

LOSING THE ACCIDENTAL: HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE IN THE THIRD GENERATION

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There are certain images that nearly anyone in the Western world would recognize as representations of the Holocaust: a small boy with a yellow star on his coat raising his hands above his head as he crosses the street; a skeletal, nearly naked man staring at the camera as other men lying in cubby-like bunks crane their heads to look at the photographer; stick-thin bodies tumbled like broken dolls into mass graves. These are just a few of the many images that have become iconic, images that crop up again and again in a weary montage, part of what the critic Susan Sontag calls the “vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice” (20-21).

Marianne Hirsch, in her essay “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” raises this concern: that the excessive repetition of such photographs from the Holocaust will desensitize us, making us less and less emotionally affected by its horrifying images. But she soon dismisses this idea, asserting that for her generation, the repetition of images does not desensitize; and that, in fact, the appearance of a few iconic pictures of the atrocity, which become ubiquitous through repetition, provides a means for members of the second generation to incorporate it into their own memory and their own sense of identity. These images, she says, are a “*mostly* helpful vehicle for working through a traumatic past,” a process she calls “postmemory” (9, Hirsch’s emphasis).

Hirsch notes that postmemory has its basis in the second generation’s vicarious reliving of events it could not actually experience, and that the second generation’s connection to the past is “mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation” (9). Photographs, as well as documents like survivors’ testimonies and transcripts of the Nuremberg trials, are so important to the second generation’s understanding of the Holocaust because that generation was born too late to witness it for itself; it must rely on the stories of others. Postmemory involves the absorption of these stories into the second generation’s sense of itself, to such an extent that the stories become “so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (9).

As a Modern Orthodox Jew who has attended Jewish yeshivas from kindergarten through high school, I have had nearly lifelong exposure to the images and narratives from the Holocaust that became essential components of postmemory for Hirsch’s generation. If anything, my exposure to Holocaust memorial material has been more extensive and more sustained than the norm. I have attended school-wide Holocaust Memorial Day assemblies since elementary school, written book reports on Holocaust novels or memoirs each year in junior high school, and made four or five trips to New

York's Museum of Jewish Heritage, which advertises itself as "a living memorial to the Holocaust."

According to Hirsch, my repeated exposure should enable me to work through my people's traumatic past by providing a basis for the work of postmemory, which is a matter of "adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (10). But the effect of my exposure has been almost exactly the opposite. By the end of high school, I was sick of hearing about the Holocaust and had perfected stratagems for skipping my school's Holocaust Memorial Day assembly, whose invariable program—a moment of silence, the names of the deceased scrolling down a screen, memorial candles lit one by one in a darkened auditorium—I found simply clichéd.

An entire catalogue of such clichés has come into being in the sixty-five years since the end of World War II, solely as a way for the second generation to capture an event that, by its nature, defies easy capture. The black-and-yellow motif, the six-pointed star emblazoned with the word "Jude" in Gothic lettering, six memorial candles for the six million dead—none of these symbolic tools assisted me in any real way in understanding mass murder (if mass murder can ever be truly understood). Yet each of these symbols has become an instant mental marker for the Holocaust. Such symbols serve no other purpose than as memory triggers for those who have already assimilated the Holocaust into their own memories, who have accomplished the work of postmemory. Yet an entire generation has now grown up experiencing the Holocaust as much through such established symbols as through its own attempts to understand what is, perhaps, incomprehensible.

Do these relentless symbols trigger memory or clog it? At the beginning of her essay, Hirsch quotes extensively from Susan Sontag's account of her first encounter with images from the Holocaust, an experience that Sontag describes as formative and deeply traumatizing:

One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is . . . a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau that I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. . . . When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. (qtd. in Hirsch 5)

I find Sontag's experience startling, because it is so different from my own first exposure to the Holocaust. I only vaguely remember seeing Holocaust photographs for the first time, I do not remember the images themselves, and I have no recollection of my own response. All I retain is an impression of a darkened classroom, slides

projected onto the blackboard, and a low murmuring reaction from the class. I cannot even remember how old I was at the time. Upon reading Sontag's so vividly rendered account of her experience, my primary reaction was to wonder why I could not give a similar account. What made my first exposure to the reality of the Holocaust so different from Sontag's?

Part of the explanation is that I was simply much younger at the time of my first encounter than Sontag was, and so I just did not remember it. But I propose that there are other factors at work as well. Sontag herself helps to explain when she remarks that "photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging" (4). Almost as important as the photographic image is the context, physical and emotional and even temporal, in which it appears. In his essay "The Loss of the Creature," Walker Percy expands on this idea with his thesis that any object encountered in the classroom ends up being overwhelmed by the educational packaging in which it is presented. For instance, a student's experience of a Shakespeare sonnet becomes "obscured by the symbolic package which is formulated not by the sonnet itself but by the *media* through which the sonnet is transmitted" (57, emphasis Percy's). Like a sonnet, any photograph comes with a "symbolic package"; this could be more or less neutral, like a picture frame, or freighted with meaning, like the speech with which my teacher prepared us to look at Holocaust images.

I would argue that the difference between my experience of iconic Holocaust images and Sontag's experience of the same images is comparable to the gap between Percy's English student and the individual who experiences his environment without any obscuring symbolic package. While the student sees himself as a "consumer receiving an experience-package," someone who comes across the same sonnet by chance, free of the classroom, approaches it as though exploring virgin territory (Percy 57). Sontag came across photographs from Bergen-Belsen and Dachau on her own, by chance and at a young age, without any context for what she was seeing. I, too, first learned about the Holocaust at a young age, but my experience of it was as much context as content. My teacher (I can neither remember her name nor the class subject) certainly taught us that the Nazis used to be in control of Germany and that they were evil and barbaric, that they hated the Jewish people because of our religion and tried to wipe us out forever. I can be sure of this much because, though I do not recall the actual words she used, I remember thinking such thoughts about Nazis and Germany later on in childhood in exactly that framework of "us versus them." After having "packaged" these remarks, she then turned on the projector for us to see the images for ourselves.

