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A Shoah that speaks to everyone

Flags are lowered, a siren wails, a memorial prayer is recited – these are the rituals of Holocaust Day. But for the past three years, a group of experts has worked to create a new, interactive and inclusive sort of commemoration. The first such ceremonies will take place next week

Govrin. "Our project expands on the term 'heroism.' We list ways of standing firm and rebelling in the Holocaust." *Emil Salman*

Hilo Glazer

Immediately after she arrived in Israel – after surviving the *aktions* in the Krakow Ghetto, as well as Plaszow concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau and the death march to Bergen-Belsen – Rina (Regina) Poser-Laub (1912-1987) underwent plastic surgery to remove the number the Nazis had burned into her arm. She never said anything to her daughter about the murder of her first husband. Or about how she ran after a truck that carried children – among them her firstborn son, who was 8 – to the gas chamber.

About 20 years after her death, her daughter, Prof. Michal Govrin, a novelist, poet and theater director, began work on a novel about her mother's silence. She is still writing it.

Govrin has been tried to piece together the story of her mother's life in part by speaking with the surviving members of a group of 10 Orthodox women who supported one another in the Holocaust, and whom her mother befriended; with the German prosecutor in a trial at which her mother testified against one of the commanders of the Krakow Ghetto; and with the help of a report on file in Tel Aviv's Haganah Museum (which documents the history of the pre-state Jewish militia), which details her postwar activity in the effort to smuggle tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from the British Zone in Germany to Palestine.

The attempt to weave all the strands together into a coherent narrative was, however, doomed to failure. A "burst of imagination" was needed to fill in the gaps – to produce "a story with events and chronology, and the 'living' characters of my mother, her first husband, her son, her girlfriends," Govrin wrote four years ago. "It's fiction that will make it possible, in the end, to draw close to them, to render them present now. The power of identification that a story exerts made it possible to create a continuity, albeit partial, between the 'there' and the here-and-now."

Govrin's private journey raises fundamental questions, for her mother's death is part of the inexorable process at the end of which the generation of eyewitnesses will be gone. According to the nonprofit Foundation for the Benefit of Holocaust Victims, there are still about 190,000 survivors living in Israel. By 2025, says the organization's general manager, Rony Kalinsky, only 70,000 will remain. "Taking into account that already today their average age is 85," he adds, "I would say that it will not be very long before none remain."

With this prediction in mind, Govrin approached the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, which agreed to sponsor a project that would consider the question of "how to transmit the memory of the Holocaust after the demise of its last survivors."

> Govrin: 'Our aim is to wrest Holocaust Day from the glorification of annihilation and consider what we can take from it for the future, what meanings it possesses. To break with the fixation of worshiping death.'

To that end, Govrin gathered a group of experts from a variety of disciplines, including historians, artists, curators, brain scientists, clerics and psychoanalysts, each of whom also embodied a specific population group (ultra-Orthodox, Mizrahim – Jews from Islamic lands – and so on). Govrin makes no apology for this "cataloging."

"The idea was to articulate something that would speak to everyone and encompass the multiplicity of voices in the present, as an act of correction for the mutual exclusion in which each person retained his own memory and did not make room for the other," she explains.

Following three years of monthly meetings at Van Leer, the group came up with a format for a ceremony that is intended to be experiential and to spur active involvement on the part of participants, based on the model of the Passover seder. This eyar, for the first time, commemorative events based on the format devised by the "Transmitted Memory and Fiction" group, as it is known, will take place on April 15, the eve of Holocaust Day – known officially as Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day – at 10 locations around the country. Each of these interactive gatherings will consist of about 30 participants and a moderator.

"This will be a non-frontal scenario, meaning [each gathering] will be carried out by the participants themselves under the guidance of a moderator, in the role of the leader of the seder," Govrin explains. "It's a modular format, and each 'community' will be able to choose the texts it finds appropriate. There will be times of singing and also times when the participants will be invited to share their thoughts and memories."

In addition, various discussions and an exhibition titled "What Is Memory? Seventy Years Later," which largely sums up the process the group underwent in the past three years and aims to present "the multiplicity of forms

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SHOAH

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The Passover story of the Exodus from Egypt is fitting in the sense that it has become a universal myth about physical and psychic liberation from bondage. Nor does it demand a precise reconstruction of historical events but rests on a ceremonial format that allows for changing interpretations.

