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'NO LONGER WAS THERE A PLACE FOR HIM IN THAT WORLD': REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN IN HOLOCAUST SPACES

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Abstract

David Roussett's term 'concentrationary universe' and Primo Levi's 'gray zone' both apply unique concepts of system and space to the Holocaust, which contribute to the suggestion that the uniqueness of the Holocaust space may also need commensurate aesthetic representation. This article examines Holocaust narratives that depict two types of space in which children experienced the Holocaust – rural and urban hiding spaces and the contained spaces of ghettos and camps. Though the experiences of these spaces differ, they also share some universal attributes in their representation. I compare depictions of the child's hiding experience based on their rural or urban locations, which may necessitate frequent movement among spaces or long periods of uncomfortable stagnancy. Despite their relative freedom in comparison to those trapped in camps or ghettos, whether the open spaces of the countryside or the close quarters of the big city, the necessity of hiding also makes it a form of confinement. I also examine the impact on the child characters of being restricted inside the closed worlds of ghettos and camps. Ghettos, as walled off portions of a bigger city, and camps, as structured areas not far from cities or villages, restricted inhabitants to the limits of walls and fences. As such, they become their own universes, existing within yet apart from the space around them.

Inspired by documented historical experiences these narratives present portraits of the places themselves—the Theresienstadt ghetto-camp, the Warsaw Ghetto, infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buchenwald and its satellite labour camps, the Aryan side of Warsaw, and villages in rural Eastern Poland. Each of these spaces requires different tactics for its child characters to navigate with the hopes of prolonging life, as well as narrative strategies in order to portray them. Thus I aim to show that the setting not only influences the child character's Holocaust experience, it also impacts the reader's understanding of the historical event itself.

Key Words: Holocaust, literature, survivors, children, trauma

Concentrationary Representation

In 1947, French writer and political activist David Roussett coined the term *l'univers concentrationnaire* or 'concentrationary universe' to represent a space and its system, disclosing the hidden structure 'of the novel political space of systematic terror'.¹ The concentrationary goes beyond the historical space of the physical camp into the realm of aesthetics and representation.² It can also be applied to other spaces of the Holocaust, such as the ghetto and hiding places, to depict the 'political system of terror whose aim was to demolish the social humanity of all its actual and potential victims within and beyond the actual sites.'³ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi also identifies a linguistic reading of the term as 'a self-contained world [that] both generated its own vocabulary and invested common language with new, sinister meanings'.⁴ Roussett's universe, as well as Primo Levi's 'gray zone',⁵ denotes a unique space within the Holocaust experience; literary representations about and by survivors of this unique space explore the restricting and rearranging of persecuted Jews across both broad and narrow geographical boundaries. In particular, for the youngest victims whose natural growth was severely impacted by this restructuring and limiting, these narratives convey a childhood unique to traditional definitions.

When examining the places of hiding, ghetto, and camp, the literature may be broken down into a comparison of hiding places, both rural and urban, and the closed worlds of the ghetto or camp. Each of these spaces were both a part of and separate from the greater space around them: the ghetto is a walled off portion of a bigger city, the camp is a structured space uncannily close to cities or villages but separated by high fences and guard towers, and hiding spaces require either physical seclusion or identity suppression. Removal from any of these places often involved deadly consequences. Hiding on false papers necessitated frequent movement among spaces, between cities or from the city to country, which contributed to the destabilisation of identity. The shifts between rural and urban spaces can be seen to impact the child's hiding experience; the open spaces of the countryside and the close quarters of the big city both act as a form of confinement due to the forced nature of hiding. There are several ways that children were historically hidden that the narrative examples represent: on false papers, in the countryside (either in the woods and fields or in remote villages) and in a convent. Explored within narratives about ghettos and concentration camps is what critics have called 'the closed world'⁶ and 'the grey zone', spaces which require different tactics than hidden spaces for navigation and survival and impacts the child characters in different ways. Examples about the closed worlds of ghettos and camps come from several different works in which the plots and characters share many similarities, reflecting the common strands of the real experience inside ghettos and camps. Thus, the physical space in which the narratives are set directly impacts the reading of the narrative, the reader's understanding of the historical event.

Hiding in the City and Country

In his work examining literary representations of the English countryside and city, Raymond Williams notes that the ideas of the places 'country' and 'city' have changed over time and have carry both positive and negative connotations. Positive attributes associated with the country have included 'the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue'; whereas the city has been associated with 'the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, [and] light'.⁷ On the other hand, Williams notes that powerful hostile associations include the city as 'a place of noise, worldliness and ambition' and 'the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation'.⁸ The evolution of communities in the city or country and the stark differences between the two is highlighted in many of these texts, as the child characters experience different forms of hiding based on their location. Although literature has often separated the country and the city,⁹ these Holocaust texts necessarily combine attributes of each as their hidden characters navigate them both for different reasons and to different ends.

