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## BREAKING TABOOS IN ISRAELI HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the phenomenon of second-generation Israeli Holocaust literature, also known as 'bearing witness' fiction, that appeared with great resonance on the Hebrew literary scene in the 1980s. It argues that this new band of writers overcame the dual moral obstacles of describing a reality that they did not directly experience and making art of a subject that defies human comprehension. The article focuses on one particularly important novel, *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim*<sup>1</sup> (*The Legend of the Sad Lakes*) by Itamar Levy, which tested the limits of representation of the Holocaust and provoked intense debate about its graphic and violent scenes of Jews tortured by the Nazis as well as about its postmodern techniques in portraying the Holocaust experience. The article maintains that despite the fact that *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* broke taboos in Israeli Holocaust literature with its disturbing, and perhaps sensational sequences, that at heart Levy's narrative presents a profound confrontation with the anguished past that affords young readers the necessary gateway to engage with the Holocaust on an individual, rather than a public level. The article makes the case that novels such as *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* represent deeply veined journeys into the heart of the Nazi beast, by Israeli writers who are propelled by a wish to unshackle the Shoah from the fetters of the collective and reclaim it as a personal experience.

Despite the critical and testimonial surfeit available about the Shoah, and the relentless sword thrusting by historians, a sensitive and intelligent novel of the Holocaust can offer a band of golden rays for those numbed by the nature of historical documentation. No doubt, novels and short stories can grant an open space for independent and meaningful thought about the Holocaust in a way that history books cannot. This inevitably raises the question of how does one write after Auschwitz?, how do those who mercifully were spared the catastrophe imaginatively fill in the blanks?, and how do they translate the trauma that has been transmitted with empathy and affinity?

Indeed, an often discussed aspect of the act of writing after Auschwitz is the way in which it tests the limits of representation. Second generation Holocaust stories encompass multivalent forms. They often depict the life crises of the children of survivors, who delve into their consciousness to recover their personal identity, yet sometimes adopt fantasy, blurring the boundaries dividing truth and fiction. This brings up the question of the authenticity and the legitimacy of such writing, especially when it engages in flights of fantasy – usually associated with postmodernism – that may deform and twist the burning horror.

Thus, an obvious question is: why are second generation prose writers shifting to the fantastic over the mimetic? Hanna Yaoz takes up this point:

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<sup>1</sup> Itamar Levy, *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1989).

The tendency toward the fantastic in second generation writing can be explained by the fact that what the Nazis did deviated from any former reality and pushed the imagination to the absurd, so that when we speak of the Holocaust the fantastic is real. The joining together of real and familiar facts acquires a reality of its own in the minds of the writer and reader precisely when it comes to the Holocaust, whose reality was so abnormal. Those who were not there – who write out of attraction and repulsion, who need to fill the blanks with the creative imagination – resort to fantastic realism much more than do Holocaust survivors in order to close the gap between what is known and what is guessed, often on the thinnest factual grounds.<sup>2</sup>

Second-generation novels represent an attempt to undermine and deconstruct predominant Israeli assumptions about post-Shoah identity. Hence, the works question the adequacy of the official and sacrosanct frameworks produced by the state to portray the Holocaust as well as offer alternate ways to depict the legacy of the Holocaust. In more ways than one, the works betray a gritty spirit of rebellion against the statist appropriation of the Shoah and a vigorous desire to de-nationalise Holocaust narrative and reclaim its personal and intimate dimension. In other words, what is at play here is an effort to privatise the traumatic memories of individuals that had been collectivised by the state. Above all, these texts serve as testament to the fact that within Israeli culture, literary representations of the Holocaust have transcended generational, tribal, or national limitations. Ideology has ceded authority to literature. If, before, the state was the repository of collective memory, enlisting its institutions in service of a mono-ideology that dictated the terms for local memory of a specific experience, the Holocaust, this oppressive coherence no longer exists. To be sure, the notion of an indisputable canon has now been completely dismantled.

