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The Ha-Ha Holocaust: Exploring Levity Amidst the Ruins and Beyond in Testimony, Literature and Film

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Comparative Literature

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THE HA-HA HOLOCAUST:
EXPLORING LEVITY AMIDST THE RUINS AND BEYOND
IN TESTIMONY, LITERATURE AND FILM

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Aviva Atlani

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Jewish humour sheds a crude light on the social, political, and historical realities of the Holocaust. Paradoxically, contentiously, doses of levity during this period were very much a reality, and even a psychological necessity. The purpose of my thesis is to explore the historical, social, and political ramifications of such laughter provoking manifestations. In doing so, the nuances which are found within the laughter of the ghettos, the transit camps, and the concentration camps are highlighted. Furthermore, some of these jokes, and their subsequent variations, reappear within the discourse of children of survivors. The dissertation explores how some of these children use humour to navigate the horrors that their parents experienced. By doing so, parent-child divisions are both highlighted and bridged. Moreover, while classic characters of Yiddish folklore disappeared during the Holocaust, their resurgence within fictional, quasi-comical Holocaust and post-Holocaust settings, bridges a cultural schism. The reappearance of the *dybbuk*, of the *schlemiel*, and of the Chelmites becomes as damning as it is healing. Finally, even the notion of memory is called into question, particularly within popular culture. Humour highlights both the absurdity and the reality, which permeates such a dialogue. While there is little room for political correctness, issues of memory must be addressed and veiling them within a comedic context heightens the relevance while diminishing the threat of repeating or forgetting the Holocaust. In the end, extensive research suggests that the types of levity found within testimonies, (auto)biographies, documentaries, films, graphic novels, fictional prose, television shows and specials act as a psychological and historical portal into the past and the present.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Jewish humour, comedy, jokes, levity, testimony, second-generation survivors, memory, Hitler.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family members, of blessed memory,
whose laughter was forever silenced.

Julianna LOCK ROSENBERGER (1862-1944) – great-great-grandmother

Béla (Dov Ber) ROSENBERGER (1864-1944) – great-great-grandfather

Heléna ALT JUNGREISZ (1875-1944) – great-grandaunt

Gizella ALT SCHISCHA (1881-1942) – great-grandaunt

Flóra ALT HIRSCH (1883-1942) – great-grandaunt

Irma ALT LOWINGER (1887-1942) – great-grandaunt

Rebeka (Rivka) GROSZ DEUTSCH (1869-1942) – great-great-grandmother

Szeréna (Shaindl) DEUTSCH LOWY (1890-1944) – great-grandaunt

Sára DEUTSCH BRAND (1893-1944) – great-grandaunt

Hanna DEUTSCH FRIED (1894-1942) – great-grandaunt

Dávid DEUTSCH (1897-1942) – great-granduncle

Lenke (Lea) DEUTSCH GOLDFINGER (1897-1944) – great-grandaunt

Mózes (Moshe Elazar) EISENBERGER (1881-1944) – great-grandfather

Sámuel (Shmuel) EISENBERGER (1883-1944) – great-granduncle

Henrik (Chaim) EISENBERGER (1885-1944) – great-granduncle

Benjámin (Binyomin) EISENBERGER (1891-1944) – great-granduncle

Irén (Nesha) EISENBERGER LEOVICS (1911-1944) – grandaunt

Herman (Aharon Tzvi) EISENBERGER (1913-1944) – granduncle

Ignác (Yitzchak) EISENBERGER (1920-1944) – granduncle

Lipót (Menachem Aryeh) EISENBERGER (1925-1944) – granduncle

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INTRODUCTION

Making a Case for Laughter within the Context of the Holocaust and Beyond

While humour, laughter, or comedy can generally be viewed as either positive or negative, the Judaic point of view regards it as *a priori* neutral. In *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*, Arthur Asa Berger, when recalling the story of Isaac’s birth announcement and later his binding, reaches several telling conclusions. The first is that both Sarah and Abraham laugh upon hearing the news that she will be with child; so he will be called Isaac [Yitzchak], meaning laughter. Thus, “we have at one of the most important points in Jewish history, from the union of Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews, a strong association between laughter and the Jewish people” (34). Furthermore, in his metaphoric reading of Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac episode), Berger concludes that “[l]aughter is not to be killed, but maintained. Abraham is not to sacrifice ‘laughter’ but preserve it, and so he sacrifices a ram, the first ‘stand in,’ providentially caught in a thicket, instead [of his son]” (34). When used for sacred purposes, laughter or the comedic connects this world to the Heavens.¹ The Talmud (tractate Shabbat 30b) states that before commencing his lessons addressed to scholars, Rabba used to say a joking word [מילתא דבדיחותא], and the scholars were amused. After that he sat in dread [אימתא] and began his lesson (qtd. in Boyarin 9).² Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch explains that Rabba began with humour in order to open up the minds of his students and make them able to receive the lessons of the *Torah*. Even though levity “passes quickly into a state of awe and dread” (Boyarin

¹ Sarah Blacher Cohen proves that numerous instances of laughter are present in the Torah and the Talmud. Please refer to her introductory chapter, “The Varieties of Jewish Humor,” in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* for specific examples.

² Religious historian Daniel Boyarin uses this passage to prove that the Bavli Talmud “invokes the same structural opposition between the comic (*mitla debdihuta*) and [the] solemn (*’ēmta* = literally “fear”) with which Plato is working” (9).

11), the fact that this text incorporates humour implies that rigid gravitas is offset by levity. According to Niddoh 23a, Jeremiah would purposely ask foolish questions so that his teacher, Zera, would smile. In another Talmudic tractate, Ta'anit 22a, the prophet Elijah is said to have proclaimed that those who bring laughter to others will be rewarded in the world to come. Rabbi Dovidl of Dinov believed that “all humorous stories contained G-d’s truth” (Dorinson 448). And in her discussion of laughter and catastrophe, in regards to the connection between the books of *Eikhah* and *Esther*, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes:

What is particularly relevant in this context is that both the lamentational *and* the comic are linked to the cataclysmic — and that both are reflexively concerned with language and writing in the face of catastrophe: *Lamentations* and its attendant rites privilege literary (as opposed to literal) representations of catastrophe; *Esther* and its attendant rites privilege the comic and the carnivalesque. (289)

Furthermore, by quoting the *Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations* (Section 5, passage 19) in which four Rabbis – Gamliel, Eleazar b. Azariah, Joshua, and Akiba – respond to the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezrahi points to an element of optimistic and redemptive “play” which results *in response to* the disaster. According to the text:

[... They] were coming up to Jerusalem, and when they reached Mount Scopus they rent their garments [as a sign of mourning]. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They fell a-weeping, but R. Akiba laughed. They said to him, “Akiba, you always surprise us. We weep and you are merry!” He replied to them, “Wherefore are you weeping?” They answered, “Shall we not weep that from a place of which it is written, *And the common man that draweth nigh shall be put to death* (Num. I, 51), a fox emerges, and concerning it the verse is fulfilled, *for the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, foxes walk upon it*?” He said to them: “For that reason I am merry. Behold, it states, *And I will take unto Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah* (Isa. VIII, 2). Now what connection has Uriah with Zechariah? Uriah lived in the time of the first Temple while Zechariah lived in the time of the second Temple! But what did Uriah say? *Thus saith the L-rd of hosts: Zion shall*

be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps (Jer. XXVI, 18). What did Zechariah say? There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem, every man with his staff for every age (Zech. VIII, 4); and it continues, And the broad places of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the broad thereof (ibid. 5). The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'Behold I have these two witnesses, and if the words of Uriah are fulfilled, the words of Zechariah will be fulfilled; and if the words of Uriah prove vain the words of Zechariah will prove vain.' I rejoiced because the words of Uriah have been fulfilled and in the future the words of Zechariah will be fulfilled." Thereupon in these terms did they address him: "Akiba, you have consoled us..." (qtd. in Ezrahi 290-1)

Crucial in this passage is not the act of destruction or its details, but rather the response to it. While three rabbis sob, one rabbi is merry, even cheerful; the word *mesahek*, which characterizes his response in the text, could also encapsulate within it the act of laughing (Ezrahi 291). Thus, it is not the tears that are of interest but rather the space provided for reinterpreting destruction. In this and in other biblical and midrashic examples, humour is shown to be a comforting and legitimate response to devastation: laughter is infused with redemptive powers and allows for imagining both alternate histories and soothing reinterpretations. These examples could also provide alternatives to the standard response to the Holocaust, thus creating a space for both tears and laughter.

To bring in the further support of political theory, in his discussion regarding the notion of state and the sovereign, found in *Political Theology*, German political philosopher and theorist Carl Schmitt insists that, in times of exception, "the state remains, whereas law recedes" (PT 12). Within the framework of exception, "the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind" (*Ibid.*). He further writes, this time in *The Concept of the Political*, that "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (26) and that, "[i]n its entirety the state as an organized political entity decides for itself the friend-

enemy distinction” (30). This distinction of friend-enemy when placed within the concentration camps becomes convoluted for the prisoners themselves become not a community, but rather, a “political entity” (37). The combination of this duality with a new juristic sense during the Third Reich allowed for the creation of concentration camps. As such, one could suggest that the concentration camps become a topographical result of Schmitt’s discussion regarding the fusion between affairs of the state and social matters. The camps themselves become a state of exception within the State of Exception that the National-Socialism represented in the 1930s and 40s.

Combining this duality with the perverted notion that the innocent are guilty for simply existing, the inmates of the concentration camps, for the most part, become an exception to the exception: in this inverted mimeticism, they are able to preserve their “inner man” and this by means of humour. While it is the sovereign “who decide[s] on the exception” (*PT* 5), political jokes, cabarets, and humour in general rebel against that exception and create a new friend-enemy distinction. The greatest example of this can be seen in relation to the inmates of these concentration camps who join together not only against the State (the Nazis), but against the Nazi project of turning men into non-men (or “put the inner man to work, make him productive,” as Stalin used to joke). If, as Schmitt believes, “[t]he state as the decisive political entity possesses an enormous power: the possibility of waging war and thereby publicly disposing of the lives of men” (*Concept* 46), then humour rejects both the ideological and the political and becomes an exception to the exception. The most notable instances of this are jokes related to the *Muselmänner*³.

³ According to his testimony, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levy observed that:

Known as the living-dead of the concentration camps, this group was despised by all, including the other inmates, because they served as a reminder of the consequences of not being able to negotiate with one's surroundings. Doubly alienated, this group of inmates were ignored by the majority even though they were grotesquely captivating. They not only incurred the derision of fellow prisoners; they also incurred the wrath of the guards as they, being unable to work, were deemed useless. One way of dealing with their abject condition was to ignore it; another was to make fun of it. For instance, Aleksander Kulisiewicz, a political prisoner in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, composed fifty-four songs while incarcerated, one of which was the satirical, "Muselmann – Kippensammler." This song and its subsequent performance

vividly evoke[s] his encounter with a camp Muselmann, an emaciated inmate who had lost the will to live. According to Kulisiewicz, such prisoners were sent to *Stehkommando*, where they were forced to stand for hours on end in the latrine as punishment for no longer being able to work. Kulisiewicz first sang "Muselmann" for his friends in Cell Block 65 toward the end of July 1940. (Like Kulisiewicz, the protagonist of "Muselmann" was a political prisoner whose uniform, as noted in the song, was branded with a "red triangle badge.")⁴

To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death [...] (90)

Giorgio Agamben believes that, "[t]he *Muselmann* is not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman" (55). For an extensive etymological examination of this term, see the chapter "The Muselmann" in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, 41-86.

⁴ <http://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/music/detail.php?content=muselmann>

The Polish song, which Kulisiewicz (1940-43) describes as a “tragic parody,” was sung to a tune adapted from the “circus tunes ‘Szanghai’ and ‘Zulejka’” and was, in later performances, accompanied by

a bizarre would-be ‘Muselmann dance,’ improvising on wobbly legs a one-step Lambeth Walk, and a boisterous ‘Cossack dance.’ As he relates: *The scene was intended to look pitiful. At hop, hop! hi-ho!, the madness became more pronounced: knee-bends, flapping elbows, high-pitched squeals of yippee, yahoo! At the words I’m dancing!, a Muselmann-like oblivion was depicted by an angelically idiotic expression that suddenly contracted into a look of utter despair. The singer then returned to the pandemonium of the camp: a Muselmann slowly sinking from a crouch to a kneeling position, head hung as if severed, a sob caught in his throat. For the finale, he stopped moving entirely, as if unconscious.*⁵

Kulisiewicz explains that the inspiration for the song stemmed from the time he spent as a circus performer:

I would lie down on the sawdust, like a corpse, while the boss would beat me on the head with an inflated rubber club. I’d then get up whistling, out of the blue, “Czardasz Montiego,” and afterward a simply idiotic, unrefined couplet called “Szanghai” (Shanghai) would begin. Later, in 1940, when in Sachsenhausen, I once again put on a “clown’s costume”, this time a tragic version of it. I was obsessed with that circus song. I thought to myself, the camp is some sort of dark, perverted circus of sadists and miscreants. But here they don’t hit you with inflated rubber clubs. Fellow prisoners looked like striped clowns, on whom an entire menagerie was unleashed. There was no stardust, only cold dirt. No one had to *pretend* to be dead.⁶

Acting as both a testament to what was witnessed as well as affirming life, this song rebels against an imposed state of exception. Within the concentration camp setting, these witticisms not only indicate that a new friend-enemy grouping has been established, but they also attest to the spirit and strength of the *bios*.⁷ Moreover, by singing about a

⁵ <http://www.reelingwrithing.com/holocaust/pack/116-121.pdf>

⁶ http://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/music/popup/muselmann_origin.php

⁷ In his *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben distinguishes between two terms which mean life – *zoē* “expresse[s] the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” and *bios* which “indicate[s] the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (9).

prisoner such as himself, Kulisiewicz could be paying homage to this nameless individual who has been stripped of all dignity. By laughing, even if it is a sinister, tragic laughter, life, the past, a human being, are being commemorated and affirmed.

At an extreme, Holocaust laughter is a commemorative laughter: one also laughs on behalf of those who can laugh no more. This “borrowed laughter,” tied to sadness in a complex figure that dominates its own contradiction, doubles itself up, as if an echo of itself that cannot be recognized as such from the outside. Holocaust laughter admits no outsiders; it is “naturally” jealous. The Holocaust is, certainly, no laughing matter; but Holocaust laughter replicates the inner logic of the Hebrew Bible covenant: in the mutual election of God and Israel, no “other” is admitted – no witness, no critic, and certainly no prison guard. Things Jewish happen only in no man’s land, the land forever crossed by the Wandering Jew, dreamt of as the Promised Land by the many, the land whose non-physical existence grants the Bible the role of “land” – as both a site of the living and a ground in which the Jews are buried. The question of the symbolic land is crucial in Holocaust humour. An easier way of understanding this, albeit not an easy one, is by exploring the status of the Muselmann.

The Muselmann, as both mud and ground, is the figure opposite to the German myth of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil); it is so because the German ‘sacred ground,’ or the soil soaked in the blood of the forefathers has both a physical and a symbolic presence that comes to the forefront of Nazi propaganda. On the contrary, the Muselmann cannot be avowed as the ‘Jewish ground’ but, like an inverted bible, acts as the imaginary land, opposite to the Promised One.⁸ While the Germans were trying, via war, to enlarge

⁸ It becomes the sacred imaginary space which offers salvation as seen in the pivotal moment in *Train de vie* in which the train is stationary, safe from the raging battle, yet positioned in the middle of it.

the German vital space (*Lebensraum*), by soaking in blood other lands, the hellish ground provided by the Muselmann tends to shrink to zero. As Agamben explains, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

Hitler's 'peopleless space' instead designates a fundamental biopolitical intensity, an intensity that can persist in every space and through which people pass into populations and populations pass into *Muselmänner*. *Volkloser Raum*, [an empty space of people] in other words, names the driving force of the camp understood as biopolitical machine that, once established in a determinate geographical space, transforms into an absolute biopolitical space both *Lebensraum* and *Todesraum*, in which life transcends every assignable biopolitical identity. Death, at this point, is a simple epiphenomenon. (85-86)

Thus, humour makes the link between two kinds of survival; escaping the Kapos' bullet and dodging a Muselmann's becoming. One can surmise that the ultimate laughter in the camps is borrowed from the Muselmann, as the one who absolutely laughs no more. This humour provides a state of exception that Schmitt's exception cannot touch.

Within the context of the thesis, it is my intention to examine where and how humour fits into tragedy for, without it, the next generation becomes stuck in Planet Auschwitz; something that may be acceptable for history but not acceptable for life. Ezrahi suggests that, "[t]he impulse to stay inside of or as close as possible to the site of trauma comes as a response not only to the psychic numbing caused by over-exposure to images of horror but also to the pervasive sense of art as a form of betrayal" (296). However, without art and its productive imagination, and without popular culture, the Holocaust runs the danger of remaining hieratic ("as sacred, unchanged memory"), fossilized in public discourse, or forgotten. According to Ilan Aivars:

The reservations regarding the discourse of art are very serious, but their final conclusions are unacceptable. For if indeed art is inadequate to deal with the Holocaust in any meaningful manner—intellectually stimulating or ethically constructing—then we face a colossal cultural scandal. Those

concerned with the aesthetic distortions of the extreme historical experience cannot call for the elimination of one of the major spheres of expression, which could and should play a critical role in imprinting the Holocaust's significance on the post-Auschwitz mind. At the same time, from an artistic point of view the claim that Auschwitz is beyond art means a terrible admission that our culture has been incurably maimed by the Nazi horrors. For even if we don't share today the romantic exaltation of art as the most important human activity and of the artist as the legislative spirit of cultural development, we must still recognize art to be the most important act of personal and social-examination, as a crucial means of communication of thoughts and sharing of human experiences, and as the special mirror of the moods and limits of the human spirit and its major concerns in any given period. (Avisar viii)

“We are,” in the words of Jewish philosopher and Rabbi, Emil Fackenheim, “bidden to turn present and future life into death, as the price of remembering death at Auschwitz. And we are forbidden to affirm present and future life, as the price of forgetting Auschwitz” (294). Yet, according to his 614th commandment, “*the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory*” (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the inclusion of humour in relation (and retaliation) to the Holocaust may be understood as a testament, not of death, but of life, of survival and of continuation. In his testimony, survivor and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl writes that, “[t]he attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living” (64). And if “it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent” (64), then should it not be possible to practice this very same art once the danger has been overcome? The tension persists between past and present, between commemorating loss and affirming life, between looking to the past in an attempt not to forget it in the future. “In contrast to officially sanctioned mourning rituals and state commemorations, Holocaust humor provides an alternative way to memorize the horrors of the past, one that stresses the need

to work through mourning via laughter” (L. Kaplan 344). Thus, while we remember the catastrophe through prayers, monuments, tributes and candles, we pay tribute to the humanity through instances of resistance, including moments of laughter. Hitler, in his desire to exterminate the Jews, tried to stifle their laughter as well. As such, laughter can be seen as both a *tikkun* and a testament. Its presence, both during the war and after, indicates a stubborn desire to hold on to humanity and overcome barbarism in the face of despair.

Decades after the Holocaust, that right to laugh and to recognize this laughter not only remains necessary but becomes more crucial in the desire to affirm life. In the introduction to his *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin posits that laughter, and essentially all farce, undermines that which is official (4), by “offer[ing] a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (6). What Bakhtin is talking about is a universal structure. As such, laughter, within the context of the Holocaust and after, is both liberation from and rebellion against the prevailing social order.

While many Holocaust survivors talk about the guilt of survival, humour associated with the Holocaust may allow one to step outside of guilt and trauma. Humour, and by extension the carnivalesque, undermines the tragedy associated with the Holocaust and, in that rebellion, acknowledges the trauma while affirming life. It is not just the survivors, but all, who need to laugh, because the lack of laughter indicates that the incongruities of life have overwhelmed the desire to live; laughter does not *bios* fall into *zoē*, but keeps life above mere survival in the proximity of death. A prime example of this dichotomy can be found in a *Seinfeld* episode, “The Raincoats” (Season 5, Episode

18), in which Jerry is being reprimanded by his parents, Helen and Morty, over his sacrilegious behaviour of making out with his girlfriend during the movie *Schindler's*

List:

HELEN: How could you?

JERRY: How could I what?

HELEN: You were making out during Schindler's List?

JERRY: What? No.

MORTY: Don't lie Jerry.

JERRY: (turns) Newman.

HELEN: How could you do such a thing?

JERRY: I couldn't help it. We hadn't been alone together in a long time and we just kinda started up a little during the coming attractions and the next thing we know, the war was over.

(Morty and Helen both sigh and turn to go back to what they were doing; Phone rings)⁹

To survive is a feat, but to live again is a true victory. And this is why shows, such as Jerry Seinfeld's "Schindler's List" episode become both jarring and palliative, for he asserts that the here and now takes precedence. If, according to Ecclesiastes, "There is a time for everything ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance," then perhaps, now is the time to make out during a too-standard Holocaust movie and laugh about it. For without being able to question and poke fun at notions of propriety in relation to the Holocaust, the event itself becomes a dangerously untouchable, holy event; a trauma that will continuously re-inscribe itself without ever having to happen. An event from which there can be neither healing nor redemption. An event from which there is no exit. An event from which there is no escape. Unlike popular culture which provides a space for history to move forward, past the trauma, history and historians reject this forward trajectory, and in so doing, remain entrenched within the horror – offering little hope for any type of redemption.

⁹ <http://www.seinology.com/scripts/script-82and83.shtml>

In discussing the Holocaust in relation to popular culture, historian Alvin H. Rosenfeld suggests that history is at odds with the literary and cultural dissemination of this overwhelming catastrophe. The Holocaust has, in his words, “become a volatile area of contending images, interpretations, historical-claims and counter-claims” (7). Disturbed by the direction taken by Holocaust, by Holocaust studies, by Holocaust remembrance, by comparative victimization, he asks, “What stage of historical consciousness have we reached when, as one is amazed to learn, children of Holocaust survivors can bring themselves to crack jokes like the following: “Why did Hitler commit suicide? Because he got the gas bill.” (Rosenfeld 11)¹⁰

The answer he provides is perhaps a predictable one, “the mass murder of millions of innocent people is trivialized and vulgarized, a catastrophic history, bloody to its core, is lightened of its historical burden and gives up the sense of scandal that necessarily should attend it” (11). But what if he was to reformulate this argument by the following: through the “domestication of the Holocaust” (12) the horrors will not be forgotten. Scholar Sybil Milton, in his discussion of Holocaust memorials, writes:

Since Holocaust monuments and memorials are not built in a political or geographical vacuum, they also invariably reflect selected aspects of national style, religious tradition, public expectation, and artistic skill. The absence of commonly accepted definitions of the Holocaust and the lack of consensus about appropriate rituals and symbols for its victims have in turn provided additional ground for volatile confrontations. (8)

These words can reflect not only memorials but also novels and films. Historian Lawrence Baron believes that movies (and, if I may add, novels), are “expressions of a

¹⁰ In 1951, journalist Irving Kristol asserted that, “[t]oo many corpses obstruct the comic perspective” (432) for he could not believe that humour could “survive a life of sheer nihilism” (433). (Although he tried to prove that Jewish humour was dead, I question if he would still reach the same conclusion now, 70 years after the *Shoah*.) In contrast to this position, Antonin J. Obrdlik posits that “the purest type of ironical humor is born out of sad experiences accompanied by grief and sorrow” (715).

particular mind-set, place, and era in history” (viii). Thus, the argument can be made that these cultural products are markers not only of history but also of current socio-political ideologies and a constantly changing understanding of historical events.¹¹ However, even if this were true, the fear, and as such the taboo, exists “that the subversive and anarchic power of laughter – even if registered as laughter directed against the oppressor – would make a mockery of these sanctification methods” (L. Kaplan 344).

Furthermore, by placing a moral judgement upon the idea of laughter, the historian becomes at odds with the psychologist. According to clinical psychologist Harvey Mindess, in certain instances the need for laughter “clash[es] with our image of ourselves as good people” (73). As such, “[s]ick humor, comedies of despair, and cynical wit in general” (70) are not “allied to goodness” (73) and do not serve as a moral compass but serve rather as psychological barometer in recognizing and giving voice to the need for some relief.

Thus, there exists a schism not only within ourselves between, as suggested by Mindess, the desire to be good and the desire to be natural, but also between history and humanity, between art and “appropriate” representability. This division is acknowledged by many as, by their very nature, “[w]orks of art are... in a different ontological status than authentic experience, which means that the transformation from history to art is not an act of direct transmittance but actually a translation into a different order of human experience” (Avisar viii). While history captures and frames the horrors, while the witnesses bear the scars of time, how is the next generation and the one after that, how

¹¹ Throughout his work, Lawrence Baron inserts multiple graphs indicating a shift in representation based on subject matter, country, theme and type. For instance, in his chapter discussing humour in relation to the Holocaust, Baron indicates that of all the Holocaust films produced between the years 1945-1959, only 3.6% (4) were comedic, whereas between the years 1990-1999, Holocaust comedies increased to 11.7% (26).

are they to maintain the “the sense of scandal” (Rosenfeld 11)? From a psychological point of view, it is a dreadful burden that many in this generation willingly and consciously reject. The notion of scandal encompasses both a moral and a legal outrage, the intensity of that outrage diminishes as the years progress and as more travesties unfold.

Though I too take issue to the use of Holocaust language and images in a non-Holocaust context, though I too am uneasy with comparative victimization, I firmly believe that examining humour and laughter within the context of the Holocaust and beyond is short of a moral imperative – one of many when dealing with this catastrophe. In his 1987 “Holocaust Laughter,” Terrence Des Pres outlines what the limits of “respectable study” (277) are and states that, “fictions informing the field of Holocaust study force upon us a set of rules, a decorum, a sort of Holocaust etiquette...” (278). And though many feel that, “the comic attitude is irreverent, a mode that belittles or denies the moral severity of the subject itself” (279), Des Pres believes that certain “comic works of art, or works that include a comic element [...] give us laughter’s benefit without betraying our deeper convictions. They foster resilience and are life-affirming” (286). While Des Pres makes this assertion from a philosophical and literary point of view, sociologist Anna Pawełczyńska, an inmate of Auschwitz, affirms that the best chance for survival was incumbent upon retaining “inner freedom while outwardly adapting” (127); this included maintaining a sense of humour and finding things to laugh at. Though tragedy and comedy are often closely related, the relation between them is ironically found - according to anthropologists and folklorists Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild

-, in the word Auschwitz; “‘Au’ (‘ow’ as in pain), ‘schwitz’ (sweat), and ‘witz’ (joke)” (259).

My thesis is comprised of four parts: the first chapter is historical and attempts to prove that levity was present during different stages of the war and that laughter could still be heard – albeit softly and sparingly. In that same chapter, I examine fictional works that clearly delineate between fact and fiction. While these works may incorporate factual elements, they are definitely works of fiction. It is because of this important distinction that I was not inclined to include Jean-François Steiner’s 1966 text, *Treblinka*.

The second chapter engages not so much the question of survivors’ memory as that of the survival of memory. The Holocaust, its traumas and the duty to remember them is shared with the children of survivors. Yet, there exists no prescribed mode of telling, no compulsory questions to ask and no forced answers. This chapter examines how these children process the heavy burden of past suffering, and especially how their responses are fraught with the tensions of an anguished laughter.

Unlike the first two chapters, which primarily deal with the Holocaust on a personal level, the third chapter stresses the literary and the aesthetic by focusing on traditional Yiddish characters and their resurgence in the wake of the Holocaust. In my attempt to suggest that the reappearance of these iconic figures is a way to bridge the cultural abyss and the geographic ruptures created by the Holocaust, I am tackling the *dybbuk*, the *schlemiel*, and the inhabitants of Chelm as paradigmatic representatives of Jewish humour.

The fourth chapter engages the complicated and convoluted relationships between memory, politics, and the Holocaust. The reasons for this shift are too numerous and

complicated to discuss in detail here, but it must be said that they include extremism, the vilification of the State of Israel and, by extension, of the Jewish people as a whole, and by the usurping of both the term and the notion of the Holocaust to signify not just this catastrophic event but all injustices. Moreover, in the advent of other genocides, the Holocaust is no longer *the* moral barometer or *the* tragedy to befall a people; it is one of many. As such, my final chapter explores this notion and also focuses on the ways in which memory is evoked, perverted, maintained, and explored.

I have tried to preserve the integrity of this thesis by examining original works; only in a few instances did I use both a text and its subsequent film. I have also attempted to cut down on both pious repetition and facile fun; thus, missing from this corpus will be Leslie Epstein's parodic novel *King of the Jews* (1979), Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1997) and Jurek Becker's 1969 novel *Jacob the Liar*, which was twice turned into film (1975 and 1999).

While I do not believe that the works examined throughout this thesis weaken the historicity of the Holocaust, I trust that they raise questions regarding truth, artistic representability and the human spirit. Moreover, humour, in the context of the Holocaust and beyond, acts in direct defiance to the Hitler regime - as a revolt to the imposed state of exception. In his address to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, Adolf Hitler stated the following:

And one more thing I would like now to state on this day memorable perhaps not only for us Germans. I have often been a prophet in my life and was generally laughed at. During my struggle for power, the Jews primarily received with laughter my prophecies that I would someday assume the leadership of the state and thereby of the entire Volk and then, among many other things, achieve a solution of the Jewish problem. I suppose that meanwhile the then resounding laughter of Jewry in Germany is now choking in their throats.

Today I will be a prophet again: If international finance Jewry within Europe and abroad should succeed once more in plunging the peoples into a world war, then the consequence will be not the Bolshevization of the world and therewith a victory of Jewry, but on the contrary, the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe. (qtd. in Dawidowicz 106)¹²

The leading goal of my thesis is both academic and personal. In addition to proving that humour during the Holocaust and beyond is necessary, and in addition to exploring the psychological nuances found within the different types of humour, this thesis also acts as a revolt against imposed modes of dealing, remembering, and living within the shadow of the Holocaust. It offers an alternative to the tears and the despair. The celebration of humour counters the loss and the darkness and declares its victory over death, as Chaim A. Kaplan predicted in his diary entry dated August 15, 1940:

It is not for nothing that our ancestors coined the phrases: “Blessed be the L-rd day by day!” “And what one nation in the earth is like thy people Israel?” Who else could bear as we do the burden of terrible sufferings and torments and yet stand upright and tell jokes? Nerves of brass would snap.

Anyone besides the Jews would stumble and fall under the burden of torment. Some of them would lose their minds; some would take to their beds; some would seek alms from door to door. That is natural. But we are fortunate in that we disregard nature. There is no increase in the number of lunatics in Warsaw; if there is it is only because of an influx of them from the provincial cities. In general, laughter is evident. The youth goes on as always, busy with sports even when they are hungry.

A nation that can live in such terrible circumstances as these without losing its mind, without committing suicide—and which can still laugh—is

¹² Hitler appears to have been obsessed with Jewish laughter. Lucy S. Dawidowicz points out four instances in which Hitler vows to silence the laughter and, by extension, the lives of Jews: his speech to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939; then, on January 30, 1941 he said “...if the rest of the world would be plunged into a general war by Jewry, then the whole of Jewry would have finished playing its role in Europe! They may still laugh today at that, exactly as they laughed at my prophecies. The coming months and years will prove that I also saw correctly here” (110). And on September 30, 1942, Hitler stated, “I do not know if [the Jews] are still laughing also today, or if their laughter has not already been subsided. But I can also now only assert: Their laughter everywhere will subside” (111). And finally on November 8, 1942, Hitler declared that, “[o]f those who laughed then, countless ones no longer laugh today, and those who still laugh now will perhaps in a while also no longer do so” (111). While Hitler appears to have gotten his dates mixed up (in regards to which date he gave the speech at the Reichstag), his trajectory is clear - silencing the laughter means liquidating the Jew. Thus, Ron Rosenbaum sums up this correlation by concluding that “those who laughed are now having their murders measured out in the sound of their subsiding laughter by the very one they laughed at” (189).

sure of survival. Which will disappear first, Nazism or Judaism?
I am willing to bet! Nazism will go first! (182)

And it has. While the Nazi regime has long fallen and crumbled, laughter, especially Jewish laughter, has not only survived but also triumphed.

CHAPTER 1

A Mishmash of Theory, History, Testimony and Fiction

Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful;
and the end of mirth is heaviness.

Proverbs 14:13

In *La psychologie du rire* Ludovic Dugas writes:

Il n'est pas de fait plus banal et plus étudié que le rire; il n'en est pas qui ait eu le don de d'exciter davantage la curiosité du vulgaire et celle des philosophes; il n'en est pas sur lequel on ait recueilli plus d'observations et bâti plus de théories, et avec cela il n'en est pas qui demeure plus inexpliqué. On serait tenté de dire avec les sceptiques qu'il faut être content de ne pas chercher à savoir pourquoi on rit, d'autant que peut-être la réflexion tue le rire, et qu'il serait alors contradictoire qu'elle en découvrit les causes. (1)

Though it is not my intention to kill laughter, it is unfortunately necessary that, for this project, various theories and contexts of humour be examined as even an apparently simple joke can be quite complex. In addition to providing entertainment, “people also use verbal humor for other ends: to establish harmony or rapport, to ingratiate themselves, to lighten the mood when contentious issues are raised, and to soften the force of criticism” (Blake x). While these are the positive results of humour, humour also has a “negative side” as it can be used “to deride, to mock, to belittle, to stereotype” (xi). Moreover, humour and joking may, at times, appear to stand in contradiction to the subject in question as “a lot of jokes deal with bodily functions or unpleasant human experiences such as death, disease, dismemberment and disfiguration...” (*Ibid.*) As such, the issue of humour is both simple and complex – a joke is told and a person laughs. This correlation is established only when the speech act is coherent. Both the teller of the joke

and the audience must be, so to speak, on the same page. Content and context must mesh, otherwise, the joke gets lost, the punch line becomes discounted, and the teller is left waiting for, but not receiving, the “appropriate” response.¹³

According to Barry J. Blake, “satire aims to ridicule, to prick pretensions, to expose hypocrisy, to show that appearances can often be deceptive” (16), while parody is a comedic device that mocks its subjects by distorted imitation.¹⁴ He also includes the burlesque in his list of the humorous and complicates his categorical list by acknowledging that, “the term **burlesque** rivals parody and the two terms were to a great extent interchangeable, though burlesque perhaps tended to be used of mockery of a genre rather than of a particular work and was especially applied to theatrical parody” (18). Irony is defined as “the incongruity between the innocence or ignorance of a participant and the knowledge of the author or the audience” (19), and is closely associated with sarcasm, which is “more direct than irony and usually involves someone saying something that is the opposite of what is appropriate, often in a derisive or mocking tone” (21).

¹³ In his examination of humour within the context of the Holocaust, Michel Borwicz posits that even though written satires existed during this period:

[L]es textes publiés après la guerre ne peuvent donner l’idée du phénomène, pour la simple raison que la plupart des ouvrages du genre étaient destinés uniquement à un milieu donné, dans un moment donné. Traités, même par leurs auteurs, d’éphémérides, ils étaient moins que les autres conservés. Ceux d’entre eux qui ont survécu à l’occupation sont souvent « impubliables », les uns à cause de leur langage trop vert, les autres parce qu’ils font trop appel à la couleur et aux détails locaux ; ils ne peuvent être compris par un lecteur ignorant des faits divers locaux (197-198).

¹⁴ In *The Offensive Art*, Leonard Freedman points out that there are two styles of satire, “the Juvenalian – full of rage and disgust at universal corruption – and the Horatian – more mellow and amused, but not particularly appalled, by the follies of humankind” (2). Daniel Boyarin, in turn, distinguishes between two styles of satire – Horatian and Menippean. He explains that, “Menippean satire, also known as *spoudogeloion*, is a peculiar type of literature produced by and for intellectuals in which their own practices are both mocked and asserted at one and the same time” (26). As such, “Menippean satire is satire in the sense of *satyra*, a mixture of things that don’t belong together, of things that contradict each other, not as a censure of immorality as in the Horatian tradition” (27).

What is Jewish Humour?

Within these categories, the question of Jewish humour arises, for “[t]he Jew has the happy faculty of being able to perceive the grotesque and the ludicrous in the most tragic situations. He can laugh even in the face of death” (Richman xi). Described as “sardonic,” a Jewish joke, according to Jacob Richman, mixes humour and pathos for “[b]eneath the smile you can notice a tear” (xiv).¹⁵ Though countless examples of humour can be found in the Torah and the Talmud,¹⁶ each type has a different purpose. Henry Eilbirt writes, “[m]uch of Jewish humor deals with such ... negative facets of Jewish experience. Therefore it is wry, bitter, ironic. A common Yiddish phrase identifies it as *lichen mit yashtsherkes*, which means literally ‘laughing with lizards’ but is best translated as ‘laughing through tears’” (278).

According to *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, “Jewish humor is too rich and too diverse to be adequately described by a single generalization” (XX). Despite this prelude, the editors of this text do attempt to define this particular humour by offering the following pointers:¹⁷

- Jewish humor is usually substantive, it is *about* something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as food (noshing is sacred), family, business, anti-Semitism, wealth and its absence, health and survival. Jewish humor is also fascinated by the intricacies of the mind and by logic, and the short if elliptical path separating the rational from the absurd.

¹⁵ However, this response to tragedy is not solely Jewish. As Blake points out, there are “innumerable jokes about misfortune” as is proven by the joke “*Santa didn’t have time to visit Asia this year, he just gave them a giant wave*” referring to the 2004 tsunami in which 200,000 individuals were killed. In his list of mechanisms for humour, Henry Eilbirt states that “one of the most powerful mechanisms of all is *shock*” (34). These types of jokes deal with “forbidden topics” and they function by “*open[ing] up repressed feelings*” (35). Arthur Asa Berger calls this type the disaster joke, which is “an important genre of jokes that seem to spontaneously arise after [or during, depending on the duration of] major disasters...” (117)

¹⁶ According to Jacob Richman, the types of humour and wit which can be found in the Torah and Talmud include satire, sarcasm, parody, paronomasia (word play), riddles, practical jokes, masquerading, repartee and anecdotes.

¹⁷ Please note that the following bullets are direct quotations from the text pp xx-xxii.

