Surviving the Holocaust: The Ordeal of the Hidden Child

• *Vicki Zack* •

Résumé: *Vicki Zack examine l'oeuvre de Rhoda Kaellis,* ***The Last Ennemy****, laquelle raconte l'histoire d'une jeune fille, Lili, qui a survécu à la Shoah en vivant dans la clandestinité et qui, traumatisée par cette expérience, ne peut s'adapter au monde de l'après-guerre. Dans son analyse, V. Zach situe le roman à la fois dans l'ensemble des oeuvres pour la jeunesse consacrées à ce sujet et parues depuis 1952, et dans le corpus récent des récits documentaires écrits à la première personne.*

Summary: *The paper examines Kaellis's book,* ***The Last Enemy****, which tells the story of a child, Lilly, who survived the Holocaust in hiding. Shaped and traumatised by the events of the cataclysm, Lilly cannot find peace in her post-war life. The paper situates this book, published in 1989, both within the works of Holocaust fiction for young people which deal with the child in hiding — novels written from 1952 to the present — and within a recently-emerging corpus of first-person documentary material.*

This paper examines Rhoda Kaellis's (1989) *The Last Enemy*, a relatively unknown novel aimed at young adult readers.[1] The novel explores the psyche of a Jewish girl who survived the Holocaust by being hidden in a convent during the war. The main part of the paper is devoted to a literary study of the work and includes brief excerpts from one adolescent reader's response to its dark message. This is followed by an examination of how the theme of hidden children in this novel differs from earlier treatments of the same topic in Holocaust literature. The shift is reflected both in the focus and the tone of the subject matter. The paper concludes with a discussion of *The Last Enemy* within the context of recent survivor testimonies about the emotional upheaval endured by hidden children.

The novel, *The Last Enemy*, is gripping, provocative, and daring, despite some unevenness in the writing. Kaellis, a Canadian author, grapples

with disturbing questions previously untouched in children's literature about the Holocaust: "Where was God?" and "Why did the Holocaust happen?" The story is narrated by twelve-year-old Sarah Cardozo, the only child of a loving, Jewish family living safely in post-World War II New York. Into their lives comes Lilly, Sarah's eleven-year-old Belgian cousin who, assuming the name and identity of a fictitious Catholic girl, Lilly LeClerc, had been successfully hidden in a convent during the war years. At the war's end, when the death of Lilly's parents in Auschwitz is confirmed, Lilly is sent against her wishes to live with the Cardozo family. By juxtaposing Sarah's loving expectation that Lilly will feel pleasure as a member of the welcoming family with Lilly's categorical refusal to accept this offer, Kaellis masterfully frames the distance between the two girls. To Sarah's bewilderment, Lilly prefers to associate with the Polish Catholic children in the public school they both attend, and much of the novel is devoted to tracing the conflict between the two young people, revealing incrementally the trauma Lilly has undergone and is still suffering. Not only Sarah but also her family are ill-equipped to understand why Lilly continues to feel alienated despite their well-intentioned and extensive efforts to welcome her.

Consider first the distance. The girls are close in age but worlds apart in experience. Sarah has all her life been loved, protected and innocent. Lilly feels abandoned, world-weary and frightened to death. As André Stein notes in his interview for *The Passionate Eye* in 1996, "When you are in hiding, you are not a child anymore. You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders." Lilly, shaped and haunted by the cataclysm in Europe, is remote, and in essence remains a ghostly stranger even when it seems partway through the novel that she is adapting somewhat to a more everyday life. Kaellis works throughout with the image of Lilly as wraith, stating explicitly at one point that hidden within the child who appeared to be acclimatizing herself to the new world, is the terrified child in distress: "Lilly crept back into her shell, retreating visibly behind blank eyes and the compacting of her body that I had noticed the first day we saw her in the ship terminal" (122). Stephanie, an adolescent reader of the novel, commented thus upon her impression of Lilly at the beginning of the novel: "At the start [of the novel] she was more of a ghost. She was nothing, she wasn't human, she scared me.... All her spirit was gone ... she was this pale, skinny little girl." Later in our talk, Stephanie said yet again: "She scared me. It didn't seem she was real. She was totally lost." Stephanie also explained that she felt she could better relate to Lilly once Lilly started to revolt. She referred specifically to an occasion when Lilly and Sarah lashed out at each other with fists and curses. Indeed both Lilly and Sarah are more credible as characters from that point on.