Looming large are questions of how secondary Holocaust Israeli fiction helps those reading it edge closer to identification with the victims, despite being separated from the event by several decades. Given the imminent passing of the survivors, the torch has been passed to this generation, in particular the sons and daughters of the survivors, who suffered vicariously from the syndrome of silence. In other words, the second and third generation are the new eyewitnesses to the dying group of victims. They form a bridge to allow those future generations who feel impelled to cross over, to enter the world of devastation, which, while not inflicting a physical wound upon them, has left an emotional scar. Thus, the medium of fiction acts as a mode of articulation, liberating both parents and children from living with an untold past, and allowing them to burst the membrane of a proscribing amnesia.

In the wake of the rise and rise of postmodernism, both in prose and literary hermeneutics, it is not unreasonable to ponder the role this aesthetic has played in expanding the cohabitation of art and the Shoah. A central pillar of postmodern posture is the absolute denial of one narrative, truth, or reality, within the whirlpool of ideas, constructs, histories, and references. It is a modality that moves towards the concept of an ungraspable reality, and liberates the writer from the need to depict a precise and fixed reality of the Shoah universe. As such, postmodernism rejects the tendency towards accurate coordination of words or terms comparable with any accepted image history

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<sup>2</sup> Hanna Ya'oz, 'Inherited Fear: Second Generation Poets and Novelists in Israel', in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory After Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998), 164.

might render. It empowers the author to sketch his or her own plastically ambiguous and evanescent map. 'It is precisely the Final Solution,' Friedlander avers, 'which allows postmodernist thinking to question the validity of any totalising view of history, or any reference to a definable metadiscourse, thus opening the way for a multiplicity of equally valid approaches'.<sup>3</sup> Such jettisoning of mimetic vestiges notwithstanding, Friedlander warns of the dangers lurking within such a theory: 'This very multiplicity... may lead to any aesthetic fantasy and once again runs counter to the need for establishing a stable truth as far as this past is concerned ...'<sup>4</sup>

Any author who chooses to write about the Holocaust will inevitably consider the adequacy of the literary frameworks and criteria that were available before, but now may seem to transgress and violate the truth of the historical event. Perhaps, if we are to employ Lyotard's metaphor of the Holocaust as an earthquake that has obliterated all tools of measurement, we must admit that the event has shattered humanity's common sense and foundations and along with it its conventional instruments of figuration.<sup>5</sup> Since this recalcitrant reality is at the heart of our situation, the principal questions before us are these: How can an author appropriate the Holocaust for his or her aesthetic aims? And what modes of description can be generated to fit this design?

Salient to this discussion is Hayden White's formula of historical interpretation. White insistently questions the headlong pursuit of a single version and the demand that Holocaust narratives represent reality as it was. According to White's re-alignment of the historical compass and re-defining of the traditional frames of reference, the very nature of narrative requires the writer to make a choice among the abundance of fictional forms available, including and excluding certain technical emplotting devices, language and ideological markers. White argues that there is no one objective standard superior to another, that any critical faculty engaged with assessing the reality of any given instance is a frail vessel that can be kept or glossed over. Unlike previous commentators, White's discourse does away with the requirements of an authentic representation of the Holocaust. He discards the constraints on imaginative storytelling that were embraced by those Holocaust writers who felt obliged to remain utterly faithful to the factual record.

In asking whether the Final Solution and its evils impose absolute limits on writers of fiction, White argues that:

... unless a historical story is presented as a literal presentation of real events, we cannot criticize it as being true or untrue to the facts of the matter. If it were presented as a figurative representation of real events, then the question of its truthfulness cannot be criticised as being either true or untrue to the facts of the matter ... The kind of anomalies, enigmas and dead ends that met with discussion of the representation of the Holocaust are the result of a conception of a discourse that owes too much to realism that is inadequate to the representation of events, such as the Holocaust'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Saul Friedlander, 'Trauma, Memory and Transference', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56-58.

<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40, 50.