When examining rural and urban spaces, Williams draws on authors from world literature, including Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Baudelaire, all of who share representational ideals of the Holocaust narrative. For example, Balzac has shown the social intricacy of the city and its constant mobility,¹⁰ although, of course, the danger of this position is never understated. Some of the examples here also show this complexity, depicting characters comfortable in their social positions in the city and the new interaction between hidden Jews and those among whom they hide. For those characters from the country, the city is viewed with less comfort, more in line with Williams' analysis of Dostoyevsky who 'emphasised the elements of mystery and strangeness and the loss of connection'.¹¹ In contrast, and perhaps most relevant to the Holocaust narrative of the twentieth century, Baudelaire identified the same isolation and loss of connection among city dwellers, but found from these conditions a new and lively perception, perhaps most conducive to the Jew in hiding seeking to reinvent himself.¹² The city has a social character: 'its transitoriness, its unexpectedness, its essential

and exciting isolation and procession of men and events—[which are] seen as the reality of all human life'.¹³ Into this intricate space, these texts' character must fit or perish.

Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies* focuses on Maciek who, with his aunt Tania, uses false papers to hide, initially in various large cities and then on a rural farm.¹⁴ They opt to hide in different Polish cities to take advantage of the relative ease of anonymity in crowded metropolises and the underground networks that are more easily established and hidden there. Perhaps this decision results from the comfort of their having grown up in a reasonably large town, which the narrator describes in general terms to encompass any similar place in the region: 'T., a town of about forty thousand in a part of Poland that before the Great War belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire'.¹⁵ They are comfortable in their primarily urban surroundings and only choose the countryside for visits to Maciek's grandparents, who represent the older generation and a reflection of the past, and holidays, which depict sentimentalisation of Maciek's childhood and escapism from the chaos of real lives in the city.

The space most commonly associated with the Holocaust is the concentration camp and despite the fact that Maciek is never in a camp, their presence and signification are still keenly felt. As Sue Vice writes a 'backdrop of mass murder implicitly infuses Maciek's experiences'.¹⁶ There are many instances of *Judenaktionen*, or round-ups, before they go into hiding and whilst they are still in their home city, in which the Jewish population has been segregated into makeshift ghettos. These roundups are followed with comments such as 'My grandparents and I never saw him again'¹⁷ or that the town has now 'become *judenrein*',¹⁸ which implies the deadly finality of the deportees' destinations. Whilst still together in T., as the round-ups become more frequent, Maciek's grandfather Bernhard attempts to explain to him why he must not be deported alone. The warning implies the grandfather's insightful presumption that deportation from the ghettoised city leads to death.¹⁹ He also mentions 'concentration camps where people were meant to die',²⁰ but does not give details, if he has any, within Maciek's earshot.

These menacing spaces outside the city are vague and shapeless, constructed out of legitimate rumours and fear. Any explanation as to how the adults recognise the dangers of events or places, in particular as to how Tania knows what she knows, is unnecessary. Tania knows that the 'Jews in T. and everywhere else in Poland were as good as dead, but she intended to live and to save [her family],'²¹ no matter the cost. Thus, when they are caught up in the expulsion of Poles from Warsaw and Tania learns the train's destination is Auschwitz,²² she intuits the destination's meaning and the importance of trying to escape that route. After their timely departure, Maciek and Tania work on a rural farm for their room and board. In this final hiding place, the countryside is represented as a place where few questions are asked and suspicions are less readily acted upon. Maciek thrives with the physical demands and freedoms of farm life, out from the confines of city ghettos and hiding places.

Like *Wartime Lies*, Henryk Grynberg's *The Jewish War and the Victory* is also about a hidden child in Poland. The protagonist, Henryk, is younger than Maciek by five years at the start of the work. Initially, he hides in the homes and barns of former neighbours, next in a forest dugout, then in the city and finally, masquerading as non-Jew, in the countryside. Just as Maciek is helped by a female adult, his aunt Tania, Henryk's mother facilitates his hiding. Henryk and his mother come from a small rural town with a segregated community of religious Jews and, although they will also hide in the city, they are significantly more comfortable when they decide to hide in the countryside. For example, Henryk remarks that 'Life was good in the country'.²³ The difficulties of hiding in the city, such as the close proximity to occupying and betraying forces, are different to those of hiding in the country, which include the suspicious and curious natures of close-knit communities in which

neighbours frequently interact. When Henryk is in large cities, the sheer number of people disrupts his way of thinking about space that has developed out of hiding in the country:

I had not imagined that there could be so many people still left in the world. How could I have? Since the time when our shtetl disappeared I had thought that nothing remained except the fields and forests where we were hiding, that towns had ceased to exist.²⁴

Grynberg is highlighting the fact that young children perceive their worlds in relation to the spaces in which they live. Henryk had only known the shtetl²⁵ and the wilderness; the first is a closed off Jewish community, isolated from non-Jews in the town, and the second his experience of hiding.