The core of the novel pertains to Lilly's trying to make sense of what

happened and why. One set of explanations is put forth by Yosuf, Lilly's cousin, who draws upon reasoning rooted in Talmudic practice to argue that God had nothing to do with "the hatred that produced the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms" and the Holocaust (159-160). The ensuing philosophical debate ends with the comment that ultimately no one can explain why the Holocaust happened. Lilly concludes that it is man who is to blame. Despite Sarah's effort to show Lilly that "there were people who endangered themselves and sacrificed their lives to help Jews" (161) Lilly remains steadfast in her view that humanity has "no redeeming qualities " (162). Lilly excludes no one from her cynicism, not even Yosuf whom she adores, and she engages Sarah in a bruising argument when she proclaims:

> I saw it all myself. I see it happening everyday. People behave decently only when they have plenty to eat and they're safe. Give a little push and they eat each other up.

Sarah's heartfelt response, "And Yosuf? Do you think Yosuf's like that? Would he eat you up if he weren't comfortable?" is quickly challenged by Lilly when she replies:

> Yosuf is wonderful. If I love anybody, I love Yosuf. But what would he do if he were starving, if he were being tortured, if he was threatened with what is his worst nightmare ... I don't know. You don't either, Sarah, and neither does Yosuf. None of us knows until we're faced with it. (162)

Sarah entreats Lilly to stop turning to look back, begging her to not let the past poison everything (163). Her mention of the poison resonated for me with one Holocaust survivor's caustic, haunting comment in the movie *Shoah*: "If you licked my heart, it would poison you" (Lanzmann, 1985). Lilly is suffused with despair and mistrust. In response to Lilly's cynicism Sarah states: "[If] people really are monsters, if you see them like that, how can you stand it?" To this Lilly replies: "How can I go on? I ask that question, too" (162).

The recurring themes of being hunted, of being both visible and invisible, of salvation and damnation, of facing impossible choices are evident as Lilly continues to suffer her war experience even though she is in New York. The Holocaust remains central to her existence. In Belgium, Lilly lived visible but hidden, always in danger of being found out due to a slip of some kind. In New York, Lilly lives wraithlike, silent whenever possible, never at peace, and never safe as a Jew. The nuns in the Belgian convent taught her that the Jews were hunted and killed because they had killed Christ; the Polish priest in New York convinces her that only conversion to Catholicism

will result in her salvation. Hence, salvation as the act of saving her from harm at the hands of the Nazis becomes instead the act of saving her soul from sin through conversion to Christianity. However, even when Lilly, at the age of 16, converts to Catholicism, her torment does not end.

Rumplestiltskin constitutes a metaphor for the impossible choices facing the characters, the impossible tasks that face Lilly, and which faced her mother before her. In the novel there is mention of Yosuf, Sarah and Lilly attending a marionette production of *Rumplestiltskin* (108-109) but no further discussion of that event. In the story of Rumplestiltskin, the young girl-Queen is placed in an impossible position by her father, by authority. If she fails and she cannot guess correctly, she will forfeit what is most precious to her, her child. This dramatic scenario mirrors the dilemma faced by Lilly's mother. Rather than flee with Lilly to safety in England, she chooses to stay in Belgium with her husband since the British government would not grant him papers. This choice, though distressing, was an obvious one for Lilly's mother, a loving wife. In contrast, Lilly, with the simple, absolute certainty of the young child, feels that her mother should have fled with her to England. The impossible choice which followed was to decide whether to keep Lilly with them or to place a seven-year-old in hiding "in plain sight." There is no way to guess which is correct. However, the mother is aware of the imminent danger posed by Rumplestiltskin-Hitler for her child, and she, with the implicit agreement of Lilly's father, makes the decision to entrust Lilly to the care of the nuns. Paradoxically however, this act of love and sacrifice is looked upon by the child as abandonment.

