The Child, as the Hero/Victim of the Dark Planet — The Holocaust

• *Lillian Boraks-Nemetz* •

Résumé: *Dans cet article, l'auteur analyse la dichotomie entre l'être en soi et l'être comme victime, qui caratérise l'identité du personnage-enfant des romans et des récits autobiographiques de la Shoah. Elle met aussi en relief la valeur éducative de la littérature pour la jeunesse dans des oeuvres traitant de l'Holocauste comme* ***The Old Brown Suitcase.***

Summary: *This essay explores the her/victim dichotomy in the psyche of the child survivor protagonist in Holocaust novels and memoirs. It also emphasizes the educational value of Holocaust literature for young readers in such books as* ***The Old Brown Suitcase.***

Many writers have tried over the recent decades to analyze the phenomenon of the Holocaust, to make some sense of its senseless tragedy. Their common point of agreement is that the Holocaust distinguishes itself as an event of apocalyptic proportions, which happened on a planet separate from anything we consider normal on Earth.

One of the greatest difficulties for a writer, in my opinion, is to translate this dark metaphoric planet of the Holocaust into a linguistic realm that can be of significance to the generation of today.

A writer needs to exercise a profound sense of intuition and carry out a huge amount of research in order to convey the meaning accurately. Whether it be in the genre of children's or adult literature, representing the Holocaust presents an almost insurmountable challenge. Many authors have tried; many have failed. Ultimately, the memoirs of child survivors have proved the most successful and honest testimonies to the truth.

When I write about the Holocaust, I envision the life then as mere existence in a dark place. It was, and still is, a realm of terror and nightmare, where I lived as a small child inside the ghetto, imprisoned by a ten-foot

wall. I feel it intensely, this enclosure made of brick, barbed wire and pieces of jagged glass stuck into the mortar. My sense of light is eclipsed; no sunbeams touch us there, nor the scent of flowers or daily bread. There seem to be no birds singing, and no spring. There is no real humanity, or freedom, and the language of this time and space translates into brutality and silence.

The Jewish children who endured the Holocaust were not heroic; they were powerless victims. A million and a half of their brothers and sisters perished. Those who survived have been left a heavy legacy. And those who survived did so by mere chance or a lucky break. The guilt for having survived while the others died is no small price to pay for their lives. This is why one of the most baffling problems I have encountered in writing about the Holocaust is the portrayal of the main character. It seems that while in the Holocaust memoir the child is portrayed as victim, in the North American novel the trend is to portray a child survivor as hero. The cultural myths in the literary imagination of Canada and the United States explore tragedy, but ultimately, exalt heroism.

I have also found that some educators, editors, and sometimes even critics, wonder why these Holocaust child survivors as characters are so unaggressive — quiet and often introverted, neither boisterous nor rebellious — different from the more outgoing Canadian boys and girls. The reason is that they carry within them the Dark Planet.

In most Holocaust memoirs, the child\protagonist finds her- or himself in a helpless state, where life and death walk hand in hand in an unknown territory ruled by luck, perhaps God, but definitely, the predator. The child is terrified and is powerless, and therefore unable to rebel. This kind of protagonist as victim is often unpopular among publishers, editors and even general readers. And yet writers of Holocaust fiction for young people have to make clear the psychological significance of childhood persecution and childhood war experience. This is not easy, as even some of our best psychoanalysts are ill trained to comprehend how a society such as the Nazi Germany of the thirties could become the ultimate racial predator, under whose regime every European Jewish child was automatically sentenced to death.

In my experience, I have found that such violations of life produce deep silences in the child's psyche. The child has no means by which to express the paralyzing terror. This violation of the child's self extends to religious practice. Not all Jewish European children, as is commonly thought, come equipped with a Jewish Orthodox background. In reality, because of overt anti-Semitism in Europe, many Jews assimilated into society at large in order to make a living. Many were so sick at heart over being persecuted that they kept their Jewish identity a secret. That is not to say that they did not privately consider themselves Jews or didn't love their God.

Therefore, the character of the child of the Holocaust, particularly the

child in hiding, is one who has suffered a loss of childhood and identity and often feels confused about her\his religious loyalties. Many young Jewish children, not yet indoctrinated about their own Hebrew religion, were placed in hiding under false papers and were made to survive the war as Christians. This state of existence served to confuse the child survivor even more as to his\her identity as a Jew, and consequently, as a human being.