In their final hiding place, a village in the country, Henryk's mother determines that this remote location where they couldn't possibly be known would be the best place to last out the war. The remoteness of this countryside village emphasises the emotions of hidden Jews. Henryk claims that the village appeared 'melancholy':

Or perhaps it only seemed so to us because we knew this was our last refuge. Not because we foresaw that here everything would come to the final resolution and conclusion. We only knew for certain that there was no more escape for us from here.²⁶

That Henryk and his mother have literally reached the farthest corner of their known worlds, underscores that this country village is the final destination of their time in hiding, one way or another. The importance of the village as their ultimate hiding place is marked by the narrator's comment that the last of the Jews who they had first hid with in the forest 'were being wiped out by cold, hunger, and by the band of villains who believed that their bodies and souls contained gold'.²⁷ This village is besieged first by the Russians then the Germans and the civilians are marched and burned out of their homes. They are inadvertently caught in the midst of the war, which physically changes their landscape: when the fighting is over, they emerge from where they had fled into the fields, onto 'land washed clean with bullets'.²⁸

After initially trying to resettle in the former shtetl, Dobre, Henryk and his mother find that it is impossible to go back to old ways with the decimated Jewish community and occupied property. Joining many other refugees, they relocate to a war-torn Warsaw. The city has transformed once again, the burned ghetto becoming an 'exotic, stony landscape',²⁹ a heap of rubble that his mother cannot bear to see. Henry discovers that the city is alive in a way that his hometown of Dobre could not be in the shadows of the dead: 'the streets and gutters were overflowing and pulsed with life'.³⁰ However, the city is also determined not to be a suitable place for young children and Henryk and his stepsister are sent to a Jewish Children's Home near Łódź, whilst his mother tries to secure visas and money to emigrate out of Poland altogether. This temporary departure from the city is recommended because the poor conditions are perceived to jeopardise the health of children who have been weakened by wartime deprivation.³¹ Once again, the darker and dirtier image of the city is contrasted with the clean healthfulness of the country.

The Holocaust child's countryside experience is highlighted most in Aharon Appelfeld's *Tzili: The Story of a Life*. In *Tzili*, the title character hides in the forests during warmer months, and then pretends to be a local prostitute's daughter to labour for gentile peasants during the winter. Tzili grew up in the country on the outskirts of a very small town surrounded by wilderness, and fleeing into it, whilst not a conscious decision, is an understandable one. Like the denseness of city populations and architecture, the denseness of fields and forests can conceal. They can provide sustenance as well as danger (for example, from the elements) and they can provide safety in the isolation or madness in it. Though

always rural, Tzili's hiding place is periodically transplanted into village huts where the population is depicted as extremes of the backwardness of historical country stereotypes. Their rural location seems to shelter them in many ways from the events of the modern warfare. Tzili's experience with what Appelfeld calls the 'peasants' in the country, demonstrates a less-idealised version than Williams describes, where the closed ranks do not 'succeed in being neighbours first and social classes only second'.³² The populations Appelfeld describes align more with historical stereotypes; for example, city dwellers are depicted as slightly less anti-Semitic, more willing perhaps to help someone in need or, at least, to turn a blind eye, more educated, less dependent on religion or superstition, and more worldly about foreigners. The peasants with whom Tzili interacts are unable to possess these qualities in their temporal and spatial isolation.

Tzili's experience of hiding in the countryside also separates her from other Jewish experiencers. She is different from those who survived elsewhere not only geographically but psychologically as well. This affects how fellow refugees view her and how she views herself. Since Tzili spent the war years in rural hiding places – exercising, ingesting more vitamins, and being in the sun and fresh air – she does not share the same starved, stricken, and shorn look of the Jews who survived the camps. Thus, she is perceived as being healthier – and consequently less Jewish – than the camp refugees with whom she ends the book. When Tzili joins their ragtag southward wandering band, the refugees remark incredulously: “‘She doesn't look Jewish. She looks healthy.’” “‘A miracle.’”³³

