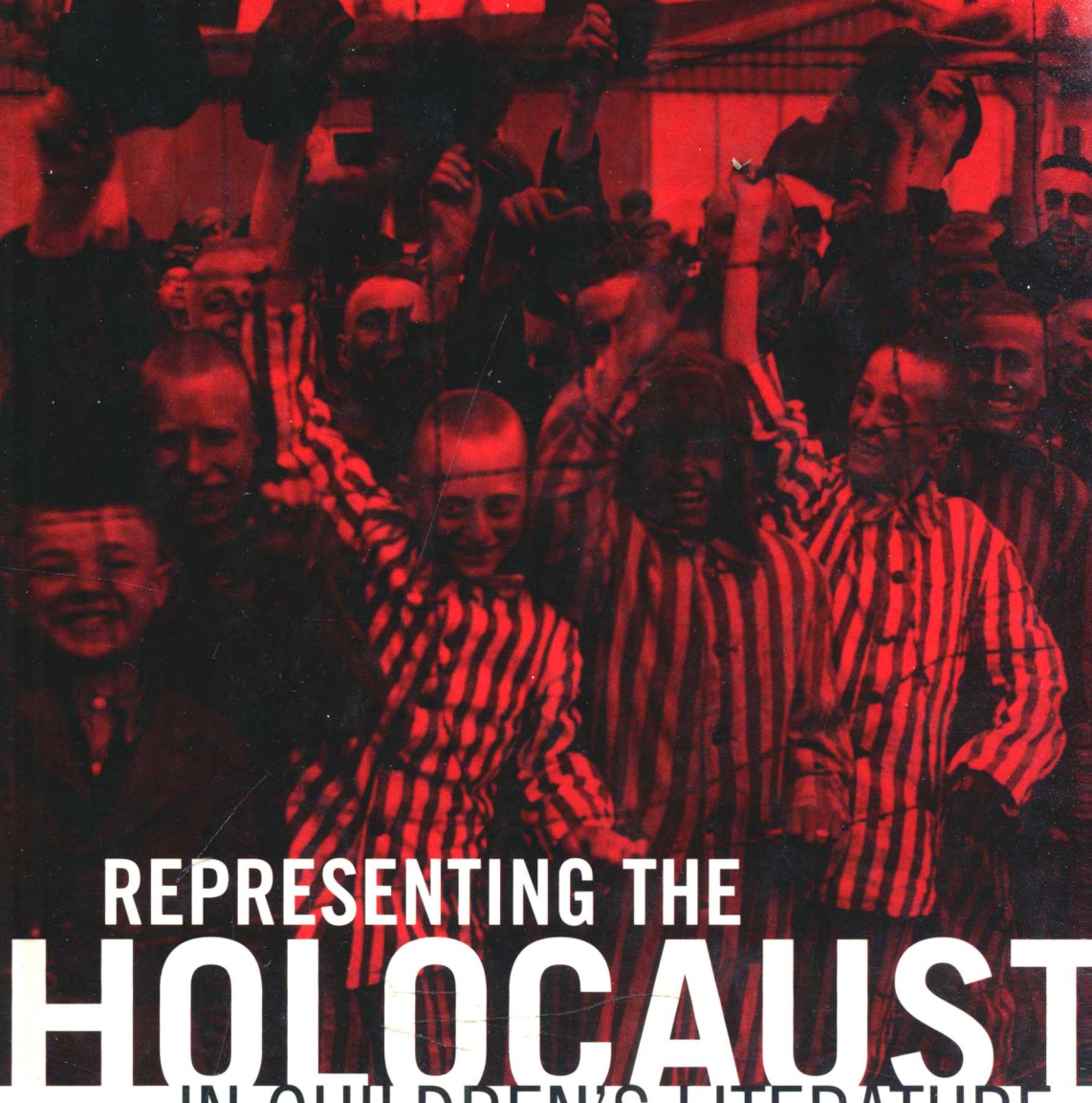

REPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature

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For the chilpas with gratitude, and Meeri with love.

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Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

Contents

Introduction

8,000 Jews were executed by the Security Service.

