



# OUT OF THE DARK: THE EMOTIONAL LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST

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*A child was on his hands and knees searching under the street light. A passing policeman became curious and asked the child what he'd lost. 'My house keys' replied the distressed child. The policeman joined the search. After some time he asked the child where he'd dropped them. The child pointed down the street a hundred metres away. 'Why are you looking for them here?' The child responded, 'It's too dark to look there'.*

This exhibition will confront and surprise some visitors, whether they have experienced the Holocaust or not, and visitors may experience a mixture of unfamiliar emotions. The works are arranged to emphasise the special relationship between parents who experienced the trauma of the Holocaust and their children, the second generation. They both confirm and extend the observation of Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel that 'If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony'.<sup>1</sup>

The Holocaust reverberates through generations of perpetrators, survivors, inciters and witnesses, entangling them in a range of historical, religious, ethical, moral, legal and psychological conundrums. Driven by Nazi ideology, the perpetrators – ordinary men and women – implemented Hitler's agenda for the Final Solution. As Bernard Schlink, author of the novel *The Reader* and retired judge, has observed:

[what remains] both historically unique and persistently disturbing about the Holocaust is that Germany, with its cultural heritage and place among civilised nations, was capable of those kinds of atrocities. It elicits troubling questions: if the ice of a

culturally-advanced civilisation upon which one fancied oneself safely standing was in fact so thin at that time, then how safe is the ice we live upon today? ... Has the ice grown thicker with time or has the passage of time only allowed us to forget how thin it really is?<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition teaches us that the Holocaust imprinted life-long changes on both adult and child survivors as well as on the second and third generations. The late Professor Judith Kestenberg has explained the psychological process of transposition, whereby parental trauma imprints 'as if' experiences through invisible moments, so that the traumatic reactions of the parents shape the next generation's consciousness.<sup>3</sup> This was the experience of Eva Hoffman, a child of survivors, who recalled the 'torn, incoherent character of those first communications about the Holocaust':

... they remained compressed, packed, sharp. I suppose the inassimilable character of the experiences they referred to was expressed – and passed on – through this form. For it was precisely the indigestibility of these utterances, their fearful weight of densely packed feelings, as much as any specific content, that I took in as a child.<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Reading Pictures*, the distinguished writer Alberto Manguel puts this view about the resonance of works of art:

[The] image of a work of art exists somewhere between perceptions: between that which the painter has imagined and that which the painter has put on the board; between that which we can name and that which the painter's contemporaries could name; between what we remember and what we learn; between the acquired common vocabulary of a social world





and a deeper vocabulary of ancestral and private symbols ... [a painting] may seem to us lost in an abyss of misunderstanding or, if we prefer, a vast no-man's abyss of multiple interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

This exhibition offers another view: that personal moments of trauma reach beyond ordinary darkness and that the visual testimony of trauma conveys the intensity of double darkness. We appreciate this intensity only gradually when, as we immerse ourselves in moments of transformation, previously vanished and invisible realities become tangible and visible. Looking at these artworks, our vision slowly adjusts to clues, auras and traces emerging from slender gaps, from spaces in the enveloping double darkness.

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**T**he images and objects, and indeed the exhibition's physical layout, suggest a dimension beyond any one person's whole-of-life experience. They encompass the two-generational consciousness of parents and children, and they embody the struggle of both generations to accommodate their mutual incomprehension of the Holocaust's emotional legacy.

Visitors familiar with war art might assume that the works in this exhibition reflect the claim of German artist Otto Dix that war art is a form of exorcism. Or they might accept Betty Churcher's view of Holocaust art, expressed in relation to Bernard Slawik, that his work reflects a need 'to lay his personal ghosts to rest through the cathartic act of drawing [which] was stronger even than the fear of death.'<sup>6</sup>

18

However, motives other than exorcism and catharsis have emerged from comments made by the artists contributing to this exhibition, who speak of the need to explore, to search for lost relationships with people and places. Why do survivors persist with this search in the dark, decades afterwards? I suggest that the answer lies in the notion of preciousness. For what is more precious than to reconnect to memories of lost families and homes that have shaped our identities and defined who we have become?

Yet another motivation is the survivor's impulse to provide a visual testimony to counter the conspiracy of silence. More recently, this testimony serves to confront the trivialising and fictionalising of past trauma that takes its most extreme form in the pseudohistory of Holocaust denial.