Put differently, White allows for the train of literary expression to pass through many stations on its journey of exploration and negates an overall account of the Shoah. In summa, he states:

Our notion of what constitutes realistic representation must be revised to take account of experiences that are unique to our century and for older modes of representation that have proved inadequate ... the best way to represent the Holocaust and the experience of it may well be by a kind of 'intransitive writing' which lays no claim to the kind of realism aspired to by the nineteenth-century historians and writers.<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, it is noteworthy that Aharon Megged, the author of the 1955 short story *Yad Vashem*, now a classic in Israel's Holocaust literary canon, answers the question of whether those who were not there can imaginatively and creatively describe the event's bestiality with an unequivocal affirmation, 'Writing fiction in general does not necessarily imply first hand cognisance of the subject matter ... The possibility of dealing with such material stems from the faculty a writer possesses that enables him to identify himself with different, various characters and states of mind ...'.<sup>8</sup>

Postmodern and fantastic novels of the Shoah are often seen as subversive. The vertiginous points of view and realities contained in such fictions serve to stress once more the dangers of such aesthetical gymnastics. The problem is that due to the always shifting, fluid and negotiable forms with which postmodernism is obsessed, as well as the contrapuntal perspectives that accord even the murderers a voice (albeit in some cases *sotto voce*), the spectator may be engrossed by the pervasive fusion of allegory and anti-realism in a similarly digressive plot. The paradoxical result may be that the original intent of the author – descending into the belly of the horror and painfully conveying the suffering and terror wrought on the victims – is diluted.

In response to this side effect, several writers who seek a documentary link between their imaginative creations and the undisputed facts of the Holocaust, have deepened the element of verisimilitude. The desire to avoid undermining the foundation of historical accuracy has provoked a repeated assertion of real episodes that emphasises the realistic authority of the novel. Perhaps, as James Young puts it, the writer's motives for proceeding in this way derive from the fear that, 'the rhetoricity of their literary medium inadvertently confers a fictiveness onto the events themselves'.<sup>9</sup>

In the same way, second generation novelists must contend with the central paradox of crafting their stories from material that not only exists outside their own tactile experience, but also challenges them to transcend their own reserves of imaginative re-creation. Finding the proper modes of rewriting the unthinkable in modern literary terms and techniques remains an arduous challenge to the artist. As Lawrence Langer observes, 'Holocaust reality limits rather than liberates the vision of the writer ... who ventures to represent it. It abnormalizes the normal'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Aharon Megged, 'I was Not There', in *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research*, eds. Asher Cohen, Yoav Gelber and Charlotte Wardi (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 100.

<sup>9</sup> James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), xvii-xix.

Primarily, by confecting a story composed of authentic aspects and aesthetic inventions, and by plunging backwards to a time beyond their own to imagine events, authors risk the charge of tilting the genocidal reality to manipulate a reader's emotions. Indeed, the fictional constructs of a second-hand cartographer, mapping out his or her own renderings (as the 'bearing-witness' generation does) can transgress the sanctity of real events by rupturing his or her factual integrity – especially since they depend on the partaking of transmitted memory and mediated imagination. A related moral concern asks whether wordsmiths who spin tales for their audience with the intended aim of moving and exciting the reader are benefiting from the victim's anguish. A literary record of the Holocaust set forth in heightened prose and with intense emotionalism may indeed depend on the sensational and dramatic for its success.

In different ways, Itamar Levy's controversial book *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* (translated into English as *Legend of the Sad Lakes*) pushed beyond the comfortable parameters of post-Auschwitz aesthetic representations, in essence re-defining and resisting generic boundaries. To be sure, Levy utilised a novelist's license in his strategies of narration to create a complex chamber for reflections about the nature of Nazism that sometimes pressed aside narratological constraints and conventional categories of exactitude and faithfulness to the historical record. The author's choice of a revised palette of approaches, of refuting the mimetic trend and of choosing the fantastic as a thematic and structural element may be driven by the realisation that, 'to establish an order of reality in which the unimaginable becomes imaginatively acceptable exceeds the capacities of an art devoted entirely to verisimilitude; some quality of the fantastic, whether stylistic or descriptive, becomes an essential ingredient ...'<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, Levy, is not the son of Holocaust survivors. This fact indicates that the consuming passion to relate to the Holocaust affects the generation born after the war in toto, and not only those whose lives were directly marked by their survivor parents. As Yosefa Loshitzky remarks, 'If we expand the narrow psychological definition of who is entitled to inclusion within the category of the second-generation, then we may as well talk about a second-generation "sensibility" that transcends the empirical status of the "real" children of Holocaust survivors and refugees'.<sup>12</sup>

Levy offers his readers an intellectual game, tacitly acknowledging that his narrative is a fairy-tale. On the one hand, as we know, the thematic premise of fairy tales, more often than not, is smoothed over with a happy texture and ending. Yet on the other hand, the primary narrative of *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* is very sad and its plot antithetical to the normal dynamics of traditional fairy tales.