The above line was quoted by the historian, Raul Hilberg, at a conference in 1987.[1] It is a single line in a report from the local military headquarters in Mariupol, Ukraine, dated October 29, 1941. Eight thousand lives are dismissed in this single line of administrative paperwork. If we are to represent the events of the Holocaust, then to account for this single line alone we would need to recreate 8,000 individual personalities and destroy them in one fell swoop. An accurate reconstruction would also demand that we saw the lives and motivations of those who carried out the massacre, of those who stood by and watched, of those who dealt with the bodies, of those who mourned, and of those who supplied the bureaucratic records of the final act. To really *know* about the Holocaust, we would have to repeat this act of imagination literally millions of times.[2] Clearly, this is beyond the powers of human imagination. However, the last two decades have seen an upsurge in attempts to make the Holocaust comprehensible to young people through novels, picture books and auto/biographies. This book examines these genres of Holocaust literature written for and/or read by children and young adults in order to explore the ways in which material which has been called "unrepresentable" may be represented.

We may first ask why the Holocaust should be anymore unrepresentable than any other period in history. Historical novels have always been problematic for literary scholars and historians alike. Hester Burton referred to them as "mixed marriages [that] are frowned upon by the Establishment."[3] The blending of fiction with faction certainly causes alarm on topics other than the Holocaust. Nevertheless there seem to me to be two factors related to the representation of the Holocaust that are not necessarily true for other historical periods.

First, the deaths of six million Jews and nearly as many "other" individuals, along with the brutal treatment of many more is so horrifying that ordinary words do not seem fit tools for the task. Please note that I am *not* claiming that the Holocaust is the only event to be subject to these particular difficulties. Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union form one of the most obvious parallels, although more recent acts of genocide in Ruwanda and former Yugoslavia are not without their similarities. Steven T. Katz's extensive survey of other acts of genocide suggests that the Holocaust should be considered unique only in the sense that it was a state-instituted systematic programme of murdering one nation, and not in terms of the numbers or even the proportions killed.[4] Yet, just as each individual who was murdered was an individual, each of these acts of genocide is unique. While others may wish to compare them in order to make generalisations about human behavior, my concerns are with the circumstances and the people affected by the specific events we collectively refer to as the Holocaust. Thus when I refer to the Holocaust as a unique event, I do not intend to belittle other instances of genocide. Rather, I refer to the specifity of the events that took place and the individuality of those people who died, of those who suffered, and of those who mourned—they are unique.

Second, the Holocaust has been subject to very specific attacks in the form of Holocaust denial. Quite simply, we do not have similar instances of Ancient Egypt-denial, or Victorian-era-denial or even World Trade Center-denial. This means that authors writing about the Holocaust have greater responsibilities concerning the presentation of the Holocaust as having taken place. There are greater pressures on them to be historically accurate and to avoid any form of writing which might encourage or enable young readers to deny the historical evidence. Thus, whereas many scholars have raised concerns about children's recognition of fictionality, I am also concerned with their recognition of factuality.

Boel Westin has examined critics' responses to the fictionality/factionality divide in literature for children and young adults.[5] She suggests that adult critics have a "fear of fiction," that is, they fear that children will not recognise the fictionality of what they read and will consider the texts to be truthful. This concern has a long tradition; nineteenth century editors felt it necessary to state that *The Adventures of a Pincushion* was fiction. In relation to the study of biographies and autobiographies, I too respond to these concerns. However, for the most part, my concern is the other direction—the fear that children will not recognise the factuality of what they read. Within Holocaust fiction for children, we can presume that this fear is widespread. For instance, the subtitle "an allegory of the Holocaust" was added to Eve Bunting's *Terrible Things* when it was reissued through the Jewish Publication Society. Many works contain paratexts informing young readers how much of the text is based on evidence and how much on conjecture or imagination, thereby blending traditional history writing

with fiction. Such trends are not surprising: teachers are encouraged to use Holocaust literature to complement history teaching. Thus historical accuracy can also be considered an appropriate criterion for assessment alongside more traditional modes of assessment established by literary scholars.

In short, Holocaust literature for children can be conceived as having a greater moral obligation to be historically accurate than historical fiction dealing with less catastrophic events. Although the basic issues and techniques involved are not different from any other kind of historical fiction, when the Holocaust is represented in literature for young readers, they are accorded a greater enormity. This moral obligation, combined with the more general problems of combining historical faction with fictional devices are at the core of my concerns in this study.