- As social or religious commentary, Jewish humor can be sarcastic, complaining, resigned, or descriptive. Sometimes, the “point” of the humor is more powerful than the laugh it delivers, and for some of the jokes, the appropriate response is not laughter, but rather a bitter nod or a commiserating sigh of recognition. This didactic quality precludes laughing “for free,” as in slapstick humor, which derives its laughter from other people’s misfortunes.
- Jewish humor tends to be anti-authoritarian. It ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and kicks pomposity in the pants. It is strongly democratic, stressing the dignity and worth of the common folk.
- Jewish humor frequently has a critical edge which creates discomfort in making its point. Often its thrust is political – aimed at leaders and other authorities who cannot be criticized more directly [...] In general, Jewish humor characteristically deals with the conflict between the people and the power structure, whether that be the individual Jew within his community, the Jew facing the Gentile world, or the Jewish community in relation to the rest of humanity.
- Jewish humor mocks everyone - including G-d. It frequently satirizes religious personalities and institutions, as well as rituals and dogma. At the same time, it affirms religious traditions and practices, seeking new understanding of the differences between the holy and the mundane.

Avner Ziv believes that there are several core elements which can be found in

Jewish humour. They include an intellectual, a social, and an emotional dimension:

1. An intellectual dimension: a desire to distort the reality, to alter it and make it laughable (and thus less frightening and threatening). Reducing the awful reality into absurdity is a cognitive process by which one tries to make life more tolerable.
2. A social dimension: trying to maintain internal cohesiveness and identity. By comparing “us” with “them” it is possible to show that even if in reality “they” are stronger, “we” can still win, mainly by using our wits.
3. An emotional aspect: helping one to see oneself as one is, namely far from perfect. Making fun of some unsavory aspect of one’s behavior and personality might help in accepting them. It can even show that they are not so terrible: the proof—I can even laugh at them. Another emotional aspect related to self-disparagement is the sympathy one

earns from others, and being accepted is, and was for two thousand years, a serious problem for a wandering¹⁸ people.
(qtd. in Arthur Asa Berger 13-14)

Arthur Asa Berger concludes that the majority of Jewish jokes and humour (which can be split between Old World Jewish humour and New World Jewish humour, a distinction we will return to later), contain the following elements:

1. Religious content: “it deals with rabbis, G-d, Judaism, and its various practices and beliefs” which indicate “a preoccupation with Jewish identity and the dangers of assimilation” (23).
2. Jewish relations: between Jew and Jew, between Jew and non-Jew (23).
3. Psychological sensibility: “Jewish humor reflects what might be described as a Jewish mentality or sensibility tied to the Jewish religion and caused by Jewish marginality and the fact that Jews have been forced to wander all over the globe. Their sensibility tends to be very moral, concerned with social justice and democracy – though it is also quite absurd” (24).

On the other hand, the Jewish-German satirist, Alexander Moszkowski, quite simply defines Jewish humour, particularly the joke,¹⁹ by the following:

Ein jüdischer Witz
Mit jüdischim Akzent:
Was ein Goy nicht versteht
Und ein Jud immer schon kennt.
(qtd. in Reik 182)

A Jewish joke
With a Jewish accent
What a Goy doesn't understand
And which a Jew always already knows.

¹⁸ In his interpretation of Ziv, Arthur Asa Berger suggests that, “[t]his marginality of the Jews is... one of the major factors behind the development of the Jewish comic sensibility, a matter Ziv alludes to when he talks about Jews being a ‘wandering people’” (14).

¹⁹ Arthur Asa Berger’s definition of the joke is, “*a relatively brief narrative or story, meant to evoke mirth and laughter, with a punch line*” (25-26). But this type of a humour is more than a speech act – jokes, particularly the ones which “are intimately connected to the societies (or elements of societies) in which they are found” (27) act as a barometer to and a commentary upon the human condition.

For Sigmund Freud, Jewish humour tends to be masochistic, particularly self-mocking:

The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes [...] have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. [...] Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of people making fun to such a degree of its own character. (133)

The question then becomes, what is the value of such humiliating laughter? Sarah Blacher Cohen believes that:

Jewish humor, however, is not only based on the masochistic characteristics of the Jews expressed in their self-critical jokes. It has also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness. (4)

Thus, in addition to internal mocking and criticism, Jewish humour provides a psychological defence against unflattering perceptions and external vilification, allowing for “the maintenance of dignity in the face of persecution” (Kalman 177).

Mindess takes this notion one step further. He too agrees that Jewish laughter/or laughter of the oppressed liberates for it allows man “the capacity to picture his plight as part of the absurdity, the gross injustice of human affairs and in so doing to become a free, detached observer of fate” (49). Yet, particularly in relation to Jewish laughter, Mindess suggests that it not only indicates an “expanded perspective” but also an acceptance of “one’s deficiencies by frankly admitting and enjoying them” (*Ibid.*).²⁰

Similarly, Theodor Reik states that there is a sense of familiarity or intimacy that characterizes Jewish wit when, or perhaps especially when, this wit is aggressive:

²⁰ Though Mindess and many others put a very positive spin on Jewish humour in relation to hostility, the other reason that a Jew may mock himself and other Jews is not to enjoy the stereotype but to pre-empt it. Either way, this laughter acts as a type of protection from either real or imagined threats.

It will bewilder us that the aggression can solder together continuous and cruel criticism with an unmistakable affection for its maltreated object to form a united expression. That kind of aggression is painful. Yet it does not loosen the ties with the other person and it does not diminish the feeling of belongingness. It rather acknowledges the existence of these ties in the very manner of the attack and caricature. (190)

Though Reik suggests (by offering many anecdotes and jokes) that Jewish wit is used to bring Jews back together, “to restore a familiarity that threatens to get lost, to tighten again the bonds that begin to loosen” (193), what needs to be acknowledged is the position of the teller and of the listener, not only within a Jewish context as evidenced by the following witticism:

A Jew asks a friend from his school days to take him in. When the friend timidly admits he is too afraid, the Jew takes his leave, giving his friend a bottle of wine. ‘What’s this for?’ asks the friend. ‘That’s so you can later say in good conscience that you had an Oppenheimer concealed in your basement.’ (Herzog 212)

One such joke, depending on the characters, was recited by both the Jews in the Holocaust, and by the Russians under Communism:

The Gestapo is about to shoot some Jews when the commanding officer walks up to one of them and growls, ‘You almost look Aryan, so I’ll give you a chance. I wear a glass eye, but it’s not easy to tell. If you can guess which eye it is, I’ll let you go.’ Immediately the Jew answered, ‘The left one!’ ‘How did you know?’ asks the Gestapo commander. ‘It looks so human.’ (Herzog 209)

Another joke, which “speaks” not only to a Jewish audience but to all those individuals who are suffering from what Rudolph Herzog calls a “wounded national pride” (130), goes as follows:

After the annexation, a Nazi district leader visits a school in Linz, where the students have carefully rehearsed questions and answers. The district leader calls on little Seppl Ebesder: ‘Who is your father?’ ‘Adolf Hitler.’ ‘Who is your mother?’ ‘Greater Germany.’ ‘Very good! And what do you want to be when you grow up?’ ‘An orphan.’ (Herzog 130)

On the other hand, another effect or motivation of Jewish wit is to counter aggression or hostility. Though the wit itself drifts across eras and geographical areas, it carries information regarding particular times and places. For instance:

Levi and Hirsch bump into one another in the wilderness of the Sudan. Each one of them is carrying a heavy rifle and is leading a column of bearers. ‘How is it going,’ asks one. What are you doing here?’ ‘I’ve got an ivory carving shop in Alexandria, and to keep costs down, I shoot the elephants myself. And you?’ ‘Much the same. I’ve got a crocodile leather business in Port Said and am here hunting for crocs.’ ‘And what’s the story with our friend Simon?’ ‘Oh, he’s a real adventurer. He stayed in Berlin.’ (Herzog 86)

While Reik posits that Jewish wit is “an attempt at blasting holes from the ghetto-walls from within” (195), in the context of the Holocaust, it was used to both criticize and protect. Moreover, he believes that another element characteristic of Jewish wit is the “ability to make a joke out of suffering” (212). Unlike gallows humour, which allows for a “deliverance from a momentary emergency” (*Ibid.*), Jewish wit offers “a moment of truth in a permanent emergency [...] The social situation of Jewry makes misery the normal and commonplace condition; the Jew only makes a joke out of it, a joke that can awaken laughter, but is not merry” (*Ibid.*). An example of this wit can be found in Chaim A. Kaplan’s diary entry dated January 6, 1940: “The Jews joke that they no longer have to travel to Carlsbad, for the spa to come to them. Their weight has dropped, and their drawn, thin faces show poverty and privation” (97). Another witticism comes from Chaim Weizmann who quipped, “There are two sorts of countries in the world – those that want to expel the Jews and those that don’t want to admit them” (Rappoport 37).

Some believe that laughing without joy is not just a Jewish quality but exists in all cultures in which the subjects are victims of constant oppression. This conclusion is supported by Dan Ben-Amos:

Jewish humor is not inherently Jewish anymore; it is not an expression of the postulated ‘inheritance of psychic dispositions,’ but a reflection of certain given socio-economic environmental factors. Similar circumstances should produce the quality of self-ridicule in the humor of any other ethnic group. Thus, according to this social rather than psychological determinism, Jewish humor is not an expression of the genius of the Jewish people, but just a particular case of a general sociological principle. (117)

Interestingly, when it comes to humour – even with humour related to the Holocaust – many types of humour can be found resulting in various ends for a multitude of audiences.²¹ It is, however, important to keep in mind the words of humourist George Mikes who, in his own book on humour, writes:

I read, as is usual with philosophy, many brilliant statements and arguments but, in the end, knew no more about humour than at the outset. Most philosophers distinguish between wit, joke and humour – a perfectly legitimate distinction, but they write as if the three belonged to three different, hermetically sealed and strictly non-communicating departments. Having established this principle of segregation, they proceed to mix up three elements and it is often not clear which one they have in mind. It should also be remembered that humour is an utterly different problem for the philosopher, for the psychologist and for the literary essayist. (8)²²

Theories, Types, Nuances and Purposes

Neither scarcity nor exhaustiveness is registered when it comes to the theories regarding types of and purposes of humour, “a multifaceted phenomenon, so that no one

²¹ Joseph Dorinson puts forward the notion that throughout history, “the Jewish comic perspective ... seeks to restore balance, homeostasis... Although not usually a weapon for open combat, it has revolutionary potential—as Hitler must have realized when he first banned cabaret humor liberally spiced with Jewish flavor” (459). In *Scroll of Agony*, Chaim A. Kaplan testifies that, “[t]he legal destruction has darkened our world, but even this has become a subject for Jewish jokes. But this is gallows humor” (56). According to Steve Lipman, gallows humour or *Galgenhumor* “can be traced back to 1848 [and] describes the fatalistic wit of the condemned, the last quip before the inevitable meeting with the hangman, the guillotine, or the barrel of a rifle” (63). Freud explains that this sort of response indicates that the ego, “insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” (290).

²² For a comprehensive historical and philosophical analysis of humour see *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall, 1987.

theory satisfactorily explains or predicts all aspects” (Haig 9). The Macquarie Dictionary defines it such: “[t]he quality of being funny, the faculty of perceiving what is amusing or comical, or the faculty of expressing the amusing or comical” (qtd. in Haig 3). Humour, once broadly defined, can then be divided into several types – which do not necessarily function independently from one another – such as the Superiority Theory (whereby laughter is a result of feeling superior to another and tends to be ego based), the Incongruity Theory (which functions through absurdity or contradiction), the Surprise Theory (which “overlaps with incongruity, but simply focuses on sudden, unexpected events [...] that are experienced as a happy shock” (Rappoport 17), the Ambivalence Theory (in which laughter is a result of conflicting emotions), the Cognitive Theory (in which laughter, explains Leon Rappoport, can only be achieved or attained on the “condition that the audience has both the knowledge and information processing ability required to understand them”) (18), and the Release or Relief Theory (in which laughter is a result or a response to a tense or uncomfortable situation). Furthermore, within these theories, there exist different types of humour such as wit, satire, mirth, irony, sarcasm, parody, mimicry, cynicism, puns, riddles, banter, the sardonic, farce and practical jokes. Jon E. Roeckelein quotes *Webster’s* (1993) to highlight the nuances of some of the above terms:

Wit implies intellectual brilliance and quickness in perception combined with a gift for expressing ideas in an entertaining, often laughter provoking, pointed way, usually connoting the unexpected or apt turn of phrase or idea and often suggesting a certain brittle unfeelingness. *Humor*, in this comparison, can signify a disposition to see the ludicrous, comical, ridiculous, or absurd or to give it expression or can apply to the expression itself, often suggesting a generalness or a greater kindness or sympathy with human failings than does *wit*. *Irony* applies chiefly to a way of speaking or writing in which the meaning intended is contrary to that expressed on the surface, but in a more literary or dramatic sense it implies

a deeper perception of the discrepancies implicit in life and character or applies to the actual discrepancies applying frequently to a situation in which what results is the direct, often tragic, opposite of what was desired, intended, or worked for. *Sarcasm*, applies chiefly to a type of humor intended to cut or wound, often employing ridicule or bitter irony; *satire* can apply to any criticism or censure relying on exposure, often by irony and often subtle, of the ridiculous or absurd qualities of something; *repartee* sometimes still applied to a witty or clever retort, applies chiefly to the power or the art of replying quickly and with wit, humor, or, infrequently, sarcasm. (25)

In addition to which, Arthur Asa Berger suggests, in *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*, that there are “three ways to look at humor and its rewards” (6). The first, *Haha*, “represents an involuntary (though desired) response we make to jokes and other forms of humor that generate sudden laughter” (*Ibid.*). The second, *Ahah*, “suggests a kind of discovery through humor of some important insight. ‘Ahah’ is an inversion of ‘Haha,’ and the focus is not on a sudden burst of laughter (which may be connected to insult and aggression, for example) but on an epiphany, a sudden discovery of some relationship between things we had not see before” (*Ibid.*). It becomes about “Discovery and Pleasure.” The third response is an *Ah* which “represents a sense of relaxation, of well-being, of success, perhaps even a sense of triumph in some respect.” (*Ibid.*) Yet, despite these different responses, one does not always negate the other. Thus, all three rewards “may be found in the same joke or ‘text’ (to use the jargon of contemporary literary theory)” (6) as will be evidenced in the subsequent discussion of the Hitler salute.

Laughter during the Third Reich

In 1933, laughter came to an end as the Nazis felt that “jokes about the party and its leaders” were considered to be acts of treachery and “tellers of political jokes were

among the more than 5,000 sentenced to death by a ‘People’s Court’²³ meeting in closed session” (Freedman 96).²⁴ ²⁵ Rudolph Herzog offers the following statistics and makes a correlation between the number of death sentences given out and the shape of the war efforts emphasizing that, “[i]n 1942, the year in which it became clear that the fortunes of war would turn against Germany, the death toll increased tenfold” (169).²⁶

²³ Lipman explains that the court, “based in Berlin, was established to set quick verdicts against accused traitors. The panel of two professional judges and five other members – from the ranks of the army, the SS, and Party officials – met in closed session in the chambers of Berlin’s law courts, in a room decorated with three large swastikas and busts of Hitler and Frederick the Great” (34).

²⁴ Lipman points out that many other oppressive regimes such as Stalinist Russia have attempted “to suppress critical humor” (26). As Egon Larsen explains, “[j]okes may not be able to topple a dictatorial regime, but there is one important factor which adds to the effectiveness of political humor: the oppressors have no defense against it. If they try to fight back they appear only more ridiculous” (37). As such, humour can topple the toughest regime in two ways, which are somewhat mutually involved: the humour of the people, which erodes, with time, the seriousness of the masters who, in attempting not to be ridiculed, become inattentive to matters at hand; and then the humour – or irony – of history, which brings down any such totalitarian concoction.

²⁵ In fact, there were even jokes about the penalty for telling jokes: “What is fratricide? If Hermann Goering slaughters a pig. What is suicide? If someone tells this joke in public” (Lipman 52). Interestingly, Herzog maintains that joking about the punishment and penalty for telling jokes suggests that the fear and consequence of punishment was an “effective deterrent to free speech – including free humorous speech” (65). While there is nothing “Jewish” about that joke, there is a Jewish version of that joke as recorded in S. Felix Mendelsohn’s compilation entitled *Let Laughter Ring*. In his version, the joke is told by a Jew to a Jew:

Simon: Well, what’s new today?

Nathan: At last I have something new. I have just heard a brand new Nazi joke. What do I get for telling it?

Simon: Don’t you know by this time? Six months in a concentration camp (109).

²⁶ In the conclusion of his essay, Antonin J. Obrdlik raises a very interesting point, namely: the reaction to [gallows humour, and by extension all genres of humour] on the part of the oppressors tells a long story about the actual strength of the dictators: if they can afford to ignore it, they are strong; if they react wildly, with anger, striking their victims with severe reprisals and punishment, they are not sure of themselves, no matter how much they display their might on the surface (716).

Humour can then be used as an instrument of power against established power in that humour, by its very nature, rebels against commands, obedience, and the status quo. It acts as a non-violent method for both protecting the ego and resisting an imposed state of exception. In Poland, for instance, “the Polish Underground movement considered jokes and caricatures deriding the Hitler regime to be ‘minor sabotage’” (Blumental 50). Thus, those who tell jokes, and those who listen to them, engage in acts of solidarity not against violence but against power, and in so doing assert their own power for, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “[p]ower springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow” (19). In her “Reflections on Violence,” Arendt states that, “[r]ule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost” (20) which explains the above statistical data as “[v]iolence appears when power is in jeopardy” (21). Though some equate violence with a life-force and creativity, creativity may also come from power in that it actively counters violence. For instance, “[t]he Yiddish Leftist Underground newspaper in the Warsaw Ghetto, *Morgen Freiheit*, published a column under the heading ‘A Political Joke’ in almost every single issue during 1941-1942” (Blumental 51).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Death sentences</i>
1937	32
1938	17
1939	36
1940	53
1941	102
1942	1192
1943	1662
1944	2079

However, Herzog makes one more important distinction which is that the consequence for telling a joke is not dependent upon the joke itself but also depends upon the person who is telling the joke and, “the defendant’s attitude toward National Socialism” (172) as proven by the following:

Two pictures, one of Hitler and one of Göring, are hanging on the wall of a school with a space left in the middle. A teacher asks, “What should we use to fill the gap?” A pupil stands up and says, “A picture of Jesus. The Bible says that he was nailed between two criminals.” (172)

In 1933, telling this joke was considered to be a misdemeanour, yet, when a variation of this joke was told in 1944, the *Volksgerichtshof* or this “governing body” sentenced Josef Müller, a Catholic Priest, to death for telling two of his parishioners the following joke about a dying German soldier’s request: “Place a picture of Hitler on one side of me, and a picture of Goering on the other side. That way I can die like Jesus between two thieves” (Lipman 34). Herzog insists that, “[w]hat lead to the death sentence was not the content of the joke, but the biography of the priest who told it” (173) as Joseph Müller, in the position of clergyman, “often warned his pupils against chasing after ‘spectres,’ that is, extreme political positions” (174). Either way, joke telling became increasingly dangerous and deadly for both the speaker and the listener.

While political jokes still existed they were, for the most part, “whispered ones” (99), for “no anti-Nazi satire appeared in print in Germany” between 1933 and 1945

(Freedman 98).²⁷ And, in a sense, this leading group was correct in fearing jokes for, according to Richard A. Grunberger, “[a]nti-Nazi humour was a low-key expression of resistance (or at least disapproval) and a form of therapy” (331). Moreover, Egon Larsen, in his discussion of jokes during the Hitler years, suggests that early political jokes, especially the ones dealing with what I call mixed identity or message: propped up the political and intellectual confidence of many Germans that the whole Hitler nightmare could not last very long, by demonstrating that the country still contained millions of Anti-fascists, many of them in brown and black uniforms” (45).²⁸

According to Tim Kirk, “[j]okes were told, songs were sung; and the leaders of the party and state from Hitler down to local functionaries, were cursed and maligned... Hitler was variously a dog, a swindler, a megalomaniac, an idiot, a scoundrel (*ein Lausbub*) and – significantly – queer or Jewish” (qtd. in Lipman 182). Jokes to this effect go as follows:

Hitler and his chauffeur are driving through the country, when there’s a crash. They’ve run over a chicken. Hitler says to his chauffeur: “I’ll tell the farmer. I’m the Führer. He’ll understand.” Two minutes later, Hitler comes up rubbing his behind from where the farmer kicked him in the ass. The two men drive on, and a short time later there’s another crash. This time they’ve run over a pig. Hitler tells his chauffeur: “You go in this time.” The chauffeur obeys, but it’s an hour before he comes out of the farmer’s house, and when he does, he’s drunk and is carrying a basket full

²⁷ Interestingly, the word for such a political joke was *Flüsterwitz*, literally meaning whisper joke. The idea of being silenced is turned into a joke but the need for a silent joke or a whispered joke becomes in itself a joke:

Five citizens of the Reich sit in a railway station. One sighs, another clasps his hands, a third groans, and a fourth sits with tears streaming down his face. Says the fifth: ‘Be careful gentlemen. It’s not wise to discuss politics in public’ (Benton 35).

²⁸ Though quite lengthy one of the best jokes deals with “a tramp who needs a roof over his head”: [H]e goes up to a policeman, shouts ‘*Rot Front!*’ and raises his clenched fist. The policeman pretends not to have heard or seen anything and continues on his beat. A column of stormtroopers comes marching along, and the tramp repeats his performance. One of the SA men breaks rank and tells him off: ‘Are you nuts, mate? There, in the third row, we’ve got a Nazi!’ The frustrated tramp decides to spend the night in a Tube station. As he walks down, an SS officer comes up. ‘*Rot Front!*’, the tramp shouts again. ‘Idiot,’ hisses the SS man, ‘Can’t you see I’m in uniform?’ (Larsen 45)

of sausages and other gifts. Hitler can't believe his eyes. "What did you tell the farmer"? he asks. The chauffeur says: "Nothing special. I just said, 'Heil Hitler, the swine is dead.'" (Herzog 182-183)²⁹

A cabaret comedian in the Aryan part of Warsaw told the audience: 'Now I know how to count in German.'

He puts four piglets on the stage, and counts:

'Einer! Zweier! Dreier! Führer!'

He was thrown in jail for insulting Hitler.

Six months later, considered rehabilitated, he returned to the cabaret.

'Now,' he said, 'I indeed know how to count in German.'

Again he puts the four piglets on the stage, and begins counting. 'Einer! Zweier!

Dreier!'

As he reached the fourth piglet, he waved a finger at him and said, 'Uh uh! You won't catch me this time.' (Lipman 75)

Political jokes were primarily a form of non-violent resistance, a veiled manner to tell the truth about the political situation, to emphasize the hypocrisy and weaknesses of the leaders, and a way to rebel against their domination.³⁰ In the above examples, the heroic status of Hitler is undermined – after all, "the spirit of humor is incompatible with both hero worship and fear" (Morreall 102). Humour then becomes a corrosive element which tarnishes the glorious image that Hitler and the Reich tried so hard, even too hard, to create and maintain.

From Wandering Jokes to Stationary Sketches

Similar to political jokes in terms of content, cabaret humour tended to be political, critical of the greater political situation, and rebellious of an imposed state of

²⁹ Another (shorter) variation of that joke is quoted in Lipman:

While driving through the country, Hitler's car runs over a dog. His chauffeur stops the car, looks at the dog, and pronounces him dead. Hitler instructs the driver to inform the farmer of the accident and recompense him for the loss. The chauffeur enters the farmer's house, identifies himself, and announces, "The dog is dead."

"Wonderful," responds the farmer. "Let's drink to that good news." (89)

³⁰ While the negative side of jokes, in this case political jokes, does exist, "they are refreshingly economical" and function as "a window on to the unlovely backside of dictatorships" (Benton 38). They act as an antithesis to political double-speak, for jokes are "incorruptible, and true even when false..." (39)

violent exception. In 1933, according to the desire of Joseph Goebbels, the *Reichskulturkammer* (Chamber of Culture), was created. Composed of seven divisions, the task of the Chamber was “to direct the work of creative artists and to stifle any deviation from the Party’s ‘absolute airtight control’” (Lipman 115). During the Third Reich the political cabarets were, to put it mildly, leading a “precarious existence” (Lipman 113). Opened one day and closed the next, “[t]heir intimate halls afforded the country’s independent-minded, often-left-leaning citizens a brief respite from Reich propaganda” (113). A mixture of musical satire and biting political commentary, each cabaret “developed its own identity” (Lipman 114). Critical of Nazi ideology, “the wit of the conférenciers emerged as a survival tactic in the early days of Hitler’s power” (Appignanesi 153). Illustrations of such humour include the following:

An SA man baiting a Jew: ‘Tell me Jew, who’s responsible for the fact that we lost the war?’

The Jew: ‘The Jewish generals, of course.’

SA man: ‘Good, good.’ (Then reflecting a little)... ‘But we didn’t have any Jewish generals.’

The Jew: ‘Not us – the others!’ (*Ibid.*)

A conférencier, raising his arm to the level of a ‘Heil’, looks up at it questioningly: ‘That’s how high we are in shit...’ (*Ibid.*)

One conférencier, Fritz Grünbaum, created a cabaret sketch entitled “The Vote,” in which

[a] dozen worthy men in frock coats stand on a stage devoid of décor. In front of them, an unmistakable figure with a toothbrush moustache, speechifies: ‘Party members, we are coming to a decision over the important issue of authorization for full emergency powers. Those for, stand up. Those against, sit down.’ The gentlemen in frock coats look around searchingly and, since there are no seats, remain standing. Short pause. Then the figure of the Führer states loudly: ‘Party members, the motion is unanimously accepted.’ (Appignanesi 156)

Interned in Dauchau, Grünbaum died in 1939.

Another famous conférencier of that epoch, Werner Finck, worked in *Die Katakombe*, which “emphasized the battle against the increasing power of the National Socialists and their apocalyptic ideology of racial purity, and exposed the nature of internment, along with other aspects of Nazi terror” (Appignanesi 158). Its name, Finck explained, was chosen by the fact that, “[t]wo thousand years ago, the catacombs provided a place of refuge for the first Christians; today it is a place of refuge for the last” (qtd. in Appignanesi 159). Though the troupe was “completely Aryan,” the content was anti-Nazi and subversive. Herzog documents the following sketch:

According to a report by a contemporary, Carl Schulz, the Berlin cabaret artist Werner Finck performed a Hitler sketch [...] It took courage to mount the stage before the eyes of the secret police and informants who might have been in the audience. Schulz describes the scene:

After the Nazis came to power, a decree was issued that a picture of Hitler must be hung in all the government offices. Willi Schaeffer [the director of the cabaret] carried a picture onto the stage so that the audience could only see the back. Everyone in the audience, though, thought, ‘That’s a picture of Hitler.’ Suddenly Schaeffer stumbled and almost dropped it. Finck hurried up to him, calling out, ‘Don’t topple, don’t topple!’ – which was greeted with uproarious laughter. (23)

Michael Schwartz, of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote that, “Finck’s technique of the half-sentence was even more than a stylistic whim, it was an expression of a trancelike understanding with those who listened to him [...] It belongs to the entity of great satire that leaves the censor helpless in the end” (qtd. in Lipman 117).

Both Grunberger and Steve Lipman agree that Finck’s most famous skit involved Finck going to the tailor to get measured for a suit. However, there is some discrepancy in the retelling of the performance. In Grunberger’s description the dialogue is the following:

TAILOR: What sort of jacket should it be? With chevrons and stripes?

FINCK: You mean a straitjacket?

TAILOR: How would you like your pockets?

FINCK: Wide open – in the current fashion.

Grunberger continues to explain that, “[a]s Finck kept his right arm extended in a gesture resembling the Nazi salute, the tailor took sleeve measurements, mumbling, ‘[n]ineteen-thirty-three – suspended rights’ [...]” (371) In Lipman’s version, the following exchange takes place:

Einreihig oder zweireihig? (single-breasted or double-breasted?), the tailor would inquire.

Das ist mir gleich. Nur nicht diesreihig. (It’s all the same to me. Just not this-breasted.) (119-120)

Making sure to pronounce the last word as closely to the word *Reich* as possible, the insult is implied not stated. Regardless of the exact version, the importance of this performance is that humour is used to undermine and reject prevailing political ideologies.

The reception of Finck’s routine was applauded by some and disdained by others. During one routine when Werner Finck was called a “lousy Yid” by an audience member, he retorted, “I’m afraid you are mistaken. I only look this intelligent.” (qtd. in Appignanesi 159) While his technique was known as “the suggestive pause: It made the point of attack invisible” (qtd. in Lipman 116) some of his remarks were quite pointed. During another performance, he asked Goebbels’ henchmen, “Gentlemen, am I speaking too quickly? Are you following me? Or shall I follow you? (qtd. in Appignanesi 159) He commented upon the pact between the Church and the Nazis by stating that, “[t]hey will probably have to divide the swastika³¹ [...] The Catholics will have the cross [...] and the hooks will be the Nazis” (qtd. in Lipman 119). Finck’s humour proved to be too sharp

³¹ *Hakenkreuz* (cross of hooks) is the German word for Swastika.

and, in May 1935, *Die Katakombe* was shut down. Sent to the Esterwegen concentration camp, Finck was “allowed to stage an evening of cabaret while inside” (Herzog 72):

Comrades, we are going to try to cheer you up, and our sense of humor will help us in this endeavor, although the phrase *gallows humor* has never seemed so logical and appropriate. The external circumstances are exactly in our favor. We need only to take a look at the barbed wire fences, so high and full of electricity. Just like your expectations.

And then there are the watchtowers that monitor our every move. The guards have machine guns. But machine guns won't intimidate us, comrades. They just have barrels of guns, whereas we are going to have barrels of laughs.

You may be surprised at how upbeat and cheerful we are. Well, comrades, there are good reasons for this. It's been a long time since we were in Berlin. But every time we appeared there, we felt uneasy. We were afraid we'd get sent to the concentration camps. Now that fear is gone. We're already here. (*Ibid.*)

Karl Valentin, another famous comedian/cabaretist, truly challenged Hitler in one of his skits. According to Larsen's account, “[h]e walked briskly onto the stage, raised his arm in the Nazi salute and shouted ‘Heil’- then scratched his head and confessed, ‘Dammit, now I've forgotten the name!’” (46). The Nazi salute, a unifying symbol of power and acceptance, is perverted and criticized; and the *Reich* is rejected.³²

³² This joke has also been attributed to Werner Finck (Allert 62). Over the years, the Nazi salute has been parodied by many artists. The purpose for the mockery has shifted. For instance, both The Three Stooges' 1940 short film *You Nazty Spy* and Charlie Chaplin's 1940 *The Great Dictator* pervert the salute in order to generate laughs while mobilizing anti-Nazi sentiment among American audiences. In the 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, an ex-Nazi scientist struggles to control his mechanical right arm which involuntarily tries to salute. Though a parody, the character is based on Nazi scientist Werner von Braun and the film comments upon the fickleness of politics: American leaders were less concerned about who was a Nazi then with the question, “How can we stop the Communists?” In Mel Brooks' 1968 film, *The Producers*, humour arises when a flaming Hitler appears on stage saying “Heil Myself.” Thus, questions of sexuality and politics come into the fore. In a more recent example, a German artist, Ottmar Hoerl, placed over 1,000 gnomes, painted black and posed in the Hitler salute, in the town square of the Bavarian city of Straubing. According to him, the purpose of the instalment is to raise awareness about totalitarianism without breaking the law or being offensive. And finally, an interactive art exhibit, in Blackpool's Grundy Art Gallery, installed a nine-hole miniature golf course in which one hole, created by Jake and Dinos Chapman, “features a statue of Adolph Hitler with a golf hole in it, and when you sink your putt, Hitler's arm goes up in a Heil Hitler salute” (Shear). Though not intended to offend, depending on context, the use of the Hitler greeting provides a forum for deliberation, rebellion, laughter, and reflection.

Moreover, while jokes against Hitler, the Nazis, and some National-Socialist markers were told in numerous European countries, some jokes still kept their regional distinction. For instance, “[t]he Dutch had their own anti-Nazi gags, such as raising their right arms and calling out, ‘Heil Rembrandt!’ When challenged by the Nazis they would say, ‘Why shouldn’t we hail one of our painters – don’t you do it too?’” (Larsen 51). And in the region of Alsace-Lorraine, “‘Heil Hitler’ might thus become *Ein Liter* (‘One liter’)³³ or *Drei Liter* (‘Three liters’)” (Allert 44). Tilman Allert concludes, “[j]okes about the Nazi salute also allowed Germans to reconnect with ‘normal’ German conventions; the absurd linguistic combinations or substitutions involving either or both elements of the new greeting helped to renormalize old forms” (44). One must admit that some of these routines, mocking the regime along with certain jokes, have what Freud calls “a certain length of life” (151). When reading and reciting jokes,

il ne faut jamais oublier l’importance du contexte : dans une société libre, une blague est un luxe, alors qu’elles sont souvent la dernière possibilité d’exprimer une critique dans les sociétés totalitaires. Dans les camps, une simple irrévérence, comme la transformation de *Mein Kampf* en *Mein Krampf* [*Ma crampe*], de Hitler en « Horowitz » ou de Mussolini en « Moshe Ber », pouvait provoquer une joie immense, alors qu’à notre époque, elle nous arrache tout juste un sourire. (Lauterwein 82)

Thus, while certain witticisms no longer have the humorous and the political bite that they originally did, they are still important from a social, political and historical perspective.³⁴

The importance of cabarets as a whole was that the performers relied on satire to undermine, mock, question, and pick at the prevailing social conventions and order. In

³³ In his memoir, *Tomi: A Childhood under the Nazis*, Tomi Ungerer recalls that “[i]n Alsace we said ‘Ein Liter’ (*one liter*) instead of ‘Heil Hitler.’ It sounds the same” (138).

³⁴ An example of such a joke is presented by Emmanuel Ringelblum: “Heard this joke: Someone comes to a fortune teller in a chauffeur’s uniform and asks to have his fortune told. He is told: ‘You’ll run out of gasoline, your axle will break, and your driver’s license will be taken away’” (110).

fact, had they not had an “unmeasurable effect upon the consciousness of the people” (Appignanesi 125), then the cabaret writers would not have “numbered among the first of Nazi terror” (126). The result of the joke, and by extension the cabaret, was that,

[a] joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke *will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*. I will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation ... (Freud 122-123)

While much of the cabaret humour was critical of the Reich, the humour tended to be a conflation of slapstick, double-entendres and punning. Even after the cabarets were officially closed, the performers did not stop performing, not even while imprisoned in the ghettos and the concentration camps.

Heil Hitler – Hehe, Hoho, Haha!

By 1933, the Hitler salute became the official German greeting; “*heil*, [which] means not only ‘hail,’ but also ‘heal,’ ‘cure,’ ‘mend,’ ‘close,’ or ‘remedy’ – superseded all prior forms of greeting and took over the familiar spaces of communication” (Allert 6). In fact, it became such a significant political and psychological gesture that those individuals who opposed or refused to use this new greeting were “prosecuted in special courts and if convicted were fined or sent to concentration camps” (15). Its aim was to eliminate class distinctions and regional differences while creating a militarized type of unity (53). Ironically, while the Hitler salute was initially “used to gauge adherence to the

new regime” (15), the more that it was used, the less telling it became as a political barometer.³⁵

Although the origin of this greeting/gesture is murky, for it is a take on the *saluto romano*, attempts to academically legitimize it began in 1933 resulting in satirical laughter:

*The Old Germanic tribesmen on both banks of the Rhine
Lay spread out bearskins, drinking their wine,
When, with German greeting, a Roman entered their midst,
“Heil Hitler, you Germans, ‘tis I – Tacitus.”* (Allert 58)

The perversion of this greeting indicated political leanings, allegiances and mistrust in the Führer’s powers.

One joke that made the rounds in the Third Reich has someone being greeted on the street with ‘Heil Hitler’ and responding “What’s he got to do with it?” Another familiar standby was to pretend to understand the word *heil* as the imperative form of the transitive verb ‘to heal’ and answer the greeting with, ‘Am I a doctor?’ or *Heil du ihn!* (‘Heal him yourself!’) (Allert 44)

Thus, for those against Hitler and the new regime, it became a symbol to be mocked; sometimes though it is hard to tell. In his book, *The Hitler Salute*, Allert presents two photos. The first is ambiguous in nature: it is a picture “of vacationers saluting a sand sculpture of Hitler at a popular beach resort on the island of Sylt,” (15) while the second is clearly satirical as it captures “Frankfurt [jazz] musician Emil Mangelsdorff and friends from the Hot Club performing the ‘Swing Heil’” (16). As such, while certain images are

³⁵ There were some individuals who tried to avoid using the salute without offending the regime. In Munich, for instance, in order to avoid saluting the *Fedherrnhalle*, “the site of Hitler’s attempted Beer Hall Putsch of 1923,” citizens would take the *Viscardigasse*, a narrow street which is until this day referred to as “Shirkers’ Alley” (Allert 59).

unquestionably parodic in nature, others are more ambiguous, depending upon interpretation and reference point.³⁶

According to Lipman's research, some German "citizens flaunted their contempt for the regime with greetings of *Morjen* and *Wiedasehen*, Berlin dialect for *Guten Morgen* and *Auf Wiedersehen*, instead of the *de rigueur* 'Heil Hitler.' When the salute was unavoidable, it [in the words of Heinz Kuehn] 'resembled the gesture with which one brushes a fly off his forehead and the words become indistinct in a sudden fit of coughing'" (66). Moreover, in his book, *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany*, Herzog provides another joke which combines punning and parody in regards to the salute.³⁷ It goes as follows:

A drunkard passes a vendor on the street who is crying "*Heilkräuter!*" ("Medicinal herbs"). "*Heil Kräuter?*" he ponders. "We must have a new government." (40)³⁸

There are many jokes about the Hitler salute. All are based on puns and incongruity. For example:

Hitler was to inspect an asylum. The inmates were carefully coached. As Hitler walked down the line, each lunatic gave the Nazi salute and shouted, "Heil Hitler!" But the last man stood stolidly at attention. "Why don't you salute me?" shouted Hitler. "Your Excellency is making a mistake," came the polite reply. "I am the keeper." (Lipman 88)

³⁶ The same ambiguity can be found in Traubert Petter's vaudeville performance in which his chimpanzee, Moritz, ends the show by giving the Hitler salute. Initially, party members took this as a compliment, but then, in 1934, a memo was "sent to local police stations by the Ministerial Division 1A of the Hessian State Government [stating that...] 'Displays of this sort make a mockery of the German greeting and are liable to provoke public disorder [...] in case of violations, to see to it that said animals are destroyed'" (Allert 60). Guilty of defaming the gesture, Petter was sent to the Russian Front in 1940 and "[m]iraculously, both he and his monkey survived" (Allert 104).