The author's point may be that it is incumbent upon the spectator to choose whether on the whole this is a fable, to suspend his or her disbelief of the fantastic style and to see the fantastic as real since the literary material is based on actual events.<sup>13</sup> In content, style and structure, the book presents a reality in which the constituent ingredients of the real world have been reversed, with a fastening line to the ground or a kinship to the realistic scarcely

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>12</sup> Yosefa Loshitzky 'Hybrid Victims: Second-Generation Israelis Screen the Holocaust', in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (London: Athlone Press, 2001), 154-155.

<sup>13</sup> In this context, Batya Gur observes, that the entire novel is written as if on the verge of a dream. Batya Gur, Review of *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim*, *Haaretz*, November 3, 1989, 8B.

in sight. It is a stage where nothing is stable or indisputable, where the expressionistic plot is stripped of real time or space.

Formally, the novel consists of a swirl of shifting styles, braiding idiomatic Hebrew with Agnoneseque speech, as well as a myriad of erotic and violent situations mounted unremittingly one on top of the other. Amplifying its amalgam of jerky styles, techniques and tones, is the novel's truly polyphonic makeup, with six narrators who tell the story of the Nazi regime and the inferno of the camps. The blurring of identities makes it at times difficult to determine the identity of the speakers, adding to the novel's jarring distortion of plot and narration. At the peak of the book's colourful innovation, which intermingles the trivial and the terrible, we encounter a talking parrot who discourses on Nazi historiography along with the central protagonist, Nazi pets who night after night frequent a lake to talk among themselves, and a cow whose milk tells horrific accounts of the treatment of the Jews in Europe.

The story opens in Tel Aviv in February 1988, with the arrest of Yochanan Greenberg, accused of being SS officer Obersturmführer Joachim Kronn. Not only did the Nazi criminal of Dachau choose to hide in the land of his victims, it is claimed, but he also had a son, Arnon, with a Jewish camp inmate whom he married after the war. The devastating chain of events begins when Baruch Fein, a Holocaust survivor who in the camps served as the 'Jewish plaything' to the alleged Nazi officer, recognises Greenberg's neck while travelling on a bus. Having to watch the beastly criminal rape of his family and friends in the camps, Baruch, in revulsion, had turned and focused on Kronn's neck, perfectly memorising it. Yochanan Greenberg is secretly arrested and placed in complete isolation in Acre prison. During the legal proceedings his wife dies, although her voice is not muffled – she freely narrates her experiences and the Jewish community's living hell throughout the book.

Faced with the mounting evidence and a personal crisis, Arnon sets out to prove his father's innocence. He travels to Munich where he hopes he can discover exculpatory evidence. The trip to Germany, however, backfires, as he uncovers conclusive proof that his father is indeed the Nazi officer. Visiting a cemetery where Obersturmführer Joachim Kronn is alleged to be buried, he discovers the grave to be empty, placed there by aging members of the International Nazi Network Odessa (of which his father was an active participant) to serve as a convenient alibi. Although Arnon does not present his father with the inculpatory facts he unearthed, the father confesses to the charges through a letter he sends to his dead wife and to his son (a letter he signs 'Heil Hitler') and commits suicide in his cell. The possibility that he is the offspring to a Nazi monster brings about a simultaneous outburst of fury and doubt in Arnon as well as a desire to reclaim the foundations of his previous identity that have disintegrated. At first, he leaves his pregnant wife Einav and moves to a run-down hotel, since he cannot stand the thought that he will sire a Nazi offspring. Then, understandably, he feels bound to trace his family's history in an attempt to recover his crushed sense of being. The fantastic, irrational nature of the discovery forces the author to resort to stylistic pyrotechnics mirroring the agony and anguish Arnon feels, which partly enable him to configure some emotional constancy into his shattered existence. The young man is forced to confront Nazism head on, as he considers the possibility that he, as the son of a Nazi officer, took in the evil poison injected into his soul by his father. His pregnant wife Einav believes that this toxic legacy will be passed on to the third generation, to her unborn child (whom she thinks of as the heir to