Another place/space in which Jewish children hid during the war was in non-Jewish institutions, such as in Elisabeth Gille's *Shadows of a Childhood: A Novel of Friendship*. The novel takes place in a convent in France's more rural Bordeaux region and follows a young orphaned Jew, Léa, who is hidden in the convent boarding school, where she forms the titular friendship with the daughter of French Resistance fighters, Bénédicte. Léa is a city child with memories of wealth and the boulevards of Paris. The countryside she is transplanted into is also deeply entrenched in the occupation and war. Removed from the cosmopolitan metropolis, Léa is installed in a remote Catholic institution, emphasising the 'backwardness' of strict adherence to religion in the country. When the nun and child go to Paris in search of word of Léa's deported parents, the country nun feels very out of place in the bustling city; Léa temporarily comes alive when she knows she is on familiar streets, but the reality of the post-war city do not match her childishly embellished city memories and she can no longer recognise them. Léa then spends the remainder of her childhood in more a more rural setting, in smaller towns and at the seaside, which her guardians deem relatively safe and healing.

Despite Léa's relative freedom of movement and changes of space, her traumas restrict her emotionally and psychologically; her obsession with war crimes trials and all Holocaust-related news consumes her and traps her forever in the place of victim, of hidden child, of Jewish orphan. However, in her post-war and post-child future, she feels the pull of Paris heedless of her guardians' misgivings of two young women alone in the city. Williams notes that it is significant that 'the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future'.³⁴ He identifies the struggle between the pull of the country and the idea of the city with one between old, human, natural ways and progress, modernisation, and development.³⁵ Léa's move from the country into the city as a young adult signifies the movement away from her Holocaust past towards a post-war future and the potential to put her childhood trauma behind her. However, Léa's variety of forward and outward movement was not always possible for other experiencers, such as is represented in narratives about ghetto and camp experiences.

Closed Worlds and Grey Zones

Although also located in both rural and urban spaces, the more common settings for Holocaust literature are those two primary places created by the Nazis to incarcerate the Jews: ghettos and camps. Because the historical purpose of the ghetto and the camp was to keep their victims both inside and separate, the characters' interactions with each other and the world are more limited. Thus, in these literary examples, survivor-writers confine the intervention of the outside world into the narratives, restricting it spatially by means of the setting or mentally through the child's consciousness. Regardless of how they are accomplished, closed worlds are carefully constructed so that the narratives uphold the antagonists' brick walls and wire fences and trap the reader inside with the characters. Through focusing solely on the viewpoints of those confined inside and avoiding panoramic perspectives of historical matters, these narratives reinforce a perspective of suffering and captivity.³⁶

Rousett's concentrationary universe describes a self-contained world of inverted meaning in which the ordinary rules by which people lived no longer applied and were replaced by other, more troubling, standards. However, Ezrahi notes that Rousett's term may not be limited to the geographical confines of the concentration camp, but could allude to the general condition of the European Jew during World War II who was marked for extermination, whether imprisoned in a ghetto or camp, hiding on false papers, or physically hidden away.³⁷ According to Hannah Arendt, the characters inhabiting the concentrationary universe are people who have 'lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human'.³⁸ Their confinement inside the closed worlds is a determining factor in the characters no longer being considered human beings.

Bogdan Wojdowski's *Bread for the Departed* is essentially a profile of the Warsaw Ghetto, a particularly unique space in history. Wojdowski traces the ghetto from its foundation to its liquidation and presents it through the experiences and observations of young David. Only one chapter depicts David outside of the walls, risking his life to steal across and smuggle food back. David feels rootless when he is on the Aryan side of the wall. The armband with its Jewish star and his forced placement in the ghetto has supplanted David's belief that he belongs to the rest of Warsaw, his former home: 'no longer was there a place for him in that world'.³⁹ Apart from this brief interlude, the text occurs within the Warsaw Ghetto; Wojdowski encloses his narrative within the ghetto, mimicking the characters that live and die there. When characters depart from the ghetto alive, through deportation, they also depart from the narrative and are generally presumed dead thereafter. During the ghetto liquidation, characters also go outside the closed world, escaping to the other side of the wall; they are also never present in the narrative again aside from in speculations. The ghetto is a relatively large space, but due to the large numbers of people forced into it, it is depicted as feeling significantly smaller. By contrast, those moments outside of the ghetto in Warsaw proper, whilst not devoid of people, signify the freedom not available to those confined to the ghetto—the lanes are wide, shops are open, and life seems to be continuing rather than dying out. In this way, Wojdowski uses the closed space and narrative lens to highlight the constriction of the ghetto.