Visitors who seek to understand the relationship between the survivors and the second generation as expressed in these artworks may profit from Michael Rothberg's definition of traumatic realism as applied to literature:

traumatic realism is an attempt to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture. Because it seeks both to construct access to a previously unknowable object and to instruct an audience in how to approach that object, the stakes for traumatic realism are both epistemological and pedagogical.<sup>7</sup>

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The assumption that Holocaust survivors should retain their pre-trauma range of emotions after surviving massive trauma is flawed. I choose these words carefully as my mother is a survivor of, among other concentration camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was a teenager in 1944 when, unknowingly, she witnessed her mother and sister murdered in those gas chambers. Many veterans of the Holocaust like my mother went on to recreate their emotional lives, regulated by trauma's legacy. Others could not.

One reason that survivors and their families struggled for decades to come to terms with their losses was the 'conspiracy of silence'. Survivors' experiences were denied. Precisely for this reason, some visitors to this exhibition may experience profound surprises. As they look at the artworks some may experience, for the first time, a mirroring effect and see reflections of their hidden emotions.

Such fleeting moments may be transformative, as both artists and visitors encounter their psychological vanishing points through the image. They have the power to reconnect the person to an invisible reality, to shed light into a double darkness. I know that my aunt Anne Handelsmann-Braun discovered parts of herself during just such a creative process:

*At the time I thought of this drawing as a self-portrait, but as time went by it took on more meaning. At times I saw it as my childhood self, with my mother during the Holocaust. At other times I saw it as myself with my children and grandchildren. Often I see the child protecting the adult. One thing is certain: this work is the outcome of both the creativity of the child and the experience of the adult.<sup>8</sup>*



Anne Handelsmann-Braun, *The Embrace*, 2007  
dry point print, 56 x 38 cm

Several contributors to this exhibition took part in art groups run and recorded by Carmella Grynberg and Tamara Blacher. As they recaptured moments of Holocaust experience of segregation, stigmatisation, concealment, round-ups, mass shootings, deportations, slave labour, concentration camps, torture, medical experimentations and murder, each transformed into an 'artist-turned-beholder' and experienced 'being seen being heard'. One group





member, 'N', commented that 'I have been carrying the image for 53 years and wanted to get it out' and said that having 'entered the picture, it was no longer something separate'. The group leaders added that 'she stated that she felt she was actually back in the ghetto'.<sup>9</sup>

Here I need to make a critical distinction between two forms of experience. Walter Benjamin termed *Erlebnis* that fleeting sense of living a moment in time, and *Erfahrung* a contextual experience of living that moment historically. From a psychological perspective, this distinction allows differentiation between art as representation and as enactment.

Enactment has been described as powerful experiences within or between individuals where 'overt manifestations' of deep-seated emotional patterns of behaviour are relived without conscious awareness.<sup>10</sup> While the concept of representation is necessary to explain 'N's image-making after 53 years, it is not sufficient to account for her feeling that she entered the picture 'no longer something separate'. In that unguarded, timeless moment she enacted that experience. Through her artistic process she entered a space for enactment, located as a shifting borderland of energy flow, a sliver of disconnection between her physical and psychological self. Unlike disengaging in a physical space with boundaries, say leaving one room for another, 'N' traversed an aura sheer beyond measurement by even the most sensitive gauge. Once breached, this aura becomes her *memento mori*, a darkness enveloping another darkness. These numbed states of being, variously defined as absence, silence, emptiness, lacking or abyss, compose her double darkness.

The artworks in this exhibition decode many such 'absent' emotions and disconnections that have

persisted for decades, indeed generations, in the domain of what I have called the exiled self.<sup>11</sup> Current neuroscience illuminates how experiences may be processed through art.<sup>12</sup> The process of artistic creativity has provided the survivors of trauma with second chances to rekindle exiled emotions.

So what is the relationship between these artistic works, trauma and testimony? Art as visual testimony seems to have the power to reconnect parts of our lost visceral centrality. Such repair – the illumination of double darkness – transforms our sense of who we are as artists or viewers. We emerge from the dark to life.

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What messages can we take away from this exhibition? Through a unique partnership between the Cunningham Dax Collection and the Jewish Holocaust Centre these artworks offer visitors a new level of awareness of the generational effects, nearly seven decades later, of a massive psychological trauma that is still raw and palpable. Through this experience visitors may better appreciate the emotional legacy of other atrocities, such as the Armenian, Bosnian, Cambodian and Rwandan genocides. In time, when the Holocaust passes from living memory, testimonies in art and literature will enable future generations of students, teachers and professional groups to bear witness to invisible emotions. That is a profound legacy of massive psychological trauma.

We hope this exhibition will inspire visitors to reflect on the risks about which recent history teaches us – the risks implicit in Bernard Schlink's image of thin ice as seeming to be all that separates civilised behaviour from genocide.

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I am grateful to friends, colleagues and family, especially to Alice Halasz whose continued family conversation about the legacy of her Holocaust experiences inspires my ongoing research.

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