³⁷ According to Herzog, "[t]he salute and the words 'Heil Hitler' were a litmus test by which Nazis could find out whether someone was an ally or a potential enemy" (39). Allert agrees although he confounds the obvious by stating that, "[a] German who enthusiastically gave the Nazi salute in public [...] could still be staunchly opposed to it within the privacy of his home" (9).

³⁸ A variation of this joke was told by Valentin, a cabaret performer: "It's lucky that Hitler's last name wasn't 'Kräuter,' [...] otherwise we'd have to go around yelling *Heilkräuter* ['medicinal herbs']" (Allert 44).

And finally:

First doctor on meeting his colleague: “Heil Hitler.”
 Second doctor: “Why don’t you do it?” (Shaw 25)³⁹

A joke which mocks both the Nazi salute and Hitler himself goes as follows:

*Why does Hitler have such a funny way of doing the Hitler greeting?
 After the war, he wants to become a waiter.* (Herzog 189)

Another joke regarding the Nazi salute can be found in Rabbi Shimon Huberband’s *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious Life in Poland during the Holocaust*. A mixture of genres – diary, eyewitness account and autobiography – this text records the life and death of a community. In the second part of this work, “Daily Life and Death in the Warsaw Ghetto,” a number of pages are dedicated to jokes. Though none are attributed to individuals, within these jokes, the hopes, fears, problems and responses of a community

³⁹ In his exploration of Hitler, Rosenbaum interviewed Will Schreiber who is “one of the last living survivors of the Weimar press wars” (164). During their discussion, Schreiber stated, “what people forget at that time, is that everyone was searching for a *Heiland*” ... (*Ibid.*) Translated either as saviour or healer, Schreiber provided several examples of individuals who, at the time, considered themselves to be and were considered by others to be promising messiahs or apocalyptic figures. Hitler was one of these individuals, for his “nicht natürlich strangeness” was, in an ironic sense, “perfectly attuned for the wider, deeper longing for a figure of higher irrationality, a Heiland to rescue Germany. People who’d lost faith in conventional politics were looking for a political faith healer” (165). Thus, while jokes were being made about the Hitler

salute in relation to healing Hitler, Rosenbaum questions the implication of the ritualized greeting and posits that it could

have been designed deliberately to evoke the longing for a Heiland, for a healer, a holy man [...] Was there always a deeper level than mere salutation, mere hailing, in the incantation ‘Heil Hitler’? A sense in which the speaker, the chanter, was imploring, urging the Führer: *Heal Hitler*, Heal Us Hitler, Heal Germany, Hitler. Less a salutation than a prayer. (165)

Samuel Beckett, during his trip to Germany, noticed “a sign above the portal of the Dominican church” and noted, in his travel journal, on March 3, 1937, in Regensburg, Bavaria: “Walk away past Dominikanerkirche, that I don’t look at, except to see on northern door notice Grüss Gott crossed out + replaced by Heil Hitler!!!” (qtd. in Allert 1). The implications of this are staggering for if the verb *heilen* means to heal, “the noun *Heil* means happiness or welfare, or in religious contexts salvation” (Allert 39). Allert continues to explain that in a religious context, “*heil* signifies the condition of being untouched by worldly harm or the effects of human mortality, and it postulates the existence of a divine authority representing happiness or welfare in their pure form – in a word, salvation” (41). And it would then make perfect sense that if Hitler was to be synonymous with the Saviour then the Jews would become, once again, the Devil. In fact, the Jew was considered to be “both a devil and a parasite” (Bauer 32).

can be uncovered. Sanitary conditions in the ghetto were terrible, yet Jews managed to laugh and poke fun:

No garbage was permitted to be taken out of the ghetto. A Jewish ghetto administrator appeared before his German commissioner to request permission to remove the garbage accumulating in his home. When the Jew came into the commissioner's office and did not raise his arm in the Hitler salute, the commissioner became furious and threw him out of the room.

A few days later the Jewish administrator appeared a second time in the commissioner's office. The commissioner was certain that this time the Jew would salute him by raising his arm. And indeed, the Jew entered the room, raising his arm. So the commissioner addressed the Jew, "This time, *Jude*, you acted correctly by raising your arm in the Hitler salute."

"No, Mr. Commissioner," the Jew answered. "I just wanted to show you how high the garbage has gotten." (120)

As of 1937, Jews were prohibited from using this unifying greeting as a way "[t]o protect the messianic spell of the greeting from 'foreign' contamination" (Allert 51), making its presence in the joke doubly transgressive and tendentious. The reason for this is that if the salute signified commitment to the regime and to Hitler, then in this particular context, not only is a rebellion taking place but a statement is being made: basically, the regime is rubbish.

Superiority, Incongruity and Relief

According to Freud, "tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (125).⁴⁰ Thus, jokes and the "light" response to tragedy could

⁴⁰ According to Freud's theory, there is a distinction between innocent jokes and tendentious jokes. The first category does not have an ulterior purpose, whereas the latter group "is not an aim in itself [...]" (114). Tendentious jokes, as the theory continues, can then be divided into "either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)" (114-115).

additionally be explained by the notion of superiority. The Superiority Theory, as discussed by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, and others, essentially suggests that, “[t]he laughable person is the one who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is” (Morreall 4). So those who are laughing may be doing so out of cruelty, but they may also be trying to separate themselves psychologically from the less fortunate. They may also be relying upon wit, satire, parody and the burlesque to soften their deadly reality and to undermine the power of their oppressors. A dead-on example is provided by Mindess, who, in his *Laughter & Liberation*, puts forward a joke which is an example of superiority and retaliatory wit also known as *repartee*:⁴¹

A little Jew in Hitler’s Germany brushes by a Nazi officer, knocking him off balance. ‘Schwein!’ roars the Nazi, clicking his heels imperiously. To which the Jew, undaunted, makes a low bow and replies, ‘Cohen. Pleased to meet you.’ (45)

In this instance, there are several factors at work which create a feeling of satisfaction and humour for the speaker and for the listener. The first is that although the Jew is described as “little,” his response is sizeable; in the fight between might and cleverness, wit wins. Moreover, the Nazi appears as a brute while the Jew is nothing but polite. In this

115). As such, “tendentious jokes are so highly suitable for attacks on the great, the dignified and the mighty, who are protected by internal inhibitions and external circumstances from direct disparagement ...” (125) Further on in the text, Freud declares that, “[t]o the classes of tendentious jokes that we have considered so far – exposing or obscene jokes, aggressive (hostile) jokes, cynical (critical, blasphemous) jokes – I should like to add another [...] ‘sceptical’ jokes” (137-138).

⁴¹ Arthur Asa Berger provides a list of techniques of humour:

1. Absurdity 2. Accident 3. Allusion 4. Analogy 5. Before/After 6. Bombast 7. Burlesque
8. Caricature 9. Catalog 10. Chase Scene 11. Coincidence 12. Comparison 13. Definition
14. Disappointment 15. Eccentricity 16. Embarrassment 17. Exaggeration 18. Exposure
19. Facetiousness 20. Grotesque 21. Ignorance 22. Imitation 23. Impersonation
24. Infantilism 25. Insults 26. Irony 27. Literalness 28. Mimicry 29. Mistakes
30. Misunderstanding 31. Parody 32. Puns 33. Repartee 34. Repetition 35. Reversal
36. Ridicule 37. Rigidity 38. Sarcasm 39. Satire 40. Scale, Size 41. Slapstick 42. Speed
43. Stereotypes 44. Theme/Variation 45. Unmasking

According to him, there are forty-five techniques of humour. Though all humour incorporates one or more of these elements, “different styles of humor are formed by using certain constellations of techniques” (56).

example, the Nazi “is hoisted by his own petard; his own expletive is used against him and, on account of that, the joke deals out an extra measure of satisfaction (Mindess 45-46). Moreover, as Arthur Asa Berger explains:

[t]here is, in much of Jewish humor, a kind of existential courage as weak and powerless Jews contend, using humor, with people who discriminate against them, hate them, persecute them, and at times, kill them. Because of their marginality and relative weakness, Jews have used humor as a survival mechanism – not only to soothe their psyches but also to ensure, to the extent possible, that the societies in which they found themselves were democratic ones where they had a chance to be justly treated. (37)

Another joke which highlights most of these ideals goes as follows:

One Nazi sees another walking out of a rabbi’s home. ‘Why were you in a Jew’s home?’ he asks.
 ‘I’m having the rabbi teach me Yiddish,’ the first Nazi answers. ‘That way I can listen when they are talking and discover their devious plans.’
 ‘That’s really clever of you.’
 ‘Yes,’ boasts the linguist, pointing to his head. ‘That’s using my *tochis*.’
 (Lipman 180)⁴²

This joke literally makes an ass out of the German officer (as *tochis* is Yiddish for buttocks), proving that laughter then serves as both rebellion against authority and preservation of self-respect. In many instances, the Nazis are presented as simple brutes. Another example, which once again conflates Jewish humour with the Superiority Theory, goes as follows:

⁴² A similar punchline is used in a skit by Shimen Dzigan and Yisroel Shumacher, a famous comedic duo from Warsaw. According to Ruth Wisse:

[a] popular routine brought on stage the anti-Semitic priest Stanislaw Tzeciak, whose agitation often led to violence against Jews. Passing himself off as a scholar of the Talmud, Tzeciak had accused Jews of using their religion to dominate others – for example, by inventing the practice of ritual slaughter of animals as a means of controlling the meat industry. The stage priest spouts what the audience recognizes as absurd interpretations of the Talmud. As he walks offstage, he boasts of his Jewish brains – “What does the Talmud call it? Oh yes, *tukhes*.” He points to his head while alluding to his rear (*MJH* 145).

While this is a clear example of superiority, it also indicates incongruity. Moreover, as Dzigan himself explains, “...perhaps because we subconsciously felt that our verdict was sealed and our fate unavoidable, we consciously wished to shout it down and drown it out. With effervescent joy we wanted to drive off the gnawing sadness, the dread and fear that nested deep inside us” (qtd. in Wisse, *MJH* 147).

Un gardien de jardin public nazi aperçoit un Juif assis sur un banc dans un jardin de Berlin.

– *Sale Juif! crache le gardien, tu n’as pas vu la pancarte à l’entrée :*

“Entrée interdite aux Juifs et aux chiens”!!

– *J’ai vu, mais comme j’ai vu que vous êtes quand même entré...*

(Ouaknin and Rotnemer 18)

While Freud believes that, “[b]y making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him...” (122) Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Dory Rotnemer posit that this type of humour (which they label as being Jewish) « reste encore une bonne façon de supporter le rejet social que les Juifs ont subi pendant longtemps » (19). Thus, while the Superiority Theory allows the strong to feel stronger, it also permits the everyman to rise above social and psychological oppression. This technique is especially effective when turning anti-Semitic discourse on its head as the following joke indicates:

Adolf Weismann, citoyen de L’Allemagne nazie, dépose un dossier pour changer son nom. La demande passe devant le juge qui, s’en emparant, réplique sévèrement :

– Encore une combine juive pour cacher tes origines? Tu crois que le Führer te permettra de te cacher derrière un noble nom allemand ? Ne reviens pas ici, Weismann !! Weismann tu es, Weismann tu resteras !!

– Votre Honneur, répond calmement Weismann, je suis tout à fait satisfait de mon nom de famille. Je veux juste changer Adolf en Eliezer.

(Ouaknin and Rotnemer 257)

As such, the laughter of superiority, depending on context, allows a space for the mockery of the other or for the outsmarting of the powerful.

Other laughter is a result of incongruity. Mentioned by Aristotle and discussed by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, the theory essentially suggests that laughter arises when an expected outcome is either thwarted or amiss. A wartime jokes goes as follows:

Some Nazis surrounded an old Jew and asked him who was responsible for the war.

‘The Jews,’ answered the old man, and then added, ‘the cyclists.’

‘Why the cyclists?’ asked the puzzled Nazis.

‘Why the Jews?’ answered the old man. (Cowan 141)⁴³

In the example above, laughter is a result of superiority but also of incongruity. While the listener expects an answer, he or she does not expect it to be in the form of a question nor does one expect a random and innocuous group, “the cyclists,” to become the scapegoats. That is the incongruity. The superiority arises from the fact that the Jew, being smarter than the Nazis but not as powerful, weakens them by stressing their dim-wittedness. In this instance, from a psychological viewpoint, “humor can be a defense against oppression” (Eilbert 277). In essence, this joke “allow[s] us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously...” (Freud 122-123) and it conflates two humorous theories – superiority and incongruity. Though the above example suggests that humour is reactive, laughter can also be active, particularly, when it is used as a social corrective and not only as a mere commentary. Moreover, the joke takes on a Talmudic reasoning or logic and the punchline creates laughter but also something more - for “[i]n Jewish jokes a question is so often not meant as a question but as an expression of a doubt or even an opinion” (Reik 204).

Another theory of laughter, the Relief Theory, deals neither with “the emotions involved in laughter” nor the “objects or ideas causing laughter” (Morreall 20) but

⁴³ Another version of this joke is the following:

Two German police officers grab a Jew in a street in Munich and beat him up. Then one screams, “Jude, who was responsible for the humiliating defeat of the Reich in the First World War?”

Immediately the Jew responds: “I know. It was the Jews and the pretzel makers.”

The German scratches his head. “The pretzel makers? Why the pretzel makers?”

The answer comes back at once: “Why the Jews?” (Eilbert 277-278)

explores the notion of laughter as a release. In his 1711 essay, “The Freedom of Wit and Humour,” the Earl of Shaftesbury writes:

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers.
(qtd. in Morreall 20).

Though not all jokes result in laughter, they nonetheless act as a release from tension. According to Algis Ruksenas, “[u]nderground political humor is a natural vent for collective frustrations built up as a result of the hardships of daily life and is a self-satisfying retort to the incessant propaganda” (qtd. in Lipman 27).

While jokes could be and were general, they also made reference to specific events and groups of individuals. For instance, “One man asks another, How are you doing?,” and the response is, “Like a Jewish lawyer: no complaints” (Herzog 85). Though much is lost in translation, in order for the joke to be funny, both the speaker and the listener need to be aware that on October 30, 1933, Jewish lawyers were forcibly disbarred from practicing law and that, in German, *Klage* means both complaint and lawsuit (Herzog 85). While the humour is sardonic, it highlights the increasingly precarious situation in which the Jews found themselves.

Jokes may highlight or emphasize a new restriction or decree, and they can also indicate the enemy’s position or situation. An example of this is a joke from 1941.

According to Lucy S. Dawidowicz:

In December in 1941 the Germans confiscated whatever furs could be taken from the Polish Jews. They took men’s and women’s fur coats and fur linings, neck pieces, fur collars, fur cuffs, skins, and sheepskins. The German army’s troubles with the Red Army and the Russian winter made the cold in the ghetto tolerable. ‘I’d rather have Hitler in my furs,’ went a ghetto joke, ‘than for me to be in his skin.’ (209)

Another example goes as follows, “Against the Moscow frost and Moscow cold [/] He’s trying to save himself with Jewish furs and gold” (219). According to the context provided by Dawidowicz, the jokes are congruent with historical, factual events and their existence “reflected the indomitability of the ghetto spirit and became the weapon of the powerless” (218).

In addition to the witticisms provided by jokes and puns, euphemistic language infused the overbearing and at times deathly seriousness of the Third Reich with satiric levity. According to Grunberger, “the fat shortage gave rise to ‘Hitler-butter’ as a euphemism for margarine, and the regime’s eugenic measures produced the term ‘Hitler-cut’ (*Hitlerschnitt*, a word play on *Kaiserschnitt* or ‘Caesarian operation’) as a grimly jocular code word for sterilization” (332). Air raid sirens were renamed “Meyer’s Buglehorn” as “[a] whole cluster of wartime jokes about Goering hinged on his boast that he would change his name to Meyer if the enemy should ever penetrate German air space” (334). In regards to the topic of corruption, “[t]he replacement of an incompetent official by someone actually qualified to do it was called ‘sabotage’, and a ‘reactionary’ was the occupant of a lucrative post coveted by a Nazi” (336). Humoresque topics included a large array of issues: the “poor quality of beer” (336), “[t]he bewildering impact of the self-sufficiency programme on agriculture” (336), the Hitler Youth (335), the “Nazi mania for abbreviations” (335) and, finally, “[t]he Big Brother theme” (338).

However, it was not just the civilians and political dissidents who incorporated wit into their everyday lives but so did the Third Reich. While I do not wish to focus upon anti-Semitic humour, or what Dundes and Hauschild call “executioner’s humor” (250), it is interesting to note that the prisoners in Dachau who were responsible for

removing “sewage from the open latrine” were called “‘squad 4-7-11’ after the eau de Cologne,” ‘paratroopers’ was the name given to the Jews who were “about to be pushed over the edge of the quarry precipice” in Mauthausen, while the inmates who extracted “tooth fillings from the mouths of gassed corpses at Auschwitz were referred to as ‘the gold-diggers of Alaska’” (339). According to Rappoport, “in extreme cases of war and national rivalries, slurs and stereotypes are employed to dehumanize one’s opponents, or at least reduce them to a laughably inferior status” (46). Thus, euphemisms were utilized by both the victims and the torturers for very different ends. For the former, euphemisms allowed civilians to be critical, to retain their humanity, and to be superior. For the latter, euphemisms allowed them to follow party policy, to be stripped of all compassion, and ironically, highlighted their need for superiority while emphasizing their capacity for evil.

Humour was also used as a way to psychologically punish Hitler. Reik offers two examples. The first joke appears to be of Austrian origin and deals with a Jew (who is essentially hogging all the newspapers) and Hitler in a coffee-house. “In the Jew’s imagination, Hitler then comes to the table and politely asks: ‘Please, is the *Wiener Journal* free?’ The Jew will answer: ‘Not for you, Herr Hitler!’” (49). In his examination, Reik concludes that, “[t]he point is not that the punishment for the criminal is so harmless, but that the Jew cannot imagine a more cruel and more exquisite torment than the withholding of the desired newspaper and the suffering of agonizing suspense of the loathed enemy” (49).⁴⁴ The second joke was published in a soldier’s magazine in

⁴⁴ In his memoir/testimony, *Quand vient le souvenir*, Saul Friedländer recalls a Viennese Jew named Fraenkel making the same joke with one distinction – in his version « La guerre est finie. Un juif se retrouve dans son café habituel à Vienne ... » (56) In this version, an act of revenge is taking place as the Jew withholds the paper not only to stress his superiority but because he recalls « tout ce qu’il a subi, de tout ce que son peuple a souffert » (56). Moreover, while providing Friedländer and his family with a moment of levity during the war, it also speaks to a time after the war when life returns to normal and the Viennese Jew returns to his beloved home.

response to the question, “What would the appropriate punishment be for Hitler after his capture?” A Jewish-American soldier, stationed in Italy, answered, “He should live with my in-laws in the Bronx” (qtd. in Reik 49). Reik is surprised by “the mildness of the penalty,” yet it is the superiority in the first joke that leaves both the teller and the listener satisfied, while it is the absurdity or incongruity of the second joke which results in laughter. Moreover, the second joke speaks to North American stereotypes of Jewish in-laws. However, it is important to keep in mind not just the psychological aspects and functions of humour, but also the political ones.

Maintaining Laughter within the Ghetto Walls and Beyond

While certain political jokes allowed neighbours to test political and ideological positions, for the Jews, these jokes represented much more. Dawidowicz asserts that:

[p]olitical jokes reflected the indomitability of the ghetto spirit and became the weapon of the powerless. Humor transformed the reality of power relations, its fantasy permitting the Jew to triumph over his persecutor. The joke afforded the relief from the oppression of inferiority and from tension and anxiety. (218)^{45 46}

⁴⁵ In addition to the snippets of popular songs found in the ghettos, Dawidowicz provides the following as examples of political jokes:

- “What’s the difference between the sun and Hitler?”
“The sun goes down in the West and Hitler in the East.”
- “What’s new?”
“Did you hear? They are confiscating chairs from the Jews.”
“What happened?”
“Hitler got tired of standing outside of Moscow and Leningrad.”
- Hitler appealed to the smugglers in the Warsaw ghetto to help him get half a million German soldiers into Moscow. They agreed, but in their own special way – piece by piece, heads, hands, feet, each section separately, little by little. (219)

⁴⁶ According to Antonin J. Obrdlik, “[p]eople who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property find a refuge in inventing, repeating, and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors” (712). Thus gallows humour allows for a rebellion but it also allows for what Freud sees as a preservation of self. The example he gives is, “when a rogue on his way to execution asked for a scarf for his bare throat so as not to catch a cold ...” (285) Though the humour can be explained by incongruity, its purpose indicates “the man’s tenacious hold upon his customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair” (*Ibid.*).

One such proof is provided by a resident of the Warsaw Ghetto. Mary Berg's October 29, 1941, diary entry reads as follows:

Even these sad conditions give rise to various bits of gossip and jokes among us, and serve as material for songs and skits that are sung and played in cafés and theaters.

Every day at the Art Café on Leszno Street one can hear songs and satires on the police, the ambulance service, the rikshas, even the Gestapo, in a veiled fashion. The typhus epidemic itself is the subject of jokes. It is laughter through tears, but it is laughter. This is our only weapon in the ghetto – our people laugh at death and at the Nazi decrees. Humor is the only thing the Nazis cannot understand.

These programs are tremendously successful. I used to be indignant at the jokes which took as their butt the most tragic events in ghetto life, but I have gradually come to realize that there is no other remedy for our ills. (111-112)

As hard as the Nazis tried, they could only succeed in quieting, but not fully stopping, the laughter during the most brutal times and in the most hellish places.

In his *Écrits des condamnés à mort*, Michel Borwicz examines early ghetto life. In his discussion of literary cafés in the Warsaw Ghetto, he writes:

Le plus notoire d'entre eux fut l'*Art* (Sztuka). Ses collaborateurs stables étaient deux pianistes connus [...], une chanteuse de talent, etc. La grande attraction de l'*Art* fut cependant le Journal parlé ayant pour auteurs des gens de lettres [...] Le *Journal* changeait chaque semaine et comprenait les dernières nouvelles du ghetto sous forme de chansons satiriques et de monologues. (17)

Other shows and revues were staged illegally and semi-illegally to a very limited audience. In Lwów, for instance, Dr. Henri Graf, a lawyer and friend to many writers, would hold « [des] matinées littéraires » in which « [a]près avoir pris connaissance de quelques satires mises en circulation secrète, il commença à les faire réciter dans divers bureau » (20). The show took place in the following way:

Pour préambule, la « matinée » présentait d'habitude un court article écrit par A. Brat (ancien rédacteur du journal quotidien *Chwila* à Lwow). L'actrice Hoffman lisait à son tour un extrait tiré des livres des *Prophètes*,

toujours sur un thème bien prémédité : d'abord en hébreu et ensuite dans la traduction polonaise. Maurice Szymel (auteur de plusieurs volumes de poèmes, édités avant guerre) récitait telle ou telle de ses œuvres lyriques. La seconde partie de la revue comprenait des satires toutes actuelles et extrêmement mordantes. (21)

The chief purpose of these clandestine shows was not only to free oneself from German rules and regulations but also to boost morale and act as a diversion from the drudgery of everyday life. While the Germans did not allow themselves to be mocked, all things Jewish, including Jewish folklore and the Council, were allowed to be ridiculed. However, the freedom that these intellectuals thought that they were exercising was ultimately a ruse created by the Germans (20) to create a false sense of normalcy. In fact, as Borwicz points out in a footnote, they were written

par le D^r Kornreich (avant la guerre, avocat à Cracovie, auteur de vers satiriques populaires publiés dans les journaux sous le pseudonyme « Koren »), E. Weintraub (jeune peintre et journaliste, originaire de Cracovie), D^r I. Berman (essayiste et traducteur connu avant guerre) et M.. Borwicz. — Hoffman, Berman, Szymel, Weintraub furent assassinés par les Allemands pendant la « grand action » au mois d'août 1942 ; plus tard furent assassinés Graf (au mois de mai 1943) et Brat (juin 1943). (21)

In the end, with the liquidation of the ghettos, all semblance of normalcy was eliminated.

In his dissertation, Borwicz locates other sources of the satirical or the comical, « dans des écrits rédigés aussi bien par des personnes menant leur vie sous l'identité d'emprunt par des habitants des diverses cachettes » (197). One example he provides under the category of "humour" can be found in *Journaux secrets*:

Le 25 mars 1943 (...) Nous sommes quatre ; nous attendons des temps meilleurs, et... Philippe M..., le cinquième locataire de notre petit « palais ». Ce « palais » fait partie de l'ensemble habité par des êtres d'espèces diverses. Nous, des hommes, non, je m'excuse, des Juifs, nous habitons le fond du souterrain, le rez-de-chaussée étant occupé par deux petits cochons qui coûtèrent 700 zloty. Il y a aussi un coq. Le premier étage est occupé par des lapins au nombre de quatre. En outre, nous voisinons encore avec une vache. (...) De nous tous, c'est-à-dire des Juifs,

des poules, des cochons et la vache, s'occupent des êtres supérieurs, c'est-à-dire des hommes aryens (197).

This extract's sardonic tone sheds light and pokes fun at the social situation. Moreover, « [l]a désinvolture humoristique soulignait non seulement la connaissance de la situation, mais encore le détachement quasi philosophique vis-à-vis de cette situation » (*Ibid.*). As we see, while some laughter was a public event or semi-public spectacle, other types of levity were more private and personal, bordering on the existential.

In his nine-part testimony, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*, Adam Czerniakow, the chairman/mayor of the Warsaw Ghetto, details his dealings with the Nazis, records community events and intersperses tragedy with a touch of light-heartedness. For instance, in his diary entry dated May 22, 1940, Czerniakow writes, “Expulsions from Krakow. The optimists, the pessimists, and the Sophists” (152). The humour is low-key and gets lost in the English translation but the above is a pun for *soph* (meaning ‘end’ in Hebrew). Another joke was recorded on February 23, 1942, “One fellow asks another: What is the news from the front? I have no idea, my apartment is at the back, was the reply” (329). While the above is a general comment upon the situation, the hopes, and the uncertainty of the Jews, the following joke, recorded on May 7, 1941, refers to certain ghetto practices; in this case, smuggling, “One of the many jokes: they tell that some Jewish fellow gave his daughter, as a dowry, a hole in the wall, which is in use twenty-four hours a day” (231). The footnote explains that “[t]he joke refers to a hole in an apartment wall facing ‘Aryan’ Warsaw. The hole in the border wall was used for smuggling” (231). Other humouresque instances are self-directed, as is shown by the entry on August 25, 1940, “In the morning at the Community. Someone asked me, what was my chairmanship all about? I replied that it made me lose my paunch” (190). While

this remark indicates ambiguity in Czerniakow's privileged position, jokes told about him suggest that individuals used humour to rebel against figures of authority and that Czerniakow was not above criticism and reproach. On May 8, 1942, he writes:

He [Auserwald] asked me whether he should give permission for a satirical show in which I am being caricatured. I told him that I had no objections. Just as I do not mind their singing in the streets: '*Czerniakow hot a grojssen boch. Er esst Klop und trinkt joch* [Czerniakow's belly is big and round. Gulps broth and meatballs by the pound].' In spite of this he did not settle the matter favorably, and postponed the decision. (351)

His tone is occasionally sardonic, plaintive without showing weakness, as evidenced on June 11, 1941, "In the morning at the Community. It has been raining. Fortunately for us this does not entail any costs to the Community" (248). In addition to the puns, the self-mockery, the satire, and the sarcasm, black humour makes its entrance into his diary, as evidenced by the following entry on June 22, 1942, "Jewish optimism: 'Two Jews standing in the shadow of the gallows. The situation is not hopeless, says one of them, they have no bullets'" (369). Levity and tragedy converge, the resulting humour is tragic and the laughter is, for the most part, heavy and bitter. Likening himself to the captain of a sinking ship, Czerniakow writes:

Many people hold a grudge against me for organizing play activity for the children, for arranging festive openings of playgrounds, for the music, etc. I am reminded of a film: a ship is sinking and the captain, to raise the spirits of the passengers, orders the orchestra to play a jazz piece. I had made up my mind to emulate the captain. (377)

Fifteen days later, on July 23, 1942, Czerniakow killed himself.

According to Lipman's *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust*, unlike political jokes, which tend to resist hostility and make fun of the other, Jewish jokes tend to turn inward, "the Jewish humor from Nazi Europe was intrinsically Jewish. It was by Jews. It was *about* Jews, Jewish suffering, Jewish holidays, and Jewish

ideals” (140). It is important to emphasize that, “traditional foils of European Jewish humor [...] were largely absent from wartime humor” (Lipman 140-141) as humour was found not in stock characters but in the language and the culture.^{47 48} Several examples of such Jewish jokes are the following:

If we can endure for twenty-one days, then we’ll be saved. Namely eight days of Passover, eight days of Succos, two days of Rosh Hashanah, two days of Shavuos, and one day of Yom Kippur. (Huberband 118)

A contemporary Jewish prayer: O L-rd, help me become a chairman or vice-chairman, so that I can allocate funds to myself. (Huberband 120)⁴⁹

The Führer asks Frank, “What evils and misfortunes have you brought upon the Jews of Poland?”

“I took away their livelihood; I robbed them of their rights; I established labor camps and we are making them work at hard labor there; I have stolen all their wealth and property.”

⁴⁷ Please note that while Jews did revert to humour to ease the pain and make their experience tolerable and less threatening, not everyone agreed with this psychological coping mechanism. In the Vilna Ghetto, “a large part of the population disapproved of the levity [...] claiming, ‘A graveyard is no place for entertainment’” (qtd. in Lipman 145).

⁴⁸ According to Freud, while humour is used to criticize important people, jokes about lowly figures such as the *Schnorrer* or the *Schadchen* are made to attack not just the individual but also the “institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed of a joke concealed by its façade” (129). As such, according to Lipman’s observation, one could conclude that the lack of these stock characters in the jokes as well as the witticisms of the time could be attributed to the breakdown and the restructuring of the Jewish communities within the ghettos – instead of laughing about the marriage-broker and the institution of marriage, one laughs at, and is critical of, current individuals, such as Czerniakow, committees and organizations, such as the *Judenrat*, the Jewish police officers and the Nazis themselves. The new topics for jokes touched upon the new rules and institutions and reflected the anxieties of the current political and social situation. For instance, in his diary entry on May 11, 1940, Chaim A. Kaplan records that:

A great uproar arose suddenly in Jewish Karmelicka Street: Some psychopathic Nazi is demanding that every passerby take his hat off in his honor... The little “wise guys,” the true lords of the street, noticed what was going on and found great amusement in actually obeying the Nazi, and showing him great respect in a manner calculated to make a laughingstock out of the “great lord” in the eyes of all the passersby. They ran up to greet him a hundred and one times, taking off their hats in his honor... Some did this with straight faces, while their friends stood behind them and laughed... There was no end to the laughter... This is Jewish revenge! (153-154)

Moreover, what is also interesting and important to note is that these stock characters reappear in post-war literature and film. For some, it is a way to pay tribute to the past, for others, it is a way to bridge the cultural schism created by the war. Please refer to Chapter Three below for a more detailed discussion.

⁴⁹ Known for its corruption and its powerlessness, many Jews in the ghetto were suspicious of the *Judenrat* as indicated by the name *Judenverrat* meaning “betrayal of the Jews” (Dawidowicz 239) yet, some did benefit, at least temporarily, from the protection they received.

But the Führer is not satisfied with all these acts.

So Frank adds: “Besides that, I have established *Judenraten* and Jewish Self-Aid Societies.”

The Führer is satisfied, and smiles at Frank. “You hit the target with the *Judenraten*, and Self-Aid will ruin them. They will disappear from the earth!” (C.A. Kaplan 205)⁵⁰

Rubinshteyn says, “I had a groschen, but I lost it; I had a *tsveyer* (two-groschen piece) but lost it; I had a *drayer* (three-groschen piece) but lost it. Only the *firer* I can’t seem to lose.” (Huberband 121)⁵¹

A Storm Troop leader entered a streetcar and, upon noticing a Jew, began to shout:

“You dirty Jew! Every thought you think is an insult to Germany.”

The Jew ignored the venomous comment. After sitting still for some time, the Nazi asks the Jew: “What time is it?” The Jew did not answer. The question was repeated again but there was no answer.

“May I know why you are so rude as not to answer a civil question?” asked the Nazi.

“I don’t think it is necessary to answer your question,” replied the Jew. “If by looking at my forehead you are able to ascertain my thoughts, it stands to reason that by looking at my pocket you ought to be able to tell the time.” (Mendelsohn 123)

If one was to agree with the premise that, from a psychological point of view, “the telling of jokes also has the unconscious aim of cementing the bond that was originally founded on certain common values, and on the awareness of the Jewish isolation within the nations in which they live” (Reik 236), then it would be fair to say that telling the joke within the ghetto or the concentration camp not only brings people together but also

⁵⁰ A variation of this joke is recorded by Ringelblum. His version goes as follows:

Horowitz [Hitler] asked the local Governor General [Hans Frank] what he has been doing to the Jews. The Governor mentioned a number of calamities, but none of them sufficed for Horowitz. Finally, the Governor mentioned ten points. He began: ‘I have set up a Jewish Social Self-Aid Organization.’ [Hitler replied:] ‘That’s enough; you need go no further!’ (55)

In both versions, what is being highlighted is the “ghetto dweller’s valid criticism against a corrupt authority” (L. Kaplan 348).

⁵¹ The word *firer* sounds like *Führer* (Hitler). The pun is that: “[t]he Jew cannot rid himself of Hitler” (Huberband 121). Moreover, according to the footnote, Rubinshteyn was well known “in the Warsaw ghetto for his gallows humor” (121). He was considered to be « par les uns comme un ‘fou non sans méthode’, par les autres comme un clown-philosophe. Ses ‘dictions’ faisaient assez de bruit pour être longuement répétés ; Rubinstein mit en scène entre autres ses propres funérailles. Il fut également connu par les Allemands qu’il avait coutume d’aborder avec des questions insolemment ‘naïves’. Il mourut, pour emprunter l’expression qui fut la sienne, d’une mort ‘de luxe’, terrassé par le typhus » (Borwicz 23).

creates distinctions between victor and victim, them and us. Moreover, these jokes act as an emotional, spiritual, and psychological barometer of historic events and personal response. While Reik reads the Jewish joke as a type of prophecy into the future, it can also be understood as a testament to the past, and an indication of the present.

In his text, *No Traveler Returns*, Henry Shoskes describes the trials of the Jews living in the Warsaw Ghetto, but also provides countless examples of faith, heroism, and to some degree, examples of levity and laughter. As he relates:

The only relaxation for most of the Jews – those who could afford it, that is – was the theater. There were in the ghetto a large number of Jewish or half-Jewish singers and actors who had formerly been with the Polish National Opera and other theaters. In fact, most of the best actors in Poland were now in the Warsaw Ghetto. They played in wooden barracks, in half-ruined apartment houses, in vacant factories.

There was the Eldorado, which presented light musical comedies and dramas in Jewish. There was the New Azazel Theater, where Jewish classics were shown. There was the Femina, which played in Polish. It had a choir and a ballet and was considered the representative theater of the ghetto. In July a second Polish theater opened, the New Studio Theater, devoted mainly to modern plays of more intimate character. The Zionist Youth organization founded still another theater which played in Hebrew. There was also a marionette theater for children.

The theaters played from two to five in the afternoon, because there was a curfew in the evening. But they were always crowded. People might go hungry, but they would not miss a show. Here was the only relief from drab and unhappy reality. Here for a few moments they could dream, could share in the joys and sorrows of those on stage, be torn by conflicts which belonged in another world. Here there was no hunger, no slavery or humiliation; or, if there was, the crime was always followed by punishment. And, happily, theater tickets were not rationed.

Finally, there were a great number of variety shows, some of high artistic standing. All of them produced shows of social and political significance. There would be a song full of double meanings, and everybody in the public understood that everything which was said against a certain non-existent person was meant to be applied against Adolf Hitler or some prominent Nazi. There would be recitations of certain parts of the Bible containing curses against the Egyptians or other enemies of the children of Israel, to the accompaniment of muffled drums or a gong, and all those who listened knew that it was not the Egyptians or the Philistines who were meant, but the Germans. Or there would be funny sketches

satirizing the Jewish Council and its prominent members, making fun of their weak spots or of the bureaucracy which had swamped certain departments.

Even in their precarious situation, with the future so uncertain, the Jews could always fall back on one of their greatest talents: to make fun of everything around them, including themselves. It was a good relaxation, this making fun. And in a way it was also a weapon, the only weapon they could use against their oppressors. But if ridicule could kill, many of the Nazis would have fallen dead in the streets of Warsaw during those days.

This talent of the Jews for making fun of themselves and of their enemies created an unbelievable and seemingly inexhaustible number of new jokes which the people in the ghetto told each other. Many made fun of the Fuehrer himself.

There was, for instance, the incident which was supposed to have occurred in 1933 in a German school which Jewish children were still allowed to attend. The teacher asked: 'Hans, what would you be if your father was the Fuehrer?' The answer was: 'I would be a general.' 'And what would you want to be if your father was the Fuehrer, Karl?' And the answer was: 'I would like to be an admiral.' 'And you, Abraham, what would you want to be if your father was the Fuehrer?' And little Abraham answered spontaneously: 'In that case I'd love to be an orphan.'

Or there was the story of the Pole, the Ukrainian, and the Jew who were arrested by the Gestapo and asked: 'Where do you want to be buried after the execution?' The Pole wanted to be buried in the military cemetery in Warsaw. The Ukrainian wanted to be buried in Lwów, near the grave of the famous poet, Iwan Frank. The Jew said: 'I would like best to be buried near our beloved Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler.' The Gestapo man almost had apoplexy. 'How dare you? Don't you know that the Fuehrer is still alive?' Whereupon the Jew added, 'Oh, I'm not in a hurry. I can wait.'

