been something toxic, wrong, inauthentic about my obsessions? Have I, too, in the phrasing of Alain

Finkielkraut (whose work I was hardly surprised to find quoted in Bukiet's 'Introduction'), become an 'imaginary Jew'?¹⁹

I don't think so. And not only because not everything I write is about 'me'.

'What matters [...] in the historical novel', wrote Georg Lukács, 'is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events.'²⁰ The expansion of the territory already covered.

I adored my grandfather. Most people who knew him did.

Nobody loved the 'Oseh Shalom' like Sam Dreifus did. He wanted to be a cantor.

But a master of narrative, he was not. Only if questioned by his elder granddaughter might he speak (and then, in the English that even after 60 years in America never quite flowed) about his orphaned childhood, about life in 1930s Germany, about the early refugee days in Yorkville and the later ones in Washington Heights. And perhaps, a tiny bit about the Army.

He was someone who got out of bed every day to put bread on the table (quite literally) for his own family, and for others. He did not have the time – or, frankly, the education or money – to remember and repeat and work through. If he ever considered the complexity and awesome implications of even the Clarinda episode he certainly never discussed his feelings with anyone. Not his wife. Not his son. Not his grandchildren.

The 'great historical events' that surrounded his life story, and those of the characters of '*Lebensraum*' and many of my other stories arguably offer more than mere backdrop. But the 'poetic awakening' is key, not only for them, but, yes, for me. I've needed to be awakened. To lose the third generation nightmare. To remember and to repeat, yes. But also to work through.

And to carve out my own *Lebensraum*.

In a panel on intergenerational transmission held on 31 January 2003, the author dedicated this paper's presentation to the memory of her grandmother, Ruth Roos Dreifus, born January 22nd 1915, died January 31st 2002.

Notes

- 1 History/Records: Selective Service System/Induction Statistics, <http://www.sss.gov/induct.htm>, cited 8 July 2001.
- 2 Watson B. Miller, 'Foreign Born in the United States Army During World War II, With Special Reference to the Alien', in *Interpreter Releases* XXV, no. 29, August 11, 1948, pp. 264, 271. For more on 'aliens' in the United States military see, for example, Maurice R. Davie, *Refugees in America*, New York and London, 1947, pp. 189-99; William H. Fitzhugh, Jr., and Charles Cheney Hyde, 'The Drafting of Neutral Aliens by the United States', in *American Journal of International Law* 36, no. 3, July 1942, pp. 369-382 and James B. Jacobs and Leslie Anne Hayes, 'Aliens in the U.S. Armed Forces', in *Armed Forces and Society* 7, no. 2, Winter 1981, pp. 187-208.
- 3 I. Kaufman, *American Jews in World War II: The Story of 550,000 Fighters for Freedom*, vol. 1, New York, 1947, p. 349. For more on this subject see also Samuel C. Kohs, *Jews in the United States Armed Forces*, New York, 1945.
- 4 Dorothy Seidman Bilik has used the term 'immigrant-survivor' to describe 'the fictional counterparts of those Jews who came to the United States after World War II.' She notes that the word 'immigrant', bearing a 'connotation of movement for the sake of economic and social advancement, is imprecise as a designation for any European who came to the United States after 1933 as an exile and refugee, or later as a survivor.' But she adds: 'Those postwar remnants [...] must be distinguished from the refugees who fled from persecution before and during the war.' Borrowing from Bilik, I will use 'refugee-survivor' to characterize those, such as my grandparents, who survived by fleeing (prewar) Nazi-dominated Europe. See Bilik, *Immigrant-Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish American Fiction*, Middletown, CT, 1981, p. 39.

- 5 For more on Camp Clarinda see Patrick C. Miller, 'Camp Clarinda: A POW Camp in Southwest Iowa (Master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1993). See also the Inspection Reports on Prisoner of War Camps, 1942-1946 (Clarinda, Iowa), Box 24, Records of the Special War Problems Division, RG 59 (Records of the Department of State), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 12, London, 1958, pp. 147-56. Janet Burstein explores similar ideas in 'Traumatic Memory and American Jewish Writers: One Generation After the Holocaust', in *Modern Jewish Studies* 11/*Yiddish* 11, no. 3-4, 1999, pp. 188-197.
- 7 Erika Dreifus, 'Passport from the Past: American Jew Reclaims Her Family's German Citizenship, And Her Roots', in *Boston Globe*, 24 August 1997, p. D1.
- 8 William Heyen, *Erika: Poems of the Holocaust*, New York, 1984, p. 61.
- 9 See Bar-On, *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust*, Cambridge, MA, 1995, p. 21.
- 10 Julia Chaitin, 'Facing the Holocaust in Generations of Families of Survivors: The Case of Partial Relevance and Interpersonal Values', in *Contemporary Family Therapy* 22, no. 3, September 2000, pp. 289-90. See also Lucia Ruedenberg-Wright, 'The Second and Third Generations: Where do we go from here?' Paper presented at the 29th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, December 1997, Boston (<http://lrw.net/~lucia/pubs.ajs>).
- 11 See Aaron Hass, 'The Third Generation', Chapter 9 in Hass, in *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation*, Ithaca, NY, and London, p. 156.
- 12 Sources include: Burstein, op. cit.; Richard Exner, 'Some Reflections on Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Writing', in *World Literature Today*, 60, no. 3, 1986, pp. 402-406; Karein Goertz, 'Transgenerational Representations of the Holocaust: From Memory to Post-Memory', in *World Literature Today*, 72, no. 1, 1998, pp. 33-38; Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory', in *Discourse* 15, no. 2, Winter 1992-93, pp. 3-29; Joel Shatzky, 'Creating an Aesthetic for Holocaust Literature', in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 10, no. 1, 1991, pp. 104-114.
- 13 Thane Rosenbaum, 'An Act of Defiance', in *Elijah Visible*, New York (St. Martin's Griffin Edition, 1999), p. 59.
- 14 Thane Rosenbaum, quoted in Shai Oster, 'Dark Laughter', in *Moment*, April 1999, p. 76.
- 15 Thane Rosenbaum, *The Golems of Gotham*, New York, 2002.
- 16 Harvey A. Barocas and Carol R. Barocas, 'Wounds of the Fathers: The Next Generation of Holocaust Victims', in *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 6, 1979, p. 339.
- 17 Mevin Jules Bukiet, 'A Note on Method and Category', in Bukiet, ed., *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, New York, 2002, pp. 27-28.
- 18 Bukiet, 'Introduction', *Nothing Makes You Free*, pp. 16-17.
- 19 See Finkelkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff, Lincoln, Nebraska, and London, 1994. Bukiet cites Finkelkraut on pp. 17-18 of his 'Introduction'.
- 20 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, Lincoln, Nebraska, and London, 1962, p. 42.

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