

THE SILENCE: BELATEDLY SEEKING TO RECONSTRUCT HOLOCAUST NARRATIVES

Suzanne D. Rutland

Over the last two years I have read a number of recently published books, each of which have sought to reconstruct what happened to diverse individuals and families during the Holocaust. These books are written in different genres, as memoir, biography, creative non-fiction and fiction. Each is a powerful read and each expresses the anguish of their protagonist(s) not speaking about their Holocaust experiences, of the authors' reluctance and failure to ask the right questions when they were able to, and about the fact that their family members or friends did not wish to speak about their Holocaust experiences. Scholars refer to this as 'The Silence', but this is an issue about which there has been strong scholarly debate.¹ These accounts mirror my own family experiences and my deepest regret at not asking my mother more questions when she was alive.

Israeli author Emuna Elon decided to address this difficult topic through a novel which has been described as a thriller.² The central theme of the novel is the impact of trauma on memory. It also illustrates how the impact of that trauma can be passed onto the second and even third generation. As the novel progresses, the themes of hidden children, of the collaboration of the Dutch population, particularly the civil service and the police, the role of the Joodse Raad (the Jewish Council), of stolen art and the gradual deterioration into brutality and degradation are explored. Yet, the theme of a son seeking to know his family's story through research in Amsterdam, even though his mother had forbidden him to ever visit the city, permeates the narrative. Elon has written a powerful novel which clearly illustrates the issue of seeking to explore survivors' reluctance to speak about the past through a fictionalised account.

Well-known Australian novelist, Alex Miller, chose a biographical investigation of Max Blatt's Holocaust story, the first time that he has ventured into non-fiction.³ The author first met Blatt in 1961, when Miller was 21. It was Max's belief that Miller would become a writer, encouraging him to begin his successful career as a novelist, so that the book is both a biography of 'Max' with strong autobiographical elements of Miller's own life. In writing Max's history so much later in his life, Miller fulfills his subject's wish expressed more than four decades earlier. During a visit to Israel in 1976, Max had told his niece, Liat, that Miller would write his biography (p. 176). However, Miller stresses that there is no 'wholeness' in his account, as he reflects on his efforts to uncover the truth, with his subject no longer alive and the relevant sources scattered on different continents.

The dominant theme running through this award-winning biography is the issue of Max's silence. Miller explains early in the book that 'he was my hero, but he had also been a man, a man whose past had been concealed within a deep silence that he broke only rarely' (p. 13). The author was attracted to Max due to 'a grand poetic silence filled with mystery and meaning' (p. 15). He notes that sometimes Max did have a compulsion to speak about the past, but what he shared were only fragments:

He had wanted me to understand but had been unable to freely offer me his story.
Fragment by broken fragment he gave me what he could. I had never tried to hurry

¹ Suzanne D. Rutland, "From Hell to Hope: Postwar Jewish Holocaust Survivor Migration," in *Legacies of Violence: Rendering the Unspeakable Past in Modern Australia*, ed. Robert Mason (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 142-161.

² Emuna Elon, *House on Endless Waters* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020).

³ Alex Miller, *MAX* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020).

him. I had never asked for more than he offered. I knew each fragment had a heavy price for him. He only ever ventured into that painful past when he and I were alone... I saw how the vast silence of his inner life drew him back into himself, like the dark attraction of an invisible world, compelling him to an unwilling silence. He was a refugee not only from his country but also from himself. In his own words, he was a broken man, a man whose soul had been broken in two, a man divided against himself, a man no longer master of his own motives. This was one of the most intriguing, most painful and most misunderstood things about him (p. 21).

Miller knew that somehow Max had escaped Europe to Shanghai during the war and migrated to Australia after the war, but he knew nothing about Max's family or details of his past. He was haunted by these fragments and wanted to find the missing pieces. Reflecting on his journey of discovery and what he had learnt about Max's life, a journey he shares with the reader through a compelling narrative, Miller describes the story as one of shattered shards:

... broken pieces... Many of the most precious and beautiful things that had once been part of Max's and his family's life had been smashed beyond recovery. The mosaic of their story contained in an incomplete collection of shards. Large pieces of the picture were missing and would never be recovered. His song, the song of his family, had no chorus in which all the voices sing together. Silence had become one of Max's imperishable truths. His silence, that mysterious silence that had drawn me to him the very first time I met him, contained a whole world that no longer existed and would never exist again. (p. 210).