"Will it be possible to tell a story that makes it possible for those who identify with it to say, 'Let each person see himself as though he came out of Auschwitz?'" Govrin writes in the group's document of principles, referencing a passage from the Haggadah.

"We are using the Passover seder only as a platform of community performance," Govrin says. "It's far more useful than passively viewing a ceremony or film, and allows for a conversation about life and not only about death. I imbibed with my mother's milk opposition to and repulsion from victimization, and it seems as though I share that feeling with the others in the group."

But there were also other voices. For example, Rabbi Aharon Stern, from the editorial board of Aderaba, a monthly devoted to the "world of penitence," thought that the primary emphasis should be on "the sense of helplessness in the Holocaust." In his view, "the weakness [of the Jews] was not necessarily connected to the notion of the victim." He maintains that the feeling of impotence was not given proper expression over the years, "under the hegemony of the heroism myth."

It is also important, he adds, to remember that "the persecution and the murder were aimed concretely at the Jews. This gives rise to the question: What in me is Jewish? What Jewish values do I reflect?" In many communities, Stern explains, "there is a tendency to blur the Jewish component of the Holocaust, and I expressed the opposite view."

The group was "very much aware of the question of the limits of universalism," adds Dr. Mali Izenberg, a lecturer and Holocaust researcher at Bar-Ilan University. "The current fashion in world research is to perceive the Holocaust as a genocide like every other genocide and not to attribute a distinctive status to it."

The Van Leer group, she observes, tried to give the Holocaust a contemporary context, "but we were careful not to obscure its specific Jewish dimension, which in my view must be present." She also thought it would be wrong to include texts at the gatherings that challenge the place of God in the Shoah, "because if, in the name of a multiplicity of voices we cause some groups to recoil, we will be undermining our goal."

The texts include excerpts from classic works such as Stefan Zweig's "The World of Yesterday," but also more up-to-date cultural references. The most striking of these involves an episode from the Israeli television series "Zagouri Empire" in which Beber, the father of the Moroccan-descended family, refuses to stand when the siren sounds on Holocaust Day until the state also declares "Ma'abarot Day" – referring to the refugee absorption camps in 1950s Israel. Beber counters the Holocaust with a kind of Moroccan "Nakba" (a term usually used by Palestinians to denote what they call the "catastrophe" of the founding of the Jewish state) whose fomenters were Ashkenazim.

"They ruined our lives," Beber says. "When we came to Israel they took out on us their rage at everything the Germans did to them."

'Mystification and obfuscation'

The episode sparked a heated public discussion, and the group felt that it called for a rethinking of the "Mizrahi issue," which had in any case played a prominent role in their discussions.

Izenberg, who is also in charge of academic conferences at the Massua Institute for the Study of the Holocaust on Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak, relates that studies conducted by Massua among students every few years "show that for them the Holocaust is the most dominant element in the construction of their Israeli identity." Accordingly, the "Zagouri Empire" episode had a "subverting effect." The Van Leer group, she notes, made a point of including texts "that could stir a discussion even among those for whom the biographical element does not play a part, those whose families were not specifically affected."

Nevertheless, Izenberg observes, "it is impossible to ignore the fact that the mass of the events occurred in Eastern and Central Europe. We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of mystification and obfuscation of the Holocaust only in order to curry favor."

However, Govrin – despite or perhaps because of her family history – was in favor of "expropriating the Holocaust from the Ashkenazi public." This, she says, produced a highly emotional response on both sides. "When we disseminated the draft version, some claimed we were giving an exaggerated place to Mizrahi memory, whereas a Mizrahi voice assailed me for juxtaposing his pain to our pain. His concern was that the Mizrahi wound would be diminished and swallowed up by the Holocaust."

In the current version of the text, the Mizrahi viewpoint is represented, in part, by material in Ladino, quotes from Mizrahi rabbis and ethnic songs. More significant is a table showing the population of the Jewish communities in the Arab states before World War II and "after the waves of displacement and emigration." This table, which reflects the emptying out of the communities in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere in North Africa, appears immediately after the far more familiar data concerning the "destruction and loss" in Europe.

The unavoidable question arises: Can a comparison be drawn between those who were sent to the gas chambers and those who were sent to poverty-stricken remote towns in Israel?