Writing stories about true horror, about an historical event, and for children presents authors with an unusual combination of restraints. Many writers adopt a purposeful didactic stance that emphasises the presentation of information. While such false or didactic narratives rarely fall into the trap of encouraging readers to take pleasure in the suffering of others, they are also unlikely to engage their readers. A well-written non-narrative text in an information book would probably be a more effective means of achieving the aims of such texts. However, what constitutes a successful narrative is not a matter on which consensus is likely to be reached. The purpose of this study is not to prescribe how authors should write about the Holocaust for children, but to examine the various means by which authors have attempted to write Holocaust literature for young readers. Naturally, such an analysis does entail a discussion of the relative success of various narrative devices.

Holocaust youth literature has recently been subject to intense scrutiny from educationalists and critics alike. While the former have focused on the value of these texts for educational purposes, critics' concerns have been more disparate. Two recent works of criticism stand out as milestones in the field: Adrienne Kertzer's *My Mother's Voice* (2002) and Hamida Bosmajian's *Sparing the Child* (2002).[6] Kertzer's work is a highly personal working through of her own experiences of learning about her mother's suffering during the Holocaust alongside interactions with children's literature on the same subject. She speaks with the voice of inherited knowledge. Bosmajian provides the non-Jewish German voice for whom the camps form "intellectual, not experiential, knowledge".[7] Born in Hamburg in 1936, Bosmajian's personal history comes far closer to the events of the Holocaust than my own. In her introduction to *Metaphors of Evil* she describes her feelings of guilt as "suspect, for I can afford to be guilty about a past in which I did not act because I was a child" (ibid.).

Aware of these critics long before their ideas were published in book form, I struggled with questions of the right to speak. However, I came to see

that the voice of the outsider whose knowledge was wholly acquired through reading was not only relevant, it was sadly lacking. I cannot provide the personal insights and a lifetime of experience as can Kertzer. Nor can I cast judgments on whole generations of Germans as Bosmajian can. What I can offer, I hope, is something closer to the perspective of many contemporary child readers who, like me, must learn about the Holocaust through texts alone. We who have nothing but the texts to guide us must be very sensitive to the quality of the information they contain. In stating how Holocaust literature for children communicates with a person like me, there may still be time for those with other forms of knowledge to correct misunderstandings.

When I say that my research matter is Holocaust literature for children, I immediately invite a number of questions concerning my terminology: What do I mean by the Holocaust? What do I mean by Literature? Where do the borders between fiction and nonfiction lie when writing about an historical event? And, how do we separate literature for children from literature for adults? A brief response to each of these questions seems necessary to establish the limits of this inquiry.

First, what does it mean to say that my subject matter is concerned with the Holocaust? In choosing the term *Holocaust*, rather than the many other alternative terms for describing the events orchestrated by the Nazis, in my title, I have already adopted a stance towards my research area that should not be left implicit.

The term *Holocaust* has two related roots. The first derives from the Septuagint (ancient Greek version of the Old Testament) term *holokaustoma*, which can be translated as "totally consumed by fire" from *holos* meaning whole and *caustos* meaning burnt. The second arises from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *olah*, which refers to the type of ritual sacrifice that was totally burned. Berel Lang states that the English word *holocaust* developed from literally referring to a religious burnt offering to becoming a metaphor for sacrifice generally, although the association with fire remained.[8] It was used earlier to describe warfare in writings about the trenches in Flanders during the First World War. The use of the term *Holocaust* to refer to the events that took place under the Nazi regime places a greater emphasis on the destruction by fire. Rosenfeld notes that the addition of the definite article to the term emphasizes the event and, more importantly, an epoch that is determined by the event.[9] A capital is often used to distinguish the Holocaust from other uses of the term holocaust and also to show respect for the magnitude of the event.

Elie Wiesel, who was one of the most influential writers in getting the term *Holocaust* accepted in common usage, has since come to regret his use of the term because he feels it has become trivialized.[10] He notes that one reporter described the defeat of a sports team as a holocaust. Such misuse of terminology destroys the power of language to describe Auschwitz. Others

reject the term because of its associations with sacrifice, arguing that such associations evoke a sense of holiness, of good coming from atrocity, of meaning and of value in the systematic destruction of specific groups of people. Such scholars choose other terms.

The most common alternative is *Shoah*, which is the Hebrew term connoting wasteland or destruction. A Yiddish variation, *Churban* (destruction), which is associated with the destruction of the temples, is also used, but less frequently. Both these terms reject the notion of sacrifice, emphasise the Jewish victims, and also imply a sense of a turning point in history. Berel Lang (ibid.) objects to these terms on the basis that they only describe the events from the point of view of the victims and fail to take into account the specific role of genocide as it figured in the deeds of the Third Reich. The term *Holocaust* could equally well be criticised on this basis.