Thus, Miller manages to bring his powerful writing skills to the difficult and challenging story of Holocaust survival, and to survivors' reluctance to speak about their experiences after the war.

A similar exploration of the past is undertaken by poet and novelist, Gwen Strauss. *The Nine* deals with the story of nine female French resistance fighters who were caught, arrested by the Nazis and sent to Ravensbrück.⁴ At the end of 1944, they were selected for the slave labour camp, HASAG Leipzig, where they endured horrific conditions, but managed to escape a forced march two weeks before the end of the war. Strauss was drawn to this story after her great-aunt, Hélène Podliasky, who was the leader of the nine women and was an Officier de la Légion d'honneur, briefly mentioned her escape during a lunch in 2002. This led Strauss, who has not heard about this escape before, onto the detective trail to research and write about each of the nine women in the group. She skilfully interweaves each personal story with their group story of escape and the day-by-day challenges, threats and tribulations of their two-week trek by foot to reach the French border. Based on extensive historical research, the book is written as creative non-fiction, that is "a genre of writing that uses elements of creative writing to present a factual, true story."⁵

This important and powerful book again revolves around the theme of 'The Silence'. This issue is embedded in each story, with Strauss stressing how difficult it is to pierce

⁴ Gwen Strauss, *The Nine: How a Band of Daring Resistance Women Escaped from Nazi Germany* (London: Manilla Press, 2021).

⁵ Literary techniques that are usually reserved for writing fiction can be used in creative nonfiction, such as dialogue, scene-setting, and narrative arcs. Kaelyn Baron, "What Is Creative Nonfiction? Definitions, Examples, and Guidelines." <https://www.tckpublishing.com/creative-nonfiction/> Accessed February 24, 2022,

together these stories written so long after the events she described. Writing about her great-aunt, Strauss comments:

The family was proud of her, but we rarely talked about her past. As happened in many families after the war, people wanted to leave those dark days behind. It was thought best for everyone to just forget about the past. Not to talk about it. Not to dwell in darkness. There was survivor guilt as well, along with the memory lapses caused by trauma by the unspeakable ways some people had behaved. Hélène wanted to spare her family the grim details. And if you hadn't experienced it, you couldn't really imagine it. It took time, it took the generation who had not been through the war to start asking questions (p.14).

In Strauss's case, it was only in 2002 that she learnt from her great-aunt about the escape of the nine women, six of whom were French, two Dutch and one originally Spanish but had grown up in France. Strauss also learnt that Helene's father, a Russian professor of Mathematics, was Jewish, and that another member of the group was fully Jewish, but that neither identified as being Jewish and this was not picked up by the Nazis. Even at that late stage, Strauss noted that Podliasky 'wondered out loud if it was meaningless to dig up all these old memories' (p.15.) As she started to write the story, Strauss struggled, wondering if she was 'breaking a taboo' and whether it was not better to leave the past in the past. This theme of the silence and the desire to know more about her great-aunt's story and the events of the escape was a strong motivating force, even though Strauss's background is in writing poetry and children's books.

These themes are also repeated in Nina Bassat's memoir as a child survivor from the area known as Galicia in south eastern Poland some of which is now Ukraine, including her time in Lvov (Lviv) and her mother's ingenuity in terms of always being one step ahead of the Nazis.⁶ Even though Nina lived through all the experiences as a very young child, when she began to write her memoir, she expressed her regret about not asking her mother more questions because there were so many gaps in her knowledge. Writing about one incident when her mother had escaped detection, she referred to her mother's two interviews with the Jewish Holocaust and Research Centre in Melbourne in 1996 and her own short audio interview with her mother. She asks: 'Why is that all I have? There are so many questions I could have asked, not just about this incident but so much more' (p.66).