There was the story of the Fuehrer who, after having tried in vain to subdue England, was finally persuaded to seek the advice of a famous rabbi as to how he could manage to cross the Channel. The rabbi was brought to him and after a moment's deliberation declared: 'There is only one thing for you to do. You must get hold of the rod which Moses used to divide the Red Sea so that the children of Israel could walk through it without even getting their feet wet.' Hitler asked impatiently, 'But how can I get this rod?' 'Oh, that's easy,' the rabbi answered, stroking his beard. 'You'll find it in the British Museum.' (44-46)

Though quite lengthy, this excerpt is important for numerous reasons. In addition to describing the ideological and political leanings of the plays and entertainment, it stresses that neither the perpetrators nor the victims were exempt from mockery and criticism and that the discontent and retaliation was couched in biblical verses, satire and double-speak.

Furthermore, it provides three examples of actual jokes which highlight both Jewish superiority and sensibility. Finally, as the author himself states, humour was used as a psychological defence against oppression, even if the laughter was self-directed.⁵² Yet, despite the documentation of such tragic gaiety, a shift in tone is stressed. The chapter, entitled “The Idyllic Period”, ends with the following words, “On June 22, 1941, Hitler started his most gigantic effort, the invasion of Russia. On July 22, 1941, the ‘idyllic period’ of the ghetto ended” (46). Only two jokes are found after this chapter, the first on page 138 and the second on page 165. The former is not a joke as much as it is a pun. In describing Cohn, a man who lived at 6 Walicow Street, Shoskes writes, “Everybody was afraid of him. They called him ‘Moishe Gestapowietz’ (‘Moshe of the Gestapo’)”. Though not laughable funny, this seemingly oxymoronic pun aptly describes the man’s political position while allowing for “new images and ideas [to be] formed out of dull parts” (Mindess 89). The latter joke deals with the realization and the longing for Jews to return to a pre-Hitlerian state in which, according to Shoskes:

⁵² While some theorists and psychologists suggest that self-disparaging jokes are a form of masochism, Harvey Mindess understands them to be a sign of acknowledgement and acceptance. He states that, “Jewish laughter [...] is evidence not of masochism but of expanded perspective [...] It is evidence of the mental act of rising above one’s deficiencies by frankly admitting and enjoying them” (49). However, some jokes complicate that theory. In his memoir, *Quand vient le souvenir*, Saul Friedländer recalls a joke told by a Jewish-Viennese family friend:

Vous avez la dernière? La police arrête un juif à Marseille; il ne sait pas un mot de français, rien que le yiddisch. “Vous êtes juif?” “ Il a saisi de quoi il s’agissait et fait un violent “ non “ de la tête. “Alors quoi, catholique peut-être?” Encore “non”. “Vous vous moquez de nous : protestant?” Toujours “non”. “Quel culot! Vous n’allez pas dire que vous êtes grec orthodoxe, non?” Le visage du juif s’éclaire, il fait un signe de jubilation : “Ot, ot, ot”, s’écrite-t-il (ce qui veut dire “ C’est ça, c’est ça”, en yiddisch) (56).

While the joke is told by a Jew to a Jew and can thus be seen as self-disparaging, this joke tends to highlight the Jewish foolishness and could be interpreted as masochistic for it is the cultured, intellectual Jews who transmit and respond to this tale. Thus, an element of superiority is present indicating geographic and class divides between the European Jews of the city meaning culture/class vs. the ignorance associated with the Jews of the *shtetl*. As such, this joke would fit into the category of hierarchical elitism – one of the four categories or political cultures in Aaron Wildavsky’s society. The other political groups include the Fatalists, the Egalitarians, and the Individualists. Keeping this division in mind, Arthur Asa Berger suggests that, “[m]embers of each of these political cultures [...] should like jokes that reinforce the values that they believe in...” (43).

the only problem [the Jews of Warsaw] had to deal with was Polish anti-Semitism. It was not a very heroic attitude to take, and the Jews themselves were the first to realize this and to make fun of themselves in countless stories and jokes, such as the following:

An old Jewish couple wakes up in the Warsaw ghetto. The wife says: 'I had such a nice dream. I dreamed I was walking on a Warsaw street. It was warm and the sun was shining. There were shops full of goods, and all over the shopwindows you could read, 'Don't buy at a Jewish store.'

'Well, what is so nice about such a dream?' the husband wants to know. 'Don't you understand? I dreamed I was in good old Poland again!'⁵³

An actual joke with a punchline: the humour arises in the absurdity of the wife's pronouncement as well as the incongruity of it. It is a bitter joke, but a joke nonetheless.⁵⁴

It would appear from this testimony that jokes petered out as the despair and horror intensified, but this is not necessarily the case.

In his journal, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Ringelblum, a teacher and historian, kept an "accounting of everyday life in the ghetto from 1940 to 1942" (L. Kaplan 345). Described as a "social historian [...] he saw history as primarily the interplay of social, economic, and institutional forces, and only secondarily as the effects of the actions of powerful individuals" (Sloan x). While his journal is not "the observations of a single man" (*Ibid.*), the collection of experiences allows for a general overview of the situation in the ghetto. Moreover, his journal was part of a larger project,

⁵³ A variant of this joke is recorded by Ringelblum, a contemporary of Shoskes.

⁵⁴ According to Mindess:

The frame of mind associated with a chuckle, a smile, or a laugh is one of mastery, of conquering a specific threat or stress. Those topics at which we laugh most heartily are all, in some way, sources of anxiety or discomfort, but as we laugh at them, our anxiety lessens, our discomfort decreases. In deriding our superiors, for example, we revitalize our dignity. They may be more powerful than us, but our wit seeks out their defects so that, in laughing them down, we build ourselves up. Even when we make fun of ourselves, we are engaged in working off anxiety and cultivating self-respect. When we joke about our looks or manners, our stupidity or cowardice, we are attempting to accept ourselves with all our faults. The moment before we laughed at it, the quality referred to may have been a source of dismay; in the act of finding it amusing, though, we detach ourselves from the problem, confess it, and demonstrate that we can take it in our stride (144).

Oyeg Shabbat, in which individuals kept records of the events.⁵⁵ He recorded both the travails and the triumphs of the Jewish people.

Tragedy was documented, but so was the laughter, as humour acted as “a brilliant counterpoint to the dominant note of repressed anguish” (Sloan xxvi). Essentially, “Ringelblum realized implicitly that such jokes served as a liberating means of psychological and spiritual resistance in the Jewish struggle for survival” (L. Kaplan 345). While the jokes are of a political nature, some tend to be Jewish, and ALL function as a “fantastical weapon” (*Ibid.*) against inhumanity and oppression allowing “the oppressed to take revenge against their persecutors before organized armed resistance, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April and May 1943” (*Ibid.*).

While some of the jokes were based on punning (from a technical viewpoint), from a psychological perspective, others expressed a death wish much like the political jokes previously discussed. What makes the subsequent joke different is that it is about a Jew, told to a Jew, and recoded by a Jew. “There’s a joke about a Jew riding in a streetcar. When he comes to the Hitler Platz, he cries ‘Amen!’” (Ringelblum 68). The

⁵⁵ According to Samuel D. Kassow, author of *Who Will Write Our History?: Emmanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyeg Shabes Archive*, the purpose of the Oyeg Shabes group was to observe and record all aspects of Jewish life, from the religious to the economic, and from the political to the social. “[T]he archive adopted a variety of approaches including impressionistic surveys, transcriptions of street songs, essays dealing with the ghetto streets, and even a study of the ghetto’s cafes” (253). Instances of “shared community and humor” (256) were documented by some. For example, in Sh. Shaynkinder’s observations recorded in “In the Streets,” he wrote of the candle seller who tried to sell his merchandise:

“Candles [laugh], Jews, candles [laugh] for 20 groshen.

They burn day and night without mercy. Candles [laugh], Jews, candles (laugh)...” While a smiling crowd gathers in the narrow lane, the peddler shouts louder: “Buy, Jews, and may they burn on memorial days, and during festive occasions, on days commemorating the dead, and G-d be willing, on days to commemorate the scoundrels! Candles [laugh], Jews, candles [laugh] for 20 groshen and may the Jews at long last be able celebrate! Jews are eager to buy candles like these” (qtd. in Kassow 256).

As Kassow explains, “in Warsaw Yiddish dialect, the word for candles (*lakht*) was pronounced the same way as the imperative ‘to laugh’” (256). Moreover, in the footnote he further clarifies that “[t]he candle seller is also punning on the well-known Yiddish curse, ‘May you burn like a candle [Zolstu brenen vi a likht]’” (451).

joke works because *platz* means both plaza and burst. Moreover, Louis Kaplan explains that “[t]his veiled witticism is a perfect example of an anti-Nazi ‘whisper joke’: while it appears on the surface as if the Jew supports Hitler with his affirmative exclamation [...] the underground subtext reveals that this ‘Amen’ expresses the concealed wish that Hitler should explode” (346).⁵⁶ Other jokes expressed the superiority of the Jew. Examples of this type include the following:

- Twin babies were born in Germany, one called Horowitz [Hitler], the other Moses Ber [Mussolini]. They were bathed, and then got mixed up; no one knew which was Horowitz, which was Moses Ber. They asked a Jewish passer-by to tell. He answered, ‘The one who makes in his pants first is Moses Ber...’ (54)
- When forced to ride on a Jewish streetcar only, “[s]ome of the Jews say, ‘Well, we’ve finally achieved a streetcar with a Jewish star.’ Others joke, ‘... and with a *mezuzah*, too!’” (64)
- Horowitz [Hitler] comes to the Other World. Sees Jesus in Paradise. ‘Hey, what’s a Jew doing without an arm band?’ ‘Let him be,’ answers Saint Peter. ‘He’s the boss’s son.’ (40)⁵⁷
- The Jewish revenge: The Jews are very forgiving (153).
- RSJF [standing for Radio Station Jewish Fantasy], the rumor mongers. ‘Anything new?’ ‘What’s the matter – are you too lazy to think up your own news?’ (153)
- The *big fellow* ordered three different tailors each to make him a suit and furnished the material. One tailor said, ‘There’s only enough material for a vest.’ The second tailor said, ‘There’s enough material for a whole suit.’ The Jewish tailor said he could make three suits out of the stuff: ‘He may be very big to Them, but to us he’s a pigmy!’ (153)⁵⁸

⁵⁶ According to Louis Kaplan, in the original text, the name of Hitler is omitted altogether (346). In other instances, Hitler becomes Horowitz or H.

⁵⁷ While this joke privileges a Jewish boy over Hitler’s decrees “[o]n an institutional level [it suggests] the possibility of an ideological conflict between Hitler and the Church” (L. Kaplan 348). Moreover, it “meditates on the question of privilege and its relationship to survival” (348).

⁵⁸ Louis Kaplan interprets this joke in the following manner: “[t]his joke turns the tables on the Nazi’s racist rhetoric that subhumanizes the ghetto Jew. However, this joke also can be read as a parable for life in the ghetto itself and the pressing need to make everything ‘stretch’ to survive...” (346)

- A joke is making the rounds. Germany has waged a total war in Poland, a *monumental* [“momentary”] war in France, a *ratal* [“installment”] war in England, and a fatal war in Russia. H.[itler] is trying to imitate Napoleon. He began the war with Russia on the 22nd of June, the same day Napoleon invaded Russia. But H. is already late, because Napoleon was in Moscow by the 14th or 15th of September. They say that at the beginning of his Russian campaign Napoleon put on a red shirt, to hide the blood if he should be wounded. H. put on a pair of brown drawers. (216)⁵⁹
- Here’s a joke that’s making the rounds: A woman was having a difficult labor. Nothing anyone did could help her. But the moment her friends left the house, the infant came crawling out of the womb to ask his mother: ‘Mama, can I come out now, have all the *schleppers* gone?’ (225)⁶⁰
- After the Russian victory at Rostov [November 28, 1941], the Jews began to call the city ‘*Rosh-tov*’ – meaning, ‘a good beginning’ in pidgin Hebrew (242).
- A new society was formed, called Strength through Malicious Joy (252).⁶¹
- The German Jews [...] have brought a number of jokes with them. One of them is that they explain the emblem *Jude* [Jew] that they have to wear on their chest as being the initials of the words: *Italiens Und Deutschlands Ende* [The end of Italy and Germany]. (288)⁶²

Some Jewish jokes and witticisms are laden with sarcasm and attest to the helplessness

⁵⁹ Scatological in nature, this joke not only “plays with the identification of the Nazis as brown shirts” (L. Kaplan 346) but also reverses “anti-Semitic rhetoric that equate[s] the Jews with feces” (*Ibid.*). Thus, Hitler undergoes his own humiliation by being called a coward who, to use the colloquial expression, is scared shitless.

⁶⁰ A *schlepper* literally means “one who pulls or drags something” (Sloan 225) but in the ghetto it was a term used for “‘strong-arm’ squads” (*Ibid.*).

⁶¹ The footnote reads, “[p]araphrasing the Nazi slogan, Strength through Joy” (Sloan 252). Louis Kaplan expands upon this suggesting that, “[i]f the Nazis seek to organize the German people around the propagandistic slogan [...] the Jewish joke retaliates with a dose of malicious joy [...] that draws its strength from Nazi defeats and failures” (346).

⁶² In response to the decree forcing Jews to wear a Star of David armband, Ringelblum wrote on February 23, 1940, that “Nalewski Street looks like Hollywood nowadays – wherever you go you see a star” (22). Thus, demoralization is turned into something positive; “fame, celebrity, stardom” (L. Kaplan 347). Interestingly, in Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 comedic film, *To Be or Not to Be*, “Hollywood stars play the inhabitants of Nalewski Street in an American-style act of comic resistance against the Nazis” (*Ibid.*). Regardless of that aside, ultimately, in both these jokes a “strategy of ironic resistance seeks to convert the badge of humiliation into a badge of honor... [Thus,] the stigmatization of the Jew (*Jude*) is decoded and thereby revealed to be an acronym which spells out the inevitable victory against the Axis powers” (*Ibid.*). These examples of inversions offer a relief from oppression and degradation.

and to the bitterness of the ghetto dwellers:

- A Jew alternately laughs and yells in his sleep. His wife wakes him up. He is mad at her. “I was dreaming someone had scribbled on a wall: ‘Beat the Jews! Down with ritual slaughter!’” “So what are you so happy about?” “Don’t you understand? That means the good old days have come back! The Poles are running things again!” (79)⁶³
- The demoralization of the Jews of Warsaw is frightful. It has reached the point where, when two Jews meet, one says to the other: ‘One of us must be serving the Gestapo!’ (175)
- The populace was just bursting with jokes about the new year. One of them was that 1942 would be called 1941, because H. promised his people he would end the war in 1941. (251)⁶⁴
- In April or March Jews were forbidden to use German marks that bore the likeness of H.[Hitler]. Apparently they’re afraid Jews might give him the Evil Eye! (289)
- The German attitude to the Jews is best illustrated by this folk tale: Once there was a landed gentleman who was living high. He kept borrowing money on interest from his banker Shlomo, until finally the Jew collected his debts by auctioning off the gentry’s property. Foaming at the lips, the impoverished nobleman cursed the Jew who had made him poor. In revenge, he called his dog ‘Shlomo’ and beat it. The same thing, people say, is happening to the Germans. They are being defeated, their cities are being destroyed, so they take their revenge on the Jews by beating them three times a day. (290-291)
- In the Ghetto (as well as outside it) Jewish physicians and professors are conducting scientific investigations. One of the most interesting subjects is hunger. Interesting, because it is the most widespread disease in the Ghetto and there’s a simple remedy for it – just let the Germans leave Poland! (294)

⁶³ This joke was preceded by Ringelblum relating the experience of his friend who was robbed and followed by an account of two lawyers who committed suicide as a result of a resettlement decree. Louis Kaplan understands the laughing and yelling of the Jewish dreamer “as an explanatory mechanism for the very transmutation process in which the Jewish joke is engaged. For it was never a free and easy laughter” (349).

⁶⁴ While I do not completely agree with Louis Kaplan’s interpretation of this joke, that “[t]he Jewish joke reveals the Orwellian world view of the Nazi propaganda machine and its brainwashing strategies of inculcation when it comes to matters of mathematical calculation” (348), I do agree that **certain** “Jewish joklore” functions “as a form of counter-propaganda whose function was to expose Nazi rhetoric as a discourse of lies, deceit, and empty promises” (348).

- [In discussing why 10 per cent of the Jews were permitted to remain in Warsaw Ringelblum writes:] The answer is political. If all the Jews were to be cleared out of Warsaw and out of the Government General [of Poland] as a whole, They would lose the Jewish argument. It would be hard for Them then to attribute all their difficulties and failures to the Jews. The Jews have to remain in keeping with the proverb: ‘G-d grant that all your teeth fall out, except one to give you a toothache!’ (325)

Other jokes and anecdotes were purely political as evidenced by the following:

- Why should the Germans bomb London and the English Berlin? All that flying back and forth is a waste of gas. The Germans ought to bomb Berlin, the English London. (65)
- About Brenner: What did Hitler and Mussolini talk about? ‘Benito zebito, O Adolfo, we need helpo, O sweet Duce, we are kaputshee. Heil Hitler I am looking for a middlemanner. If so, Mussolini, you are a swiney. If you have to complaino, go to Ciano, It was R...b...p [Ribbentrop] who did this to me, the goddamn s.o.b.’ (75)⁶⁵
- Africa is losing its [Italian] hair. (112)⁶⁶
- Hitler is wearing a vest nowadays, because he lost his ‘flotilla jacket.’ (150)⁶⁷
- Little by little, the populace has embellished the Hess flight to England. For example, there’s a story about three generals, Milch, Motke, and Hoffman, who fled with Hess. The story runs that the flight is associated with a division of opinion among the Nazis revealed at the last Party conference. There is talk that Goering was killed, that Hess’s flight was aimed at Russia, that he was trying to persuade the English that England and Germany should oppose Russia together. The populace has crowned the Hess affair the *Ness* [miracle] affair. They see it as a way out of their hopeless situation. People make puns: A *Ness* begins with Hess. In the morning Hess was a *Mess* [dead man]. (The first communiqué stated that he had flown to an unknown destination, and there was no news of his whereabouts); in the afternoon Hess was a *Ness*; in the evening Hess had performed a *Ness* and turned himself into a *Mess*. It was a *Hessliche* [ugly] affair. And the like. (183)

⁶⁵ This editor explains that this ditty refers to “[t]he meeting between Hitler and Mussolini at Brenner Pass on October 4” (Sloan 75).

⁶⁶ The footnote explains that, “‘Italian’ and ‘hair’ are the same word in Polish” (Sloan 112).

⁶⁷ According to Sloan, in Polish, flotilla and jacket are the same word. Moreover, “[o]n April 7 and 8, 1941 the British Air Force raided the German fleet at Kiel; and again on the night of April 8-9 (150).

- The letter “V” for Victory, posted by the Germans, is flooding all of Warsaw. You see it everywhere – in the streetcars, movie houses, on the walls, postmarks, and the like. The populace keeps making up jokes – for example, the “V” stands for the fifth-class state lottery. Everywhere on the Aryan Side, next to the “V” they wrote: “*Deutschland-Verlorren, Verspielt, Verrat*” [Germany-Lost, Played Out, Betrayed]. (198)
- ‘*German General Woes!*’ some of the news vendors shout – instead of *German General News*, – ‘*Cracow News, Pack o’Lies!*’ (253)

Others jokes and witticisms indicate spiritual malcontent and tend to be bitter and sardonic in tone:

- A Jew prayed poorly on Rosh Hashana. When asked why, he replied, ‘The praying matches the year.’ (66)
- A friend to whom I wished a ‘calm Passover’ (that was last year’s motto) replied: ‘Rather wish me an easy fast.’ (154) [Yet,] The Seders were a source of spiritual strength to the exhausted and homeless refugees. (155)

In contrast to the above, the following anecdotes and subsequent jokes attest to a spiritual resistance and superiority:

- It is said that the rabbi from Kozenice, when They were beating him, remarked that when the ram’s horn was blown at the end of the world, the Germans would turn into geese. The rabbi asked, ‘Are there any Jews in Holland?’ He was told there were, and in Denmark, France, and Norway as well. ‘If that is so,’ he said, ‘the German is the prisoner of the Jews!’ (55)
- In the prayer house of the Pietists from Braclaw on Nowolipie Street there is a large sign: Jews, Never Despair! The Pietists dance there with the same religious fervor as they did before the war. After prayers one day, a Jew danced there whose daughter had died the day before. (125)
- There were assemblies in the celebration of Purim this year. People hope for a new Purim – to celebrate the downfall of the modern Haman, Hitler – one that will be commemorated as long as the Jewish people exist. The new Purim would surpass all previous Purims in Jewish history. (139)

- [In the entry dated April 14, 1941, when discussing an issue of *Liberty*, “a Zionist Young Guard paper” (151) Ringelblum writes,] Saw an edition of *Liberty*: ‘The war’s end will see the end of all imperialism.’ – Saw a fine Polish-language Purim number on the paper, called *Laughter through Tears*. (152)
- They tell this story: Churchill invited the Chassidic rabbi of Ger to come to see and advise him how to bring about Germany’s downfall. The rabbi gave the following reply: ‘There are two possible ways, one involving natural means, the other supernatural. The natural means would be if a million angels with flaming swords were to descend on Germany and destroy it. The supernatural would be if a million Englishmen parachuted down on Germany and destroyed it.’ (265)⁶⁸

In terms of style, “the transient and ephemeral nature of the Jewish joke partakes of the same spirit as the chronicle itself – in its documentation of the fleeting instant and the passing moment” (L. Kaplan 345). His manuscripts were buried in rubberized milk containers in the hopes that, “not a single fact about Jewish life at this time and place will kept from the world” (qtd. in Sloan xxi). Ringelblum was murdered on March 7, 1944.

Another text which incorporates the difficulties of life in the ghettos with political decrees and shifting policies is *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941-1944*. It is a compilation of eye-witness accounts, written in both Polish and German. The Archives, under the permission of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski:⁶⁹

gathered materials from both the German and the Jewish ghetto administrators, including orders, proclamations, memorandums, the texts of speeches, official correspondence of every sort, statistical data, a variety of printed and mimeographed material, photographs, and other visual documentation. (xi)

⁶⁸ Though this joke is political and bitterly ironic it “draws upon the traditional Jewish joke figure of the *Wunderrabbi* [...] These traditional jokes mock the charismatic Hassidic rabbi’s supposed supernatural powers or his belief in miracles” (L. Kaplan 347).

⁶⁹ Rumkowski was head of the *Judenrat* in the *Łódź Ghetto*. His position was a complicated one as he tried to compromise, negotiate, and appease both the Germans and the Jews. He was reviled by many and considered to be a traitor and a tyrant. In the end, he was deported to Auschwitz.

One of the aspects that is most interesting about this Chronicle is that amidst the descriptions of food shortages, housing problems, ghetto crimes, the incidents of suicide, the various reasons for death, is the fact that space was allocated to describe fleeting beauty and laughter within the ghetto walls. The heading for Friday, December 5, 1941, is “*ES GEYT A YEKE MIT A TEKE*” meaning “There goes a Yeke [German] with his briefcase.” The refrain of the song is the following:

There goes a *yeke*
 With a briefcase
 Looking for butter or margarine
 No way
 There’s nothing to buy
 He gets a visa to Marysin⁷⁰

Written by Jankele Herszkowicz, who is described in the Chronicles as “the popular ghetto street ‘troubadour,’” the song “is sung to the tune of the popular army song, ‘The Machine Gun,’” and describes the hardships of the newly arrived German Jews. Unaccustomed to the hardships and shortages,

[t]he song makes fun of the newly arrived ‘Germans’ [...] The song treats their ups and downs with good humor and tells of the *Yekes*, forever hungry and searching for food, and the ‘locals’ who make fun of them and quite often take advantage of their naïvete and unfamiliarity of local customs. (92)

However, the song ends on a very tragic note for the Yeke, unable to buy anything, “gets a visa to Marysin,” a forested area in Łódź where the cemetery was located. In addition to songs, humour also presented itself in the form of puns. Dated Tuesday, March 7, 1944, under the heading, “GHETTO HUMOR,” the following is mentioned: “People here have a saying: There are two Kaufmans [*Kaufmann*: merchant] in the ghetto, one for fire and

⁷⁰ <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/ghettos/lodz/herszkovitchyankele/es-geyt-a-yeke/>

one for water. (The directors of both the Fire Department and the Department of Soup Kitchens are named Kaufman).” (470)

Food appears to be quite a topic for laughter and criticism within the Chronicle.

On Monday, March 22, 1943, the Chronicle reports that the “morale is very low” (327) yet, in a separate heading entitled, “GALLOWS HUMOR,” the following is documented:

Even the ghetto has its wags who can sum up an entire situation with a single well-aimed joke. Their sense of humor is typically Jewish—sarcastic and critical. Food, of course, is the paramount theme.

Lately, the abominable food situation has begun to be reflected in people’s outward appearance. The sight of people swaying as they walk down the street has given rise to macabre humor. With tears of laughter in his eyes, a ghetto Jew will remark in jest: ‘Before the war we ate ducks and walked like horses, now we eat horses—and waddle like ducks.’ Of course, this witticism is not altogether accurate, since people ‘waddle’ only because they are allotted barely 20 grams of horsemeat per ten-day ration period. If there was more horsemeat the joke itself wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.

Another joke makes for an even more incisive comment on the situation. One Jew meets another and asks: ‘Why do you think I’ve lost my drive?’ The other answers: ‘In the ghetto, if you don’t have pull, you don’t have drive.’ (327-328)

On Wednesday, February 23, 1944, the chroniclers, in this instance P[eter] W[ertheimer] under the heading, “SKETCHES OF GHETTO LIFE: LOFIX,” writes:

This is what the ghetto jokingly calls the black pancake that is replacing real food during the current period of hunger: ersatz food made of ersatz coffee, fried in a pan. Lofix pancakes really do resemble the kindling material made of tar and pitch that is distributed at the coal market in lieu of wood. But while the combustible Lofix can ignite a fire, the edible variety cannot spark a person’s energy when it is waning. It has no nutritional value; it merely deceives the stomach... (460)

And on Tuesday, March 21, 1944, under the heading, “SKETCHES OF GHETTO LIFE: A SNATCH OF CONVERSATION IN THE STREET,” the following observations are recorded:

Two very little boys conduct the following conversation: ‘Did you drink your lunch already?’

‘No, I’ve eaten some coffee.’

The question and answer characterize the situation in the ghetto. The midday meal consists of a more or less thin soup. The few potatoes hiding at the bottom of the murky liquid offer the teeth little opportunity for exercise. There is really not much to eat, merely something to drink. On the other hand, the Lofix pancakes are made of [ersatz] coffee and roasted until hard in a frying pan; they alone give the teeth a workout. (473)

Another joke related to food was recorded later on Wednesday, May 31, 1944. In fact it is the only recording for that day. Under the title, “GHETTO HUMOR: ANALYSIS OF THE WORKSHOP SOUP,” the following observation is made:

Quantity	under 0.7 liters
Color	bluish gray
Aroma	horse stable
Clarity	very murky
Taste	sour to bitter
Protein	none
Sugar	none
Fat	none
Peas	isolated sightings
Groats	traces
Water	80 percent
Soda	15 percent
EFFECT: diuretic. (496)	

Thus, upon reading these instances of humour, one can conclude that the Jews not only made fun of each other and the conditions in which they were forced to live, but also of themselves. According to an entry dated Wednesday, December 15, 1943, the following episode is recorded:

When he [Chaim Rumkowski] was brought before the deputy chief of the [local] Secret State Police, the Chairman promptly identified himself as the Eldest of the Jews in Litzmannstadt. The official replied that since he had been brought in [for questioning], he did not have to identify himself as though he had come voluntarily. Rumkowski answered: ‘Well, since I *am* here, I have most obediently identified myself.’ With his characteristic resiliency he succeeded in improving the atmosphere by remarking in jest that this was his first day off from work in years. (416)

Though the humour was grim, it could and did exist. The humour provided a forum not only for social observation but also offered a temporary relief from perilous situations.⁷¹

⁷¹ In addition to the jokes, the Chronicle also mentions concerts and shows as a way of making “life pleasant” and boosting morale. For instance, in the entry dated May 27-31, 1941 a chronicler writes, “On Saturday, May 31, the House of Culture put on a revue. The show was composed of skits, genre pieces touching on current events, monologues and dance performances...” (57) Poetry was read, performances of chamber music were given, and classical works were recited. Shows were also put on for children. In addition to these distractions, other ways of creating levity are recorded. Children, for instance, created their own toys and games. According to one chronicler, O[skar] R[osenfeld]:

... the Jewish child is talented enough to do without the fantasies of the toy manufacturer. Our children collect empty cigarette boxes. They remove the colorful tops and stack them in a pile, until they have a whole deck of cards. Playing cards.

And they play. They count the cards and deal them out. They arrange them by color and name. Green, orange, yellow, brown, even black. They play games that they invent for themselves, they devise systems, they let their imaginations take over (361).

At a later date, the same chronicler observes that the children of the ghetto not only invent playing cards but also create their very own musical instruments – castanets:

The streets of the Litzmannstadt ghetto are filled with clicking, drumming, banging... Barefoot boys scurry past you, performing their music right under your nose, with great earnestness, as though their lives depended on it. Here the musical instinct of Eastern European Jews is cultivated to the full. An area that has given the world many musicians, chiefly violinists—just think of Hubermann, Heifetz, Elman, Milstein, Menuhin—now presents a new line of artists (374).

According to George Eisen, “[...] ghetto games and play activities were a natural reflection of a newly emerging ghetto culture and folklore. This culture amalgamated old values and traditions with the altered social and psychological conditions, creating very new distinct forms of humor, songs, and poems” (70). Yet, it is not just children who create toys and make up games to maintain a sense of normalcy, boost morale and pass the time. In his testimony, Rudolf Vrba, recalls how he and a cell mate, Fero Langer, passed the time by playing a game of Skittles. The game was made up from a loaf of bread. As Vrba recounts, “[Langer] took a loaf of bread and broke it in half. One half he stood at the end of the room. The other he rolled into hard, little pellets. He rolled one at the loaf of bread, missed by a mile and said very seriously: ‘Your turn. We’ll play for salami’” (45). Eisen believes that “adult play represented an important escape and coping mechanism both in the emotional and mental realms” whereas “[c]hildren [...] are rarely, if at all, concerned with the intellectualization of their actions, especially play” (72). For children, play in the ghetto incorporated their reality (it was a form of parody or imitation) and was both space specific and at times gendered. The boys, for instance, played at “Going Through the Gate,” “Blowing up Bunkers,” “Seizing the Clothes of the Dead,” and “Eldest of the Jews,” while the girls played out scenes imitating their mothers standing in line-ups (Eisen 76-77). Ghetto games reflected the rules of *that* particular space as did camp games. In Birkenau, for instance, Greek boys played a game of ‘Klepsi Klepsi’ and children in Auschwitz/Birkenau played games of ‘daring,’ ‘Lageraeltester,’ ‘Blockaeltester,’ and even ‘Gas Chamber’ (Eisen 80). In all the examples provided, the play indicated their frame of references and “provided the children with ‘a buffered learning,’ an activity frame in which one could learn to be safe in an abnormal situation, without worrying about being out of control” (Eisen 79). In any event, for both adult and children, play, like humour, “mediate[d] stress and facilitated a psychological removal from the stress situation” (Eisen 87). Functioning in a similar manner to the superiority aspects of humour, games also allowed for a moment of revenge or defiance. As Eisen specifies, “in the Kovno ghetto [...] children used to play ‘grave-digging: they would dig a pit and would put a child inside and call him Hitler’” while the children of the Vilna Ghetto played “Liberation” in which as a nine-year-old survivor recounts:

children playing ‘Jews’ were led by the ‘Gestapomen’ to Ponary, a wooded area in the Vilna district, to be killed. The ‘Jews,’ however, overpowered the ‘Gestapomen’ and beat them with their own rifles [sticks]. The liberated ‘Jews’ tied the hands of the

Laughter in the Chronicle presented itself both via the content and also through the tone. In describing the lack of pets in the ghetto, O[skar] R[osenfeld] focuses on the conditions of the ghetto cats whose purpose was to keep the mice away from the food at “the so-called food distribution points” (433). In his entry, “SKETCHES OF GHETTO LIFE: THE PRIVILEGED CATS,” dated Saturday, January 15, 1944, Rosenfeld writes that like the inhabitants of the ghetto, the cats “too have to demonstrate *produktivsyte* [productivity]” (433) and like the rest of the inhabitants of the ghetto they, the cats, no longer have meat to eat:

... Their heads droop, their tails drag sadly. A pitiful sight. The cats accept no other food; they are slowly perishing. They spurn the ghetto dweller’s diet—turnips, radishes, or soup. Truly deplorable. Even they, the privileged creatures, must know misery and the grim reality of life. In January, 1944, they too must share the fate of the ghetto, man and beast. Eating one’s fill is not the norm, but the exception. Remember that, O cat in the food shop! (433-434)

Thus, in this entry, sarcasm creates a smile while acting as a thinly veiled criticism of ghetto conditions for both beast and man.

Another reason to smile is the invocation of religion within a secular context. Rosenfeld, when describing the over abundance of cabbage within the ghetto, writes that “[p]eople drank the cabbage soup by day and passed it spasmodically by night” (533). He ends the entry on Sunday, July 23, 1944, with the following words:

Finally, we heard that potatoes were about to arrive, large quantities of potatoes, enough to supply the [soup] kitchens, when suddenly—cabbage came rolling into the ghetto again. Naturally everyone was sick of cabbage; even the little man began selling his cabbage rations. And then, all at once, a mood arose that cannot be put into words because it cannot be traced to any tangible event. Be that as it may, the last week of July,

‘Gestapomen’ with strings and took them to the place of execution instead of the ‘Jews.’ At their destination, they were lined up and with rifles [sticks] shot to death (Eisen 89).

The main differences though between games and jokes are that jokes did not appear to have a didactic purpose whereas certain games did and games (like chess) helped pass prolonged periods of time.

1944, proves that psychological factors can override any physical ill. The last week of July in the ghetto year, 1944, was dominated by the hope that the Eternal, Praised be His name, would liberate the ghetto from cabbage soup, *mehayro veyomaynu* [soon, in our days]... (533)

Thus, G-d is called upon not liberate the ghetto dwellers from their oppressors, but from an overabundance of cabbage. Though not a formulaic joke, both the tone and the religious recontextualization of the phrase “*mehayro veyomaynu*” adds levity while voicing complaint.

From the Ghettos to the Transit Camps

According to Nora Levin, “[t]he chief forms of resistance in the Ghetto were in terms of creative expression through drama, satirical cabaret, poetry and music” (485). Though there were two types of theatre in the Ghetto of Terezín, the official, approved productions and the unofficial, unapproved cabarets, I intend to focus on the underground productions for, according to Jana Šedová:

The most important elements in our repertoire were those created in Terezín. Plays, which came into being directly in the camp, which reacted straight to the main problems of camp life, were naturally most successful among the ghetto prisoners. Among these must be mentioned Kühns ‘Puppets’ and Jelínek’s ‘Play about the Trap’ as well as, naturally, the entire repertoire of both satirical theatres, whose managers were also playwrights, i.e. ‘The Prince in Bed’ and ‘Ben Akiba Told a Lie,’ works by co-authors Lustig and Spitz, as well as Schwenk’s plays ‘Long Live Life’ and ‘The Last Cyclist’. (223)⁷²

Karl Švenk or Schwenk, (depending on the spelling), was known as the “Aristophanes of Theresienstadt.” Šedová describes him as being,

a born comic, an unlucky fellow tripping over his own legs, but always coming out on top in the end. There may have been a little of Charlie

⁷² While an official copy of these sketches, plays and parodies do not exist (as it was too dangerous to keep paper records), memory tries to fill in the blanks. In her article, “Theatre and Cabaret in the Ghetto of Terezin,” Jana Šedová provides additional information regarding the productions mentioned.

Chaplin in it, the dead-pan face reminded one of Buster Keaton, but principally he was Karel Švenk himself. (224)

As an ex-theatre director, musician, and writer he was one of the most famous inmates at Terezín. In the film/documentary, *Diese Tage in Terezin*, by Sibylle Schönemann, Lena Makarova and Victoria Hanna Gabbay, an attempt is made to piece together the life and works of Karel Švenk. One of the first to be brought to Theresienstadt in 1944 and deported in October of that year, Švenk gave, according to what the narrator describes as a “hastily written invitation,” a “secret performance” in a potato cellar. The narrator continues to inform the viewer that by the fall of 1944, Švenk “had given more than 130 performances”. Despite the horrific conditions, and the increase in transports, Švenk wrote a satire, “in which he drew a connection between Stephenson’s invention of the steam locomotives and the transports.” He wrote sketches, satires and parodies but, at the end of each underground cabaret, he would sing the “Terezín March,” otherwise known as, “Anything Goes!” – a song whose ultimate message is hopeful, if not triumphant:

Anything goes, with good will,
we will join hands,
in defiance of the cruel times,
we have humour in our hearts.

[...]

Hey, life begins tomorrow
and with it nears the time
when we can pack up our bundles
and go back home.

Anything goes, with good will,
we will join hands,
and at the ruins of the ghetto
we will laugh.⁷³

⁷³ Qtd. in the lyrics section of *Terezín/Theresienstadt*, CD, produced by Deutsche Grammophon, Hamburg, 2007 (29). When discussing the origins and the evolution of the cabaret, Lisa Appignanesi writes, “[i]n the latter half of the nineteenth century, the song, or *chanson*, became the principle form of entertainment [...]

In addition to the “Terezín March,” Švenk also produced the following skits/cabarets; “The Lost Food Card,” “Anything Goes,” (42 performances) “Ghetto in Itself,” (38 performances) “Long Live Life, or Dance Around a Skeleton,” (20 performances) and “The Same But Different” (29 performances). Actor, director, singer and pianist, his sketches and songs brought hope to so many. According to Naomi Patz, Švenk, along with Rafael Schächter, produced the first cabaret, “The Lost Food Card,” in early 1942. This “all-male variety show” was described by Šedová as being:

satire in the true sense of the word. No misbehaviour in the camp escaped his biting wit. And the Nazi overlords were ridiculed in the same bold manner [...] Fortunately, the SS had no idea that they were being criticized on our stage.