the survivors and to the destroyers). On her way to meet Kronn's lawyer, Einav recites a poem for her baby, firmly placing it in the whirlwind of an imminent Shoah: 'My Child / Hide in my belly / Do not lift your eyes to the danger / Your mother/ Is warning you / My Child / Hide in my cellars / Learn your height so you can adjust to the low walls / Prepare your eyes for the darkness / My Child ...'<sup>14</sup>

Struggling with the psychological reality that his heritage has been defiled, the alienated Arnon sets out to learn about his and his family's origins. At one point, he asks himself, 'Am I the hunted or the hunter ... Am I a Jew or a Nazi?'<sup>15</sup> The pervasive analogy between Jew and Nazi promoted in the book is reinforced when, after being set on by Odessa members in a graveyard in Germany, Arnon, bloodied and bruised, decides to accept his fate – he decides to become the same dark animal that attacked him. This motif is heightened by Lana, a German woman who sleeps with Arnon because he smells of Aryan blood like her father – she calls him 'My Little Nazi' – and Arnon's dead mother who affirms the son's divided self, in a paragraph in which she assumes the duties of narration:

In his outward appearance my son is split between the good and the bad. His right eye is quiet, his left is raging. One ear is flat, the other stands out. My son's face is divided. Half is like me, half is like his father. His actions too, are divided. Because despite the accusations, the threats and the charges, he cares for his father, but on the other hand he leaves his wife Einav and avoids her temptations ...<sup>16</sup>

Towards the end, his father underlines both the deep connection his son has with Nazism and how his German roots are an integral component of his psychic identity. We learn that at home, Arnon was brought up on the Nazi code and ethos. Raised in a household devoid of love, he would leaf through newspaper cuttings dedicated to the Führer and would listen at night to German stories that his father secretly read to him. The following passage reflects the loss of identity that is central in the book, 'You are not a Jew, Arnon, because the Jews are not a race, but fragments of a nation. Whereas you are a German, member of the purest race. Your name, too, is not Jewish. Your real name is Rudolph Kronn. I saw you growing up strong and noble ... When the verdict is given it will be your verdict too ... You are the son of a Nazi ...'<sup>17</sup> In the end, the boundary between victim and killer is crossed, as the fury that rages within leads Arnon to kidnap and murder an old Nazi SS officer.

In the novel's most stirring monologue, Arnon conveys the internal cry of pain shared by all children of survivors:

Why don't I write about my feelings one to one? Why don't I listen to my heart like I have been told to do? Why do I evade, close gates, build walls, forget and remember and suppress and ask and erase the blue numbers that float and appear on my left skin? Why do I ignore the smells, and the sounds, and the colours? Why do I insist on listing you by your names and professions but never tell about the sorrow, the suffering and the pain? ... How do I tell about the fear of trains I inherited? Why don't I mention my childhood battles against the Nazis? I only browse

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<sup>14</sup> Itamar Levy, *Agadat ha'aganim ha'atsuvim* [The Legend of the Sad Lakes] (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1989), 72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-146.



the truth? ... What do I blame myself for? What haven't I done yet? Against whom haven't I taken vengeance yet? Why don't I tell about my work? Why don't I write poems about the Holocaust? Why don't I record my dreams? Why do I pray? Why, night after night, do I close the shutters around me? Why do I leave the light on in my porch? Who am I afraid of? Am I a 'second generation'? Why do I travel around the world seeking meetings with other survivor children? ... Don't know how to feel. Don't know how to cry. Don't know how to scream. Don't know how to explain ... Do I store food? Do I throw away bread? Am I in dream therapy? Nightmare therapy? How am I affected by knocks on the door? Or by the sharp ring of the phone? Am I sad on Holocaust Day? ... Does everyone have a mother with a number on her arm? Who's asking? Who's crying? Who's lonely? Who hates? Who eats white meat? Who's afraid of dogs? Who am I named after? Is it after my grandfather who was murdered by the Nazis? Is it after my uncle who was murdered by the Nazis? Is it after my grandmother who was murdered by the Nazis?<sup>18</sup>