Lilly, too, is tormented by the choices she feels she must make and in the end she must decide whether she wants to live at all. Lilly's suicide hits the reader with an unexpected force. It is at first a devastating shock, but in retrospect, it is not a surprise. The readers' shock results from the established view that love and time are the ultimate healers. The love of so many — the nuns, the LeClerc family in Belgium, the Cardozo family and extended family, her friend Catherine — combined with the fact that she is a young girl, lulls the reader into a false complacency. From Lilly's perspective, however, none of this support is altruistic, but rather it is extended to gain her soul (154-155). She perceived that she was being torn apart by the ones who vied for her. However, Stephanie, when interpreting the meaning of the title of the book, addressed the theme of inner conflict. She stated during our interview: "Lilly's last enemy was herself, and the internal conflict within her. Hitler was gone, the war was [finished], and yet she had these doubts." Indeed, the tragedy is that although Lilly survived the maelstrom in Europe, although so many people cared deeply for her, love was not enough; she could not find peace; she could not be "saved."

Evolving Themes in Children's Holocaust Literature about the Hidden Child

In the next portion of the paper I would like to situate *The Last Enemy* both within the works of Holocaust fiction for young people that deal with the child in hiding, and within a just-emerging corpus of first-person documentary material. I will begin with the works of fiction. In regard to theme and mood, an examination of a number of works which deal with children in hiding, works written from 1952 to the present, reveals a shift from a somewhat positive setting and resolution in the earlier works such as Bishop's (1952) *Twenty and Ten*, and Suhl's (1975) *On the Other Side of the Gate*, to a darker vision of human nature in the more recent writings such as Gutman's (1989) *The Empty House*, Kaellis's (1989) *The Last Enemy*, and Orlev's (1991) *The Man from the Other Side*.

The books published in the early years, namely Bishop's (1952) *Twenty and Ten* and Suhl's (1975) *On the Other Side of the Gate*, are idealized versions of cruel realities. In Bishop's *Twenty and Ten*, in which twenty French children save ten Jewish orphans, what bumblers the Nazi soldiers are, and how brave and sensitive is Sister Gabriel, the nun who keeps the mood cheerful and optimistic despite the danger. There is no substantive talk of religion, no hint of longing for parents who have disappeared. Juxtapose it with *The Last Enemy* and we have a more sinister turn. The nun is "saving" the Jewish children, by trying to convince them that they would be better off as Catholics. In contrast, Gutman's (1989) *The Empty House*, set in France, is a sombre story of horror and of hope. David, the protagonist, has been witness to his parents being taken away. He feels their loss unremittingly and seeks to find them or to learn of their fate. At fifteen years of age, alone, an outcast on the run, David is nevertheless secure enough in his identity as a Jew to actively resist what he perceives as an attempt by a priest to deny his identity by giving him a Christian-sounding name. He manages to do this even though his safety might, as a result, be more precarious. He suffers another blow when again he must watch as the young orphans and the adult caregiver with whom he has been hiding are taken away by the SS on what seems to be the eve of liberation. Bereft, David curses himself, feeling he has betrayed the children, and his parents, because he did not go with them to the end. His anguish is palpable.