But this made a stronger response to Schwenk’s cabaret in the atmosphere of the men’s prison. It improved not only the mood in general, but also morale, so easily undermined in camp (219).⁷⁴

one of the few means by which the people could record their daily history and publicly voice their reactions to contemporary events [...] the song could spoof or ridicule authority and act as a rallying cry” (9). Thus, the many rallying cries of the ghetto were a form of protest against hopelessness.

⁷⁴ In her article, “Theatre and Cabaret in the Ghetto of Terezin,” Šedová stresses that initially, women and men were separated and as such, the women could not enjoy his productions. As a result of this, the women created their own shows:

... it was impossible for us, however much we tried, to attain the high professional level of Karel Schwenk’s experienced ensemble. Fortunately, in one thing, at least, we did not lag behind: in speaking openly on the stage about the most burning problems in camp. And that was the main thing for our audience. The scenes that hit the nail straight on the head were always the most successful. In our case this was, as far as I can remember, the sketch about little Sarah who, after the liberation, was put into a mental home, because she brought all her good ‘camp habits’ back into civilized life (219).

Similarly, in his testimony, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl recalls that humour was created by imagining the conflation between the concentration camp universe and the return to the civilized world once the war would end:

I practically trained a friend of mine who worked next to me on the building site to develop a sense of humor. I suggested to him that we promise each other to invent at least one amusing story daily, about some incident that could happen one day after liberation. He was a surgeon and had been an assistant on the staff of a large hospital. So I once tried to get him to smile by describing to him how he would be unable to lose the habits of camp life when he returned to his former work. On the building site (especially when the supervisor made his tour of inspection) the foreman encouraged us to work faster by shouting: ‘Action! Action!’ I told my friend, ‘One day you will be back in the operating room, performing a big abdominal operation. Suddenly an orderly will rush in announcing the arrival of the senior surgeon by shouting, ‘Action! Action!’

Another survivor of Terezín and an admirer of Švenk, Jan Fišher, states: “Švenk, as I said before, was like medicine. Švenk was the best doctor, his humor. [He] was the only one who could produce humor on-site... Švenk was our classic in Theresienstadt.”

His most famous piece, “the most courageous of our plays” (Šedova 224) was entitled *The Last Cyclist*. Inspired by the “old saying that ‘Jews and cyclists are responsible for all misfortunes,’ the plot is an allegory of Hitler-Europe, but with a happy ending” (Levin 485). Based on Šedová’s description, lunatics, having escaped an asylum, become rulers of a nameless country:

The woman dictator ‘Paní’ (which means Mrs. In Czech) immediately proclaims the first mad law: all cyclists, and also all those who cannot prove their ancestors for six generations had been pedestrians, shall be deported without delay to Horror Island. The hero of the play, Bořivoj Abeles, a cyclist, happens to fall overboard during the crossing, reaches land safely and so becomes the last cyclist in a country of pedestrians. (I should like to point out here, that Abeles always gets out of all the troubles that befall him by chance and never through any efforts of his own. In the ghetto, situated in enemy territory, the so-called ‘Sudetengau’, it is not possible to incite the defenseless, unarmed prisoners to rise. To go on living was only a matter of chance, not influenced by one’s own actions.) The woman dictator learns about Bořivoj’s escape through her magic mirror. This mirror, however, warns her not to kill the last cyclist. No country on earth could exist without a cyclist, because there would be nobody to blame for things that might go wrong. Cyclists had always been scapegoats. Thus the dictatoress ‘Paní’ orders the ‘Führer’ of the ‘Little Flag’ organization—an allusion to the fascist Quisling organization ‘Vlajka’ (the Flag)—to apprehend Bořivoj Abeles and to exhibit him in the zoo as the last living specimen of a cyclist. The ‘Führer’ Krysa (which means rat in Czech) sets to work with enthusiasm. After many adventures, in which Bořivoj is always lucky enough to escape at the last moment, Krysa finally succeeds in taking the last cyclist prisoner. During a hunger rebellion Bořivoj is branded as its ringleader and sentenced by a State

Sometimes the other men invented amusing dreams about the future, such as forecasting that during a future dinner engagement they might forget themselves when the soup was served and beg the hostess to ladle it ‘from the bottom’ (63-64).

What is important about these anecdotes is that they provided a moment of levity amidst the horror and indicated the hope for redemption. They stressed the time after the war – with the defeat of the Nazis and the survival of the Jews. However, these anecdotes were psychologically realistic in that they acknowledged that the victims would be marked by their experiences upon returning to a civilized society.

Tribunal, as enemy of the state, to be launched in a rocket to the moon. And for the last time chance steps in. The dictatoress and her suite inspect the interior to the rocket, while the prisoner is permitted to express his last wish. He would like, for the last time, to smoke a cigarette. His eyes bent upon his beloved Mánička, the ‘unwilling cosmonaut,’ instead of lighting his cigarette, puts a match to the ignition of the rocket. The dictatoress, together with her retinue of lunatics, goes up in the air. Bořivoj runs joyfully to the front of the stage, appealing to the crowd in unmistakable terms to go home, that the rule of lunatics was over. But Mánička–Little Mary–restrains him warningly. The end has come only here on stage, but down there, the rule of madmen continues. Down there, nobody will be allowed to say what he thinks, he can only say in his mind the words he will one day say out loud. (224-225)

Even though the cyclist accidentally saves himself and despite his announcement that the age of lunatic rulers has ended, the audience is reminded that this is the case on stage only. Tyranny, the audience is told, continues to exist. In his discussion regarding theatre in concentration camps, Michael Patterson suggests that, “Schwenk’s piece clearly served two functions: first, to satirize the ridiculous racial laws of the Third Reich [...], and second, to hold out the hope that one day sanity might triumph” (Patterson 160).

According to Šedová, the cabaret ended with

chords of a well-known fighting song [being] played on the piano. On the stage, holding hands stood the cast and moved their lips as if they were singing the inciting text. Then the melody of the fighting song changed to some harmless tune, to return after a few bars to the original fighting melody. And the cast–in dumb show–went on singing. The audience knew exactly what was meant. (225)

Although the Council of Elders wanted to ban the play, because of its ending, the production went on as planned, without any changes. His plays, like the many other performances in Terezín, brought temporary relief to both the performers and the audience members, despite death’s constant presence:

Trains were constantly leaving for the East from the station of Bohušovice, fully loaded with human cattle in sealed trucks. And nearly every transport mercilessly destroyed one of our carefully rehearsed

performances. The hero, the comic, the lover, wiped the grease paint off his face and went to pack his bundle for the journey from which there was no return. But the play had to go on.

Those left behind were doubly in need of consolation. Many had said good-bye to their nearest and dearest yesterday; and the more difficult and responsible was our task today, to make them laugh, or at least give them an hour's forgetfulness and new hope. (Šedová 222)

Deported to Auschwitz on October 1, 1944, Švenk died, on a death march, in April 1945, yet he will always be remembered, as the Chaplin of Theresienstadt.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ In fact, his work lived on. Upon the end of the war, Šedová, who had acted in “The Last Cyclist,” returned to the stage and actually adapted this play, with Darek Vostfel, for the Rokoko theatre in Prague, in 1961. What is interesting is that the second act in her “modernized” version differs greatly from the description of the second act which she describes in her essay. The reason may be due to Communist influences. As Naomi Patz explains, “the new version was written for a production in honor of the 40th anniversary of the Czech Communist Party and the second act adapted to appeal to that audience [...] the 1961 production needed to speak in ideologically acceptable language as much as to evoke memories of Terezín and the Holocaust, that evocation in itself extremely daring in Communist Czechoslovakia” (ii). In fact, in a footnote, Patz quotes Šedová who, in the introduction to the 1961 production wrote “[b]ased on the outline of thoughts and actions of the original cabaret we tried to write a new play that would – as far as possible – just as thoroughly recall the senselessness and danger of all kinds of racism to people of the year 1961 as Karel Švenk achieved with his group of prisoners in 1944 there – in the Terezín attic” (ii). In another detailed footnote exploring the differences between the two productions, Patz points out that:

In the 1961 version, after Abeles has been arrested, tried and condemned to Horror Island, he is accidentally dropped from an airplane onto a mountaintop (the very site, where legend places the roots of Czech nationalism). [Moreover,] Abeles ends the play by saying “...So many shards. And they are everywhere.’ A voiceover says, ‘The Jews are to blame!’ Other voices follow with prejudiced remarks about Chinese, ‘Negroes’ [*negři*], and Mongolians. The play ends with Abeles addressing the audience: ‘Do you all have shards in your eyes? Say what you may, but I was imprisoned for four years. So why have I told you all this? Because I don’t want anyone to go through it again.’ The play ends with the cast mouthing the words of the Communist ‘Internationale’ while the melody is played on a piano (iv).

It is important to note that while originally this play was created as a psychological distraction and form of amusement and commentary regarding a political tyranny and oppressive reality, the 1961 version was perhaps, according to Lisa Peschel, a way for Czech Jews, in the early 1960s, “to bring the ghetto back into the realm of public discussion.” She goes on to explain that:

During the 1950s, because of the official ‘anti-Zionism’ and political purges that targeted Jews prominent in the Czech Communist Party [...] topics that might portray Jews in a sympathetic light had become taboo. With her revisions, Šedová may have been trying to create a place for this topic within larger Czech society by fitting the play inside the framework of acceptable Communist rhetoric about race and class [...]: mildly criticizing fellow Czechs for wartime collaboration, but also criticizing Jews for not being more politically engaged... (qtd. in Patz ii)

Patz’s modern reconstruction of the play has a two-fold purpose. The first is to reconstruct and reimagine Švenk’s original version, particularly in regards to the second act of the production, and, more importantly, to educate today’s audience about Terezín, Švenk, and Šedová. While the clandestine cabarets in Terezín were created to help the inmates forget their surroundings and their despair, Patz’s play focuses on the surroundings and the symbols of oppression for she writes in the Character Descriptions, “Everyone onstage (and any stage crew members and musicians who will be seen by the audience) wears a yellow Star

Many testimonies stress that the subject matter or the source/inspiration for the humour was relevant; dealing with the current socio-political situation. Thus, plays, theatres, cabarets were an escape from reality and those sketches that did deal with the dangers of life, managed to make the threats appear less threatening.⁷⁶ Unlike many of the cabarets in Terezín which operated secretly, the six revues which were presented in Westerbork, between July 1943 and June 1944 were “staged with the approval of the authorities” (Patterson 161). Interestingly, in her examination of the life of Max Ehrlich and of the role that the cabaret played in Westerbork, Brigitte Sion stresses that:

On encourage le rire alors que le destin de chacun n'est autre que la mort. Ce sont les nazis qui jouent la comédie de l'humanité en faisant monter les Juifs sur scène et en les anesthésiant d'illusions. Mais les détenus sauront tourner cet état de fait à leur avantage, en utilisant le rire comme moyen de résistance spirituelle, en se servant de l'illusion du spectacle pour survivre aussi longtemps que possible, quoi qu'il arrive. A ce stade de la persécution, les détenus n'ont pas le choix des moyens de résistance : ils n'ont pas d'armes et perdent leur force physique petit à petit. Il ne leur reste donc que la résistance morale, et s'il faut mourir, ce ne sera ni par abandon, ni par suicide, mais en livrant une dernière opposition, intellectuelle, spirituelle, artistique, la seule réponse désormais à la barbarie (71).

of David on chest and back” (4). The play is sandwiched by an “Older Šedová” who in the beginning, addresses the audience, introduces both herself and Švenk, explains the historical/cultural climate at Terezín, and ends with her telling the audience that the play they just witnessed was banned by The Jewish Council of Elders and that all the actors, excluding her were killed. She, being the sole survivor, is the last one remaining on stage.

⁷⁶ Berg records on October 29, 1941, that she went to see a play, *Love Looks for an Apartment*, in the Warsaw Ghetto. Described as a “musical comedy,” this play examined the trials and tribulations for two couples living in a shared room in the ghetto. What is of importance is not just what the play was about but also the reception of such a piece of art at such a time. In her diary she wrote, “[t]he audience laughed heartily and spent a few pleasant hours in the comfortable theater, completely forgetting the dangers that lurk outside” (109).

Yet the cabaret, according to Sion, did not deal directly with political issues.⁷⁷

Westerbork, located in Drenthe in the Netherlands, was established in 1939 « pour héberger les réfugiés allemands, en particulier les Juifs fuyant le régime nazi » (Sion 65).

In Westerbork, death and life were strongly linked to the cabaret and the letters of Etty Hillesum stress how very close that connection was. According to her:

[...] in the evening they sit in the registration hall, where Max Ehrlich, Chaya Goldstein, Willy Rosen, and others give a performance. In the first row, the commandant with his guests [...] The rest of the hall full. People laughing until they cried – oh yes, cried. On days when the people from Amsterdam pour into the camp, we put up a kind of wooden barrier in the big reception hall to hold them back if the crush becomes too great. During the cabaret this same barrier served as a piece of décor on the stage; Max Ehrlich leaned over it to sing his little songs (89).

The link is further emphasized in a letter dated August 24, 1943. Detailing how various individuals prepare for a transport, Hillesum observed:

Men from the “Flying Column” in brown overalls are bringing the luggage up on wheelbarrows. Among them I spot two of the commandant’s court jesters: the first is a comedian and songwriter. Some time ago his name was down, irrevocably, for transport, but for several nights in a row he sang his lungs out for a delighted audience, including the commandant and his retinue. He sang “*Ich kann es nicht verstehen, dass die Rosen blühen*” (“I know not why the roses bloom”) and other topical songs. The commandant, a great lover of art, thought it was all quite splendid. The singer got his exemption [...] Now here he is, dressed in khaki overalls, pushing a wheelbarrow piled high with the luggage of his fellow Jews. He looks like death warmed over. And over there is another court jester: the commandant’s favorite pianist. Legend has it that he is so accomplished

⁷⁷ While the cabaret in Westerbork did offer the actors a sense of purpose, and while it did offer the rest of the prisoners and the officers a chance to escape from reality, it was still fraught with tension as a schism existed between the Dutch Jews and the German Jews. The majority of the performers were German Jews who were able to prolong their stay in Westerbork because they were in a show. Therefore, as Lynn Rapaport explains:

there were many debates about the propriety of attending the shows. Some Jews saw the reviews as tasteless at best and sacrilegious at worst. Some believed that the shows were offensive to a sense of Jewish self-respect [...] Other Jewish attendees believed the shows provided both a temporary diversion and the mental strength to carry on (257).

For a more detailed account of the tension between Dutch and German Jews please refer to Philip Mechanicus’ diary entries dated June 3rd, July 25th, and July 28th (1943).

that he can play Beethoven's Ninth as a jazz number, which is certainly saying something... (133)⁷⁸

In describing the commandant of Westerbork, Albert Konrad Gemmeker, Hillesum presents him as both hero and devil. On one hand, “[h]e could be said to be our artistic patron here, and is a regular at all our cabaret nights. On one occasion he came three times in succession to see the same performance and roared with laughter at the same old jokes each time” (136). During a concert in the registration hall, this admirer of the arts “remained quietly seated when the concert was over. He obviously expected an encore that did not come. He had to be tactfully told that the entertainment was over” (Mechanicus 121). And on another occasion, upon hearing that the Westerbork camp was to be liquidated, Gemmeker is reported to have said, “I care more about the Jews than about most of my own SS men” (Mechanicus 145).

On the other hand, as a sign of displeasure and punishment, this *Obersturmführer* would forbid the cabaret from performing and would threaten to have it discontinued all together (Mechanicus 103). More importantly, this same gentleman oversaw the deportation of Jews; the sick, the elderly, the babies – he was an “absolute master over the life and death of Dutch and German Jews...” (137) In fact, « [e]nviron 104,000 Juifs hollandais sur 140,000 sont passés par ce camp. Konrad Gemmeker est responsable de la déportation de 80,000 Juifs vers Auschwitz » (Sion 72). Thus, this patron of art was also the patron of death. A paradox which is best explained by the following words: « Avec Gemmeker, la mort porte un masque souriant, celui des activités sociales, sportives et

⁷⁸ Death meets humour also in Philip Mechanicus' writing. Detailing the lives of the German and Dutch prisoners in Westerbork, Mechanicus writes the following in a diary entry dated Wednesday June 16th: “The current joke: What is the comparative and superlative of ‘ster’ (the Jewish star) ? Answer: ‘ster’, sterile, ‘ster’-off” (49).

culturelles. La manipulation fonctionne. La perversité est poussée à son paroxysme, notamment dans les spectacles de cabaret » (74).

This correlation between life, theatre and death is further examined and emphasized. On Tuesday, August 31, 1943, Mechanicus writes:

There is something loathsome going on in the background when every transport leaves. This time, while the transport was being got ready and was moving off, people were dancing. Actually dancing. Rehearsals have been going on for a revue. As if Westerbork itself was not rather like a theatrical show. By order of the *Obersturmführer* two thousand guilders have been made available from the camp funds for costumes. The costume-makers had to work all through the night before the transport and on the morning of the transport the dancers had to rehearse for the ballet at an early hour to make sure the première of the revue was not a flop. (145)

On the September 2, 1943, Hillesum details how the imminent deportees worked in preparation for the cabaret and how the psychological torment was compounded with religious desecration:

When I went into our little office this morning, it was in a terrible mess; it had been requisitioned as a dressing room for the revue. The revue is taking over the whole camp. There are no overalls for people on outside duty, but the revue has an “overall ballet” – so day and night, people sewed overalls with little puffed sleeves for the dancers. Wood from the synagogue in Assen had been sawed up to make a stage. One of the carpenters exclaimed, “What would G-d say if He knew what His synagogue was being used for?” Marvelous, isn’t it: G-d’s synagogue in Assen. Oh, Maria, Maria – Before the last transport, the people who were due to leave worked all day for the revue. Everything here has an incredible clownish madness and sadness (142-143).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This absurdity of life, though seemingly out of place in a detention camp, did offer certain prisoners a physical and morale respite. According to Mechanicus’ account:

Cabaret this evening in one wing of the hut. Crammed with people. *Café chantant* songs accompanied on a harmonica. An Italian aria for two baritones. Yiddish humour. [...] cabaret mood in the ward. A lot of applause. Contentment. A glimpse of old Amsterdam, the Rembrandtsplein. (62)

Yet, in another entry dated Tuesday July 6th, Mechanicus explains why a nurse was deported: “among the deportees there was a male nurse who had been given permission [...] to sing a few songs in the hospital hut in the evening, but had laid on a whole cabaret show. For this excess he was deported” (80).

Teeming with talented entertainers (singers, dancers, actors, comedians, producers, painters) such as Max Ehrlich, Willy Rosen, Erich Ziegler, Franz Engel, Otto Aurich, Jozef Baar, Camilla Spira, Otto Wallburg, Hermann Feiner, Kurt Gerron, Chaja Goldstein, Alice Dorell, Esther Philipse, Jetty Cantor, Sal Dwinger and finally, Johnny & Jones (Sion 74-75), the Westerbork cabaret, officially named *Gruppe Bühne Westerbork*, consisted of 51 individuals and was headed by Ehrlich himself. The first performance took place in July 1943, and was called *Bunter Abend*. In September of that year, *Humor und Melodie* was produced and one month later, *Bravo! Da capo!* was performed. The performances combined singing, dancing, sketches, cabaret, however, it must be stressed that the content was *not* political. « Les sketches parlent de régimes alimentaires, de mode, de la querelle des sexes. Les pièces sont jouées en allemand et débordent de sentimentalité, de nostalgie et de romantisme » (80). Any references to reality were alluded to but not pointedly. By March 1944, only 11 actors took part in another production, *Bunter Abend*, but the show had to be altered one month later due to the deportations. In June 1944, the 16th and final show was staged. Called *Total verrückt!* (Completely Crazy), the show was performed just once, as « Gemmecker estime que ce spectacle ne correspond pas à la nouvelle situation militaire et l'interdit immédiatement » (114).

These cabarets literally granted the performers and many other individuals such as the tailors and carpenters and many others involved in the staging of these shows a week's reprieve from the transports. Louis de Wijze, a survivor of Westerbork and Auschwitz explains:

On ne peut pas l'expliquer a posteriori. Tu es dans un camp. Tu vis de semaine en semaine. Chaque mardi arrive un train. Si tu ne fais pas partie

de ceux qui montent dans le transport, tu respires : c'est passé. Sans toi. Tu te dis que tu sers encore à quelque chose. Tu es en sursis. Jusqu'au mardi suivant. [...] Nous n'avions pas le choix. Ce cimetière était notre scène. Être ou ne pas être, telle était la question. (qtd. in Sion 76)

The cabaret also gave these actors and even the audience a morale boost, a reminder of how life was before the war and how it would hopefully be again. As one member of the troupe, Jetty Cantor, said, « Bien sûr qu'il y a des transports, mais on doit aussi rire » (Sion 114). While the cabaret gave these performers a *raison d'être*, it also gave the rest of the inmates a temporary escape. However, it must be noted that feelings about the cabaret and the performers themselves were ambiguous. Early on in his diary, Mechanicus wrote:

The henchman at Westerbork mocks and derides them [the Jews] by laying on a cabaret with light and airy music as a change from the macabre Tuesday morning transports. And the Jews were not ashamed to go to the cabaret (apart from those who are officially obliged to attend). (100)

As the transports increased and as all hope was lost for the remaining Jews, the performances continued. On September 13, 1944, Rosen, Ehrlich, and Ziegler were deported to Theresienstadt and both Rosen and Ehrlich were further deported to Auschwitz. Forced to entertain the Nazi officers upon his arrival to Auschwitz, Ehrlich, along with Rosen, was gassed on October 1, 1944.

Laughter in the Concentration Camps

Entertainment was not only found in the ghettos and in the transit camps but also in the concentration camps. In his discussion regarding Jewish Resistance, Leni Yahil, points out that “[t]he ghetto, of course, differed from the camp in its organizational forms and in the resources it had, but not in the fierceness of the struggle nor in its nature” (40). And though the desire to resist was the same, the means of doing so differed. In each

location, in each step of the dehumanization process, humour was used by some to maintain a sense of humanity, to affirm one's desire to not only exist, but to truly live. According to Curt Daniel, and inmate of both Dachau and Buchenwald, "[t]he nature and extent of this theatre varies in direct relation to the conditions prevailing in a particular camp," (801) for in Dachau, "any licensed theatricals are out of question," (802) whereas, Buchenwald "contained both licensed and illicit activity" (801). Daniel suggests two reasons for the difference in theatrical possibilities: "First, Dachau was in the nature of a show camp, often visited by distinguished foreigners [...] Second, the atmosphere of the Concentration Camps always reflected the personality of the S.S. officer in command" (802). Thus, while performances in Dachau were not expressly forbidden, they "would have so infuriated the S.S. camp guards that torture and death would have followed automatically" (*Ibid.*). Yet, despite the harsh conditions, levity was still present; particularly singing and theatre amongst the political and non-political internees. According to his eye-witness account, Daniel writes:

In the huts mainly occupied by politicals the chief divertissement was the singing of *Volkslieder* and the songs common to the international revolutionary movement. In addition many new songs were composed, generally around the themes of the camp and liberty. The S.S. men (who were invariably short of cash and who would take a bribe as easily as they would shoot a man down) permitted the prisoners to have a violin, guitar, accordion and harmonica. Another form of entertainment favored by the politicals was the small satirical cabaret so common in pre-Hitler Europe. This was characterized by the recital of poems criticizing the regime and making fun of the camp personnel, humorous political monologues lashing the Nazis, and anti-fascist patter for one, two or three actors. (803)

In contrast to the political entertainment, "[t]he non-political entertainment [...] was performed mostly by the professional actors among the prisoners" (*Ibid.*). The majority of

the material was, in the words of Daniel, “foreign to the camp,” based mainly on the cabaret routines of Vienna and Berlin. He explains that:

The performances generally took place inside a hut, with some hundreds of prisoners grouped in a circle around the artists. Sentries were posted at the ends of the huts to make certain that there were no S.S. men in the locality. At times there might be three shows running simultaneously in three huts. The ‘Stars’ ran from one hut to another for their turns.

Sometimes the excellence of a performance brought forth a spontaneous burst of applause. If the S.S. men on the watch-towers came down to investigate, the scene would be reminiscent of a raid on a Brooklyn speakeasy during Prohibition days, with prisoners jumping out of doors and windows in every direction. (804)

The most famous song in Dachau “was specially composed for the illicit theatre” (*Ibid.*). As a punishment for exposing the conditions of the concentration camps to the “London News Chronicle” and the “Manchester Guardian,” the Jewish prisoners were isolated and placed in darkened huts for two months:

During those terrible sixty days the Dachau Song was born. The words were so bitter and yet at the same time expressed such hope for the future that the S.S. guards made it a *verboten* song. This, however, did not prevent the prisoners from singing it. (*Ibid.*)

While Dachau was always run by “a disciplinarian who would make the generally conceived version of a Prussian officer look like a weak sister” (802), Buchenwald was “as disordered as the mind of the drunken S.S. camp commander” (804). As such, in this fluctuating state of kindness and sadism, the camp commander ordered a week of festivity to celebrate the 1938 New Year. “A prisoner was found who had been *Compère* in a Large Berlin Music Hall” (*Ibid.*) and he was responsible for finding additional talent and staging the performance. Other prisoners constructed a theatre:

The partitions of a long hut were pulled down and a stage with proscenium constructed along the middle of one of the hut’s long sides. Overhead lights were set up and a few crudely painted pieces of scenery representing a sylvan glade (*sic*) were built. (804-805)

There were approximately 500 individuals who attended the performance. They “were grouped in a flat crescent, some sitting and the majority standing” (805). The acts consisted of “jugglers, acrobats, dancers, conjurers, monologists, songsters and instrumentalists” and were framed by the *Compère* who commenced the show with the following repartee:

‘My friends, you are lucky to be here this afternoon. Here, in Buchenwald, we have the best art and the best artists in the whole of Germany. Hey you can actually laugh out loud at our jokes. Here is the freest theatre in the Reich. In the theatres outside, the actors and the audience are frightened because they fear that they may end up in a Concentration Camp. That’s something we don’t have to worry about.’

He then joked that:

‘You know, times don’t really change. I remember that when we had the Kaiser, we always had swine pushing us around. Later when we had the Republic, was it any different? No, we still had swine pushing us around. And what of today?’ He waited for an answer. The air was electric as the prisoners watched the S.S. men out of the corners of their eyes. No answer. He answered the question himself. ‘Why, today is Monday.’ (805)

The jokes were funny, a mix of gallows humour combined with incongruity, yet the show was not enjoyable for “[t]he presence of so many S.S. men threw a damper over everything” (*Ibid.*).

While the above was a permitted, even a requested performance, other performances were clandestine and, according to Daniel, a “flourishing underground theatre, both political and non-political” (*Ibid.*) existed. The political cabarets were performed by amateurs but the acts were original. He explains how they worked:

There were several groups of about five men each, who made the rounds of the political huts between 6 P.M. and ‘lights out’ on weekdays. The audience was invariably of a high intellectual level, consisting of former members of the Reichstag, leaders of the pre-Third Reich political parties, writers, artists, publicists, etc.

In the five-man cabaret in which the writer played, the performance was in the manner of the Viennese *Kleinkunstbühne*, the audience being

grouped in a small circle round the performers. Jura Soyfer [...] wrote the greater part of the show. The actual creation of the show was an intellectual feat. For obvious reasons nothing could be written down, so that the script – lasting one hour – had to be transmitted to the actors by word of mouth [...] The players took the precaution of tearing off the identification numbers sewn on the right thigh of each prisoner's pants, in case some S.S. stool pigeon should make trouble.

The details of the program were simple. The first item was always the singing of the Buchenwald Song by the group [...] Next came a humorous monologue of an imaginary conversation between the drunken camp leader and the equally drunken leader of the German Labor Front, Dr. Robert Ley. This was performed by a famous Central European comedian whose name cannot be mentioned because he is still in a Concentration Camp, though no longer in Buchenwald. This would be followed by more political songs. The most important item would be a short for three players, lasting for some twenty minutes, a mixture of comedy and satire attacking the administration of the camp and the blood-soaked system which maintained it. (805-806)

While this article is important for so many reasons (it offers an eye-witness account, it is comparative in nature, and it discusses the differences between political and non-political entertainment), only an occasional distinction is made between the Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners and entertainers. As such, discussing Jewish humour per se is virtually impossible, but ample evidence of gallows humour is recorded. In the end, theatre under such barbaric conditions offered a “temporary release from the terrible reality of life” (806). Moreover, it was, according to Daniel, hailed “as one of man's great achievements in adversity” (807).

Häim Vidal Sephia, born in 1923, and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau at the age of 20, makes the correlation between adaptability and humour. When asked by the interviewer, « *Vous riez d'un rire intérieur. Pensez-vous que certains vous reprochaient ce rire?* » his reply is the following, « Non, je crois que ceux qui ne riaient pas étaient à ce point atteints que ça ne les touchait même plus. On sentait qu'ils allaient disparaître en premier. Ils étaient déjà pris de la maladie concentrationnaire. Ils n'étaient pas

adaptables... » (110). And when questioned if comedies and humour existed inside the camps and what function derision had within this universe Sephia replies:

Elle se trouvait à tous les niveaux. [...] Entre nous, ils nous arrivait de faire de l'humour sur notre apparence ou notre origine. Souvent, quand nos cheveux repoussaient un peu, comme il fallait que nous soyons tondus pour être reconnus en cas d'évasion, on nous faisait au milieu de la tête un coup de tondeuse, on l'appelait la *Läusestraße*, la route aux poux. Les Juifs grecs on les appelait 'klepsi klepsa' [according to the footnote, in modern Greek *ego clepto* means 'I steal'], les polonais m'appelaient 'Ataturc'... (110-111)

Further on in the interview he states that, « Notre rire, dans le camp n'a pas duré longtemps, c'était l'instant du déshabillage et de nous voir soudain tous nus. C'était une defense, et nous étions entre nous! » (115) He goes on to explain that every society creates its own humour. Thus, in an environment where death is the norm, it is no wonder that if an inmate coughed « on lui posait amicalement la main sur l'épaule en lui disant: '*Morgen Krematorium*' [demain crématoire] » (112). Moreover, Sephia acknowledges that « on reprenait un peu l'humour pas très léger des SS. Ils disaient aussi '*Morgen wirst du die Engel sehen*' » (112). And humour also existed against those in power. In one Judeo-Spanish joke, Sephia recounts, « [o]n tournait Hitler en derision: par exemple, quand on allait aux WC qui se trouvait, à Bruxelles, sur le palier: *Onde vas ? – Aser de una visita a Hitler!* [Où vas-tu? – rendre visite à Hitler] » (118). And when asked if there can be laughter after this catastrophe, he responds in the affirmative but qualifies it with the following words, « c'est souvent un rire jaune, pénétré de la souffrance humaine » (114). In the examples he provides, the laughter is complex, profound and, most importantly, life-affirming.

Thus humour, by its very nature, adopts very utilitarian purposes. Its function is to preserve the “inner man” by lessening the psychological blow of trauma and it subverts

those who are supposedly dominant. In the biography, *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz*, jokes were told during the darkest of times. In her recollections, Magda Hellinger Blau, the *Blockälteste* of Block 10 (the Experimental Block) in Auschwitz states:

In the evening when all the SS doctors and SS *Blockführerin* left, we planned that the women should come down the stairs one by one in a kind of fashion parade in the gowns they had received. Imagine the show – a small woman in a big gown, a large woman in a small one. It was a comedy – a tragic comedy. Laughter on the sad faces. (224)

While the women in this cabaret mocked themselves, other cabarets mocked superiors. As Rachella Velt Meekcoms, a survivor of Auschwitz, recalls:

Once on a Saturday a bunch of us, Dutch and Hungarian kids, put on a little show for each other and I was master of ceremonies. We mimicked top overseers and I did impersonations about camp life and somebody did a little tap-dance, different funny, crazy things. The overseers slipped into the barracks while we weren't looking, and instead of giving us a punishment they were laughing their heads off. I couldn't believe it: one day they were hitting us black and blue, and then they were laughing while we made fun of them. But, you see, in spite of all our agony and pain we never lost our ability to laugh at ourselves and our miserable situation. We had to make jokes to survive and save ourselves from deep depression. (qtd. in Rothchild 409)

In his memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl also examined the role of the cabaret and the importance of entertaining on both a communal and individual level. From a psychological point of view Frankl writes that in Auschwitz:

A kind of cabaret was improvised from time to time. A hut was cleared temporarily, a few wooden benches were pushed or nailed together and a program was drawn up. In the evening those who had fairly good positions in the camp [...] assembled there. They came to have a few good laughs or perhaps to cry a little; anyway, to forget. There were songs, poems, jokes, some with underlying satire regarding the camp. All were meant to help us forget, and they did help. The gatherings were so effective that a few ordinary prisoners went to see the cabaret in spite of their fatigue even though they missed their daily portion of food by going. (61)

On a practical level, there was benefit to being the entertained but there was equal if not more benefit to being the entertainer. As Frankl points out:

On entering, everyone got a ladleful of the watery soup. While we sipped it greedily, a prisoner climbed onto a tub and sang Italian arias. We enjoyed the songs, and he was guaranteed a double helping of soup, straight “from the bottom” – that meant with peas! (61)

In the end, while the cabaret performers ridiculed Hitler and the Third Reich for political and ideological purposes, those who performed behind the barbed wires did so for several reasons: as an act of rebellion, as a form of self-preservation and, in certain cases, as a way to win the guards’ favour and increase their own chance for survival:

...in addition to the officially sanctioned performances were the more numerous, more spontaneous, and usually clandestine performances in which inmates could truly express their feelings and fears. These could take many forms. In an internment camp near Riga a group of women organized a satirical puppet show. They made the puppets out of the material of their striped uniforms, sewn together with thread picked from their scarves. A bench with blankets served as an improvised puppet theatre. There must have been some satisfaction in using the outward manifestation of their oppression, their camp uniforms, as a means to escape into the world of fantasy. (Patterson 163)⁸⁰

Thus, entertainment within these grotesque settings was not only beneficial but also life saving from both an emotional and corporeal point of view. But it is not just entertainment which is life saving, but also humour, for it is “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation” (Frankl 63).

Contrary to Frankl’s position, Lawrence L. Langer points out in his essay, “Cultural Resistance to Genocide,” that the artistic output during the Holocaust “resonates beyond the verbal chronicles of survivors and historians; it afflicts our desire

⁸⁰ According to Alvin Goldfarb, this puppet show was “[p]robably the most unique theatrical presentation in an internment center ...” (8) It took place in Kaiserwald and was organized and performed by “[a]group of female internees in the German Electrical Organization’s block... (*Ibid.*) Created to celebrate the birthday of their lenient *Lageralteste*, the project was organized by Flora Rome who wrote the satirical program and “supervised the construction of the puppets” (*Ibid.*). Aiding her were Adela Bay, Musia Deyches, Regi Litvas, and the Kotik sisters. “The text was spoken by Serele Lipovski and Musia Alperovitsch. The production was directed by Musia Deyches. Traditional songs, sung *a capella*, were included in the program” (*Ibid.*). It was such a hit, that it was staged twice.

to redesign hope from the shards of despair with the vision of an anguish that is recordable but not redeemable by the energies of cultural effort” (52). Langer in questioning the role of art and artistic output during the Holocaust in relation to the notion of cultural resistance to genocide asks, “Using their tools and talents, [...] artists etched on the tablets of history a permanent record of their experience. But how did it injure the enemy, scornful of the very idea of Jewish culture? And how did it save Jewish lives?” (52) The answer is not simple for he maintains that cultural works act as a witness to barbarism, but do not suppress it. *En masse*, artistic production (in any form) did not save lives, yet in certain instances, life was prolonged and extra rations were given in exchange for cultural productions. The desire to live was the resistance. To completely ignore that would be as damning as Langer’s belief that the word “resistance,” in relation to culture and genocide, has “been exaggerated by *us*, the heirs and descendants of the Holocaust experience, instead of its having been recruited as an accurate description of their activities by the victims and survivors of the event” (53). Though Langer does concede that ample examples of “resistance to cultural genocide” (61) do exist, he fails to take into account the resistance after the fact. Many diarists for instance, knew that they would not survive; yet, they continued to write and hide their writings as a testimony and legacy for the future. Moreover, Langer uses Alfred Kantor as an example of an artist who used his art as a form of evasion, but what of the others? What of the performers and the cabaretists who performed to not only give themselves purpose amidst the chaos but hope to so many others as well? Langer believes that, “Each work, each cultural effort, reflects not defiance but a basic human need to interpret the meaning of one’s experience, or to pierce the obscurities that shroud in apparent meaninglessness” (57). Thus,

according to his assessment, each clandestine performance, each political joke, each work of art during the Holocaust, “did not preserve human life, but [...] maintained a continuity in human culture” (61). And while he speaks in general terms about the “artist-victims” and the futility of their art as a form of resistance to “the enemies of human life” (61), individual testimonies do recount that cultural *resistance*, not just commentary, did exist. For this art resulted for some in the extra rations, it resulted in the buying of time and favours, it resulted in the fight for self-preservation and not just as an act of evasion. Ultimately, art, in any form, permitted the entertainers to retain their role and identity, to maintain their sense of purpose while providing a brief window of “normalcy” to the audiences. It was restorative and this is resistance to degradation and dehumanization.

From the Camps to the Pages of Fiction

Unlike the historical figures previously discussed, the fictional character of Antoine Moreau, in *The Last Butterfly*, is a mix between Finck and Švenk. *The Last Butterfly* was first published as a novel in 1973, then later turned into a film; the plot differences between the two are obvious. What is important is that the protagonist (Antonin Karas, in the novel; Antoine Moreau, in the movie), is sent to Terezín due to his Hitler salute skit in the cabaret.⁸¹ In the novel, his performance is depicted as follows:

... in the middle of the bow, his hair fell over his forehead, and when he straightened up, the hair placed itself like a dark shadow just over one eye. His body slumped slightly. The mask. The mask! When he stood up again he was Hitler.

The reaction from the audience was slow, but when it came it was mingled with fear.

With his left finger posed as a toothbrush moustache, Antonin broke the hushed silence of the theater by raising his right arm in the Nazi salute.

⁸¹ Furthermore, in the novel Antonin’s mother is Jewish and his being sent to Terezín is both understood as a punishment and as the “natural order” of things.