A reader with historical knowledge of the Warsaw Ghetto liquidation and the survival rates of children David's age once deported to a camp will assume that David will die after he leaves the narrative's closed world, although it is not directly stated. He avoids deportation as long as possible, first by hiding and then by working in the last remaining ghetto factory. At this point, the workers no longer believe there is work to the east, conceding that the rumours of mass graves in the forest and crematoriums in camps are the more likely outcomes for those deported from the ghetto. David anticipates that his time is running out, considering too late the advice his grandfather gave him to run. Instead, he and the remaining ghetto workers

are sent to the train platform, following his mother and his father in their suspected fates: ‘Along the way David heard people whispering that some prisoners had stayed behind on Prosta Street and that they had managed to find really good hiding places.’⁴⁰ Although there is no hope for David, the rumours perpetuate a hope that someone may yet live inside the Warsaw Ghetto for it has been established that those who leave it are generally never heard from again. If it cannot be David, let it be somebody.

Like Wojdowski’s representation of the ghetto, Ka-tzetnik 135633⁴¹ creates a portrait of the closed world of the concentration camp in *Moni: A Novel of Auschwitz*. This novel is the author’s imagining of his younger brother’s experience as a ten-year-old Piepel, the personal servant and sex slave to a Block Chief in Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁴² Ka-tzetnik’s characters and his readers are contained completely within Auschwitz, with only occasional flashbacks and references to ‘before the Hitler period’⁴³ or ‘outside, in the world’.⁴⁴ Leon Yudkin describes Auschwitz as a planet apart ‘where there is no concept of wife, children, family, where there is no God, nothing, not even the crematorium, just a grey stretch in which the only thing desired is a crust of bread’.⁴⁵ Through his child protagonist, whose individual identity is subsumed within the larger collective of prisoners,⁴⁶ Ka-tzetnik produces a naturally isolated internal world.⁴⁷ Words used in ordinary circumstances outside of a concentration camp are differentiated from those within the camp by preceding them with *Auschwitz* so that sleep is actually *Auschwitz sleep* and seven days is an *Auschwitz week*; this narrative strategy identifies Moni’s extermination camp world as a closed system that is detached from any surrounding context.⁴⁸

Ka-tzetnik focuses on another area inside of this already-closed system—the grey zone. Primo Levi coined this terminology to describe the reality of the camp as one of inverted morality, where nothing was as black and white as good or evil, perpetrator or victim, protagonist or antagonist. With this phrase, Levi confronts the uncomfortable issues that Ka-tzetnik highlights from the text’s first page—the hierarchy that unavoidably developed in the camps, intensifying Nazi methodology, and the extreme conditions under which people will harm others in order to survive.⁴⁹ Moni’s Auschwitz is situated almost entirely within this morally grey hierarchy; as a participant in the fold and sometimes observer on the margins, he exists amongst prisoners who perpetuate the cycle of abuse designed by the S.S. The extreme representational choice to situate Moni entirely inside the closed Auschwitz world poses a challenge for the reader who is trapped inside with him, reflecting the challenge faced by the experiencer and his character counterpart in extremity. Moni as a character lives and dies within the narrative space of Auschwitz.

Moni’s death at the end of the book is a remarkable scene: he has just survived the kind of beating that has killed stronger campings, and in a burst of preposterous and unprecedented life, he makes a manic dash toward the Auschwitz fences. At this point Auschwitz is temporarily personified as all of ‘Auschwitz caught its breath [at] [...] the ember of unfulfilled life that has suddenly flared in full sight of them’.⁵⁰ As if he is unknowingly putting on a performance, Moni is observed by the camp *Prominents* who had both done him harm or helped him, fellow inmates who knew him before and outside, and the S.S. in the figure of camp commandant Rudolf Höss. It is unclear if Moni is futilely trying to escape or attempting to commit suicide by throwing himself on the fence, which, though electrified during the night, is turned off during the day.⁵¹ The onlookers are amazed at the way his limbs seem to be ‘Driven by a life and will of their own. Here, in Auschwitz, no one has such free-willed arms and legs’.⁵² Robert, who Moni had served as Piepel, cries out as if to encourage him “‘Bravo, Old Whore!’”,⁵³ using the nickname that by this time had come to replace his own name; a fellow inmate will return Moni’s name to him by calling it out immediately after Robert’s cheer. Ironically, Moni’s death is also compared to ‘Life manifest’.⁵⁴ In the last lines with its final simile, the reader is reminded that Moni is, after all, just a child: “‘The earth

gathered him in like a mother cradling her little one to sleep. Hush...”⁵⁵ The hush attempts to soothe and silence any cries or protests that might come from the dying protagonist, the narrative, and even the reader’s reaction. The manner and description of Moni’s death also give something back to the boy – his free will and his sovereignty over his body in a place that had taken them both from him. Yet, Moni dies before he can reach the last barbed wire barrier, therefore he is still inside the camp and unable to leave the closed world.