In Suhl's *On the Other Side of the Gate* (1975), there is an underlying optimism concerning the infant sent into hiding. One has the sense of the possibility of bridging distances and difficulties. Set in the Warsaw Ghetto, the oppressive, insurmountable ghetto wall so ominous in historical documents and in Orlev's book, is here represented by a gate. The Polish citizen, Tadeusz, who is working with Jewish parents to spirit their child out of the ghetto, is a good person, a beacon of light in the darkness. The anguish of the

parents who have to part with their son is tempered with hope, which is provided in the long Afterword. While many children were never claimed and grew up as Polish Catholics, or were never told they were Jewish, or were the object of a court battle between the Polish hiding family and the Jewish parent who returned to claim the child, the afterword suggests that there is hope that this eighteen-month-old baby of whom we have just read will be reunited with his parents at the war's end. In contrast, Orlev's *The Man from the Other Side* (1991) reveals a darker reality. There is a powerful scene set in the cesspool underground of the sewers, in which Marek, the protagonist, discovers that his stepfather is smuggling a Jewish baby girl out from the Warsaw Ghetto. The stepfather, Anthony, though seedy and unscrupulous in his other dealings, has refused payment for smuggling children out. However, he throws away the identification information written by the desperate parents. Anthony offhandedly tells Marek that the parents will never survive to claim the child — but there is also the address of an aunt in America which he has destroyed as well — and that in any event the Jewish babies he is smuggling out are better off growing up as Catholics. Thus, whereas Hitler strove outright to annihilate the Jews, others aided in the accomplishment of this goal either directly or indirectly when in denying or hiding the child's identity they severed the children's ties with their ancestral community.

With the recent emergence from silence of many child survivors who have only begun to tell their stories 50 years after the end of World War II, Kaellis's book is timely. The stories just now being shared, and others of long standing, tell of people hidden from view, that is, *invisible*, in an attic (Anne Frank, 1952), in an upstairs room (Johanna Reiss, 1972) or behind a secret window (Nelly Toll, 1993). There were some who were fortunate to be with their family (Anne Frank) supported by loving Gentiles (Anne Frank), but after reading many of the accounts, it becomes apparent that Anne's situation was the exception. More likely, even when hiding with a sibling or parent, the child and family members were in constant danger and frequently on the move. There are accounts of children in hiding but *visible*, as was Lilly throughout her ordeal. In some cases they found themselves with abusive "caretakers." All were vulnerable, and aching for information about loved ones (Régine Miller in Buchignani's *Tell No One Who You Are*; see also Aniko Berger's story, in Stein's *Hidden Children*; Rosenberg; Greenfield). The documentary accounts by these hidden children who are now writing as adults reflect an enduring sense of loss, of shame, and of guilt at having survived when those closest to them died (Gershon, in Aberbach's *Surviving Trauma*; Gershon). Many experience difficulty in establishing relationships. At the same time, the accounts suggest that many of these survivors prevailed against great odds and constructed meaningful lives in the aftermath of their war experiences.

Kaellis wrote *The Last Enemy* in 1989, basing it upon interviews which she had conducted with survivors of the Holocaust. The book thus preceded the first conference of child survivors which took place in New York in 1991. Marks, in writing about the 1991 conference and her follow-up interviews with some of the participants, presented the stages which the hidden children she interviewed as adults went through: the ordeal, the aftermath, the healing, and the legacy. When I first read the book *The Last Enemy* I was pained by Lilly's decision to end her life, and struggled to understand why. Marks's work helps to explain Lilly's suicide. Despite all the love which Sara's family, Catherine, her American Polish friend, and Lilly's mother — posthumously, through her letters — were able to show, Lilly was never able to go beyond the Ordeal stage. There was no healing, no legacy. Without hope, without faith in humanity's goodness, Lilly could not survive.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Barbara Graves for her involvement in discussions which helped shape this article. I also deeply appreciate the involvement of four of my former students — Taylor Levy and Ilana Schrager, then in Grade Six, Stephanie Borts then in Grade Eight, and Harlie Dover then in Grade Eleven — as well as Felice Levy, Taylor's mother, for they accepted my request to read and respond orally or in writing to the novel *The Last Enemy*. Please note that because I have concerns about the emotional impact of this particular book, I have never included *The Last Enemy* in my fifth or sixth grade class library collection. Despite the fact that as a fifth grader Taylor had read many books about the Holocaust and had done an intensive research project on the concentration camps, including interviews with survivors, Taylor was deeply disturbed by the reading of *The Last Enemy*.