Similarly, Tony Bernard's compelling narration of his father, Henry's story, beginning in 1970 when Henry was flown from his Northern Suburbs home in Sydney to Germany to bear witness at a war crimes trial, illustrates this much broader phenomenon of Holocaust memory.⁷ Tony Bernard tells the reader that as a child he grew up knowing that his father had been in Auschwitz, a fact that was ever present with his father's tattooed Auschwitz number on his arm. But there was so much his father did not speak about. As with Miller's *Max*, the reader is taken on the son's journey of discovery, in his case across the decades, until his father's full Holocaust survivor story is revealed. As such this is a Holocaust memoir seeking the information which had remained in the shadows of history for over half a century.

The issue of 'The Silence' relates to other victims of trauma, such as soldiers who survived the two major world wars, as well as the Vietnam War, when the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not understood. Indeed, this term was only coined

⁶ Nina Bassat, *Take the Child and Disappear* (Melbourne: Hybid Publishers, 2021).

⁷ Tony Bernard, *The Ghost Tattoo: Discovering the Hidden Truth of My Father's Holocaust* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2022).

in 1980. This issue is highlighted in a fictional story by Australian short story writer, Michelle Wright. Her first novel resolves around the life of French-born Yvonne who married Albert Blackburn, an Australian soldier she met in Paris after World War I and moved with him to Australia.⁸ They had one daughter, the central character, Lucie. With the realisation that a new world war was starting following Germany's invasion of Poland, Albert committed suicide by setting their house on fire – Yvonne and Lucie survived but overnight they lost everything. Following a conversation that she had had with her father the day before, Lucie realised that he had deliberately lit the fire, planning a suicide that would also kill his wife and 17-year old daughter. Yvonne decided to return to France with Lucie and live with her brother, Gérard, who was a bachelor, comfortably off and an authoritarian racist. The book revolves around how Lucie befriended a Jewish family and becomes involved with the resistance. While this is the main focus of the novel, the issue of the trauma relating to her father's suicide is a sub-theme. Lucie comments on her inability to speak about this or to ask her mother questions about her early relationship with Albert. As Wright writes: 'Lucie wished she could ask Yvonne these questions, but she feared they'd evoke painful memories' (pp. 25-26).

These narratives counter and complicate the arguments of the late David Cesarini and Hasia Dinar, who have argued that survivors spoke from the beginning, commemorated the lost ones and their survival stories, and that there was no silence.⁹ They also counter the narrative that the silence was due to political factors as argued by Novick and Finkelstein.¹⁰ Rather, they reinforce Wajnryb's argument about the impact of trauma and the need for survivors to syphon off the past in order to move forward.¹¹ It was only later in life that most survivors began to share their stories with their families and the broader community, outside their small, inner circle of survivors who had gone through the same experiences. This is a complex story, because there were survivors who spoke incessantly about their Holocaust experiences, but they tended to be in the minority, and this was not represented in the various accounts that I have recently read.

Strauss notes that the family of the nine women all attested to the fact that they did not speak about their experiences, acting as if nothing terrible had happened, yet it was there in the background – unspoken and unspeakable. She quotes from Howard Stein: 'What has consciously been banned from existence returns as a ghost, usually in the form of an enactment'.¹² This concept is clearly envisaged in the title, *The Ghost Tattoo*, where Tony Bernard's father did not initially speak about his traumatic experiences apart from some 'fragments', yet it was always there in the background, manifested in his obsessive behaviour and sudden outbursts of anger. Other key psychologists such as Dori Laub have analysed the impact of Holocaust trauma on survivors and 'The Silence', a topic which requires a lengthier article.¹³ Yet, each of the books discussed in this review illustrates the

⁸ Michelle Wright, *Small Acts of Defiance* (Sydney, Auckland, London: Allen & Unwin, 2021).

⁹ See Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); ed. David Cesarini and Eric J. Sundquist, *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁰ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) and Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹¹ Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: how tragedy shapes talk* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

¹² Howard F. Stein, "A Mosaic of Transmissions After Trauma," in *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*, ed. M. Gerard Fromm (London, Karnac, 2012), 175, as quoted in Strauss, *The Nine*, 254.

¹³ Dori Laub, "From Speechlessness to Narrative: The Cases of Holocaust Historians and of Psychiatrically Hospitalized Survivors," *Literature and Medicine* 24, no. 2 (2005): 256–257.

role of trauma in survivors' reluctance to speak, a reluctance I became very aware of in my own family, but also left asking the questions until it was too late.

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