Fatelessness by Imre Kertész also depicts the closed world of the concentration camp. The story follows an assimilated Hungarian boy’s moral awakening that results from his experience of the camps Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and its satellite labour camp, Zeitz. Although the majority of the *Fatelessness* is set within the interior of the camps in which Gyuri is enclosed, it is the inside of Gyuri’s mind and his present that defines Kertész’s closed world. Kertész traps the reader inside this world with the narrator and the child protagonist, subject only to Gyuri’s perspectives on his experiences and only those incidents that he chooses to relate. This technique pulls the reader into both Kertész and Gyuri’s world from which all are equally unable to escape.⁵⁶ By maintaining strict chronology, Kertész forces the reader to live through all of the tiny details of the concentrationary universe with Gyuri. In this way, Kertész’s closed world is as much dictated by time, as it is space. Gyuri’s careful and casual descriptions of the space provide the reader with a detailed image of the camp, focusing on the interior of the buildings to which he is relegated such as the barracks.

Gyuri’s physical decline precipitates his movement between camps. Too ill to remain in the satellite labour camp, he must be moved to the hospital in Buchenwald and presumably shortly thereafter to the crematorium. Before reaching the hospital, Gyuri is temporarily confined to a cart of dead or dying bodies. Although he does not understand how he has come to this particular space, Gyuri is certain that he will die. His primary concern is no longer how to live within the concentration camp, but how he will be killed; whether by gas, medicine, bullet, or ‘one of a thousand other methods of which, having insufficient information, I was ignorant. At all events, I hoped it was not going to be painful’.⁵⁷ This warped hope conflicts with the reader’s expectations where a normal reaction would be to hope not to be killed at all. Yet, in spite of the resolve he had mentioned earlier to be more sensible about his death, Gyuri still wants to live:

Despite all deliberation, sense, insight, and sober reason, I could not fail to recognize within myself the furtive and yet—ashamed as it might be, so to say, of its irrationality—increasingly insistent voice of some muffled craving of sorts: I would like to live a little bit longer in this beautiful concentration camp.⁵⁸

Consistent with his first reactions and with what would be his response upon returning to Budapest after the war, Gyuri describes the concentration camp in a positive light. The oxymoronic phrase to describe his closed world, ‘beautiful concentration camp’, refashions the readers’ expectations and interpretations collected from Gyuri’s descriptions as well as previous knowledge the reader brings to the text about what constitutes this particular space. Perhaps this is because Buchenwald is preferable to not existing at all, or perhaps, as Gyuri has demonstrated, he has lost the ability to remember a life and place that was more beautiful before and outside of his time in the camps.

Kertész’ ending is not ambiguous—Gyuri clearly lives beyond his ordeal. He departs from the concentration camp and re-enters his former home city of Budapest, which has remained relatively unchanged in his absence. However, the boy that emerges from the camp is not the same one who was first imprisoned there and Gyuri now perceives his life to be essentially meaningless. Gyuri’s survival and departure from the camp itself is troubling; he returns to his former apartment only to discover that it is no longer in his family’s possession. This

initial homelessness precipitates nostalgia for the camps, implying his concentrationary universe has been internalised. He reflects: ‘It was that peculiar hour, I recognized even now, even here—my favourite hour in the camp, and I was seized by a sharp, painful, futile longing for it: nostalgia, homesickness’.⁵⁹

Gyuri acknowledges his survival in a way that perpetuates his fatelessness. He still does not have control over his place, life, or future; he will go to his mother, let her rejoice, and follow the career path that she had conceived for him before the camps, to be an engineer or a doctor. He views his existence in his former home almost abstractly: ‘I am here, and I am well aware that I shall accept any rationale as the price for being able to live’.⁶⁰ What Gyuri cannot seem to reconcile is how every non-experiencer he encounters describes the camps as a hardship or atrocity, which conflicts with the way he remembers them.⁶¹ He resolves that ‘the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camps. If indeed I am asked. And provided I myself don’t forget.’⁶² With characteristic irony Gyuri inverts his audience’s expectations. He states that he can’t just move beyond the past because it is reality and cannot change based on will.⁶³ And, in Gyuri’s typical doublespeak, it is only fitting that the narrator ends with the possibility that his perceptions of the concentrationary universe may in fact be forgotten with distance in time and space.