Govrin, for her part, declines to play the "who suffered more" game. Her focus is on the basic point: communities that existed but are now nonexistent.

"Even if there was no murder there," she says, referring to North African and Middle Eastern communities of Jews, "there was displacement, there was trauma, there is a wound. The Jews of the Soviet Union and Ethiopia are also part of the narrative of uprooting and leaving. We are all children of DPs or survivors.

"I am sure that people will be outraged. But if we are attacked, it will be proof that we succeeded in touching the boiling point, the core. That's exactly the idea: to cauterize the wound."

Chen: "The history of the commemorative events lets us psychoanalyze Israeli society."

Emil Salman

Deglorifying death

The Van Leer group is not the first to try to add the Mizrahi or universalist link to the memory chain of the Holocaust. The most famous precedent was set on Holocaust Day in 1995 by Sami Shalom Chetrit, at the time the principal of a Tel Aviv school (now a professor at Queens College, New York). To the six candles typically used to represent the six million Jewish dead, he added a seventh candle, in memory of all those murdered in genocides. A public uproar ensued.

In 1997, Kibbutz Beit Hashitta devoted its Holocaust Day ceremony to North African Jewry, as did the Jerusalem-based Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies last year. The invitation of then-Interior Minister Eli Yishai to be guest of honor at the ceremony held in Kibbutz Yad Mordechai in 2011 is also considered a benchmark in the attempt to contain the Mizrahi narrative within the Holocaust superstructure.

Gaining a foothold

These and other examples are included in a background study of the history of Holocaust Day ceremonies in Israel conducted for the group by Lior Chen, a Ph.D. student in anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The study addresses the changes in the ceremonies' style and content alike, and reflects tectonic social transformations in the country.

Chen notes that the attempt to find a place for the Maghreb communities was preceded by the extension of the memory narrative in Europe itself. For example, in 1973, when Zvi Goldfarb, a survivor of Hungarian origin, began to work in the Ghetto Fighters

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House, on Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot, he collected material about the Hungarian underground, which was not armed but concentrated on finding escape routes and hiding places. This project sparked objections, but two years later, after his son had fallen in the Yom Kippur War, Goldfarb was invited to speak at the kibbutz's annual Holocaust Day memorial event. Thus the Hungarian underground acquired a foothold in the national discourse.

Until then, Govrin notes, "the hegemony belonged to the youth movements that founded Yad Mordechai [named for Mordecai Anielewicz, the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising] and Lohamei Hagetaot. Their appropriation [of the Holocaust narrative] allowed one story to be told – that of the armed uprising – and, without downplaying its value, its exclusivity and sloganizing had a price."

What need did a study of the history of the ceremonies fulfill?

Govrin: "The history of the commemorative events makes it possible to psychoanalyze society and see how everything passes through the filters of what was high on the agenda at a particular moment. For example, in a sketch for a memorial ceremony that he devised, writer Aharon Megged's approach was: 'Jews, defend yourselves with weapons.' And 'Let those who lack a weapon wield a hatchet.' As though it were actually possible. But three years after Bergen-Belsen comes the War of Independence, and there's no time to talk about the heroism of a woman who shared a slice of bread – fighters are needed. "Our project expands on the term 'heroism.' We list ways of standing firm and rebelling in the Holocaust: [There were] those who taught, those who prayed, whose who painted portraits of the people around them, those who documented the events. These are acts of heroism that are not necessarily armed."

Chen's study relates that in Israel's

early years, along with the kibbutz movements' ceremonies, there was also a state-sponsored commemoration held at the Chamber of the Holocaust – Israel's first Holocaust museum – on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, attended by the religious affairs minister and representatives of the Chief Rabbinate. Some 20,000 people were present at the religiously oriented ceremony in 1951. Among the items on display there are bars of soap said to have been made from human remains, and desecrated prayer shawls. Over time, graphic visual aids of this kind have been removed from the mainstream ceremonies.

For her part, Govrin maintains, however, that there has been no essential change in what she calls the stimuli of memory: "Transmitting memory as it's done in the Auschwitz Museum, for example, which focuses on the annihilation process, is passive-obsessive, and the result is that the people who were in the camp are not 'experienced' – only the processes, the killing industry, the shoes that remained, the eyeglasses. The death camps are monuments to evil, in which the only occupation was with the spectacle of death, with agonies. I find that somewhat perverse, pornographic.

