Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

IN THE WAKE OF THE HOLOCAUST

The last enemy. Rhoda Kaellis. Pulp Press, 1989. 196 pp., $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88978-214-8.

The body of juvenile Holocaust literature is vast and growing; hardly an issue of *Horn book* comes out without an addition to the corpus, ranging from histories through personal memoirs and novels. Whatever the genre, the emphasis in most of these works is on the pre-war and war years, from life before Hitler, through ghettoization, deportation or hiding, and liberation.

In recent years, sequels to several memoirs, including Ruth Minsky Sender's *To life*, Isabella Leitner's *Saving the fragments* and Johanna Reiss's *The journey back*, have dealt with the adjustment of the child survivor to post-war life, either in Europe or in America. That period was difficult, as Johanna Reiss explains:

> 'The fighting has stopped'; 'Peace treaty signed,' newspapers announce at the conclusion of every war. From a political point of view, the war is over, but in another sense it has not really ended. People are fragile. They are strong, too, but wars leave emotional scars that take a long time to heal, generations perhaps. ("About the Author" *The journey back*)

Only a few children's books examine the impact of the presence of survivors—for many came here—upon the relatively unscathed North American Jews among whom they lived. In Myron Levoy's sensitive exploration of this theme, *Alan and Naomi*, young Alan Silverman's all-American-boy veneer is gradually stripped away as he attempts to draw war-traumatized Naomi Kirshenbaum out of her shell. More recently, Rhoda Kaellis's *The last enemy* attempts to fill this gap. Having interviewed fifteen Vancouver Holocaust survivors for a community archive, she felt there was a story to be told—not of the war, but of its aftermath here.

The book is a first-person narrative by Sarah Cardozo, age twelve, whose parents welcome to their Brooklyn home their orphaned eleven-year-old niece. Lilly survived the Nazi occupation of Belgium in hiding in a convent.

Sarah's high expectations—as an only child, she had longed for a sister—are immediately dashed when Lilly arrives remote, uncommunicative, and resentful, especially of Sarah. Bit by bit, Sarah uncovers the source of her cousin's

bitterness—an anti-Semitism absorbed from the nuns and schoolmates in her convent:

'Jews, they are not nice people, that is why everybody hates them, and I'm...not...going...to be...a Jew,' she ended, emphasizing each word. (86)

Despite the efforts and forbearance of Sarah's mother and father, who feel bound by the wishes of Lilly's murdered parents, Lilly's fears of eternal damnation, of rejection by gentiles, and of persecution lead her to leave the Cardozos and convert to Catholicism.

Anti-Semitism among Jewish child survivors was not unknown. Jack Kuper, in his memoir *Child of the Holocaust*, recalls his plan to flee his Jewish orphanage for a church, where the priest would convert him. And in her interviews with adults hidden as children during the war, Deborah Dwork discovered that conversion to Christianity, though not common, did occur after the war among those who had hidden with practicing Christians:

The common instance of this (it must be stressed) infrequent occurrence was the case of very young children who lived in pious homes or religious institutions. As these children were in hiding it would have been foolish for their foster parents or teachers to tell them that they were Jews. They were cared for as if they were of the same background as the other children; to have reinforced or inculcated a Jewish identity would have been tantamount to inviting the child to betray herself. Those children who developed a Christian identity in this way did not have a conversion experience as such. They did not turn away from or renounce their own culture. They simply grew up as Christians. (Dwork 106)

Dwork notes, however, that there were also cases in which pressure to convert was brought to bear, either by church institutions or pious foster parents, in a zeal to save the child's soul. So the phenomenon Kaellis describes in *The last enemy* is based on a not-unheard-of occurrence. Unfortunately, weaknesses in narrative structure undermine *The last enemy*'s fundamental authenticity.

The plot hinges on Sarah's determination to conceal Lilly's night terrors, anti-Semitism and personal cruelty from her parents—a hardly believable development, given Sarah's youth and close rapport with her mother and father.

The novel's voice also shifts irritatingly, even within a single paragraph; we hear Sarah the child, then Sarah the adult narrator superimposing her perspective onto young Sarah's:

I felt better but at the same time I felt very disappointed. In the face of the reality, my childish fantasies of Lilly and our lives together were absurd and shameful. (53)

This shifting perspective leads to problems when the anti-Christian prejudices of the time are presented:

I knew of no distinct classifications among Christians, knew in fact only that these people believed

in someone they called Jesus Christ who, for unexplained and unexplored reasons, was a mortal enemy of the Jews, and whose very name, if uttered, was associated with bad luck and vague presentiments of danger. (35)

Since the author is mirroring, not approving, contemporary prejudices, the author's foreword should have situated such sentiments in their historical context for the book's younger readers.