Genocide, the term Lang prefers, is more strictly accurate as it refers to the deliberate extermination of a people on the basis of their membership in that group. In order to make it clear which act of genocide is being referred to, the modifier Nazi is added to genocide, making it clear that the user of the term places the events of 1938 to 1945 within a framework of reference that acknowledges other acts of genocide. Those who would rather consider the death camps as exceptional and unlike other genocides in the history of mankind tend to use either Holocaust or Shoah to refer to the events. Thus I find that Lang's term, *Nazi genocide,* is not in line with his own observation "that the Holocaust is not a conventional or 'normal' subject at all, that the evidence of its moral enormity could not fail to affect the act of writing and the process of its literary representation."[11]

For the most part, I use the term Holocaust, occasionally using Shoah as an alternative. For me, the events to which these terms refer *are* exceptional, hence my use of capitalization. Moreover, not all of the works I discuss are directly concerned with genocide. Many are not set during the period of the death camps (1938–1945), but cover the period before (e.g., Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole the Pink Rabbit*), immediately after (e.g., Ruth Minsky Sender's *To Life*) or considerably later (e.g., Robert Cormier's *Tunes for Bears to Dance to*). Thus to describe these works as being about genocide would be inaccurate. The term's associations with sacrifice are, in my opinion, offset by its acceptance in general usage. When discussing the events with non-specialists, the term 'Holocaust' is immediately understood. The association with sacrifice comes only from those who have studied the subject in more detail. "Shoah" I find more problematic because it emphasizes the destruction of the Jews at the expense of the other groups who were also persecuted. In stating that I find this problematic, I do not wish to deny that the primary aim of the death camps was the anihilation of the Jews. Nevertheless, I find it unacceptable to dismiss the deaths of five to six million "others"—Gypsies, Soviet citizens, Soviet refugees, Poles, other Slavs, Jehovah's Witnesses,

Catholic priests, homosexuals, handicapped, and Blacks—to a mere postscript. I would find the constant use of terms that only refer to Jewish victims inappropriate. Non-Jewish victims are rare in Holocaust literature for children, making Shoah an appropriate term on occasion. Quotations are, however, left in their original form.

My second and third questions considering the nature of literature and the boundaries fiction and nonfiction are related. For a long time, the working title of this book referred to Holocaust *fiction* since I wanted to make it clear from the outset that I had no intentions of discussing diaries, poetry, or textbooks. Yet since I do discuss autobiographies and biographies, the term "fiction" seemed to question the truth value of these works. The nature of truthfulness within literature has been more widely debated in the field of literary scholarship and is one of my central concerns. Although no simple solutions to this matter can be found, the question cannot be ignored.

Over the past two decades, critics studying the Holocaust have become increasingly aware that access to the information comes by way of writings about the events. Since, as Lang notes, "writing does not write itself, that it is never transparent or self-interpreting and thus that the medium of writing constantly obtrudes on its subject, the need to consider writing about the Holocaust *as writing* becomes clear."[12] If we do not consider the role of writing the representation of the events, we cannot fairly assess how much we really understand, nor how much we can reasonably be expected to imagine.

Lawrence Langer reasonably states that "language alone cannot give meaning to Auschwitz . . . The depth and uncontained scope of Nazi ruthlessness poisoned both Jewish and Christian precedents and left millions of victims without potent metaphors to imagine, not to say justify, their fate."[13] Thus we are left in an insoluble controversy: most of our knowledge of the Holocaust comes to us through writing and yet language itself seems inadequate to the task of containing the events. I explore the idea that language is not powerful enough to deal with the Holocaust in the first chapter. This includes a review of responses to the question as to whether Holocaust literature should even be written.

The issue of the right to write is developed further in Chapter Three, where I discuss the problem of where the borders between fiction and auto/biography lie. The hesitancy with which most authors approach this subject implies that they feel that the only people who have the right to speak are those who were empirically, rather than imaginatively, affected by the events. Clearly many survivors feel the same way too. For this reason, it becomes relevant to examine certain biographical information pertaining to the authors—their ethnicity, whether they were caught up in the Holocaust directly or indirectly and the time at which the text was written—when I examine their works.