How can we not view these children as victims? And yet they survived by their own wits, by their ability to act as adults who knew when not to speak, when not to cry, and how to endure abandonment by their parents. They even adapted to caretaker-strangers and were able to function well in their new roles as Christians.

If the endurance of unmitigated hardship and the adaptability to bizarre circumstances spells heroism, then these children were able to stare down the very devil, and survive heroically. In this respect, then, the character of the child survivor appears to be divided into opposites: hero and victim living together in one individual. Though many child survivors have done remarkably well as adults and have achieved outward successes in many important fields, in each one's memory there undoubtedly still lives a frightened child, cheated by a society which claimed to fight evil and foster good.

Through writing *The Old Brown Suitcase*, I learned that for me and other survivors, the Holocaust didn't stop in 1945, and that for many, it had destroyed the possibility of a satisfactory emotional life. Having lived in the shadow of the past, in the shadow of the dark planet, I continually searched for a glimmer of light. Eventually, as the Holocaust receded into historical time, I began to review the Holocaust experience in the space of survival and healing. I sought out a just listener, became an educator and writer. It took forty years of silence to find an alternate image for the darkness. The emergence of memory from darkness to daylight involves penetrating a thick wall at the centre of which are deep wounds and scars from which the child survivor never recovers, though he or she may find a way to live that is least painful.

I am often asked how a modern teen or even a modern adult can possibly identify with the character of a child survivor of the Holocaust. I can only say that my manuscript, *The Old Brown Suitcase*, received twenty-five rejections from Canadian publishers, many saying that the young adult audience wouldn't identify with this type of story or with its victim protagonist. But this proved to be untrue. Whenever I spoke to teens and pre-teens in schools and libraries, they said that they enjoyed reading "real stories," and that they were taken with *The Old Brown Suitcase*, and would like to know what happens next to its character, Slava. I found these readers were sensitive young adults with a keen and compassionate eye for injustice, prejudice and racism. Interestingly, they view Slava Lenski, my character, as heroic,

simply because she survived the Holocaust. This reveals, I think, the dichotomy between European and North American thinking. In a way, the latter has cast a fresh view on the character of the child survivor.

Young people today live in a dangerous world, and it is better that they be gradually informed than kept unaware of what can happen in it. Young Canadian readers should learn about other children who have lived and suffered persecution and victimization in countries less fortunate and less free than Canada. Such education can only broaden their minds and shift them away from prejudice against a classmate whose cultural background is different. It would also be helpful if the public could be more educated and forthcoming on this subject, rather than viewing the stories about Holocaust survivors cynically: as yet more literature on a worked-to-death topic.

As we begin the twenty-first century, let us not discard too quickly the lessons of the twentieth. Writers, philosophers, and psychotherapists would do well to continue exploring the subject of the Holocaust. It was one of the greatest evils of this century, and it must be reckoned with, not swept away by denial. It haunts us and it will continue to do so, for much about it and its victims is not yet understood by contemporary society.

In the meantime, as the Dark Planet continues to circle the Earth, it is a reminder that all is not well with the world.

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz *is a poet, translator, and novelist. She came to Canada from Poland, where as a small child during World War II she spent two years in the Warsaw Ghetto and three years in hiding from the Nazis in Polish villages. She completed her Master's degree in Comparative Literature at the University of British Columbia, and is presently teaching creative writing in the Department of Continuing Studies at UBC. Both her own poems and translations from the Polish have appeared in various anthologies and periodicals in Canada, the US and Great Britain. She has also translated and co-translated two collections of poetry by Polish Emigré poets living in Canada. A volume of her own poems,* ***Garden of Steel****, came out in 1994. All these were published under the name of Jagna Boraks. Her novel for young adult readers,* ***The Old Brown Suitcase****, was published in 1994 and won several prizes, among them the Rachel Bassin prize in Toronto, and a Sheila A. Egoff BC Book Award for best children's literature for 1995. In the fall of 1996 a French translation of the novel was published in Quebec by Les Editions Heritages Inc., entitled* ***Slava****. The sequel to* ***The Old Brown Suitcase****, entitled* ***The Sunflower Diary****, is published by Roussan Publishers of Montreal. The next novel, which will complete the trilogy, is entitled* ***The Lenski File*** *and is due to be published this coming spring or summer (2000). She has also compiled a new collection of poems,* ***Ghost Children****, to be published in the fall of 2000 by Ronsdale Press.*