New Spaces of Understanding

Jewish experiencers of the Holocaust were bound by the limited spaces available to them and the survivor-writers who narrate these experiences often focus their representations on these constraints. For my purposes, experiencers and survivors refer to persecuted Jews who had lived through the Holocaust⁶⁴ and I take into account the differing ways that children in particular could experience it as opposed to adults, such as those hidden in Christian institutions. A survivor might have been more geographically remote from killing centres, such as when exiled on the *Kindertransport*, yet still have experienced persecution in the prelude to extermination, as well as lost many or all of their family members. The lasting impact of the Holocaust on Jewish child experiencers is not limited to the concentration camps and so I seek to demonstrate that these narratives also do not solely ascribe to that one particular space. Terms such as Rousett’s ‘concentrationary universe’ and Levi’s ‘gray zone’ reflect the physical changes of traditional spaces to those of hiding, incarceration, and extermination.

The experiences of children within these spaces were compounded by their age-related physical and psychological vulnerability and lack of understanding. As definitions of what constitutes a Holocaust experiencer and survivor adapt to accommodate younger ages, these narratives open a discussion of the less-examined experience. The narratives of Begley, Grynberg, Appelfeld and Gilles share many similarities: they encourage examination of the isolation and difficulties of coming-of-age in hiding; they examine the identity struggles when wartime years are spent in Catholic institutions or living Christian lives; and they suggest a commonality to the hiding experience for Jewish children. In these texts, the importance of space for interpreting child-specific events is underscored.

Similarly, looking at the altered and constructed spaces of imprisonment occupied by real children and their literary counterparts can communicate to readers what was unique to the Jewish child during the Holocaust. Wojdowski’s portrait of the child’s experience of the Warsaw Ghetto can present a new perspective on the infamous site, Kertész’ ironic depiction of the older child’s life in a concentration camp, and Ka-tzetnik’s narrative of a boy’s death in another camp, not only provide a younger point of view of the historical experience, they also makes accessible a type of horror that may be difficult for contemporary readers to comprehend. As shown by these textual examples, narratives that represent the children’s Holocaust experiences straddle contested boundaries between fact and fiction, history and

imagination, children and adults, all of which can contribute to new understandings of the Holocaust.

Notes

¹ Griselda Pollack and Max Silverman, 'Introduction' in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog*, ed. by Griselda Pollack and Max Silverman (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 1-23 (p. 19).

² Pollack and Silverman, p. 20.

³ Pollack and Silverman, p. 19.

⁴ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of London Press, 1980), p. 10.

⁵ Primo Levi, 'Chapter 2: The Gray Zone' in *The Drowned and the Saved* trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), pp. 36-69.

⁶ The term 'closed world' is perhaps best used in Andrea Reiter's analysis of *Fatelessness* in 'The Holocaust as Seen through the Eyes of Children' in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp. 83-96. Terence Des Pres also uses the term in *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 115.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), p. 1.

⁸ Williams, p. 1.

⁹ Williams, p. 264.

¹⁰ Williams, p. 234.

¹¹ Williams, p. 234.

¹² Williams, p. 234.

¹³ Williams, p. 234.

¹⁴ Although the protagonist and plot share many of the qualities of the author's own Holocaust experience, Begley resists the term 'autobiographical novel' and warns against readers claiming too much biographical truth in the work. Begley's insistence on calling *Wartime Lies* a novel (the full title is, in fact, *Wartime Lies: A Novel*) stems from his belief that only in the form of fiction was he able to write the story at all. In the interview and afterword included in the 2004 edition of *Wartime Lies* Begley expounds upon this issue, as well as in a short article he wrote for *The New York Times*, 'Who the Novelist Really Is' (16 August 1992).

¹⁵ Louis Begley, *Wartime Lies* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), p. 7.

¹⁶ Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 72.

¹⁷ Begley, p. 48.

¹⁸ Begley, p. 59. *Judenrein* translates to 'clean of Jews', and is similar to the term *judenfrei* meaning 'free of Jews'.

¹⁹ Begley, p. 45.

²⁰ Begley, p. 71.

²¹ Begley, p. 47.

²² Begley, p. 148.

²³ Henryk Grynberg, *The Jewish War and The Victory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 8.

²⁴ Grynberg, p. 29.

²⁵ A *shtetl*, the Yiddish diminutive for 'town', was a small town with a large percentage of Jews common in Central and Eastern Europe and primarily within the Pale Settlement of Russia, prior to the Holocaust.

²⁶ Grynberg, p. 42.

²⁷ Grynberg, p. 44.

²⁸ Grynberg, p. 58.

²⁹ Grynberg, p. 103.

³⁰ Grynberg, p. 103.

³¹ Grynberg, p. 126.

³² Williams, p. 106.

³³ Appelfeld, p. 127.

³⁴ Williams, p. 297.

³⁵ Williams, p. 297.

³⁶ Williams, p. 297.

³⁷ Ezrahi, p. 10.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 299.