He paused... not too long, but for that second which years of timing had taught him. Then he said,
 “That’s how high my dog can jump!” (Jacot 22)

In the film, the humour is visual – without uttering one word, the performer manages to undermine the authority and the insults of the Nazi officers by “portraying them as being mindlessly obedient, with his hilarious mimed rendition of a Nazi salute gone reflexively awry” (Krausz 149). The salute becomes a ridiculous gesture devoid of all meaning. Yet, because of this silent protest, Antonin/Antoine is sent to Terezín where he is to entertain the children.

With continuously divergent narratives, the novel and the film differ in regards to the performance of this mime/clown. In the text, he entertains the Jewish children by mocking Hitler:

... His body sagged. His arms hung limp. Suddenly he jumped to life in his own imitations of Hitler. But it was a Hitler who had got up one morning and lost his moustache, so that he shouted all his orders with a lisp.

Antonin spent a good deal of time on all fours looking for the moustache and when he found it he stuck it on upside-down. Of course there was no moustache, but you could tell it was upside down because he kept sneezing and trying to get it off again and turn it round. He ended up by suddenly doing a Nazi salute. The crowd slowly became silent. They weren’t sure. But Antonin knew what he was doing. Suddenly he said, “That’s how high a Jewish dog can jump – right over a Nazi’s arm!” (Jacot 82)

The levity becomes not only justified but more humorous because of the context. In this case, there is a Jew who mocks the oppressor while delighting a Jewish audience at the oppressors’ expense. Amidst the horror, Antonin wants to delight, wants to make the frightened children laugh to ease their pain – if only temporarily.

The novel mixes fact with fiction and even incorporates Pavel Friedmann’s poem, “The Butterfly,” into the narrative. In addition, the text also brings to light the arrival of

Polish children to Terezín. While used as a narrative manoeuvre to further plot progression, the fictionalized arrival of these children could have been based on the factual arrival of over 1,000 children from the Bialystok Ghetto who witnessed the execution of their families. Their state upon arrival was abysmal and has been described as follows: “They were terrified and appeared to be dumb; many were bare-footed, all in pitiful rags and half-starved. With their tiny hands they clasped little boxes or prayer books, if they had anything to clasp at all” (qtd. in Eisen 94). Yet, Eisen puts forth the notion that with the clandestine toys and the “goodness of their helpers” (95), these waifs once again became children in that they sang songs and played games. Likewise, in the novel, the convoy of Polish children regain their laughter through the nurturing care of the adults as well as through the antics of Antonin:

“Can you all hear me?” Antonin said in Polish. “Sit down. I’m a friend. We are going to get you food...it will be coming soon.” He had wandered to the centre of the hut. “You all know about food... don’t you? He paused... “Like this?”
 He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out an imaginary banana. He held it up for all to see. His eyes rolled and he licked his lips with his tongue. Then he elaborately peeled the banana on all three sides.
 He licked it. There was some laughter and the children began to sit down.
 “What’s your name?”

Pause

“You can whisper it if you don’t want the others to know!”

This brought more laughter. [...]

Antonin licked the side of the banana again. Then he pretended to try to peel the last quarter. It wouldn’t peel. His eyebrow rose and he scratched the top of his head.

He could feel the eyes on him now. He hadn’t felt so good in ages. The stench around him was overpowering, but the thin faces broke into smiles that showed swollen gums, yellowed with malnutrition. (106-107)

This quote is important for several reasons. Firstly, it highlights two modes of humour; pantomime and a joke which works based on the theory of incongruity. Secondly, it highlights what George Eisen asserts – that play restores a child’s natural vitality (95).

Thirdly, it needs to be examined within the context of Langer's essay. For in this instance, Antonin's levity acts not only as a balm to soothe the trauma that these children experienced but it also gives him a sense of purpose or meaning within the Terezín universe.

While Eisen only speculates as to the types of games these children played, stating that "[m]aybe the children responded [...] by reverting to innocent play and rhymes of a happier time [or] [m]aybe they were forced by subconscious urges to enact their more recent tragic past in play form" (95), the children in *The Last Butterfly*, played ball, leap-frog, and built a fort. Yet, Antonin is troubled by this levity for he says, "I'm thinking how funny it is to be happy at a time like this" (Jacot 121). And even though this protagonist "openly questions the propriety of humor in such a setting" (Lipman 247), he still performs for the children. On a transport to an unknown destination, Antonin understands that, in essence, there is no better time for jokes. And so, he performs at the request of the children:

"He's going to do jokes. Do jokes not music!" [...]
 "Do jokes, please Mr. Karas. Do jokes."
 Antonin played along for some time to let his mind settle. Jokes? [...]
 What better time for jokes? [...]
 The violin began to play. He revolved it in the light to show that no bow was on the strings. It was Fra Diavolo's aria. It was magic. (161)

While the novel ends with the bombing of the tracks and the escape of the children, Antonin is captured and shipped back to Terezín to entertain more children in the next transport. After all, as one Nazi officer asks, "Is it not better to go to death with a laugh on your lips than in sadness?" (220) In the film, the ending commences with the deportation. Performing his final act, the ramp onto the train becomes a temporary stage whereby Antoine again performs the skit of the dog who is unable to jump over the arm

which then evolves into the Hitler salute that is out of control. The audience, who are the Jews about to be deported, burst into laughter, angering the SS officers, metaphorically and temporarily rendering them powerless. Freud explains that, “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the joy of overcoming him” (122). Thus, this bitter joke, (which is a visual one), establishes inferiority while boosting morale for both the mime and his intended audience. Ultimately, in the words of Frankl, “humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds” (63). In this instance, laughter is short lived; its presence is a physical but fleeting revolt against fear and defencelessness. It is a testament to and a reminder of humanity.⁸²

Published in 1972, the final draft of the screenplay *The Day the Clown Cried*, deals with a similar theme as *The Last Butterfly*. In both these works, the clown or mime is a washed-up has been and the desire to perform stems not from a political ideology but is a matter of ego which is best summed up by the following lines, “I AM A CLOWN...PEOPLE LAUGH AT ME... I like being a clown ... I DON'T LIKE people laughing at me ... But, Oh, How I HATE when they DON'T !!!” (n.p.)

Similar to Antoine, Helmut Doork makes fun of the Nazi salute (though not on stage) which results in his incarceration. The prisoners with whom Helmut is lodged demand a laugh, and yet, this broken man is unable to be funny. The clown, only

⁸² Hillesum's last letter, written on the 7th of September, was thrown out of the train. It was posted on the 15th. In it she writes, “I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning [...] We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly” (146).

becomes funny because his audience changes. Performing for non-Aryan children, Helmut relies upon slapstick humour to entertain:

He quickly leans down, looks at his reflection in the puddle, and scoops up a handful of mud which he plasters on his nose to make a bulbous, artificial proboscis. He turns back to the children and in pantomime, pretends to see a fly buzzing about and tries to swat it. The imaginary fly buzzes closer [...] As the fly lands on his nose. He looks cross-eyed at the mud blob, then swats at it. The blob falls off. (n.p.)

His slapstick routine is able to literally cut through brutality for according to the directions of the screenplay, “[w]e see now that Helmut on his side of the fence is performing for the children on the other side of the menacing barbed wire fence” (n.p.). Though his performance evokes laughter in both the children and the adults, he is ordered to stop. As Johann Keltner, a fellow political prisoner, explains, “When you rule by fear, laughter is the most frightening sound in the world.”⁸³ Though ordered to forget and to be kept separate, Helmut’s compassion for the children transforms this desperate performer into a kind-hearted clown. The more they laugh, the harder he performs, regardless of the risk. He entertains the children as they await in a cattle car, bringing them comfort. Though accidentally transported, he becomes the piper and leads them singing and dancing to their deaths. He could escape but joins the children and “stretches out his arms to encompass all the children. As they gather around him, they take up his soft laugh, timidly at first, then more assuredly until the chamber resounds with gentle laughter” (n.p.). While Helmut initially performs for the laughs, his heart softens for his audience and this clown ends up performing, not for his ego but, for a higher purpose.

⁸³ In his introduction to his compilation of anti-Nazi humour, B.D. Shaw writes, “Since the dawn of humor, tyrants have tried to suppress the free exercise of wit. Instinctively they know and fear the tremendous power of laughter. But the attempts at suppression have never been entirely successful” (3). Though the statement is somewhat grandiose and vague, the testimonies which have been examined prove that despite the horrors, laughter existed. What is of importance is that the concentration camps are mentioned in these jokes which were circulating in 1939, calling into question the notion of not knowing.

The type of humour is mainly pantomime and slapstick, yet its presence within the camp is incongruous with reality. While the S.S. guards look on in bewilderment, humour allows Helmut to not only calm the children down but provide them with an alternate perspective of a very grim reality.

In the end, testimonies and historical documents indicate that humour and levity were present in various milieus such as cabarets, transit camps, and concentration camps and in various forms from skits, to songs, to formulaic jokes. Its purpose was political and psychological (for both the audience and the performers). Within the confines of the camp, humour was used to lift the spirits while creating an emotional barrier from traumatic events. As Rudolf Vrba recalls about being tattooed upon his arrival to Auschwitz:

Behind a table sat two more prisoners, one, a Frenchman, known throughout the camp as Leo, the tattooist, the other a Slovak, called Eisenberg. They were cheerful fellows, who joked about the whole business, asking the cattle politely where they would like their numbers – on the left arm or the right, underneath or on top. There was something strangely comical being given a choice in circumstances such as these ; it was rather like asking a man which side he would like his hair parted, before his head was cut off. (84-85)

Levity then presents itself the same way in fiction though it becomes more animated and naïve; perhaps because of the two-fold audience; the children who are to be entertained and the spectators who are reading these fictions. For the protagonists, Antonin and Helmut, their desire to entertain can also be explained by the fact that entertaining was good not only for the children but also for themselves. According to Eisen's research:

Children's play had the power not only to ease but to actually promote mental adaptation of the adult population to the novel demands of ghetto existence. Providing opportunities for play was part of a conscious escape mechanism through which the adult population attempted to transcend in

spirit both the physical walls of the ghetto and the mental walls of terror.
(49)

As such, while Eisen directs this observation to the ghettos, within the context of these fictional texts, play becomes a balm not only for the children but also for the adults; especially for the entertainers within the setting of a transit of concentration camp.

Ultimately, it is important to note that certain jokes and material for jokes reassert themselves within Holocaust fiction – suggesting that it is not just the trauma which keeps reaffirming, repeating, recreating, and sentimentalizing itself, but also the acknowledgment that, despite the trauma, the desire to laugh, the wish to live, and the ability to rebel against a state of exception is both recognized and inscribed within the testimonies and reinscribed within subsequent works of fiction.

CHAPTER 2

Oy Gevalt! Are These Really Our Children?!

What role might comedy, jokes, and laughter play in relation to a traumatic memory? Perhaps, in relation to such a barbaric past, there is a laughter that revolts against history, against the enemy. And a future *beyond* the enemy may require this laughter.

Joseph Rosen

While survivors have a difficult time in expressing and transmitting their experiences, the children of survivors are in the precarious situation of being the keepers of memories which were never theirs. In her book, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, Helen Epstein interviewed numerous children of Holocaust parents to discuss their social, emotional, and psychological response to this burden. Some children responded to this legacy by being emotionally distant, others felt as though they had to protect their parents, others were determined to succeed. Interestingly, throughout all the interviews, only one respondent incorporated humour. Yehudah Cohen, described by Epstein as being an extrovert with a “penchant for making incisive, mirthless jokes” (238), greets guests in the following manner: “I introduce visitors to my wife, my daughter, and Uncle George...Then I point to the nearest lampshade” (239). According to him:

Some people turn green. They find it in terrible taste. Okay, I suppose it’s really sick. It’s really disgusting humor. But I don’t consider humor as being degrading in any way. It’s something I picked up from my father. He never told me horror stories about the war. If my father told any stories at all, they were humorous. They were jokes. I think the way my father can look at something and verbalize only the humorous aspects helped him – not physically, but emotionally – through the camps. I don’t know whether it’s an acquired or inherited characteristic, but it’s something I’m proud of. (*Ibid.*)

Black humour, though unconventional and tasteless to many, is not *that* uncommon in both North America⁸⁴ and Israel.

In her work, examining the relationship between Israeli children and their survivor parents, Tamar Fox, recalls one joke that she used to tell, “What’s the difference between a loaf of bread and a Jew? A loaf of bread doesn’t scream when you put it in the oven” (qtd. in Oster 55). In addition to that barb, other examples of recorded jokes are the following:

“What’s the Friday night entertainment in Lohamei Hagettaot? Connecting the gas bottles...” (Fox 139)

“At the memorial ceremony in kibbutz Lohamei Hagettaot the speaker announces: the winner is number so-an-so...” (*Ibid.*)

“Why is our village surrounded with barbed wire? To make the residents feel at home!” (*Ibid.*)

While these jokes appear to make fun of the Holocaust and of the survivors, their cynicism is indicative of a psychological distancing. These jokes were told to either “alleviate and channel out the fear and aggression, or to contain, for children of silent survivor parents, the ‘black cloud’ of the unknown but constantly present past” (139). Other jokes indicate the implicit understanding between children of survivors and the lingering effect of the Holocaust even though the jokers never experienced the trauma. As one interviewee said:

We had jokes: for instance, my friend was chubby and I used to say: ‘Don’t eat so much! And she would say: ‘Bella, when we get to Auschwitz *my* body will have fat reserves’, and I would answer: ‘No, you’ll find it

⁸⁴ One North American playground joke goes as follows, “What’s green and flies over Germany? Snotzies” (Oster 52). According to a friend, Stan Anchel, a playground ditty popular amongst the Jewish kids in Montreal went as follows: “Hitler he only had one ball/Göring he had two but they were small/ Himmler had something similar/ But poor Goebbels had no balls at all!” (Though many variations of this song can be found, this is the one that was remembered.) Thus, the jokes are a combination of punning, black humour and blue comedy (which uses profanity to shock and entertain).

harder, getting used to hunger. I'll survive longer because I'm used to not eating!' (140)

Thus, the Holocaust becomes a constant lingering presence, which transforms “[t]he Seventh Avenue local [into] a train of cattle cars on its way to Poland” (Epstein 10), and which has Art Spiegelman fantasizing about “Zyklon B coming out of [the] shower instead of water” (*II*, 16). As a child of survivors, Bella explains, “[f]or *us* the jokes were a form of survival. A way to be happy in the darkest place on earth” (Fox 141). Thus, children of survivors who do fantasize and use jokes do so not as a way to disparage their parents’ experience but as a way to negotiate with it. Shai Oster contends that, “[i]n every joke the child of a survivor tells is the hint of the hidden horror (90). Many children of survivors, in fact, “rationalized that, as ‘second-generationers’, they were *entitled* to make [jokes]” (Fox 141). Calling themselves SGs (Shoah Graduates) or 2G (Second Generation), the members of this group use jokes for a number of emotional and psychological reasons, one of which is to express emotion and form connections without the need for onerous dialogue.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Another reason that jokes are made in relation to the Holocaust is to relativize threat. For instance, one joke which became popular in Israel during the Second Intifada is the following:

Sara in Jerusalem hears on the news about a bombing at a popular café near the home of relatives in Tel Aviv. She calls in a panic and reaches her cousin, who assures her that thankfully, the family is safe.

“And Anat?” Sara asks after the teenager whose hangout it had been.

“Oh, Anat,” says her mother, reassuringly, “Anat’s fine. She’s at Auschwitz!”

(Wisse, *MJH* 218)

Quoted by Ruth Wisse, this “joke crosses the wires of anxiety over Jew-killing past and present, and reveals in the forced recognition – surprise of surprises – that today’s danger may be greater than yesterday’s” (*MJH* 219). It speaks to the Israeli education system in which teenagers are taken to Poland to visit the death camps and to the imminent threat upon Israeli society. Moreover, this joke “[b]y acknowledging the infamous Nazi death camp as a place of refuge from what was intended to be the Jewish place of refuge ... offends both sides of the political spectrum – liberals who deny the ferocity of the Arab aggression, and patriots who cannot acknowledge that Zionism does not fully safeguard the Jews” (*Ibid.*). In this instance, Auschwitz is an old threat which, ironically enough, could potentially be a lifesaver.

In the 1988 Israeli documentary, entitled *Abaleh, kah oti l'luna park (Daddy Come to the Fare)*,⁸⁶ Holocaust survivor, Mordechai Vilozhny and his two children, Shmuel and Yael, are shown returning to Poland more than 50 years after his exodus. Though the movie traces Mordechai's past, it also focuses on Shmuel's reactions to this trauma. Shmuel is an actor by trade, and the movie commences with a dark screen and his voice telling jokes and explaining to both his audience and the viewer that this is a "one-time show." Thus, the stage is set and the film oscillates between Shmuel's comedic stand-up routine and the footage from his trip to Poland with his father and sister. Laughter mixes in this film which, as Ruth Wisse suggests, "broke through prohibitions about using the Shoah for comedy even as it deepened connections with the Jewish past" (Wisse, *MJH* 214). For the son, humour allows him to both express his anger and bond with his father. As he says at the beginning of their trip, "What really worries me about this whole trip, [honestly], is that you'll end up speaking Polish. I'll sue for damages." And as his father begins to unburden himself and talk about his "true" home, Shmuel's manner becomes dismissive as he says, "What we see outside? These ugly things?" As such, Shmuel "evokes the strained relations between sabra-son and survivor-father in a tone that assumes his listeners [and the viewers] share his impatience with the genocide that darkened their parents' lives – and consequently, theirs" (*MJH* 213).

Poignant memories are mixed with smiles and tears and Mordechai's sadness is contrasted to the dysfunctional realities faced by children of survivors. As Shmuel says in his comedic routine, "I remember, there were arguments in the family, whether to buy or not to buy German products..." And as he asks audience members if this is a familiar question, one replies, "Boycott". To which Shmuel responds, "Boycotted? They said

⁸⁶ The title is taken from a well-known 1930s Hebrew song.

Heraus mit dem Hund!! But there were no dogs in houses that boycotted German products, especially not German Shepherds.” Yet, he continues to say that many want German products as they are of high quality; “[...] in our family arguments my uncle said ‘we must have German products because they are the best quality, and my father said ‘How can you tell? And he said ‘Here. This number doesn’t come off’.” Thus, laughter is juxtaposed with death and humour is used to highlight a familial/historical schism.⁸⁷

Overwhelming feeling is quickly undone by laughter and the bonding process is both strengthened and weakened by Shmuel’s levity. “When I was in Poland... My father came from a town called Psheshnitz⁸⁸. One could die just from that. Psheshnitz. ‘Kid, where do you live?’ ‘Psheshnitz.’ ‘Kid, you haven’t got a chance...’” And though the audience laughs, it is as important to him, if not more so, that his father laughs, “Today, you are going to laugh, got it?” practically turning laughter into a moral imperative. For Shmuel, laughter means the reduction of pain, the normalization of a traumatic episode, and indicates a child-like need for reassurance that his father is and will be fine. And in the end, he does get his father to laugh in order to reduce the trauma, perhaps even to rewire the pain. “The whole time you complain that you’re uncomfortable. Your journey then was better? 3 weeks, was that easier? [...] So stop complaining. [...] Keep quiet. It’s [almost] authentic. [Almost closed in.] I tried to get you a truck but... [it] didn’t work out... [I] wanted to shut the windows so you’d feel authentic...” And as father and son

⁸⁷ At one point in the documentary, the family becomes jubilant as Mordechai learns that he was born in 1933 and is actually two years younger than he thought. “Go to Poland and come back two years younger ...”

⁸⁸ Shmuel acts the fool and uses an echo-combination to undermine gravitas. For instance, a serious conversation between Mordechai and Shmuel is lightened when Shmuel says, “Psheshnitz, Shprutznitz...” And later Shmuel says to his father “Even the Polish can’t pronounce Psheshnitz.”

burst out into laughter, a bond is reinforced. The deportation/journey, like the tattooed numbers,⁸⁹ is fodder for levity.

In addition to the stand-up comedy routine and the inside jokes between father and son, laughter can also be found within the relationship between Shmuel and the Polish people. In the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery, for instance, he comes across a Polish officer, imitates the officer's march and has the Polish officer copy the Israeli military march. Though he is being silly, Shmuel undoes the power this officer symbolizes. While Mordechai says, "You know, the boots, the uniform, it took me back to the past. 50 years went by in one second" the sabra-son, who himself was in the army, is neither intimidated nor silenced. As such, the Polish father and the Israeli son demonstrate the gap of the generations and the difference of perspective between being a Jew from the Diaspora and a Jew from the State of Israel.

Also manifest in the documentary is the pain of growing up as a child of survivors. Shmuel reproaches his father for being emotionally distant, for forcing him to grow up too quickly, for obligating him to finish his meals and, most importantly, for getting stuck in the past. In discussing his audition to be in *Schindler's List*, he laments

⁸⁹ Later on in the documentary, the number is again mentioned in jest as Shmuel describes his audition for *Schindler's List*. "You sit on a chair. After waiting for your turn. What's your number... And every one comes with excuses: 'Listen, I've got to leave early, I have a show tonight. No, I'm in rehearsals...' People can't. You have a number, stick to it. No. We have something with numbers, our people. We can't accept numbers. We can't accept numbers". Only, in this instance, it is the Israeli mentality which is being mocked. Another iconic symbol of the Holocaust and of death – the shower – is again a cause for laughter, particularly within Israeli society. During the comedic act, it is mentioned in a context which ridicules the Israeli way of doing things. Setting up the scene, he describes how his grandmother would use the bathtub for the carp, forcing him and his family to use the shower. As Shmuel says, "In our house we had a bath for the fish, not for the people. Showers were for the people. It ended in disaster. Fridays I'd panic. I'd open the door and see the carp. Parsley in its eye, carrot in its mouth..." Shmuel also pokes fun at the notion of hunger, saying, in relation to his father, "He's a Holocaust survivor so he eats a lot. He takes two servings at a time." The teasing implies closeness between father and son and the joshing indicates a recognition of the past and a recognition that the past is indeed in the past and that the Holocaust is no longer a threat.

that he was not chosen to be in the film (despite having “sold” himself and his father) thinking to himself, “Damn it. [C]an’t he see I’m from the Holocaust? [More than] I needn’t act, just give me the [text] and I’m in it, I’ll be myself. [I will be me.] You’ll have someone real.” And when the movie cuts from the comedy club to Poland, the laughter diminishes as the pain of both the father and the son intensifies. Ultimately, laughter and tears do mix, levitas and gravitas do mingle and both bring this family closer together. It must be noted, however, that the laughter tends to be a situational one, a private one, captured for the public but shared between a father and his children.

Another Israeli documentary, *Pizza in Auschwitz*, films the experiences of Danny Chanoch, a Holocaust survivor, and his children’s visit to Lithuania and Poland, including several concentration camps. Narrated by his daughter, Miri says, “On the way to Joslei, grandpa Moshe and grandma Sarah Leah’s town, it finally sinks in: I’m trapped in this van for a week of Holocaust reality TV.” Before the trip begins, Miri is ready to return home. The (physical and psychological) journey is fraught with such a tension that the division between Danny and his children, Shagi and Miri, can never fully be breached:

The whole journey is made according to his will and is constructed to fulfil a vision he has. It is something of a reconstruction journey, a journey meant to revive experiences and to be nostalgic about them, and something of a farewell journey. It is also an educational trip, meant to transmit some critical messages from the father to his children, by means of restoration and semi-symbolical re-enactment of key moments. During the whole trip, Dani Hanoch acts and reacts with a mix of nostalgia, irony and sarcasm. He rejects the common sentimental state of mind that is typical to such trips. (Dagan 161)

According to Miri, “He [Danny] likes to say that he has a BA, a [Boger] Bachelor of Auschwitz.⁹⁰ He calls the days around Holocaust Memorial Day – ‘high season’.”⁹¹ He refers to the bunks of Birkenau as being orthopedic [sic!] and claims that Josef Mengele was his private doctor. Within this seven day journey, amidst the frustration and the need to return (embodied by Danny) and the desire to ignore (as represented by his children), laughter is not only evident, but becomes necessary.

After an emotionally charged visit to the school of his youth, Danny and Miri have an argument. He is anxious to get to Mauthausen and she wants to continue to unwind, on the banks of the Dacha. Accidentally dialling on her phone, and to break the tension, she says, “We called Hitler by accident. Hitler? Hello. Where’s Hitler?” Danny then says in German, “Adolph, what’s up? You’ll accept more Jews?” Miri, now on her phone says, “Hitler, how are you? What do you say? ‘*Juden raus*,’ he says [and she gives the camera a most wide smile].” The Holocaust is so ingrained in this family’s discourse that, according to Danny, they play the Hebrew alphabet game with the horror of history:

Aleph: Auschwitz
 Bet: Birkenau
 Gimmel: Gas
 Daled: Dachau
 Hey: Hitler

Yet, it is not just Danny who approaches the Holocaust with a certain ironic attitude; his daughter, Miri, also adopts a similar tone. For instance, towards the beginning of their trip, Miri quips, “We have a great name for the latest Israeli café: ‘Ba-Ghetto.’ They’ll

⁹⁰ The ironic idea of Auschwitz as a “place of learning” is also put forth by Vrba, who explains, “It is true that I was nineteen and mentally somewhat older, thanks to the University of Auschwitz” (182).

⁹¹ In fact, in response to the comedic YouTube clip in which Hitler complains and strategizes about the difficulty of parking in Tel Aviv, Danny Hanoach, in a newspaper interview claimed, “that there’s no big harm in it; the harm is rather in the overseriousness of the collective Holocaust memory in Israel (Dagan 157). The scene reworks the bunker episode from Oliver Hirschbiegel’s 2004 film *Der Untergang* and has gone viral.

serve baguettes.” However, as the trip progresses, she admits that her father’s stories of the war made her, to this day, fearful of a knock on the door. At some points she makes sarcastic comments like when asking for a glass of water, she is given a choice “With or without gas?” Knowing that she must pay extra for carbonated water she replies, “Ok, with gas. We [the Jews] are used to paying for it.” And in the car, Miri, her brother, Shagi, Danny and the others sing;

The boy and girl scouts
 Cherli Kacherli
 Traveled by train
 Cherli Kacherli
 Went into the crematoriums
 Cherli Kacherli
 And came out through chimneys
 Cherli Kacherli⁹²

Yet, the laughter quickly turns to tears when the family arrives at Stutthof and Danny explains that it was there that his family was torn apart. Miri, overcome by emotion says, “I’d have poisoned everybody, including myself. And I know exactly why I didn’t want to come here. I’m not sure I want to continue to Auschwitz. What for? To see it on a larger scale?” Yet, the trip continues. And, when her father, anxious to get to Auschwitz on time, says, “We need to be there by 2:00,” Miri responds, “Don’t worry dad, Jews are always accepted in Auschwitz. They’ve never refused entry to a Jew.”

Despite the moments of hurt, anger, and bitterness, pockets of laughter and optimism prevail. Even in the barracks of Birkenau, levity can be found. Forcing his children to spend the night with him in “his home,” Danny lies on the bunk and is forced by his daughter to eat a slice of pizza; pizza from Auschwitz. Danny says, “This is the

⁹² It is important to point out that while the others stop singing, Shagi, the religious one in the group, transitions from this song into a *niggun* (a tune or melody without lyrics), suggesting that, unlike his sister, Miri, he finds solace in religion rather than in humour.

first time I've had pizza on this bunk. It never occurred to me. What fun." When talking about death, the scent of death, the thousands who passed through anonymously, his children become uncomfortable and wonder how much more they can listen to, how much more *they* have to suffer... After having experienced concentration camps and a death march, he can never understand his children's worries and fears, while they cannot fully comprehend his matter-of-fact, almost callous, approach to life. There, in a barrack of Birkenau, a survivor and his offspring come to a stand-still. And Miri, trying to talk sense to her father, insists that he should be happy that his own family did not experience the same horrors and fate. "So you've got Judke, and Mushke and Bulke with whom you can share your horrific Holocaust experiences. But would you want to live with Judke? Wake up with Bulke? No! Be happy that you wake up with Mom who says: 'Danny, how about some coffee? Let's do this and that...'" Smiles mingle with tears and father and children reach a comfortable stalemate as Miri remarks, "I guess there is no such thing as a Holocaust survivor." There may also be no such thing as a typical survivor at all. As Dagan posits:

The strongest argument one can make against the depiction of Dani Hanoch as a typical professional witness is his frequent use of sarcasm and black humour. It is completely antithetical to the manner in which the Holocaust is customarily dealt with in Israel's public and official sphere. In the hands of Dani Hanoch, the Holocaust – the strictest taboo, the holy of holies in official Israel – becomes the object of jokes, ridiculous songs and infantile word-games. In this sense, even if his testimony has qualities of a professional one, it surely is not representative in terms of the normative Holocaust discourse in Israel. More so: it challenges this discourse and opposes it. One can only imagine the scandal that would break out if Dani Hanoch's jokes were told by teachers in one of the school trips (partly financed by the Israeli Education Ministry) to the concentration camps. The Hanoch family's sarcasm is not public, but

rather private, although they choose to make it public and to challenge the public Holocaust memory with it. (Dagan 162-163)⁹³

For Danny, humour plays a complex role as it acts as “a defence against trauma [but also acts as] a tool that enables the preservation of nostalgia: Holocaust-nostalgia,” whereas for Miri, humour “seems to have the function of a defence system” (168). In the end, past and present merge with and repel one another, tears and laughter become a response to tragedy but “[t]his humour is redolent with heavy irony and sarcasm” (158) and a dose of anger and bitterness.

In their show, *Taking the Shoah on the Road*, children of Holocaust survivors, Lisa Lipkin and Moshe Waldoks, use parody to “skewer everyone from children of survivors who rate their parents’ suffering, to performers who make their living off the Holocaust” (Oster 52). One skit, a parody of the *Wheel of Fortune* is called “Wheel of Misfortune” in which the following game is played:

... contestants, all children of Holocaust survivors, compete for prizes. In a few moments we will learn whose parents have suffered the most and how many indelible scars have been left on our contestant’s personalities as they compete for fabulous prizes.
Our host tonight is Pat Polak and his lively Aryan looking assistant, their hidden child survivor, Vanna Veiss.

⁹³ When dealing with present day humour regarding the Holocaust, one should ask who is laughing, who is creating such laughter, why, and for what end. Doron Rabinovici, believes that :

[a]près Auschwitz la commémoration elle-même risque de tourner au pathétique et de ressembler à une nouvelle mise en scène de l’abominable. On n’y parle pas du vécu des gens, dans le détail, dans leur vie d’individus. On se limite aujourd’hui à un tout, une globalité. Sauf qu’un home c’est petit et fragile. Et c’est là que l’humour offre une chance de clarifier les choses pour éviter de tomber dans le piège d’une reproduction, d’un reflet du nazisme (281).

Thus, laughter can function as a humanizing force, allowing for individual voice and expression. It is antithetical to the normative Holocaust rhetoric but both discourses have the same goals – to humanize the tragedy and to keep it relevant in a historical framework. Humour though resists melodrama, over-sentimentalization, and schlock. Ultimately for Rabinovici, “[l]’humour contient la possibilité de pointer du doigt certaines de nos contradictions et certains aveuglements auxquels nous cédonos parfois quand nous disons que nous nous souvenons, que nous serrons les coudes... Certains rituels – pas tout – dégénèrent en festivités de l’oubli, et en alibis” (282).

The contestants are Robert Eisenberg, who is described as being “an overachieving lawyer-doctor-dentist from Tenefly, NJ. who has successfully sued himself at the supreme court,” Ilene Shusterman, who is introduced as “a radical lesbian poet, potter and [m]other [sic!] of three adopted Korean children from Venice, California,” and [T]iffany [sic!] Schwartzfus who in addition to being “a homemaker from Southfield, Michigan,” has begun “a second career designing affordable holocaust memorials for the suburban home.” Tongue-in-cheek, a game show is being used to both highlight and criticize various stratum within Jewish-American society in relation to the Holocaust. The tone is sarcastic, off-hand, almost bitter, but it acts as a resounding yawp against traditional, prescribed Holocaust discourse and memory.

While Lipkin believes that the Jewish community’s need to know about the Holocaust is, “a morbid obsession that is completely counterproductive” (Oster 73) Waldoks is “tired of the Holocaust as an anchor for life” (73) and both sing⁹⁴ their dissatisfaction:

*There’s no business like Shoah business, like no business I know!
Everything about it is appealing, everything the traffic will allow!
Nowhere can you get that special feeling, when you are reeling in pain
and sorrow!* (qtd. in Oster 50)

Humour (in the form of puns, sarcasm, and irony) is, once again, being used by the children of survivors to deal with the heaviness of the trauma. According to Oster, “[t]his is not laughter through tears, it is laughter despite tears. Humour also punctuates,

⁹⁴ According to Hasidic teaching, “the three stages of mourning are tears, silence, and song” (Oster 81) and Waldoks and Lipkin are obviously in the third stage. Yet, all writers and artists who create in response to the Holocaust, either with gravitas or levity, could be considered to be in the third stage of mourning. Alan L. Berger writes that, “[t]exts written by the contemporary children of Job speak of their own experience of the *Shoah*’s legacy. These texts speak *about* rather than *instead of* survivors, as this generation seeks to find its own way of shaping the memory and legacy of Auschwitz” (*Children* 20). As such, the artistic output is not only concerned with memory but also with how and what is being remembered and for what end.

wounds, shocks, and reveals” (90). Yet, this response can be and has been met with resistance. As the story goes:

At the end of the performance at the 92nd Street Y, some audience members ask questions. An elderly man with the thick foreign accent that marks him a survivor stands up, enraged by what he has seen.

‘If you used your methodology in Germany it would be horribly devastating because it’s negating – you’re negating what happened,’ he says. ‘I think it’s all wrong.’

‘I’d be careful about doing this act in Berlin right now,’ Waldoks answers.

Unappeased, the elderly man responds, ‘I’d be careful about doing this act in the United States.’ (Oster 90)

This exchange, between performer and audience member, between the child of a survivor and an actual survivor, indicates the complexity of particular speech acts. The emotional and psychological need to jest comes into conflict with the emotional and psychological need to treat the Holocaust with the utmost seriousness. For the performers, Lipkin and Waldoks, this routine is a rebellion against an imposed mode of telling and commemorating. For this particular audience member, artistic and aesthetic liberties seem to threaten the historical gravitas of the Holocaust. As for these performers, humour is used to rally against death while recognizing tragedy and celebrating life. Jokes allow for healing but also provide a space to voice couched criticism and discontent. It allows for a rebellion which is neither malicious nor spiteful but which becomes a *cri de cœur* that acknowledges the complexities of what it means to be the children of Job.

This complex relationship between humour and anger, between laughter and history is also explored in the 1993 film, *Angst*. While serious in that the film explores the many implications of the Shoah’s awesome legacy, humour and a sardonic tone are used to balance the despair. As Alan L. Berger points out:

What strikes one immediately about this film is the apparent dissonance between the title and the fact that the performers [Sandy Gutman, Deb Filler, and Moshe Waldoks] are comics. Their jokes and routines are quite amusing. But their personal stories are not at all funny. In reality, their humor is a mask for the angst that they feel as inheritors of their parents' Holocaust legacy. Humor in this case is a way of simultaneously distancing from and dealing with the absurdity of the *Shoah*. (150)

These comedians grapple with what the Holocaust means and how that unexperienced trauma shaped their childhood and their Jewish identity. Deb Filler explains that she “felt so guilty for not being there” while Moshe Waldoks explains that he would have wanted to take on the suffering of his parents, and Sandy Gutman tells the viewers that he just wanted to crawl into his father's head to experience the Holocaust. There is, undoubtedly, a tremendous amount of despair in their stories, in their childhood memories; as Filler quips, “I played with my Barbie Doll, dad called her Klaus Barbie”. Yet, despite the heaviness, the film also acts as a testament to the power of humour.

However, it must be recognized that in addition to the laughs, tears and anger are also present. In one scene, Gutman says, “There is no reason for people to murder Jewish people, okay we eat the occasional Christian kid or you know....” This joke can be explained by Martin Grotjahn. He makes a distinction between wit and humour; the first “is related to sadistic aggression” while the latter “is related to the acceptance of human suffering and melancholia” (98). As such, he concludes that “[h]umor does not lead to loud laughter, but to the sad smile of the great clown. The Jewish joke stands halfway between wit and humor” (98-99). It acknowledges defeat and pokes fun, but upon further examination “[i]t turns insult into victory” (99) acting as a protector and as a seemingly benign defence. Hence, Gutman's wisecrack is a fitting example of a protective, melancholic smile. However, when he starts to talk about the historical realities of the

Holocaust, humour cannot assuage the pain as he says, “I am just seething with this. I am sorry, I am going to have to go now”. In the end, he acknowledges that, “[t]he whole essence of [his] humour is based on this sort of subterranean, weird sort of inferno.” How funny and how sad! And, when asked if there is an appropriate response, Waldoks gives a resounding yell as an answer.⁹⁵ Yet, during one of his comedy routines, he jokes about the “tearful saga of the Jews: we suffered, we suffered, we suffered, we suffered, we suffered, we suffered, we suffered... Be Jewish. Now, that is great PR! Right? We expect hoards of Japanese to convert because of that...” Thus, Alan Berger suggests that each of these comedians “confides several things that together comprise a second-generation gestalt” (*Children* 150), and for all three of these comedians suffering, for the most part, is answered with levity. In the end,

For these second-generation witnesses, humor is the reverse side of rage. Humor is both the defining characteristic of their identities as children of Job and simultaneously a way of dealing with the pain of that identity. Confronting the enormity of the *Shoah*'s continuing legacy means a resort to a certain type of gallows humor that permits them both to accept their helplessness to undo the past and also to explore their relationship to their parents' experience and to the Jewish tradition.
(A.L. Berger, *Children* 151)

Though wanting to emphasize the similarities between Abraham Cykiert (Yiddish poet, playwright, and radio broadcaster) and Gutman, the interview stresses a major difference – the reason for being a comedian. Cykiert asks Gutman, “What brought you to actually to choose [comedy]? It’s one of the most bloody difficult jobs a man can have.” Gutman responds, “Comedy is my life”. Though he means it metaphorically, Cykiert agrees, but his affirmation is a literal one. As an Auschwitz survivor, he survived in part by “writing

⁹⁵ Waldoks response “immediately brings to mind the response of Pavel, Spiegelman’s survivor psychiatrist who, when asked by his patient what Auschwitz felt like, screams ‘BOO!’ He tells Spiegelman that Auschwitz ‘felt a little like *that*. But, *ALWAYS*” (A.L. Berger, *Children* 151).

gutter poetry for the hierarchy in the camp.” An example Cykiert’s work is the following: “If we took all the men in this camp, ass to prick, all those who’ve gone through the chimneys, it would be the greatest fuck-up since humanity started.” Cykiert condemns through absurdity. It is, to use Gutman’s terms, “basic” and “banal” but it is also life affirming – *literally*.