The story is frequently interrupted by clumsy digressions. A trip to the Jewish Museum is a device to teach Lilly (and the reader?) about the Christian roots of anti-Semitism:

...Mr. Gurstein asked Lilly if she knew that Jesus was a Jew and a rabbi. Lilly stopped in mid-bite and looked at him skeptically.

He smiled at her and said, 'That's right, Lilly, ask any priest. Every priest and nun knows it.'

'If Jesus Christ was a Jew, why did the Jews kill him?' Lilly said hotly.

'This is going to be hard for you Lilly, because of what you've been told, but it was the Romans who wanted Jesus to die, and they killed him. There were some Jews who were working for the Romans who went along with it, but most Jews didn't even know about Jesus.' (91)

This awkward earnestness is reflected in Kaellis's style, marked by clichés ("happy anticipation," "youthful whole-heartedness") and awkward syntax:

I imagined the advantage it would be to us when we would rattle away together fluent in both languages, she teaching me French, I teaching her English. (25)

The author knows the period well. The incidents in the novel reflect not only facts gleaned in her interviews with survivors, but her own "life's experience as a Jewish child growing up in New York during the Second World War and after." Kaellis's ability to evoke that period is remarkable, from details of interior decorating and clothing ("Our gym suits were an ugly green. They buttoned down the front and the bottoms were like bloomers," 69) to the pleasant routines of a simpler way of life (trips from a safe, secure Brooklyn to Manhattan walks in Central Park).

Despite its weaknesses, the story *The last enemy* tells will hold the attention of young readers as it builds to its disturbing climax. Lilly's tragic solution to her dilemma, her inability to integrate past and present, affects all who know her and reminds the reader that the Holocaust did not end with the defeat of Hitler. As Johanna Reiss says, its scars may not heal for generations.

A time for toys. Margaret Wild. Illus. Julie Vivas. KidsCan, 1992. Unpag., $13.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-55074-023-7.

By its uniqueness, the holocaust denies literature. We think we are describing an event, we transmit only its reflection. No one has the right to speak for the dead, no one has the power to make them speak....Therein lies the dilemma of the storyteller who sees himself essentially as a witness, the drama of the messenger unable to deliver his message: how is one to speak of it, how is one not to speak of it? (Wiesel, *One Generation After* 16)

Thus the great Holocaust author Elie Wiesel reminds us of the enormous responsibility of the writer who undertakes to speak of the unspeakable. For, Wiesel cautions, "The Holocaust experience demands something better and something different: it requires an attitude of total honesty" (Wiesel, *Times*).

It was therefore with some trepidation that I approached Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas's *A time for toys*, a Holocaust picture book. The phrase itself is almost an oxymoron. Picture books are for young children; they tend to be comforting, uplifting, reassuring. The Holocaust is none of these things.

But *A time for toys* was not intended as an ordinary picture book. The promotional material specifies an intended readership beginning at age seven. Nor is it to be read by the child alone: "An adult reading *A time for toys* to a child can go beyond the story and provide whatever historical detail the child would like. The book is a starting point for discussion" suggests the publisher's insert.

The simple story line is based on an actual incident. Shortly before their liberation, female inmates of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp fashioned stuffed toys for the child inmates from scraps of ragged clothing.

Miriam, the narrator, tells the tale. Unlike the other children in the camp, she remembers her earlier life—loving parents, good food and playthings. Saddened by young Sarah and David's wistfulness at the mention of toys, Miriam, together with the other inmates, clandestinely fashions an elephant and an owl from "bits and pieces. Scraps of material, rags, tiny strands of thread, wool, anything," to be hidden until:

a party, a very special party,....When the soldiers come to set us free—and they are coming soon, everyone says so!—they will open the gates. And for dinner we will cook chickens—chickens for everyone!—and each child in the hut will get a toy. A toy of their own.

The story ends with the liberation, the "very special party," and the presents.