- ³⁹ Bogdan Wojdowski, *Bread for the Departed* trans. by Madeline G. Levine (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 171.
- ⁴⁰ Wojdowski, p. 402.
- ⁴¹ Ka-tzetnik 135633 is the pseudonym of survivor-writer Yehiel Dinur. The first part comes from the camp slang for a prisoner, which derives from KZ (or Ka-Tzet), the German acronym for *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp); the second is Dinur's inmate number tattoo. See also Galia Glasner-Heled's article 'Reader, writer, and Holocaust Literature: The case of Ka-tzetnik' in *Israel Studies* 12.3 (2007), pp. 109-133.
- ⁴² This would be a theme in Ka-tzetnik's fiction, as his most well-known work, *House of Dolls*, is the author's sexually and violently graphic imagining of his twin sister's Auschwitz experience. For an overview of the perception of Ka-tzetnik's works as both biographical and controversial, I recommend David Mikics' article 'Holocaust Pulp Fiction' in *Tablet* (April 19 2012). His first novel, loosely based on his own experience, was *Salamandra* (1946), translated into English as *Sunrise Over Hell* (1977), and would be the first of the series (including *Moni* and *House of Dolls*), 'Salamandra: Chronicle of a Jewish Family in the Twentieth-Century.'
- ⁴³ Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Moni: A Novel of Auschwitz* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1963), p. 57.
- ⁴⁴ Ka-tzetnik, p. 94.
- ⁴⁵ Leon Yudkin, *Literature in the Wake of the Holocaust* (Saint-Denis, France: Les Editions Suger/Suger Press, 2003), p. 57.
- ⁴⁶ Yudkin, p. 37.
- ⁴⁷ Yudkin, p. 56.
- ⁴⁸ Iris Milner, 'The "Gray Zone" Revisited: The Concentrationary Universe in Ka-tzetnik's Literary Testimony', *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 14.2 (2008), pp. 113-155 (p. 114).
- ⁴⁹ Levi, p. 42.
- ⁵⁰ Ka-tzetnik, p. 185.
- ⁵¹ Moni's dash towards the usually electrified fence emulates the death of Moni's fictional sister (and the character modelled off Ka-tzetnik's sister as mentioned above) at the end of *House of Dolls* who succeeds in taking her own life by electrocution on the fence.
- ⁵² Ka-tzetnik, p. 186.
- ⁵³ Ka-tzetnik, p. 186.
- ⁵⁴ Ka-tzetnik, p. 186.
- ⁵⁵ Ka-tzetnik, p. 186.
- ⁵⁶ Andrea Reiter, 'The Holocaust as Seen through the Eyes of Children' in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp. 83-96 (p. 87).
- ⁵⁷ Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* trans. by Tim Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 188.
- ⁵⁸ Kertész, p. 188.
- ⁵⁹ Kertész, p. 261.
- ⁶⁰ Kertész, p. 262.
- ⁶¹ Gyuri's inability to make others view the camps the way his experience as an inmate makes him view them echoes the question asked by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* that opens 'Chapter 2: The Gray Zone': 'Have we—we who have returned—been able to understand and make others understand our experience?' (36). Gyuri would answer in the negative.
- ⁶² Kertész, p. 262.
- ⁶³ Yudkin, p. 188.
- ⁶⁴ I consider all of the spaces discussed in these literary texts to describe the 'Holocaust', defined here as the persecution and murder of European Jewry in the years 1933-1945. I do not discount the experiences of non-Jews but rather limit the scope of my examination to Jewish children. Early criticism considered survivors to be only those who lived through concentration camps. However, as the variety of experiences of Jews during the period surfaced, the definition of what it means to be considered an experiencer or survivor also adapted. Every major theorist who takes Holocaust literary as their subject has their own categories with which they decide who to consider survivors for the purpose of their studies. For example, in his *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), Alvin H. Rosenfeld's categories include 'the victims, the survivors, the survivors-who-become-victims' and the 'kinds-of survivors, those who were never there but know more than the outlines of the place' (19). In *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of London Press, 1980) Ezrahi differentiates only between 'survivors' and 'those who had been remote from the events themselves' (22). In *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), James E. Young categorises experiencers as 'survivors,' 'non-victims, and 'other writers' (68). These are just a few

examples of terms used to determine who can claim to have experienced the Holocaust. What this disparity between theorists demonstrates is that the struggle to define the survivor-writer persists and varies by individual.

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Biography

Lia Deromedi is a PhD candidate working with Professor Robert Eaglestone at Royal Holloway, University of London, writing a thesis on child protagonists in the fiction of Holocaust survivors. Lia earned a BA in Literature/Writing at the University of California – San Diego in 2007 and in 2010 she completed a MA in English Literature at the City University of New York – Brooklyn College.