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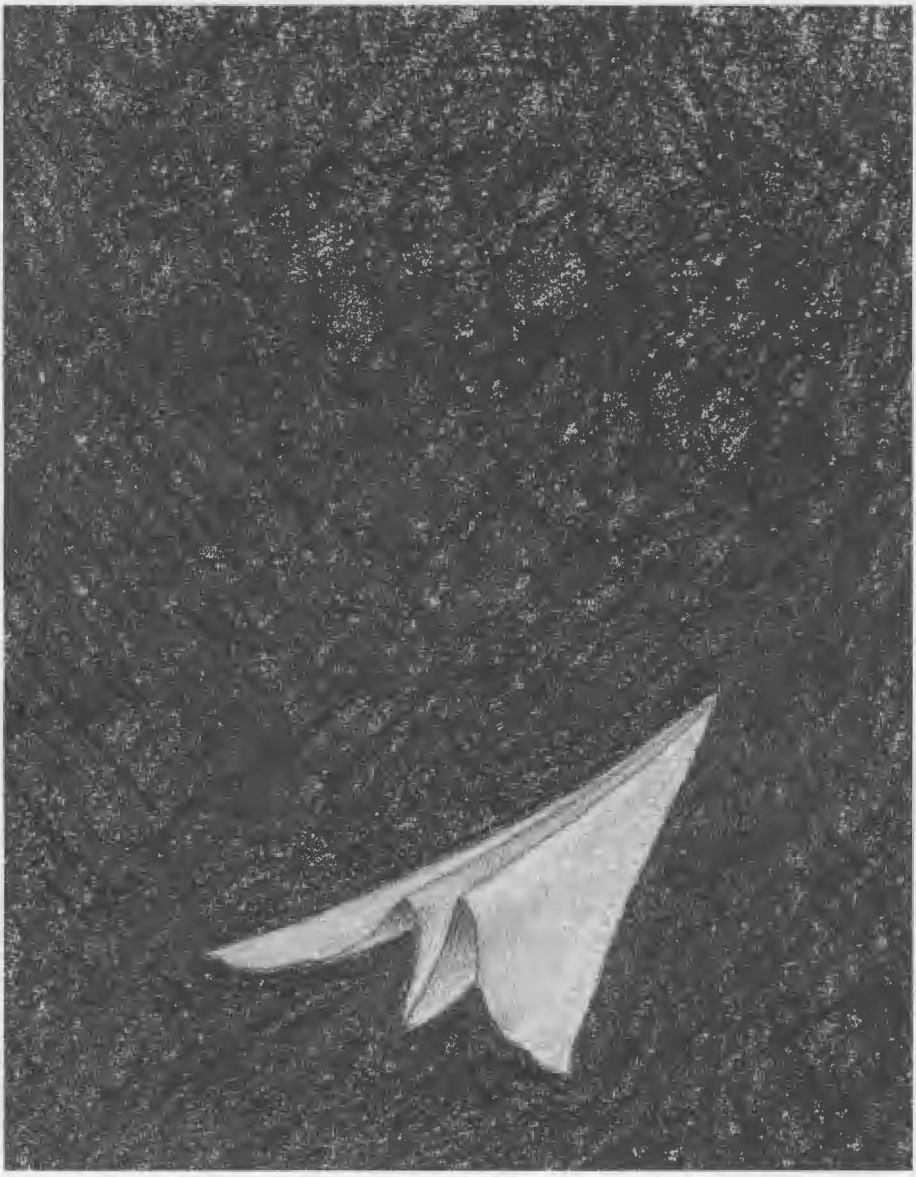
Vicki Zack *is the daughter of survivors, a student of the Holocaust in literature and history, and has taught children's literature in McGill University's Faculty of Education (1979-1985). For the past ten years (1989-2000) she has been a fifth grade classroom teacher-researcher and has explored children's responses to intolerance and genocide in children's literature ("'It Was the Worst of Times'"; "Nightmare Issues").*



Geoff Butler, 1989, 4"x6", graphite on paper