Similarly, in her 1997 film, *Punch Me in the Stomach*, which incorporates some of the footage from *Angst*, Filler’s act intersperses gravitas with gaiety. Literally using a multitude of voices and personas, she creates and explores a complex family dynamic between parents, aunts and uncles, her sister and her brother-in-law. She lovingly pokes fun at their mannerisms and at her own *meshugas*. Yet, in giving voice to her father’s experience in the camps, she too focuses on the void and the trauma through laughter. In one anecdote, she informs the viewer that on her father’s first night in Auschwitz the inmates were so crammed in the bunk that they had to all move at the same time, causing laughter. Quoting him, she says:

Sounds funny I know but you had to keep your sense of humour. I remember the first night in the camp there in Birkenau. There were eight of us to one bunk and we were like sardines squashed like dat. With one chappie at the feet. And we’d say ‘Turn’ and everybody would turn at the same time. We laughed. We had to. What else could we do? We laughed the whole first night in Auschwitz.

While not conventionally funny, the laughter could be explained by the Relief Theory. Yet, as a non-participant, Filler’s reliance upon humour may ultimately be a way for her to cope with that which is beyond her scope of understanding; it acts as a balm for the pain and loss since it “is the reverse side of rage” (A.L. Berger, *Children* 151). In describing her trip to Auschwitz with her father, she recounts their banter:

Father: "Would you like me to buy you a souvenir darling?"

Debbie: "No, dad. I am going to the toilet".

Father: "Well, don't be too long. I got locked in here once before, I don't want to get locked in again".

Ultimately, humour is used to protect the ego and allows it to process previous trauma. It allows parents and children to heal and reach some type of understanding.

Another film which combines sadness with levity is *Mendel* (1997). Directed by Alexander Røsler, the movie is based loosely upon autobiographical events as Røsler's parents, like Mendel's, were German Jews who survived the camps and moved to Norway in 1954. Born after the war, Mendel's parents, in an attempt to protect him from trauma, refuse to share their wartime experiences with him. Yet, his life is touched by their trauma, by their memories. He does not understand why the family is so relieved to have left Germany and tries to capture himself within the German landscape by clicking his eyes as though he was taking pictures. He is a curious child who, barred from entering the secretive world of his parents, Bela and Aron, and older brother, David, attempts, to piece together their secrets, with a child's gaze and subsequent mis/understanding. While the silence is a form of protection, as Aron reasons, "Should he have our nightmares without having experienced them?," it also increases the terror of the unknown and the confusion of the protagonist. Though Mendel picks up bits and pieces from listening to adult discussion, his understanding of events becomes muddled and the past and present become conflated. He discovers a photo album hidden by his father in the grandfather clock and leafing through it comes across several iconic photographs, one of them being, of course, the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto. He not only sees these images but internalizes them. As a result, when a fire breaks out in the building complex in which he lives, he thinks that a war is taking place, "Is it the war, Mama? Are they going to take

us?” He mistakes the fireman, who is wearing a mask and carrying an axe, for a murderer. When he sees the fireman carry out the neighbour’s child, Markus Freund, he becomes petrified – not understanding that the firefighter is there to save them from death. He yells, “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die!” and in a very dramatic moment, he steps forward, away from the adults, raises his hands in the air and assumes the stance of the child in the photograph.⁹⁶ Wearing a similar coat and cap, the viewer immediately makes a link between this child born after the Holocaust to the one being threatened by the Nazi officers.

Though this moment is both dramatic and tense, there is also, for certain viewers, at least, a sense of the tragi-comedic. Tragic in that this child bears the scars of a war he never experienced, but comedic in the naivety of a child who, trying so hard to make sense of the past and the world of his family, misreads his reality to such an absurd degree. Lawrence Baron believes that, “[t]his visualization of the defilement of childhood innocence obscures the lifesaving mission that is transpiring on the screen” (163). However, one could argue that by placing himself in this particular pose, Mendel’s innocence is kept intact for he does not know how to process or filter the image like an adult. His innocence then is not completely violated by the traumatic past of his family. And this perhaps is where the comedic comes in.

While the photograph itself has always been a political one, the way in which Røslér uses this image in this film forces the viewer to question the politics of memory and suggests that a new cultural treatment of the Holocaust is not only possible, but may

⁹⁶ Perhaps this is an actualization of what French writer Henri Raczymow calls “la mémoire trouée,” which is “a memory riddled with holes or gaps: a gap in the memory of what he calls ‘pre-history’ [...] a gap in the memory of the Holocaust, which took place before his birth” (Fine 191-192). Similarly, Mendel absorbs the image without contextualizing it. He, in his naivety, and with gaps in his history, knowledge and memory, incorrectly reads the void. And the viewer laughs, not out of malice but relief.

also be necessary. Memory is not static and the evolution of this photograph seems to suggest that the past can neither be forgotten nor ignored. For the viewer, humour does exist in Mendel's world. In fact, there are six formulaic jokes within this film and, as Jodi Egerton points out, "[t]hese moments of joke-telling serve to forge connections and share otherwise silenced memories..." (144).

The jokes are mainly generic; either discussing "two Jews" or "Moishe" (Egerton 145).⁹⁷ For instance, the first joke told by Aron goes as follows:

Herr Fischer. Have you heard about the two Jews who were to be shot? They are placed against a wall. A soldier blindfolds them. One tears his blindfold off. The other hisses, "Sssh, don't make any trouble, now."

While some may interpret this joke as being liberating in its defiance, Reik suggests that this type of joke is Jewish in that it offers "no escape, no deliverance from a momentary emergency, but rather a moment of truth in a permanent emergency" (212). He goes on to explain that, "[t]he social situation of Jewry makes misery the normal and commonplace condition; the Jew only makes a joke out of it, a joke that can awaken laughter but is not merry" (*Ibid.*). Mindess interprets this joke as a type of self-laughter for:

When a Jew is amused at this old story, portraying as it does the absurd lengths to which the reputed propensity of Jews for avoiding unpleasant scenes can go, he is exercising his ability to dispense with pride without rejecting himself because of his idiosyncrasies. (132)

⁹⁷ Another film which relies upon the trope of the generic Jew, or Moishe, in Holocaust jokes is *The Harmonists*. Based on a true story, and not necessarily a comedy – even though it has been categorized as a "comedy, a 'show biz biopic,' a musical, a buddy movie, and a love triangle" (Baron 111) – the film's one formulaic joke is told to relieve heartbreak and break the tension. Harry Frommermann, in reaction to the vandalizing of a Jewish store, says to both the store owner and to the non-Jewish store helper (Erna Eggstein, a woman he is absolutely smitten with):

The teacher asks little Moishe, "What race do the Jews belong to?"
 "Semites?"
 "Good. And the German?"
 "Anti-Semites."

Though the joke adds levity, based on incongruity, to a disturbing situation the fact that it is told by a Jew indicates physical helplessness but not psychological defeat. This may reinforce the stereotype of the passive Jew (particularly a male), but it may also show strength and fortitude.

Paul Lewis, on the other hand, views a variation of this joke as being not an example of gallows humour (“because neither the teller nor the listener [is] in any apparent danger”) but of ethnic humour.⁹⁸ Yet, instead of being seen in a positive light, he puts forward the argument that, “[b]y assuming that Jews are passive ... the joke supports an anti-Semitic stereotype” (66).⁹⁹ While this is a sound reading of the joke itself, what is important is the telling of the joke. The fact that a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Aron, tells this joke to a German, is an act not of liberation but of vindication. For Egerton, the telling of this joke offers, “a frank allusion to the horrors” (148) while “allow[ing] Aron to share a moment of honesty about the events of the Holocaust” (*Ibid.*). Since the truth is told in joke form, it can neither be discredited nor denied; it is an understated indictment of the past and, since it is told by a survivor, it becomes a subtle resistance against the stereotype of a weak Jew.

The second joke of the film is not political; rather it is more personal in nature, told in a private setting, from father to son:

Did you hear about Moishe? He’s outside a German butcher shop, he sees a prohibited pork steak. Finally, he can’t bear anymore. He goes in and asks the price. A tremendous thunder results. He looks up to heaven and says, “Well, just asking can’t hurt!”

Told by Aron, a man who initially actively rejects anything related to G-d and Judaism, this joke is Jewish in both content and context, as Egerton points out, for “[h]umor even taught Jews, with wit and sufficiently sharp arms long enough, how to box with G-d. The laughter evoked helped to create a delicate balance between piety and complaint”

⁹⁸ Similarly, Freud suggests that gallows humour is appreciated when “our admiration is not inhibited by the circumstances of the humorous person” (285).

⁹⁹ By agreeing with Freud’s premise that Jewish jokes tend to be self-critical, one could interpret the above joke as embodying “the exaggerated anxiousness of many Jews not to create a bad impression among the *goyim*” (Larsen 67). As a consequence, the joke is no longer liberating but rather critical for it ridicules certain Jewish sensibilities and can be masochistic.

(Dorinson 449).¹⁰⁰ This joke not only indicates how Aron relates to G-d, and by extension to his Judaism, but also indicates how father and son relate to one another. Egerton further highlights the utilitarian aspects of humour by pointing out that jokes allow Aron to communicate with Mendel and demonstrate affection (151-152). Here, the joke is told to calm Mendel down and to bring him back into the family unit.

The third joke is told not with the intent to be calming but to enhance a pleasant atmosphere. With women dancing and men joyfully toasting and intensely debating, Aron tells another joke:

The Gestapo man shouts: “Does Reboine live here?”
 “No,” Moishe replies.
 “So what’s your name?”
 “My name? Moishe Reboine”.
 The Gestapo man hits him, shouting, “Why are you lying to me?”
 Moishe answers, “You call this living?”

The punchline is incongruous and defiant; resulting in laughter and satisfaction. While the Nazis tried to eradicate the Jews through arrest and deportation, Moishe begins a quasi-Talmudic dialogue with the Nazi officer by answering one question with another. Moreover, by focusing on the word “living,” Moishe points out that being is not the same as enjoying life. However, the effect of the joke and the warm atmosphere are short-lived due to the arrival of the priest and Sister Britt who knock on Aron’s door. Initially, appearing as good Samaritans for bringing food and good will, the visit quickly turns sour as these Christians try to eradicate the Jews, not by deportation but by proselytization. While these devout Christians deal with the imaginary, Aron, his family and friends deal with the real. For instance, when the priest exclaims, “Imagine if you die

¹⁰⁰ One joke of the Nazi period which best exemplifies this tension has to do with the increase of Zionism due to the political climate, “Dear G-d, for two thousand years we’ve spent in vain praying for our return – and now it has to happen to me, of all people!” (Larsen 76)

without Jesus! Then you'll go straight to hell," his statement is immediately refuted by Herr Freund who counters, "I have been to hell!" while showing the priest the number tattooed onto his arm. And when Sister Britt responds to Aron's cough with the un/comforting notion that, "Christ who can wake the dead can heal you as well," Frau Rose retorts, "Then make him wake up my dead children!" By leaving Germany, these Jewish refugees survived the threat of physical death to face a new spiritual threat, this time, in the country that adopted them.

The fourth joke in the movie is not one of juxtaposition. Rather, it is a reflection of place and circumstance. Aron and his family moved to the countryside and Mendel learns about the rural landscape by working the land and firing rifles. He returns home one day offering a very sickly Aron potatoes, "fresh from the ground with stalks and leaves attached" (Egerton 159), in the hope that this will cure his father. Aron finds this funny saying, "Imagine, a Jewish farmer" which allows him to seamlessly transition to his fourth and final joke:

Here's a story. Two Jewish farmers meet at the market.
 Moishe asks: "What did you give your sick horse?"
 "Turpentine," the other replied.
 After a week they meet again. Moishe is furious.
 "I gave my horse turpentine too. And you know what? It died!"
 "So?" replied the other farmer.
 "Mine too!"

While some individuals may roll their eyes at the ridiculousness of the story, the above joke is important for several reasons. Firstly, the discussion between these two farmers echoes the imaginary dialogue of the Chelmites; indicating that, while Aron rejects practicing Judaism, he does not reject being Jewish. Secondly, the joke combines what would stereotypically be seen as an oxymoronic term – "Jewish farmer" – which explains

the end result of not one dead horse but two. And finally, “[t]he joke also turns on misunderstanding – the other farmer answers Moishe’s question without acknowledging the underlying qualifier: ‘What *useful remedy* do you give your sick horse?’” (Egerton 160). Thus, if turpentine did not help the horses, then Aron is perhaps delicately suggesting to his young son that potatoes will not cure him.

Throughout the film, when Aron told jokes, the room became silent yet, when Mendel tells his first joke, it drowns out, but does not completely silence, the voice of his teacher. Teaching about Christ, the teacher begins by saying, “And imagine. We’re fortunate in having one of his people amongst us... G-d’s Own Chosen People.” Yet, Mendel’s “privileged” position as the chosen one quickly collapses, for the teacher indirectly accuses him of being implicated in the killing of Christ: “When the Jews were given the choice between Barabbas the criminal and G-d’s own son, they shouted Barabbas!” This event is important for it acts as a segue, allowing Mendel to tune out and tell a joke:

To hear is a strange thing; most of it goes in one ear and out the other.
While other things, like jokes, stick in there right away.
Moishe came to heaven and cried and cried. God comes over to him and asks: “Why are you so sad?” Moishe looks up at him and replies: “My son has become christened.” God look at him and says: “Mine too!”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ In his “Dynamics of Jewish Jokes,” Grotjahn presents a variation on that joke, which triumphantly accepts defeat, for it acknowledges, “[t]he difficulty of the Jews to remain faithful to their laws... but even that leads to victory- which the Christian religion seems to illustrate” (98).

A man came running to his Rabbi, crying: ‘Rabbi! A terrible thing has happened! My son wants to marry a gentile!’

The Rabbi answered: ‘My son! Look at me. Here am I, the leader of our Jewish community. Everybody looks up to me and my family for guidance, and my son not only wants to marry a gentile, but he wants to be baptized!’

After a shocked silence, the first man asked: ‘Everyone comes to you, my Rabbi, with their problems. What did you do when you had such a horrible thing happen to you?’

‘What can I do? I turned to G-d.’

‘And? What did G-d tell you?’

‘G-d said to me: ‘*Your* son!... look at mine!’’ (97)

According to Lipman, within the context of the Holocaust, “[w]here religion and humor met in jest, humor triumphed; a theological bent was only the vehicle for a sardonic message” (202).

While the minutes before the joke is told indicates that the rhetoric against Jews is present even in the most benign atmosphere, the fact that Mendel tells this joke shows that he too is on the defensive and defiant. By telling this joke, Mendel “maintains his connection to Judaism and to a Jewish G-d by mentally leaving the classroom and telling this joke” (Egerton 168). Similar to Aron’s second joke, G-d is presented as being approachable – as an entity to engage with. Moreover, the joke defies the Christian element of Christ by reminding the viewer that Christ was born a Jew.

The final joke of the film, again told by Mendel, emphasizes the amenability of G-d for, in this instance, He not only hears a supplicant but even offers to help:

Mama, did you hear about Moishe who went for a walk and fell into a ravine? At the last moment he caught hold of a branch and shouted “Help, help, dear G-d, help me!” A voice from heaven replied, “Moishe, this is G- speaking. Trust me, let go and I’ll catch you.” Moishe looks up and shouts back “I don’t dare to.” God reappears, “Moishe, this is G-d, let go and no harm will come to you.” Moishe looks up and shouts, “Hello up there, is there anyone else I could speak to?”¹⁰²

In the wake of the Holocaust, this joke, coming from Mendel, could indicate a possible healing. Unlike Aron’s G-d who replied in a clap of thunder, Mendel’s G-d not only consoles but also seems to want to help, only to have His suggestion ignored.¹⁰³ Egerton believes that Mendel “invokes Moishe as a paternal figure, a guide in the ways of being

¹⁰² This concept of boxing with G-d appears throughout the film. For instance, when Mendel pesters his father with questions relating to the Holocaust and to the family experience, Aron exclaims “Oh G-d, help me with this child!” Yet Mendel, who has a hazy understanding of what it means to be Jewish asks, “Papa, we don’t believe in G-d, do we?” Though Aron replies in the negative with a shake of his head, Mendel very impishly asks, “Ah! So who were you talking to up there?” Although Aron denies belief in the Creator, and even though engagement with Him is disrupted, a relationship is still begrudgingly maintained.

¹⁰³ The relationship between G-d and His people has always been a precarious one. As Reik points out, “[t]hey fear Him still even when they are inclined sometimes to protest against Him... They remain faithful to Him even when they feel deserted by Him, and implore Him for His help, even when they claim that He is not kind to them” (88). And in this instance, even when He does try to help, His help is criticized and rejected.

Jewish and trusting in a G-d he doesn't quite know" (174) for in biblical times Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness while in modern times Moishe acts as a stabilizing figure having survived the flames of the Holocaust and the move to Norway. Again the joke meshes with the context of the film, for Mendel tells it after having climbed up a ladder, holding an umbrella/parachute, preparing for his jump from the second-story of his home.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, the jokes within this film serve several purposes. They allow father and son to connect, they indicate faith, they function "as a technology of memory" (Egerton 175), they allow for stereotypes to be examined without them being hurtful and they are a tool for communication, and an indication of continuation. Yet, it is not just jokes which offer comedy and levity but also the character of Mendel himself as he is young and pieces together his reality in a way that is both complex and naïve. And it is that perspective, one of a child attempting to come to terms with a past he has never experienced but which constantly impinges upon his present, which makes the conclusion of the film both comedic and poignant.

While humorous films surrounding the topic of Holocaust have been around since Charlie Chaplin's 1940 movie *The Great Dictator*, the 1975 film *Seven Beauties* by Lina Wertmüller was, according to Baron, "the first film to extract laughter from the plight of an inmate at Auschwitz" (137). In the 1990s, approximately 12 percent of the Holocaust films made were comedic, a trend which Baron explains such:

Three factors fostered this sharp increase: the search for original approaches to subject matter, the presumed familiarity of the public with the basic facts of the Holocaust, and the passing of a generation of

¹⁰⁴ Both Epstein and Fox note that some children of Holocaust parents try to prove themselves, to show that they too are brave and can overcome peril, so they either seek danger or create dangerous situations.

filmmakers who experienced World War II as adults and [the] rise of those who were minors during the war or who were born after it. (139)

But perhaps the use of humour in dealing with the Holocaust may also have an emotionally aesthetic appeal as well. Both Marianne Hirsch and Judy Chicago have suggested that certain photographs which are too horrific distance the viewer. The same may perhaps be said of film. If an unsuspecting viewer is shocked by the terrible images of *Nuit et brouillard* for example, then perhaps he or she will not further engage with the subject matter of the Holocaust, unlike another viewer who is eased into it, first by comedy. By incorporating humour into the discourse of memory and trauma, a renegotiation takes place both with iconic images and with the way in which we engage with them. This shift towards humour forces the viewer to engage with the Holocaust through a new lens; the past is thereby made both relevant and current. Audience reception, along with the release and success of Holocaust comedies, become the new socio-cultural barometer not only for the transmission of memory but also for its reception.

From a literary perspective, another work which calls into question memory in relation to the second-generation is *Maus*. Born in 1947, in Stockholm, to survivor parents, Art Spiegelman authored *Maus*, “unquestionably the most controversial and the boldest of second-generation writing” (A.L. Berger, “Bearing” 260). In a sense, *Maus* begins where *Mendel* leaves off; as both protagonists grew up in homes which, to use Robert Jay Lifton’s words, had the *death imprint*. No longer dealing with a youngster’s point of view, this commix, (defined by Hamida Bosmajian as “a comic book that is literally a graphic autobiography,” 1), deals with the complex relationship between an adult son and his survivor father. But what is most remarkable about this work is not the

written content but the visual information. Dealing with two competing perspectives (that of the father and that of the son), *Maus* is as much concerned about history, and the recording of history, as it is with aesthetic considerations.

While comics connote certain words and notions such as funny and humorous, humour, according to James E. Young, “is not an intrinsic component of this medium” (18). Despite this, the fusion between the gravity of the Holocaust and “the trivial low-seriousness of comics” (20) still shocks, startles, and forces the reader/viewer to engage with both the written and visual texts. Stylistically, Spiegelman uses techniques found in sequential art to indicate the flow of time as “present-time sequences are generally uniform in size and consequently static in comparison with past-time sequences” (Iadonisi 52).¹⁰⁵ According to Jeanne C. Ewert, there is a strong linkage between *Maus* and “the ‘funny animal’ genre of cartooning...” (92) Moreover, in the short prototype published a year prior to the commencement of *Maus*, the connection to Disney is made obvious as, “[t]he mouse child who will become Art in the later version is named Mickey, and has a Mickey Mouse lamp on his nightstand, illuminating the room while his father tells Holocaust stories at night” (92). Finally, the epigraph in *Maus II* further emphasizes the correlation between the Jews and Mickey Mouse, quoting a mid-1930s newspaper article from Pomerania:

¹⁰⁵ In his discussion of graphic novels, Stephen E. Tabachnick explains that as a consequence of the graphic novel’s freedom from the typically brief duration, flat surfaces, standardized panels, constricted techniques, stereotyped characters, and simplified plots and attitudes of the conventional comic book, the graphic novel ‘reader’ experiences a richer sense of time and space and a deeper involvement of the senses than is available from any other novelistic or sequential art medium (154). Moreover, by providing several textual proofs, Thomas Doherty shows that:

[t]hroughout *Maus*, comic-specific associations and tropes dot the cartoon landscape, as when free-floating, Chester Gould-like arrows signpost points of information (“Zyklon B, a pesticide, dropped into hollow columns,” reads one) or when, in an audacious interlude of true comic relief, the exclamatory typography of the Sunday funnies lightens thing up (78).

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed.... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honourable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal....Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!¹⁰⁶

The correlation between vermin and Jews is further amplified in Nazi propaganda; such as the 1940s poster which reads “ROTTEN UDRYD DEN” (meaning, Rats Destroy Them), the caricatures found in the pages of *Der Stürmer*, and especially in the 1940 film *Der ewige Jude* in which the Jews are compared to rats who infest and destroy civilization. However, James E. Young suggests that:

[b]y adopting the mouse as allegorical image for Jews, Spiegelman is able to caricature – and thereby subvert – the Nazi image of Jews as vermin. Subjugated groups have long appropriated the racial epithets and stereotypes used against them in order to ironize and thereby neutralize their charge, taking them out of the oppressors’ vocabulary. (33)¹⁰⁷

Yet, the inspiration for this project is the short story “Josephine the Singer, Or the Mouse Folk.” Written by Joseph Kafka, the “tale deals with a rodent people (the Jews) who live precariously in a world devoted to their extripation” (A.L. Berger, *Children* 62).

Consequently, *Maus* becomes a multilayered work in terms of historical, social, and

¹⁰⁶ In 1929, Disney released a short, entitled *The Barnyard Battle*, in which mice protect themselves from invading cats. The score, “Dixie,” is being played by and marched to by the mice, making reference to the American Civil War, and the visuals, in particular, the helmets that the cats wear, make reference to the German army in WWI. As such, “[t]he wearing of German military helmets by an army of cats which oppose an army of mice is offensive to national dignity” (TIME, July 21, 1930). Thus, Mickey Mouse was banned [in Germany] for being a foreign, subversive threat, “a caricature of so-called ‘degenerate’ African races...” (Thormann 130). Disney became even more subversive with its anti-Nazi cartoon *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1942) which “was translated into German and smuggled into Germany” (Lipman 238) and the animated film, *Education for Death: The Making of a Nazi* (1943).

¹⁰⁷ In her article, Linda Hutcheon appears to agree with Young. For her:

The governing conceit of *Maus* (underlined by the retention of the German title) is the horror that, just as mice could be exterminated as disease-carrying pests in the home or on the farm, so could the Jews be exterminated by the National Socialists. In drawing Jews as mice, then, Spiegelman counter-discursively answers back to this cultural association, reappropriating and resignifying a negative image that once fuelled anti-Semitism... (6)

The result of this reversal is that it pushes the boundaries of Holocaust conventions while inverting “the Nazi use of the rodent metaphor...” (Bosmajian 1). Yet, the satisfaction of this reversal is tempered by the fact that Zyklon B, the same gas which was used as a pesticide to kill vermin, was used to kill the Jews.

political referents. Visually complex, Spiegelman reworks the stereotypes as he represents the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, the Poles as pigs, the French as frogs, the Swedes as reindeer, and the Americans, (the true enemy of the Germans), as dogs. The result is provocative for it tells a story while “sidestep[ping] the ‘already told’ quality of the Holocaust” (Witek 103) but it is not always a seamless metaphoric transition.

Despite this clear visual demarcation of religious and nationalistic identities, difficulties remain. For instance, how should Jews posing as non-Jews be drawn? In the first volume, Jewish children and individuals “stereotypically” identifiable as Jews are drawn with tails. However, better disguised individuals (more Aryan) lose their tails. Thus, in the episode where Vladek and Anja (Art’s parents) are posing as non-Jewish Poles, with pig masks over their mouse faces, Vladek’s tail is gone but Anja’s tail sticks out. The image is reinforced by Vladek’s assessment, “I WAS A LITTLE SAFE. I HAD A COAT AND BOOTS, SO LIKE A GESTAPO WORE WHEN HE WAS NOT IN SERVICE. BUT ANJA - HER APPEARANCE - YOU COULD SEE MORE EASY SHE WAS JEWISH. I WAS AFRAID FOR HER” (Spiegelman 136). Despite her attempt, Anja is still marked as a Jewess, visually representing, perhaps, the inability of the majority of Jews to blend into society, away from their “otherness” and marginality.

Moreover, the representation of Jews as mice and the Germans as cats permits, in the opinion of Spiegelman, a more metaphoric yet authentic rendering of events. In an interview with Joey Calieri, for *Comics Journal*, Spiegelman argues that he approaches the material in the best way possible:

[t]he reason was, if one draws this kind of stuff with people, it comes out wrong. And the way it comes out wrong is, first of all, I’ve never lived through anything like that...and it would be counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that’s actually

happening. I don't know exactly what a German looks like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few scores of photographs and a couple of movies. I'm bound to do something inauthentic. (qtd. in Ewert 92)

Yet, while Spiegelman desires to be as authentic as possible, he himself, as creator and as protagonist, appears to get lost or at least muddled by the animal metaphor calling into question the limits and complications of the graphic story. In the first volume, for instance, Anja is petrified of rats while, in the second volume, German officers are depicted with having dogs on leashes. As such, the metaphors which Spiegelman tries so hard to allude to and maintain are oftentimes undermined by the logic of the narrative; an issue he self-consciously comments upon. In fact, when visiting his analyst, Pavel, (a survivor of Terezin and Auschwitz), Spiegelman observes that Pavel's place "is overrun with stray dogs and cats" (*Maus II*, 43) and he asks rhetorically [and punningly], "Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?" (*Ibid.*) The mouse answers the door with a dog on a leash. Ultimately, "Spiegelman's smart and often funny use of such representational techniques foregrounds Art's self-consciousness" (Thormann 131).

As the graphic narrative progresses, other questions and problems arise: namely, how should Spiegelman depict Françoise, his French wife who converted to Judaism. Initially, she wants to be drawn as a mouse but her husband, in a type of reverse anti-Semitism, retorts "BUT YOU'RE FRENCH!" (*Maus II*, 11). Though it was Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna, who said, "*Wer ein Jude ist, bestimme ich!*"¹⁰⁸ here, it is Spiegelman

¹⁰⁸ I decide who is a Jew.

who determines not only what Françoise is but also how to depict her.¹⁰⁹ This episode is quite humorous and emphasizes the heightened auto-reflexivity of the text.

The humour of this situation, as it is a discussion between husband and wife, can be juxtaposed to the tragic episode in which an inmate claims his Germanness over his Jewishness, and thus undergoes a visual metamorphosis from mouse to cat and finally back to mouse. While the prisoner defines himself as German saying, “I DON’T BELONG HERE WITH ALL THESE YIDS AND POLACKS! I’M A **GERMAN** LIKE YOU!” (*Maus II*, 50), the guards define this cat as a mouse. In this “comic” strip, the fluctuating visual markers emphasize the nuances and uncertainty of the witness in placing the subject into a particular national and religious category. Vladek, in recounting this episode to his son, does not know the truth about this gentleman, however, the victim clearly sees himself as being a cat, whereas the perpetrators classify him as a mouse. The result of this visual shift, in combination with the narrative, stresses a rupture in individual identity and group affiliation.

The juxtaposition between the horror and the humorous is further explored in the episode dealing with Vladek’s friend, Mandelbaum. Vladek’s oral testimony makes one pity this figure, yet, Spiegelman’s portrayal of him is grotesquely comedic and tragically carnivalesque.

¹⁰⁹ Though she is Jewish, her French nationality and the history associated with that nationality (“CENTURIES OF ANTI-SEMITISM,” “THE DREYFUS AFFAIR,” AND “THE NAZI COLLABORATORS”) are mentioned as reasons for not completely seeing her as being a mouse; Jewish.



[Fig. 1]

As the above image suggests, there is a slapstick, schlemiel-like quality to this figure and, in another context or in a different setting, one could laugh. Described by Vladek as a “MESS,” Mandelbaum’s

PANTS WERE BIG LIKE FOR 2 PEOPLE, AND HE HAD NOT EVEN A PIECE OF STRING TO MAKE A BELT. HE HAD ALL DAY TO HOLD THEM WITH ONE HAND...ONE SHOE, HIS FOOT WAS TOO BIG TO GO IN. THIS ALSO HE HAD TO HOLD SO HE COULD FIND MAYBE WITH WHOM TO EXCHANGE IT. ONE SHOE WAS BIG LIKE A BOAT. BUT **THIS** AT LEAST HE COULD WEAR. (*Maus II*, 29)

As the testimony continues, Vladek says that Mandelbaum dropped his spoon and it was stolen, spilled his soup and was beaten when he asked for more, held onto his bowl but dropped his shoe, picked up his shoe but then his pants fell down. Knowing though, about Auschwitz, about the necessity to be able to adapt quickly to the most extreme situations and conditions, all laughter is suspended. The ridiculousness of the image is eclipsed by

the reality of the dead and the proximity to death. In this case, word and image are not directly at odds, nevertheless, the potentially laughable image and sequence is quickly sobered by the pathos of the testimony. Thus, reality, or the semblance of it, has power over the realm of the visual.

The quest for textual correctness and domination appears throughout these two volumes, yet it is most evident in the episode regarding the camp orchestra. Though Vladek explicitly states that he does not recall an orchestra in Auschwitz, only the shouting of the guards, Spiegelman, nevertheless, inserts one visually. Explaining why he incorporated the orchestra into the visual narrative even though his father had no recollection of it, he says:

I didn't include this as a way of contesting whether or not there was an orchestra at Auschwitz. It really is well-enough documented so that it's clear. On the other hand, it was important to me to talk about how my father and I were collaborating... [about how] I was surface to his story and yet I was kind of supplementing that story. Just to understand what happened to him, I had to do other research and... as he tells me there wasn't an orchestra, I get to kind of cover up the orchestra with the marchers but [I] kind of have a little bit of it still showing just to insist on having my way, but at least acknowledging that there's a wrestling match in terms of the deposition – how to portray it, how to show it. (qtd. in Iadonisi 52)

The bid for narrative/graphic control in this case weakens or even usurps the witness's testimony. Historical facts are pitted against personal remembrances; the image is pitted against the word, and a son is at heads with his father. Though the episode in and of itself is not humorous, the tensions in the family dynamics, particularly “between the neurotic son (who is in therapy) and his stubborn, parsimonious, crotchety father” (Iadonisi 48) infuses the text with emotional honesty and levity.

Yet, despite the numerous misunderstandings and tension between father and son, there exist moments of tenderness and even humour within the family dynamic. For instance, when recounting details about his son's birth, Vladek says, "...WHEN YOU WERE A TINY BABY YOUR ARM ALWAYS JUMPED UP, LIKE SO! WE JOKED AND CALLED YOU 'HEIL HITLER'" (*Maus I*, 30). Moreover, Vladek, as an overbearing stereotypical Jewish parent, throws out Art's coat saying, "WHEN YOU WERE SITTING FIRST DOWN TO DINNER, I THREW IT OUTSIDE [...] SUCH AN OLD SHABBY COAT. IT'S A **SHAME** MY SON WOULD WEAR SUCH A COAT!" (*Maus I*, 68-69) Spiegelman, who is over 30 years-old is dumbfounded that his father would do such a thing. And later on in the narrative, when he shows the preliminary sketches to both Vladek and Mala (his stepmother), the dialogue is as follows:

Mala: "IT'S AN IMPORTANT BOOK. PEOPLE WHO DON'T USUALLY READ SUCH STORIES WILL BE INTERESTED."

Vladek: "YES. I DON'T READ **EVER** SUCH COMICS, AND EVEN I AM INTERESTED

Mala: "OF COURSE **YOU** ARE INTERESTED. IT'S YOUR STORY!

Vladek: "YES. I KNOW ALREADY MY STORY BY **HEART**, AND EVEN *I* AM INTERESTED! (*Maus I*, 133)¹¹⁰

Thus the circularity of the dialogue adds humour while reinforcing the dysfunctional nature of the family. And finally, when Spiegelman, stressing over the complexity of creating a comic strip testimony, is told by Françoise (his wife) to "...KEEP IT HONEST, HONEY. He retorts, "SEE WHAT I MEAN... IN REAL LIFE YOU'D NEVER HAVE LET ME TALK THIS LONG WITHOUT INTERRUPTING" (*Maus I*, 16). Yet, it is not just the dialogue which infuses the text with thought and levity, as it is based on circularity, joking, and stereotypes, but also on word play and punning. For

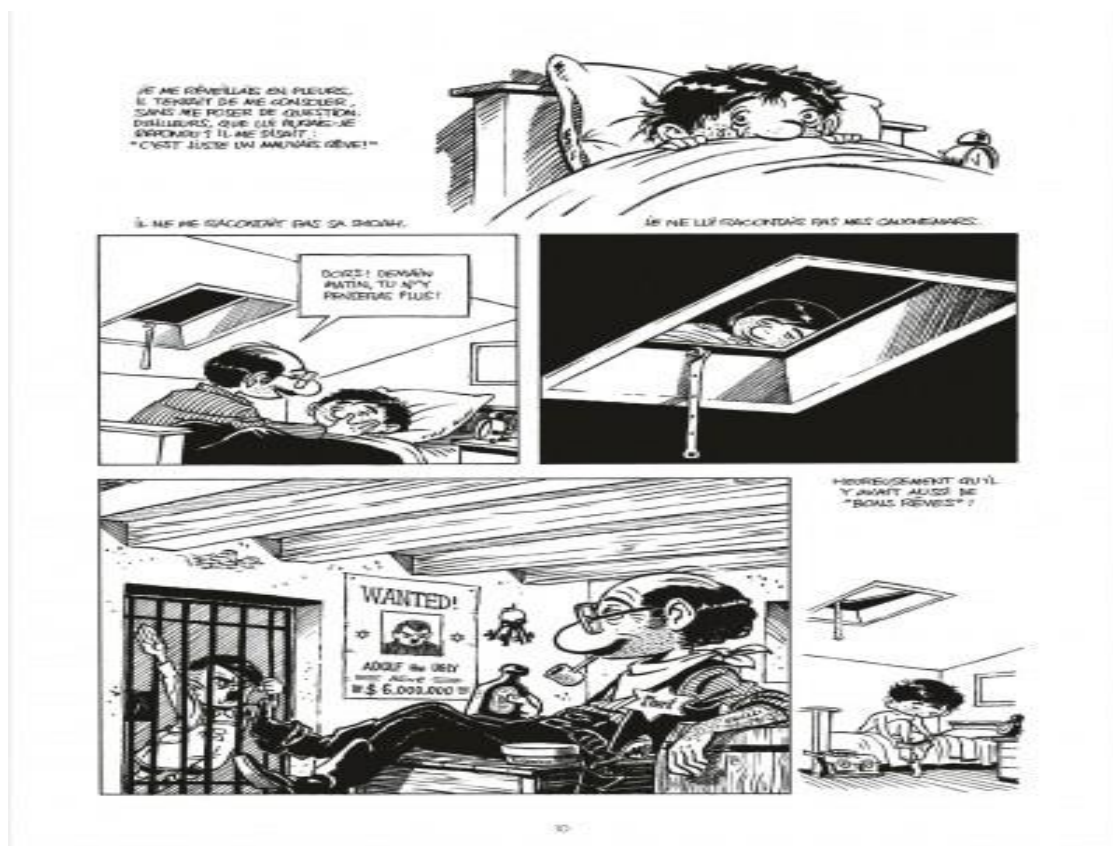
¹¹⁰ The ridiculousness of the conversation is furthered when Vladek says to his son that he will one day be famous like Walt Disney, who represents everything that Spiegelman, as an artist, rallies against. This episode depicts Vladek in a ridiculous but loving light.

example, the word, Maus, is a portmanteau of mouse and *raus*, and the chapter entitled “Mauschwitz,” is a blend of mouse and Auschwitz. Furthermore, “the chapter subheading ‘Time Flies,’ reminds us of death and decay as we see flies buzzing on page (2)41 around the dead mouse bodies near Art’s drawing table” (Tabachnick 161). The meaning of this image then is that, “[t]he presence of these imagined bodies reveals that time never flies as long as memory functions” (*Ibid.*). In the end, both clever punning,¹¹¹ and the graphics help reinforce the animal imagery while adding a sense of seriousness and levity to this work. Ultimately, it is not just the dialogue which both shocks and entertains the reader but individual words as well.