As we sat in the classroom that day, we were shocked, but it was shock that had been engineered for us to experience; we did not discover it for ourselves, as Sontag did when she came upon "the photographic inventory of ultimate evil . . . by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica" (20). Sontag's first experience of the Holocaust parallels that of the explorer who first stumbled upon the Grand Canyon, whose case

Percy cites as an example of true, unmediated experience (46). Mine, on the other hand, corresponds to that of Percy's English student whose approach to a Shakespeare sonnet is so structured and so obscured by context that, when he is required to remember what he studied years later, he recalls not the poem but "the smell of the page, the classroom, the aluminum windows and the winter sky, the personality of Miss Hawkins—these media which are supposed to transmit the sonnet . . . [but which] only succeed in transmitting themselves" (57). Just so, I remember neither my own shock nor the images that shocked me, but only the classroom in which I first saw them.

From my teacher's perspective, it might not have mattered whether a child who first learns about the Holocaust at a young age remembers her first experience with it or not—the imperative is to expose children to it early on in their development. It is a sign that educators are doing something right: after all, any child exposed to such horror at such a young age will grow up knowing in her very bones the atrocity that is possible when the world is silent and will become a positive voice in the struggle against forgetfulness. And this is indeed what happened, at least for a while. Throughout elementary school I felt all the things it is proper to feel about the Holocaust—horror, pity, the urgency of remembrance—and in junior high school I even went through a period where I sought out Holocaust books like *Night* and *The Cage* and movies like *The Devil's Arithmetic*, so much so that I began to identify with their persecuted, terrified protagonists. My engagement with the Holocaust in junior high school was, in fact, a form of postmemory; the stories I read became so real to me that they became what Hirsch would call "memories in their own right" (9).

However, the postmemory I engaged in was not exactly the "vehicle of working through a traumatic past" that Hirsch describes; or, rather, it was a superficial and truncated version of the phenomenon that Hirsch conceives of as a lifelong process (9). Though for a time I became preoccupied with the Holocaust, this effect did not last. I entered high school and began to question the now-too-simple moral parables I had been taught: of good against evil, of us versus them, of faith before reason. The narrative of the Holocaust that I'd been taught—that the Nazis were evil, inhuman reincarnations of Amalek, the historical enemy of the Jews, bent single-mindedly on the destruction of our lives and culture—began to seem too dogmatic, and our continued mourning for the six million dead too all-consuming. All my life I had been fed a narrative formed by the second generation's understanding of the Holocaust, a narrative formulated and packaged for children's consumption. All my life I had been told the same sort of things the narrator of *The Cage*, by Holocaust survivor Ruth Minsky Sender, tells her daughter Nancy when the girl asks why the Nazis killed her grandparents: "The Nazis were evil. They wanted the world only for themselves. They killed your grandparents, my family, Daddy's family, six million of our people only because we were Jews" (4). But, unlike Nancy, I was no longer a child, and simple sentences about monstrous, inhuman Nazis were no longer enough. Beyond a certain

age, words like “evil” no longer make sense when applied to an entire country; a story that boils down to “us versus them” loses meaning when “they” have been demonized for too long.

I do not know what would replace such a story in teaching the Holocaust. After all, an event of the Holocaust’s magnitude must be addressed, especially in a community such as mine, in which many children grew up with grandparents who were curiously silent about the past and hid tattooed numbers on their arms. Such children cannot be told nothing, yet neither will they understand a treatise on the banality of evil or the origins of totalitarianism. All I know is that the way I was taught about the Holocaust was fundamentally flawed; simple stories made a difficult subject easier to understand when I was in elementary school, but that very simplicity rendered them less compelling as I grew older.

So, then, I abandoned my pursuit of postmemory, turning instead towards cynicism. The emotions I’d been made to feel about the Holocaust felt cheap and manipulative, like a sentimental movie that pulls at the heartstrings effectively but in predictable, unimaginative ways. To protect myself I built up a shell against all art and experience related to the Holocaust—because nothing I had already seen could tell me anything new, I told myself there was nothing out there that would make me think or feel about it in a novel way, and so there was no reason for me to re-expose myself to the Holocaust at all. This reaction, I believe, was a direct result of the way I’d first encountered the Holocaust as a child. Because I had always approached the Holocaust in a structured, sanctioned way, and had always been told what to feel about what I saw, I began to question those feelings when I reached adolescence. For the first time I became aware of how I had been emotionally manipulated all along, from that first day watching my teacher work the projector in a dark classroom, up to the Holocaust Day assemblies I still had to attend.

My retreat into cynicism was severe, but it is not the end of the road. The ongoing intellectual process that led me to question the simple narrative I’d been taught then is now causing me to reexamine the conclusions I came to in high school about that narrative. In the process of writing this essay I have come to realize that Holocaust photographs, shorn of their educational packaging, still have the power to shock and to wound; and if I am still shocked, what grounds do I have for indifference? But if I am to accept my own emotion, and to act on it—if I am to engage in postmemory—I must feel that I have arrived at that emotion honestly. I must develop a narrative of the Holocaust that I can trust, one that does not reduce hell on earth to a simple matter of six million martyrs and memorial candles and “never forget.” It won’t be an easy process, any more than my original loss of faith was easy; but it is necessary work, and I have already begun it.

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