Levy's book was the subject of intense debate following its publication. One could argue that the accusation that in some way the novel borders on the sensational and voyeuristic is partly validated in two detailed, elongated, generatively imagined passages of torture and humiliation. The first deals with the Nazis' response to the refusal by Arnon's grandfather to cooperate in the construction of a death camp:

Because Grandfather Greenshpan refused to build their city of death, and insisted on charging them two Zlotys as a passage tax, the Nazis began torturing him. They whipped his back and hands. They forced him to clean the street's pavements with sulphuric acid that burned his wounds. They threatened his life if he wouldn't sing 'Heil Hitler' for them as he cleaned. Afterwards, they shaved his beard with their knives, tearing pieces of flesh together with the hair. They ordered him to lay Tefillin, and in the end they covered him with gasoline and threw him into the burning synagogue of Plotzk. Since he came out unharmed, and since he had no smell of ashes on his skin, they accused him of separatism, i.e. Communism, and they continued to torture him. They forced him to bend his knees again and again, for six straight hours under the blazing sun and under a shower of blows. They shoved needles under his fingers, hit him with an electrical shock, gave him a postcard and forced him to scribble a message to his loved ones: 'I have arrived safely. I am healthy. I am happy and feeling well.' They crushed his testicles and welded his fingers together. They ordered him to carry stones from here to there for no reason, to dig holes and cover them up again. They competed against each other taking aim and practised shooting at the tip of his nose and his earlobes. All the while his anguished eyes scanned the camp around him ... Since all of their deeds did not help and the Jew continued to refuse and mock, the Nazis adopted new tactics. They tied his limbs to a 'seesaw' device that stretched and dismembered his body. They put starved rats into his trousers and shot at bottles placed on his head. In the end, they dragged him to the forest and there, just for fun, for they had long forgotten what they wanted from him, they shot him in the neck, back, stomach, temples, mouth and heart. God had made a miracle for my grandfather, for although he was dead he did not allow blood to flow out of his body but created a miraculous blood that dripped only from the wounds of his pants and the cut in his shirt. His upper skin and lower skin remained smooth and clean<sup>19</sup>

In the second passage, Arnon wonders about the particulars and extent of his father's brutal deeds:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

Did you send their organs for medical testing? Did you use Zyklon B against them? Did you hang them by their wrists with their arms tied behind their back? Did you inject gasoline into their blood? Did you pour frozen water over their skin? Did you enjoy seeing this and that one standing and watching their wife and sons walking to their death? Did you force them to wipe the streets with their Tallit, burn their holy books, and dance around the bonfires? Did you force them to stand in front of the hanged corpses of their families and sing, 'I will never forget my concentration camp, the Eden of the Jews'? Did you insert wooden beams under the fingers of the one standing in front of you and light them? ... Did you throw children off speeding carriage cars? Did you throw live, suffering kids into a burning fire? ... Did you kill people with your bare hands? Did you step over their bodies and shoot those still alive? Did you order the hanging of your naked prisoners on the camp's trees? Did you unleash your dogs onto their private parts? ... Did you strangle your victims with ten fingers? Is it true you drowned their heads in buckets of water? Is it true you forced them to bend and eat horse faeces? Why did you skin your victims and decorate the lamps in your office with it?<sup>20</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the extensive and graphic passages of the torture and degradation of Jews provoked a heated debate among several commentators. Avner Holtzman's moral reservations, for example, rested on the overly descriptive dreadful humiliation and death of Jews sprinkled throughout the book. Of the horrific passages Holtzman wrote: 'Perhaps the tangible descriptions are part of the desire to shock and stun, but the result achieved is the opposite. The impression is of a simplistic, incautious use of materials, which wiser authors understood were not to be touched, realising that it is better to present the horror in small doses, indirectly and by allusion'.<sup>21</sup> In a later essay, Holtzman added this caveat with Levy in mind: 'It is good that young and talented Israeli authors have the need to write about the Holocaust. However, this is a subject – perhaps the only one – that imposes restrictions on anyone who deals with it, since playing with explosives, with all their attendant attraction and adventure, carries within it great danger in insensitive hands'.<sup>22</sup> Hanna Hertzig goes even further. She contends that what stands out in Levy's book is the pornographic element, closely associated with the 'kitsch and death' poetics coined by Saul Friedlander.<sup>23</sup>