"In the Holocaust, there were multiple stages of the collapse of worlds, which do not necessarily come together at the moment of entry into the gas chamber. The obsession with memory brought about a situation in which only the hard core is touched, as though there were no feelings."

Maybe the right way is to try to be rid of the obsession, instead of looking for other paths for it.

"Obsessions don't disappear, they only look for new ways to manifest themselves. I think that part of the inner violence that is inherent in our society is connected with the fact that the memory of the Holocaust remains unresolved and has not reached a cathartic stage. If we do not deconstruct that memory into something that is rooted in life, through which growth is possible, we will stay stuck.

"Seventy years after the war, we have reached a stage at which it is possible to cut the Gordian knot between memory and the moments of violence and the boiling point of the horror, and find ways to process it. Like the neurological and psychological process of post-trauma: Come up with a structure for the exigency and then vest it with meaning."

How does one vest it with meaning?

Participants in the 2013 March of the Living, in Auschwitz. "We situated the evil in Poland, in the camps, and we removed Germany from the picture," says Govrin. *AP*

"By coping with what is relevant for the present. Coping with contemporary manifestations of evil, unmitigated conformism, obeying immoral orders, racism and exclusionism. For example, the group met with [African] refugees and asylum seekers. That's a discussion definitely worth holding: how we, as children of Holocaust survivors, treat them. Our aim is to wrest Holocaust Day from the glorification of annihilation and consider what we can take from it for the future, what meanings it possesses. To break with the fixation of worshiping death."

The narrative unravels

The Van Leer group decided as a matter of principle not to include any Nazi-related texts in the program. Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels and the rest are even absent from the chapter on evil. The aim is to strip Nazism of its concrete, historical trappings and to present it as a warning signal that is capable of altering its form at every time and in every place.

The other components of the Van Leer ceremony are in dialogue with familiar texts and earlier traditions, most of which consisted of a set presentation containing a series of fixed rituals – lowering of the flag, a siren, lighting a memorial torch, recitation of the funeral prayer "*El maleh rahamim*" ("God, full of mercy") and the singing of the national anthem – punctuated by readings and songs.

The school ceremonies, too, possess a clear moral-ideological thrust. Their aim is to underscore the importance of the State of Israel by drawing a connection between the victims and the Jewish national revival.

According to Chen's study, a series of security events in the late 1960s and the early 1970s – the War of Attrition, the hijacking of the Sabena plane in Lod Airport, the Yom Kippur War, the massacre of schoolchildren in Ma'alot – caused the heroism narrative to unravel somewhat.

Chen: "The feeling of helplessness in the face of terrorism and war made it possible for people to develop identification with those who were 'just survivors,' who did not necessarily take part in any uprising, who simply survived in horrific conditions, and even with those who went 'like sheep to the slaughter.' We begin to see a certain change in the school ceremonies. They become a little more personal and denote [new categories of people] as heroes, such as a little girl who was very attached to her doll."

Since the start of the high-school visits to Auschwitz, in 1987, the Holocaust Day ceremony in the schools has become only a small part of the ceremonial wrapping, whose highlight is the trip itself.

"The ceremony in Poland no longer talks only about the Holocaust survivors but also gives expression to what I, Lior, experience inwardly as I go through Auschwitz. By now, it's no longer all that clear whether it's a ceremony to mark Holocaust Day, or a ceremony to mark the trip to Poland," Chen remarks sarcastically.

Govrin's critique of the "Poland industry" is more substantive. "We situated the evil in Poland, in the camps, and we removed Germany from the picture. Germany has become synonymous with a good time. Instead of going to Berlin, and coping with the Germans, with the culture that collapsed, we go automatically to the places of martyrology.

"In my generation," she adds (Govrin was born in 1950), "we did not make organized trips to Poland. I went alone. I will never forget that after Auschwitz my immediate urge was to go to a party I'd been invited to. So I completely understand the high-school kids who go back to the hotel after the visits to the camps and drink."

"People have to unwind, feel life, feel the body, not sit around all day with a memorial candle. I'm from the hard core: Until the age of 12, I didn't even know that my mother 'was in the Holocaust' and was connected to that school ceremony. Nor was I raised in the approach that one needs to seize the horror. I believe that beneath the outer layer of unease and repression, beneath what is formulated and declaimed and memorized, amazing energies exist. It's time to let them burst forth."