In stating that I am concerned with Holocaust literature, I have implied that in some ways literature communicates with readers in a manner that is

distinctively different from other means of communication such as information books, survivor testimonies, diaries, film, poetry, and paintings to mention just a few of the alternative media. When I say that literature communicates in a different manner from other media, I do not mean that they are fundamentally different. As Roger D. Sell shows, literature is also a form of mediation between sender and receiver and, as such, not wholly different from any other form of communication.[14] However, I am suggesting that literature can activate a response within a reader that differs in some fairly basic sense from the other ways in which the Holocaust can be communicated. During the course of this book, I shall be developing a sense of what can (and what cannot) be communicated about the Holocaust by means of literary devices.

We need to consider the act of writing about the Holocaust for the simple reason that the majority of our knowledge about the Holocaust has come to us through writing. Writing for children, as we have long been aware, is particularly susceptible to ideological shaping. When authors choose to address a child readership in a piece of Holocaust literature, they inevitably take on a highly moralistic set of ideologies for shaping their texts. How these ideologies are guided depend, in no small part, on how the authors respond to the multiple pressures brought to bear on their works, specifically which of the strands they value most.

My third question—How do we separate texts written for children from those written for adults?—begs further the question: Why would we want to create such a binarism? I see no value in creating a sharp divide since it is quite clear that many sophisticated teenagers read more challenging forms of literature than most adults would choose to read. While some researchers of children's literature have felt the need to attempt to define strict boundaries in terms of content, linguistic difficulty, world view, publication format, age of the protagonist, and theme, to mention some of the most common criteria, I find little value in imposing a rigid definition for my research purposes. It seems clear to me that works such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, despite being marketed primarily for an adult audience are accessible to sophisticated teenagers. Equally, Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies* and Maurice Sendak's *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* have been marketed for young readers, but contain allusive references that many mature adults would overlook. The majority of works I have selected are unquestionably children's books, but my analyses will also touch upon interpretations that would be hidden to all but the most sophisticated of reader and on borderline cases such as the four works mentioned above.

In my selection of children's Holocaust literature, I have long abandoned attempts at comprehensive coverage. Even excellent guides to the materials available, such as those by Sullivan (1999), Rudin (1998) and Goldberg (1996), are not fully comprehensive and can provide only very brief summaries of each

item. I do make occasional references to a larger number of works, but in order to make my arguments more comprehensible, I have limited my more detailed analyses to a fairly limited corpus of about fifty books. This corpus is intended to be a representative sample of narratives that are either set during the Holocaust or in some way incorporate the Shoah as a major theme.

As already stated, I have excluded overt forms of life writing, most notably diaries and survivor testimonies. I have also chosen to limit myself to the discussion of narratives, thereby excluding poetry from my analyses. Within these generous confines, I have attempted to include texts written in English or translated into English containing the major victim groups: Jews, Gypsies, Mischlings, gays, Poles and other Slavs. Unfortunately, I have found no stories for children making reference to Soviet citizens, prisoners of war, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Catholics. As already observed, references to non-Jewish victims are rare in children's books. I have examples of stories from the camps, the ghettos, refugees, on-lookers, partisans, kapos, those in hiding, those who hid others, and those whose encounters with the Holocaust are limited to meeting a survivor after the war. I have included some of the finest examples of writing for children and I have also included generic pulp fiction. I refer to picture books, illustrated stories, novels for young readers, comics and autobiographies. Clearly my sample does not do full justice to each of these categories, but I hope to give voice to as wide a range of Holocaust fictional writing for young people as is possible within the confines of a single volume. Moreover, my study makes no attempt to provide empirical studies of flesh-and-blood child readers, although I do refer to features of children's cognition such as their ability to understand history. My primary concern is how the Holocaust is represented.

Representability

The act of representation rests on a very basic assumption: that a signifier can stand for a signified object. Thus the belief that a photograph represents the person whose image appears on the photographic paper rests on the assumption that the photograph can stand for the flesh-and-blood person. That is, a direct relationship between signified and signifier is assumed. In the last century, this assumption was subjected to challenges from a variety of sources. Saussaure argued that the relationship between signifier and signified was arbitrary, agreed upon by sociocultural conventions. Roland Barthes took such notions further arguing that we have no immediate access to the world, only to language. Thus poststructuralists, like Barthes, valorized the signifier over that of the signified. And, when the signified "object" was history, critics such as R. G. Collingwood argued that history does not exist, thus refuting the possibility of a direct signifier–signified relationship. Thus although critics like Barthes and Collingwood have utterly different starting points,