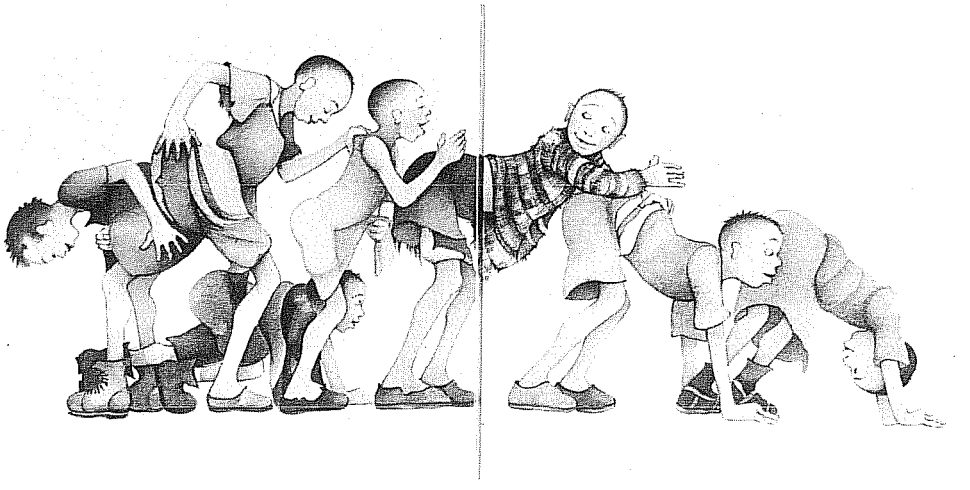
Bergen-Belsen was a transit camp, a way-station to the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. There were many orphans there, women and men were segregated, and, as the story indicates, many of the older girls mothered the orphaned children. The starvation and raggedness to which Wild makes reference were facts of life.

What is not mentioned in the story, except allusively, is death. The only indication of its presence is the recurring image of four-year-old David's

"mama's old black shawl," which he wears until the end, when he wraps his new stuffed owl in it—closing the story on an image of the continuity of life and love.

But how can death go unmentioned in a Holocaust book? What sense can we make of its message, the triumph of human warmth and caring in impossible circumstances, unless we understand clearly why the circumstances were impossible?

Unfortunately, the text's softened reality is reinforced by Julie Vivas's animated watercolours. Not that Vivas romanticizes the concentration camp: like the text, she faithfully records the suffering—the shorn heads, the rags, the bare, scrawny limbs. But the figures' wide-eyed, puckish expressions as they sew the toys and plan the party tell a different story. Bent over comically to examine each other's ragged clothing for usable scraps, they resemble a line of children playing leap-frog. The rounded masses of inmates' sleeping bodies in the barracks, painted in muted mauves and rusts, unwittingly convey a mood of peace and harmony.



This is not to say that there were no moments of relief at Belsen. Lectures on Torah were organized, children sang together, Dutch Jews performed a play to celebrate their Queen's birthday. But the mortality rate from hunger and disease was high. As Marion Stokvis-Krieg, a former inmate, recalls:

> Worst of all was all those bodies in the concentration camp on the other side. But already, of course, in our camp too, there were all those bodies lying on the ground.
>
> It was amazing. Even that was not so—it didn't frighten me; not at all. It was normal. So, he was dead, okay. Someone was lying in bed and didn't move any more. He was dead. Next item.
>
> It's very hard, but that's the way it was. (qtd. in Dwork 147)

It is natural to want to shield children from such horror.

We don't tell them of Josef Mengele's experiments on twins, or of babies burned alive in the crematoria. But to omit the slaughter of Jews from a Holocaust book is like omitting the sacrifice from the story of the binding of Isaac, as in some children's versions: it is to rob the story of any meaning.

Nonetheless, *A time for toys* tells an important story well. The marriage of text and art is impeccable. The quirky layout, from flowing two-page spreads to scattered small figures (two wistful children in the bottom left-hand corner gazing at a toy bear, elephant, doll and owl floating eerily in the top right-hand corner), reinforces the text's alternately flowing and halting rhythm:

> Sarah and David say to me, 'Tell us again, Miriam, tell us about your teddy bear with the squeak in the middle. Tell us about your doll that has eyes that blink. Tell us about your soft pink elephant that sits on the windowsill, and the owl that swings from the ceiling.'
>
> So I tell them. Sarah stares at me, and David hugs his mama's old black shawl, and I run away to be on my own, because I know Sarah and David want a toy more than anything else in the world. And in this place there are no toys.

Despite what it leaves out, I want my own daughters to hear the story *A time for toys* has to tell. But I will supply the context. For those parents and teachers who do not know enough about the Holocaust to do this, or who simply cannot find the words, I hope a future edition will include a historical note to situate this moving story in its proper historical setting.

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