Yigal Schwartz, contra Holtzman, believes that Levy's text performs a reliably moral duty. Schwartz begins by stating that in *Agadat Ha-agamim Ha-atzuvim* Levy did not try to understand, imagine or concretise the Shoah. Rather, says Schwartz, Levy attempted to look at the catalogue of texts that have previously touched upon the Holocaust. According to Schwartz, this is a novel protesting the failures of Holocaust literature, an indictment against those works that instead of opening a window for the young generation, so as to allow it to connect with the world over there, have erected an impenetrable textual wall that prevents any cognitive or emotional engagement. Levy's objective thus was to rally against the failings of the earlier models, which Schwartz labels with the neologism of 'actualisation to the point of absurdity'.<sup>24</sup> This creative route, which Levy rejects, suggests

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 23-24, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Avner Holtzman, *Ahavot Tziyon* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2006), 119-120.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 542

<sup>23</sup> Hanna Hertzig, *Ha-kol ha-omer ani: megamot ba-siporet hayisraelit shel shnot hashmonim* (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1988), 77.

<sup>24</sup> Yigal Schwartz, 'Mesima musarit be-echlet', *Efes Shtaim* 1 (1992): 123.

that the Holocaust can be understood only through synecdoche, that focusing on the story of one person in a specific situation, will explicate the fate of an entire community.

Levy rebuts this method through his description of Grandfather Greenshpan's torture, cited earlier. It is abundantly evident, Schwartz observes, that Levy condenses the entire Holocaust experience into the figure of Grandfather Greenshpan. After all, no human being could withstand such tortures, especially one as frail and old as the victim. Levy employs this strategy to signal to the reader that there exists no one man, real or imagined, whose story can reflect the fate of the six million Jews. Schwartz concludes his vehement defence of Levy by stating that through his novel, the author remonstrated against the fossilised and decayed state of the Israeli literary and cultural consciousness as regards the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup> Balaban concurs: 'There are those who will say this is a postmodern work. However, beyond these labels, this is an extraordinary novel about the Holocaust, its past and present victims ... about the ways fiction can confront the Holocaust'.<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Leonard Orr argues that although there are those who fear any divergence from the customary, non-fictional genres (diaries, documentary films, memoirs) in the teaching of the Holocaust, he feels that '... after the more traditional texts, it is valuable to use some of the experimental or oblique works of fiction that have been published recently, especially since 1980 ... other things are accomplished and new directions open up for discussion and analysis in exposing students to works that are oblique, written by people who were not themselves survivors ...'.<sup>27</sup>

One of the chief tasks of books such as *Legend of the Sad Lakes* is to inscribe, externalise, and assimilate the Holocaust into Israel's and the Jewish peoples' shared national identity. At the epicentre of Levy's narrative is an overwhelming confrontation with the painful past that denies closure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's darkest moment, declaiming explicitly that memory and its preservation have not dimmed. The novel provides the uninitiated reader with the emotional and the intellectual textual space to enter this horrific realm, which they may have suppressed in order to achieve psychological distance. In not avoiding the pain of the past or participating in the process of collective repression, Levy, through his literary creations, reminds Israeli society of the function of memory and remembering.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>26</sup> Avraham Balaban, 'Ledaber agnonit otentit', *Haaretz*, March 23, 1990, 9B.

<sup>27</sup> Leonard Orr, 'Post Memory and Postmodern: The Value of Teaching Experimental Holocaust Fiction', Workshop at the conference on Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations (2009), 2.

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