In addition to the negative nightmares and fantasies that Epstein, Spiegelman, and many others have admitted to and discussed, another type of fantasy exists – the revenge fantasy. And in certain instances, it is this reversal of fortune and history that allows for moments of humour and merriment. In his graphic novel, *Deuxième génération: ce que je n’ai pas dit à mon père*, Michel Kichka not only depicts the nightmares real and imagined but also recognizes the importance of good dreams. Within the dream images found on pages 9 and 10 of the text, a final reversal is dreamt/imagined which results in a sense of satisfaction and levity. In this revenge fantasy/image, situated in a sheriff’s office, “Adolf the Ugly” is in prison, while Henri, Kichka’s father, who is a Holocaust survivor, sits on a desk, smoking a pipe, holding a whiskey flask, with a smile on his face. His number is visible but on his star/badge is the word “Sherif.” Moreover, on the “Wanted Poster,” the

¹¹¹ A double meaning / context is given to the word bleeding. In volume one of *Maus*, entitled “My Father Bleeds History,” “the meaning is metaphorical and artistic as “in comic book parlance ‘to bleed’ means to extend a drawing beyond the confines of lines that frame a panel. The blood of memory of the experience in traumatic history cannot be contained and its seepage is contagious” (Bosmajian 7). It is also literal, for Vladek suffered a haemorrhage in his left eye and it had to be removed. Yet, Michael Levine suggests that Vladek, “cannot come to terms with what he has seen. Indeed, so wounded is his eye by flashbacks and nightmares that it must essentially be removed by a surgeon and replaced by a glass facsimile” (318).

reward for capturing “Adolf the Ugly” alive is \$ 6,000,000 – not a random sum. In this instance, the images of victim and victor are visually juxtaposed and it is the last image of reversal that offers a type of solace to both the author and the reader.

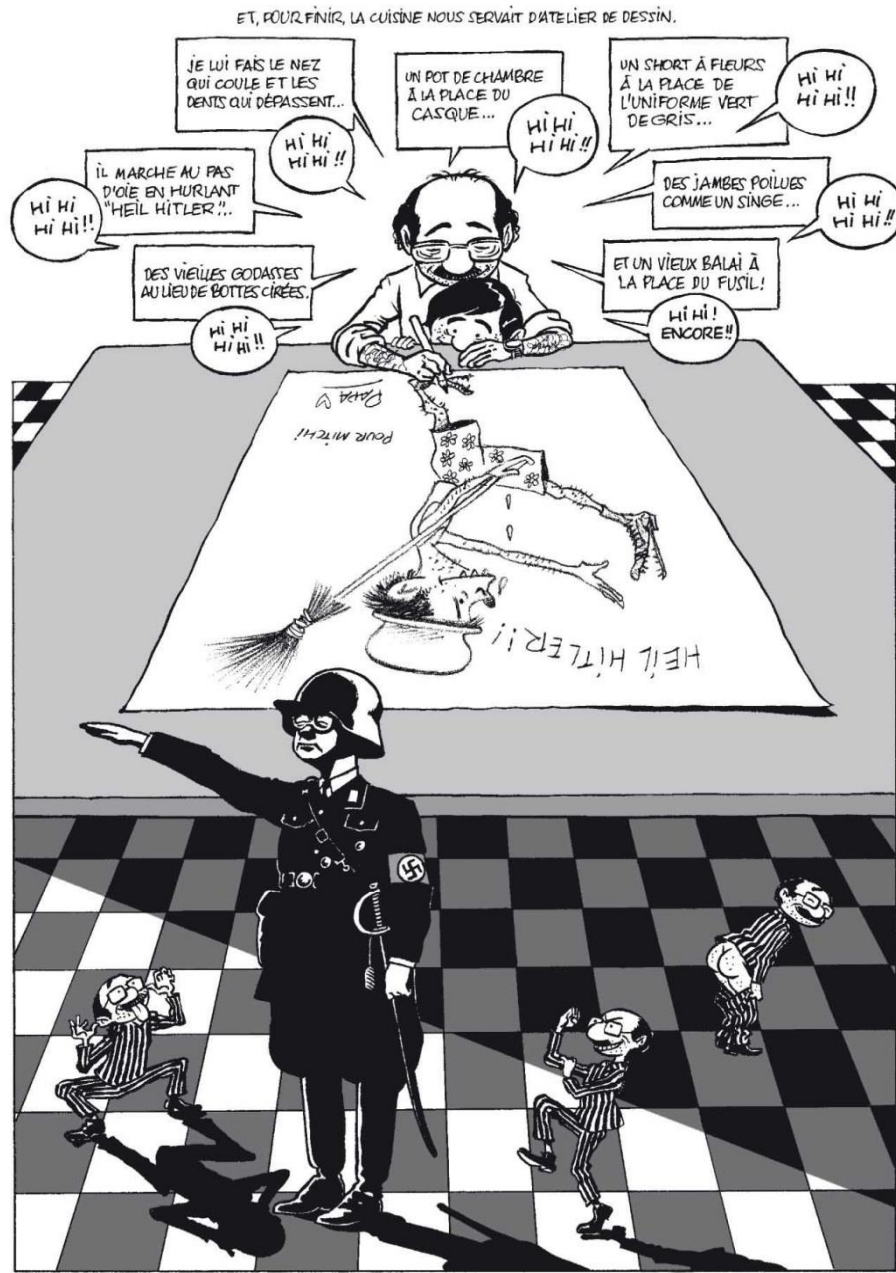


[Fig. 2]

The levity in some of these images could suggest that, while the past is always present, a superiority component is visible – perhaps allowing for a protection or healing of the ego. Nowhere is this more evident than in the image found on page 18. Proud of his son for doing so well academically, Henri says, « Je suis fier de toi, Michel, tu es ma revanche sur Hitler ». Though Michel, a child at this point, is unclear by what that means as suggested by the question mark which appears as a thought bubble, he does depict himself as a child, bundled up in bed with a smile imagining his father, wearing the striped uniform, thrusting a piece of paper in Hitler’s pouty face which reads

« Bulletin – Michel Kichka – Classement Premier! » (18) Though the image is more complex, the importance is that levity is produced by reversal and by the child's literal understanding of his father's words. Thus humour is found in both the visual and the literal.

Another image which allows for humour can be found on page 38 of this graphic novel. Though the image takes up an entire page, it is visually split in two. The top part is a flashback image of a young Michel sitting on his father's lap. Together they draw a caricature of Hitler in which Henri turns terror into humour much to the son's amusement: « Je lui fais le nez qui coule et les dents qui dépassent... », « il marche au pas d'oie en hurlant 'Heil Hitler' », « des vieilles godasses au lieu de bottes cirées », « un pot de chambre à la place du casque... », « un short à fleurs à la place de l'uniforme vert de gris... », « des jambes poilues comme un singe », « et un vieux balai à la place du fusil ». In this part of the fantasy, all threatening symbols become fodder for laughter and ridicule. Placed as a counter image to reality is the bottom portion of the page in which a fantasy is being depicted. In this half, an SS officer is surrounded by three versions of Henri dressed in a striped uniform. Henri is goading, taunting, mocking this officer – in fact, in one version, he is even mooning the officer. Interestingly, the following page depicts SS officers as being pig-like and devils with inflated egos. It is important to note that these images visually reflect some of the jokes which were told during the war regarding Hitler and his henchmen.



[Fig. 3]

While some could argue that the need for such levity after the Holocaust could be considered disrespectful, others posit that this type of humour is cathartic and healthy, in that the victim becomes victor and that the ability to laugh and make jokes indicates that the ego was not destroyed by trauma. Though this graphic novel talks about the heavy shadow the Holocaust has cast upon the Kichka family, the text ends on a redemptive note: « Avec le temps et un bon vin, un humour de la Shoah a trouvé sa place entre mon père et nous » (95). The family is seen sitting around a dinner table joking – joking about the numbers, « Oui, et on inscrivait notre numéro de téléphone déportable sur l'avant-bras! » (95), the uniforms, « et tes beaux pyjamas à lignes, c'était la mode du prêt-à-déporter » (95), and the crematoriums, « Et comme dessert on avait droit à des petits fours » (95). What is interesting is that these puns are told not just by the survivor, Henri, but also by his son, Michel, and his grandchildren. Laughter, perhaps not ours, but theirs is both private and public. And though the reader may not laugh with wild abandon, the private laughter of the Kichka family indicates that, despite the past terrors and hurts, a healing has taken place.

In the end, each artist or writer tries to find his or her own way of dealing with the burdens of the past while exploring the effect it had on their relationship with their parents. While black humour allows Shmuel to both criticize and adore his father, for Miri, it allows her to express an understanding of her father while rebelling against his Holocaust nostalgia. For Mendel, jokes allow for both a communication and a commentary, whereas, Filler's trip to Auschwitz and her subsequent show affords her the space to explore not just the Holocaust but what the Holocaust means in both the family dynamic and as an individual. In the case of Spiegelman, the recording of Vladek's

testimony allows him to get to know his father, while in Kichka's work, humour makes the terrible palatable and even ridiculous. In all of these instances, there is a bridging between the individual and the collective, between the past and the present, between gravity and levity. Essentially, levity, in any form, allows for a psychological mediation between children and their survivor parents. The tone of the artistic output, particularly with the adult children, is often dark, sarcastic, even cavalier. It screams of pain and anger without wallowing in these emotions, but the laughter, the levity, the wit indicate resilience and, at times, even peace.

CHAPTER 3

Echoes of *Shtetl* Life

Humor is an affirmation of dignity,
a declaration of man's superiority to all that befalls him.
Romain Gary

While the previous chapters of this dissertation have examined humour within life and death situations, as well as between the generations, this chapter is different in that it focuses on humorous and fantastical characters found in Yiddish literature who reappear within the context of, and in the aftermath of, the Holocaust. Functioning as both an homage to the past, as well as providing contemporary social commentary, the *dybbuk*, in *La danse de Gengis Cohn*, the schlemiel, in *Train de vie*, and the inhabitants of Chelm, in “The Tumblers,” operate as both a bridge and a dirge – recalling the life of the *shtetl* while recognizing that the Holocaust ripped through the world which created and celebrated these literary figures. Furthermore, the characters themselves rebel against an imposed state of exception in that their essence is neither distinguished nor muted despite a change in circumstances. Humour aids in creating this protective barrier but it also emerges from a most intense desire to survive.

The merging of the fantastic with the historical creates a literary landscape which questions notions of identity, emphasizes the nuances of group collectivity as well as its dysfunctionality, blurs the distinction between life and death, and fudges the boundaries between the reality of “what was” with the fantasy of “what could have been.” By hearkening back to literary tropes of yore, and as the echoes of *shtetl* life resurge, another revolt is taking place against Nazi goals and ideology, against the state of exception: in

this case, cultural identity is being preserved and celebrated amidst the ashes. As Gregory Pell explains:

Remembrance and storytelling can offer a possibility of either individual or cultural survival: memory recalls our heredity, and our heredity dictates our identity. The one who remembers is bounded with the task of recounting the brutalities, *lest they happen again*. Yet the monumental significance of the horrific events of the Shoah might tend to overshadow the whole reason survival is important in the first place: to celebrate the beauty of life, to propagate culture.... As Leslie Epstein phrases it: ‘The war against the Jews was in many ways a war against imagination (and at bottom the Jewish conception of G-d): to suppress the workings of the imagination – to deny the sufferings of the Jews any sort of symbolic representation – would make that a war Hitler won.’ (Pell 95-96)

Ultimately, these fictions provide a safe space, a temporary refuge which allows for brief moments of hope, revenge, and redemption without providing the reader/viewer with either closure or reassurance. And it is precisely at this point that the laughter is silenced, leaving a sense of wonder and shock.

There is nothing inherently funny about Hitler, the Nazis or the Holocaust, yet, humour is present in the stories of the Holocaust, of Hitler and of the Nazis (a term which comes from the abbreviated “Naso,” “Bavarian slang for ‘bumpkin’ or ‘simpleton’” (Rosenbaum 130)). Racial superiority and ideology were often mocked and Hitler was not spared. Why would he be? In the July 17, 1932, issue of *Der Gerade Weg*, Dr. Fritz Gerlich published a photo of Hitler married to a black bride; the caption read, “DOES HITLER HAVE MONGOLIAN BLOOD?” The caption, along with the article, was tongue-in-cheek calling ‘racial science’ into question. By referring to Dr. Hans Günther’s racial theory and the failure of Hitler “to live up to the standard of his own racial criteria,” Gerlich printed – and in so doing, solidified – the whispered joke which poked

fun at both the Nordic ideal and the rulers of this ideal: “thin like Göring, tall like Goebbels, blond like Hitler” (Rosenbaum 157). According to Ron Rosenbaum:

[t]he tone Gerlich adopts in his prose is crucial. Assuming the mantle of erudition and a pedantic tone that mimicked the magisterial German tradition of critical scholarship, he directs his readers’ attention to the peculiar phenomenon he proposes to explicate: the picture of the Hitler headed black bridal couple”. (167)

For Gerlich, the “‘inner harmony’ between the bride and the Hitler-headed groom, between the noggin of the purported avatar of the master race and that of his Negro marital partner” (Rosenbaum 167) led him on a quest in “comparative nosology” (168). By focusing on Hitler’s nose, which Rosenbaum interprets as an act of “satiric metonymy,” Gerlich questions Hitler’s true ancestry as he argues through racial theory that:

Hitler’s nose is not only at best Slavonic rather than Nordic, but Slavonic in a very special way: Slavonic in a way that reflects the Mongolian invasions of Europe by Attila the Hun’s hordes, Hitler’s nose, then, is not even compatible with pure, albeit ‘inferior,’ Slav stock, but with the mongrel, mixed-blood Slav types who are the bastard offspring of the rape of Slav women by invading Mongol horsemen. (171)

Thus, if the nose represents the man:

“one has to wonder” if there is not a kind of sly comic displacement going on here as well in which [...] some salacious displacement of one body part for another. In the same way, one wonders if in Gerlich’s ‘scholarly’ attribution of Mongolian blood to Hitler there is also a kind of displacement going on – a subtextual allusion to Hitler’s more widely rumored ‘Jews blood.’ (*Ibid.*)

Through a scientific study of Hitler’s nose, Gerlich attacks not only Hitler’s blood but also his soul (as another racial scientist, Alfred Rosenberg, had concluded that “the worldview ([W]eltanschauung) of an individual is a consequence of his race and blood”) (Rosenbaum 172). As such, Gerlich concludes that Hitler’s world view is in direct contradiction to that of the true Germanic outlook which calls for freedom of judgment,

whereas, his position is more in line with that of an “Asiatic-despot emperor” (qtd. in Rosenbaum 172) and he goes so far as to compare and highlight the similarities, both physical and political, to Stalin. Ultimately, satire, irony and reversal are used to weaken Hitler’s symbolic figure and call into question his racial science. However, this “mere satiric conceit,” to use Rosenbaum’s phrase, becomes sinister in a speech Hitler gave in August 1939, shortly before the invasion of Poland:

Our strength is in our quickness and our brutality. Genghis Khan had millions of women and children killed by his own will and with a gay heart. History sees in him only a great state builder. Thus, for the time being, I have sent to the east only my Death’s Head units with orders to kill without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of Polish race or lineage. Only in such a way will we win the vital space we need. Who still talks in our day of the extermination of the Armenians?
(qtd. in Rosenbaum 175)

As such, “Khan’s Mongolians were in the forefront of Hitler’s meditations about mass murder” (Rosenbaum 175), but the situation was not devoid of complexity, as the Nazis regarded themselves as Khan-type “state builders” while they were slaughtering their “Asiatic” enemies; “they [Hitler and Himmler] sought to find the Khan within and to fight the Khan without. They became Mongols in order to exterminate the Mongols” (Rosenbaum 176).

Thus, while victim and victor converge historically, they also converge in fiction, most notably, in Romain Gary’s 1967 novel, *La danse de Gengis Cohn*.¹¹² Here is its protagonist:

¹¹² The novel was, two years after its first publication, translated into English. There are many differences between the two versions as the original has 44 chapters while the English text has only 40, the frames of references also differ; but the most striking difference can be found in the resolution of the plot. In 1993, this novel was turned into a film, however, the plot of the film is more comprehensive, but also, more simplistic as Cohn is not presented as a *dybbuk* but as a ventriloquist. Moreover, Lily and Florian do not make an appearance, and as Baron points out, the plot was abridged and discussions relating to “the relationship between eros and thanatos, the significance of Christ’s crucifixion, discrimination against American blacks, and the war in Vietnam” (142) were omitted.

Mon nom est Cohn, Gengis Cohn. Naturellement, Gengis est un pseudonyme : mon vrai prénom était Moïché, mais Gengis allait mieux avec mon genre de drôlerie. Je suis un comique juif et j'étais très connu jadis, dans les cabarets yiddish : d'abord au *Schwarze Schickse* de Berlin, ensuite au *Motke Ganeff* de Varsovie, et enfin à Auschwitz. Les critiques faisaient quelques réserves sur mon humour : ils le trouvaient un peu excessif, un peu agressif, cruel. Ils me conseillaient un peu plus de retenue. Peut-être avaient-ils raison. Un jour, à Auschwitz, j'ai raconté une histoire tellement drôle à un autre détenu qu'il est mort de rire. C'était sans doute le seul Juif mort de rire à Auschwitz. (11-12)

With these words, the reader is introduced to a *dybbuk*. According to Jewish folklore, a *dybbuk* is a soul that attaches itself to a living person. This term is derived from the Hebrew *ledabek*, meaning “to cling” or “to attach,” and it is believed that this soul temporarily possesses a living person; the host’s mental illness ensues. Though the notion of an evil spirit can be traced back to the Second Temple, the use of this term became popular in the 1700s. In her discussion of the *dybbuk*, Maria Kaspina points out that, “the creature possessing the person is generally male” and that the victims are usually females in “their reproductive years who [are] in some transitional state” (36-37). Moreover, the *dybbuk* is generally thought to be “the spirit of some deceased person, a sinner who, often, died unnaturally or, at least, prematurely” (37). Though the *dybbuk* was not initially a humorous spirit, Gary’s adaptation and transformation of this foil not only references a pre-Holocaust literary tradition, but also offers an interesting response to the Holocaust; namely, the intersection between tragedy and laughter, between absurdity and revenge. This innovative aspect of Gary’s novel is highlighted by comparing the use of the *dybbuk* in his novel to S. Anksy’s more traditional approach in his 1914 play, *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds*.

The basic summary of the play is the following: Channon, a brilliant Talmudic scholar, enters the world of Kabbalah and numerology. He sees Leah at the synagogue

and, from the audience's perspective, his love for her is obvious. However, upon hearing news of her betrothal, this smitten fellow drops dead. The day prior to her wedding, Leah visits the cemetery to invite her dead relatives as well as Channon to her wedding. It is at this point that Leah becomes possessed and she speaks the following words in a man's voice, "You buried me. But I have come back-to my destined bride. I will leave her no more!" (92) Realizing that she has been penetrated by a *dybbuk*, the family takes Leah to Rabbi Azrael in the hopes that he will free her from this invasive spirit. Channon resists the exorcism and Rabbi Azrael is then forced to call upon Rabbi Samson, the City Rabbi, to get permission to perform a *Herem*. At this point, the plot thickens: Rabbi Samson states, "[...] Nissim ben Rifke [Channon's father] appeared to me three times in my dreams last night, demanding that I summon Sender of Brainitz to trial before the Rabbinical Court" (115). A trial between the dead plaintiff and the living defendant is conducted and it is during these proceedings that the truth is revealed – both these fathers made a pact for their children to be married but Leah's father broke this arrangement. Even though Sender was punished by the courts, forced to give half his wealth to the poor and ordered to say *Kaddish* for both Channon and Nissim, neither the *dybbuk* nor his father accept the verdict. In the end, the *dybbuk* leaves Leah's body but not her mind or soul. As the groom is being led to his bride, Leah leaves her circle of protection and is reunited with her predestined love. Ultimately, in *The Dybbuk*, there is a direct correlation between the emergence of the supernatural and a breakdown of moral order.

The question then becomes what does this play have to do with Gary's novel? Like Channon, Cohn becomes a *dybbuk* precisely because he has been wronged and, as a

dybbuk, he can invade the mind and body of S.S. Officer Schatz, the man responsible for his murder:

Il y a peu de chose que je n'ai pas appris à mon ami Schatz de notre histoire et de nos croyances, et il n'ignore rien de ce phénomène bien connu, que tous ceux qui ont étudié nos traditions ont rencontré : le *dibbuk*. Le commissaire de première classe Schatz sait qu'il est habité par un *dibbuk*. C'est un mauvais esprit, un démon qui vous saisit, qui s'installe en vous, et se met à régner en maître. Pour le chasser, il faut des prières, il faut dix Juifs pieux, vénérables, connus pour leur sainteté, qui jettent leur poids dans la balance et font fuir le démon. Il lui est arrivé de rôder pendant des heures autour d'une synagogue mais il n'a jamais osé entrer. C'est que c'est bien pour la première fois dans l'histoire de la pensée et de la religion qu'un pur Aryen, un ancien SS est habité par un *dibbuk* juif. (111)

Whereas in Ansky's play, the *dybbuk* (Channon's spirit) enters Leah because she invites him to her wedding, in the novel, Cohn enters the *Hauptjudenfresser* Schatz because this SS officer had come to know him as he stood apart from all the other victims:

... Je ne le connaissais pas personnellement, mais je l'avais remarqué, parce que... bon, enfin, quand j'ai crié *Feuer!*... j'avais des ordres, vous comprenez, j'avais des ordres, l'honneur de l'uniforme était en joue... en jeu... Bref, quand j'ai fait tirer, il n'a pas fait comme les autres. Il y en avait une quarantaine — hommes, femmes, enfants — au fond du trou que nous leur avions fait creuser, et ils attendaient. Ils ne songeaient pas à se défendre. Les femmes hurlaient, évidemment, et tentaient de protéger leurs petits de leurs corps, mais personne n'essayait aucun truc spécial. Pour une fois, même les Juifs étaient à bout de combines. Tous, sauf un. Celui-là ne s'est pas laissé faire comme les autres. Il s'est défendu.

– Avec quoi?

– Avec quoi, avec quoi! Il a fait un geste obscène.

– Un geste obscène?

C'est exact. Je me suis toujours demandé ce qui m'avait poussé à montrer mon cul nu aux représentants du *Herrenvolk* à un moment pareil. Peut-être presentais-je qu'on allait un jour reprocher aux Juifs de s'être laissés massacrer sans résister : j'ai donc utilisé la seule arme, purement symbolique, certes, que nous avons réussi à conserver à peu près intacte à travers les âges et que j'allais perdre dans un instant. Je ne pouvais rien faire d'autre. Il n'était pas question de sauter hors du trou et de se jeter sur les SS quitte à tomber en route, noblement : le trou était trop profond. Mais je tenais à m'exprimer. Avant de recevoir les balles dans le cœur, je voulais quand même manifester, envoyer un message à l'Allemagne, aux

nazis, à l'humanité, à la postérité. Je me suis servi d'abord d'un vieux geste insultant connu du monde entier. C'est même curieux que ce geste soit tellement universel. Il s'effectue avec le bras : la main gauche vient de frapper la partie supérieure du bras droit, en même temps que l'avant-bras est replié violemment... C'est très expressif.

– Il s'était avancé, se plaçant devant les autres, et il a fait ce geste obscène alors que mes hommes le visaient déjà. Aucune dignité. J'ai été tellement outré par une telle attitude de chien sans honneur face à la mort, que j'ai perdu une seconde ou deux avant de crier *Feuer!* et ce salaud-là en a profité avec une rapidité éclair, et qui prouve bien qu'il avait l'habitude de l'insulte... C'est à peine croyable, étant donné qu'il allait mourir dans un instant, mais...

– Mais?

– Enfin, il m'a tourné le dos, il a baissé sa culotte, il nous a montré son cul nu et il a même eu le temps de crier *Kisch mir in tokhès !* avant de tomber. Une vraie *hutzpé*, un culot monstre... (31-33)¹¹³

And this is exactly how humour should be seen – as an obscene gesture of defiance and defence. In the English translation of this novel, the connection between Jew and Nazi is further intensified, as is the notion of revenge:

There have undoubtedly been more worthy and noble last words in history than “Kiss my ass,” but I have never made any claim to greatness and, besides, I'm quite pleased with my effort and only hope that my

¹¹³ Interestingly, these words are echoed in Edgar Hilsenrath's 1971 novel *The Nazi and the Barber*. In his disturbingly funny work, Max Schulz, a Nazi, reinvents himself as “the Jew Itzig Finkelstein” (237). Illegally sailing to Palestine to start over, he engages in a discussion with David Shapiro, Jew and survivor, who is prepared to fight for the right to dock in Palestine. Schulz/Finkelstein, a true skeptic asks, “And will we land?” to which Shapiro replies, “Of course we will land.” “And then what?”, asks this ex-Nazi. The Jew replies, “Then the English can lick our asses!” (237) While many similarities do exist between the two texts (as discussed in Aurélie Kalisky's article, “Mystères de la satire: Rire gris et humour barbare dans deux romans « après Auschwitz »,” having one's ass kissed or licked by the stronger party brings a sense of glee and satisfaction even if it is never actualized; it expresses a type of harmless revenge and reversal of superiority. But what is most extraordinary is that these words can be found in Vrba's *testimony*:

He [Sandor] picked up his cap full of frozen earth and scampered away to dump it. I went back to Fred, elated, because I knew that I could rely completely on every word that Sandor had said; and mixed with my elation was a feeling of awe and strength of the man and his three friends.

Next day I saw him again [...]

“We left a little memorial in the cavity. A message, scribbled on the planks. We signed it with our numbers and if they ever find it, we're goners.”

“I'll scrub it out as soon as I get inside. But what did you say in the message?”

“Kiss our arses!”

I smothered a laugh. Then I thought of the four of them, huddled in a little hole, listening to the S.S. boots pounding all round them; and I wondered whether my own sense of humour would survive so well when I was there (224-225).

message will go down to posterity and that I will have thus contributed a little something to our spiritual heritage. I do not wish to sound bitter, but I do believe that six million Jews left without any help at all by the civilized world could not address the latter a more heartfelt and befitting message than “Kiss my ass,” or that the civilized world deserved anything more noble and dignified. Anyone who thinks otherwise should have his conscience examined.

I didn’t know at the time that by fighting back I would impress Schatz so deeply, cause him some kind of traumatic shock and stay with him forever, thus achieving a sort of immortality. All I wanted was to express myself. But Schatzchen never got over it. The whole thing became intensely personal to him. As he stood there with the order “*Feuer!*” stuck in his throat, looking me in the eye – if I may be permitted to sound a bit risqué, though as a rule I avoid off-color jokes in my act – something happened to him. He still managed to give the order, as befits an officer, but a beautiful relationship was already born. He made it even deeper by taking the trouble to find out who I was, going through my papers and diaries, trying to find learn as much as he could about the arrogant and defiant Jew who fought back. (23-24)

Gary’s hero, in this absurd episode, proves that although “[w]it does not stop Nazi bullets [...] the victims’ abandonment of humor would be a concession of moral defeat” (Lipman 21).

By entering and possessing the soul of this German officer, a hilarious revenge fantasy is being acted out on two levels. Firstly, the tormentor becomes the tormented and secondly, the Nazi turns into the Jew. In true *dybbuk* fashion, Genghis Cohn controls the foods that Schatz eats and the words that leave his host’s mouth. As Schatz says to a colleague :

– Je me surprends malgré moi à prononcer des mots dans cet infâme jargon... J’ai fini par acheter un dictionnaire pour me comprendre... *Arakhmonès*... Cela veut dire pitié. Je l’ai entendu dix mille fois, au bas mot. *Hutzpé*, culot... *Gvalt*, au secours... *Mazltov*, félicitations... Et puis, tenez, l’autre nuit, je me suis réveillé en chantant.

Guth sourit.

– Au moins, c’est plus gai.

– Vous croyez ça? Vous ne connaissez pas mon salopard ! Vous savez ce qu’il me fait chanter? *El molorakhmin*. C’est leur chant funèbre pour les morts... Il m’a forcé à me lever en pleine nuit – c’était l’anniversaire

du soulèvement du ghetto de Varsovie – et il m’a obligé à chanter leur chant pour les morts... Il était installé sur mon lit, en battant la mesure, et il m’écoutait avec satisfaction. Ensuite, il m’a fait chanter *yiddische mamma*... À moi, vous vous rendez compte? Un manque de tact! Car enfin, il y avait des mères et des enfants parmi ces malheureuses victimes d’Hitler... Cet individu n’a pas de cœur. Et tenez, il y a deux nuits... Que ça reste entre nous, mais... Il est venu me tirer par les pieds et il m’a forcé à m’agenouiller — chez moi, dans ma propre maison — et à réciter le *kaddish*, la prière pour les morts...

Est-ce ma faute si je venais de lire dans les journaux que des tombes juives venaient encore d’être profanées? Il faut ce qu’il faut.

Cette fois, l’inspecteur Guth est tout de même étonné.

— À genoux? Il vous a forcé à mettre à genoux pour réciter le... comment donc, le *kaddish*? C’est curieux. Les Juifs ne prient pas à genoux.

Schatz hésite un moment.

— *Nous les mettions à genoux*, murmure-t-il, sur un ton confidentiel.

— Ah bon ! fait Guth, un peu gêné. (35-36)

As a *dybbuk* and as a comedian, Genghis Cohn is a damning but hilarious presence. His real name, Moishe, is:

un nom archétypique que l’on retrouve dans les blagues juives et la littérature yiddish Il proclame lui-même tenir ses origines des personnages de Sholem Aleichem et d’Isaac Babel, mais se revendique tout autant de la tradition allemande, à travers le personnage du *Doppelgänger*. (Kalisky 160)

He is a cross between a warrior and a Jew: a contradiction in terms or an oxymoron according to anti-Semitic discourse and stereotypes.

Therefore, the resurrection of this figure, along with the language of the text, results in narrowing the devastating cultural schism caused by the Holocaust. Since the text is full of Yiddish proverbs, jokes, expressions and insults, the language of this text acts as a “linguistic *yellow Jewish star*” as it acquires “the function of a recognition mark for a dispersed collectivity” (Kauffmann, “Gallows” 101). This hearkening back to Yiddish literature and to a key pre-World War II figure is important, for Cohn’s presence infuses levity and truth into the text, while his absence is a constant reminder of what has

been and who has been destroyed. On a larger scale, the character of Cohn “follows the footsteps of the traditional Yiddish macabre humour whose characteristic traits are those of self-irony, in certain circumstances assuming a manner of self-mockery and often turning into self-deprecation” (Pfefferkorn 80).

In addition to bringing comedic relief, Cohn is also the cultural barometer of propriety. He is critical of post-Holocaust ideology and does not allow his tormentor to gloss over his crimes. Although Cohn was not able to truly defend himself in life, he is able to avenge his death. As Schatz explains:

— J’ai des problèmes, des soucis. Écoutez, Guth, vous êtes un ami. Je vais vous confier quelque chose. Vous êtes trop jeune, votre génération n’a pas connu ça... C’est un Juif.

— Un Juif?

— Oui. Un Juif particulièrement mal intentionné, du genre qui ne pardonne pas... du genre ... *exterminé*. Ce sont les plus coriaces. Ils n’ont pas de cœur.

Je hausse les épaules. Je n’y peux rien. Je ne l’ai pas fait exprès. Et puis, exterminé, c’est vite dit. Il y a des morts qui ne meurent jamais. Je dirais même que plus on les tue et plus ils reviennent. Prenez, par exemple, l’Allemagne. Aujourd’hui c’est un pays entièrement habité par les Juifs. Bien sûr on ne les voit pas, ils n’ont pas de présence physique, mais... comment dire? Ils se font sentir. C’est très curieux, mais c’est comme ça : vous marchez dans les villes allemandes — et aussi à Varsovie, à Lodz et ailleurs — et ça sent le Juif. Oui, les rues sont pleines de Juifs qui ne sont pas là. C’est une impression saisissante. Il y a, d’ailleurs, en yiddish, une expression qui vient du droit romain : *le mort saisit le vif*. C’est tout à fait ça. Je ne veux pas faire de la peine à tout un peuple, mais l’Allemagne est un pays entièrement enjuivé. (29-30)

Moreover, his initial role of narrator allows him to comment upon the actions of the other characters:

Le bureau est très propre, mon ami est obsédé par la propreté. Il se lave les mains continuellement : c’est nerveux. Il s’est même fait installer un petit lavabo, sous le président Luebke. Il se lève toutes les dix minutes pour aller faire ses ablutions. Il emploie à cet effet une poudre spéciale. Jamais le savon. Schatzchen a pour le savon une véritable phobie. On ne sait jamais à qui on a affaire, dit-il. (14)

The leitmotif of cleanliness spreads throughout the text. In what Dundes and Hauschild call “a metaphorical *reductio ad absurdum*,” they point out that the Nazis tried to make “dirty Jews” clean by transforming them into soap (253). While Cohn makes fun of Schatz for this, the fact that this subject matter is incorporated into the realm of the grotesquely humorous suggests that, “Auschwitz jokes would at least seem to be an admission that the horrors of the death camps are a reality...” (259)¹¹⁴ Moreover, the telling and recounting of such grotesque jokes indicates that reality is being negotiated with and through the channel of humour.

Divided into three parts, *Le dibbuk*/The Dybbuk, *Dans la forêt de Geist*/In the Forest of Geist, and *La tentation de Genghis Cohn*/The Temptation of Genghis Cohn, this novel plays with traditional narrative form and time. Somewhat confusing due to the time-shift technique and the various narrative voices talking to, about, and over themselves, the novel is set in 1968 but jumps back to the events of 1944. In that year, in the Forest of Geist, Genghis Cohn, along with other Jews, were forced to dig their graves and were then shot. While both Schatz and Cohn recount the events from their

¹¹⁴ Jewish inmates also cracked jokes about being turned into soap. According to Borwicz’s research:

Dans la période de « déportations », on avait coutume de demander : *Crois-tu dans la vie d’outre-wagon? Ou : ne t’en fais pas, mon vieux, nous nous reverrons encore en tant que petit savons étalés dans une devanture.* Il y avait même des additions. Pour taquiner l’interlocuteur, on ajoutait : *Oui, mais tandis que ta graisse servira à confectionner du savon ordinaire, de la mienne on fera un savon de toilette* (196).

In his footnote, he remarks that these same jokes can be found in several different depositions, thus proving that jokes of this nature were quite common. This view is corroborated by Grunberger who believes that a most poignant example of gallows humour is offered by the jokes and ribaldry between the inmates. In Treblinka, for example:

where the prisoners were employed to carry gassed corpses of inmates to the crematorium, prisoners who ate too much would be told by their fellows, ‘Hey, Moishe, don’t overeat! Think of us who will have to carry you’ [...] [Moreover,] the sad consolation to friends whom one had to leave was, ‘Come on, cheer up, old man. We’ll meet again some day in a better world – in a shop window as soap.’ The appropriate reply to this last remark was, ‘Yes, but while they’ll make toilet soap from my fat, you’ll be a bar of cheap laundry soap.’ (340).

Moreover, Borwicz suggests that the reason these jokes existed was because « [c]es plaisanteries macabres permettent d’entrevoir le degré de familiarité avec la mort menaçante, *inscrite* » (196).

perspectives, “Cohn’s account of the execution is related in a wild mixture of parodic and black humour that deftly turns from belly-laughs to soul-aches. His style, essentially that of a night-club raconteur, easily meanders between burlesque frivolity and historical-philosophical commentary” (Pfefferkorn 79). Eli Pfefferkorn points out that, in contrast, Schatz is troubled not by the mass murder of innocents but by the “unprecedented tampering with the clockwork-like death machine” (81). As such, Schatz’s horror stems not from the fact that he was commanding a mass murder but from the undignified disruption of and “the supremacy of the human spirit over a carefully-calculated death machine” (*Ibid.*).

In the present of the novel, over 20 years have passed and unexplained murders are now taking place in the city of Licht. Ironically, it is Schatz’s duty, as police commissioner, to find those responsible. He is deeply troubled by the events as, in his opinion, « C’est la première fois, dans mon expérience, dit-il solennellement, que quelqu’un se livre à un massacre collectif sans trace de motif, sans l’ombre d’une raison.... » (22) Here, while Gary deliberately places the events in Geist and Licht in parallel, Schatz is blind to the similarities and,

[w]ere it not for Cohn’s untiring insistence on viewing the murder in the wider historical context of the mass-graves and the gas-chambers, Schatz would have readily overlooked the possible link between the motiveless killings taking place in Licht and those perpetuated in the Forest of Geist in the spring of 1944. The reason for this oversight, he explains to Cohn apologetically, lies in the inherent distinction between a state of war and that of peace: ‘There was a war on. There was an ideology, strong political and philosophical motivations... Besides, I was merely carrying out orders.’ (p.19) These words, for the first time uttered at the Nüremberg trials and later reechoed in the denazification courts and in the smoky taverns over foaming Bavarian beer, have become a legalistic parody of this age. (Pfefferkorn 81-82)

Schatz, blind to both his past and culpability, and refusing to see the resemblances between the two events, needs Cohn's presence to make the similarities glaringly obvious:

Au moment même où mon ami avait fini de dire « C'est la première fois, dans mon expérience », *et cætera*, je sors de mes coulisses en dansant, je me présent devant lui, un bon sourire aux lèvres, et je me mets à épousseter et à polir mon étoile jaune avec le bout de mes doigts. Au *Schwarze Schickse*, je faisais toujours mon entrée ainsi, en dansant, sur un petit air de violon juif. L'effet est, une fois de plus, excellent. (24)

And yet, Schatz's *chutzpah* knows no bounds as he, in what Pfefferkorn calls "a legalistic parody of this age" (82), tries to maintain that a difference in both cases exists with the following rationalization, « Il y avait la guerre. Il y avait une idéologie... Et puis, on avait des ordres... » (25) This notion of absolution is again repeated as Schatz, no longer able to tolerate Cohn's presence, screams, « J'ai été un fonctionnaire zélé, obéissant. J'ai crié *Feuer!* parce que j'avais des ordres ! J'avais des ordres! *Des orders*, Cohn ! Je n'ai fait que mon devoir » (116). On a more macabre and humorous note, there is an even more jarring distinction between these two events: the murders of 1944 are characterized by the terror of the mothers and their children¹¹⁵ whereas, more than 20 years later, the victims die in a state of ecstasy as is made clear by one envious *dybbuk*:

Il ne fait aucun doute que tous ces homes, au moment de mourir, ont... comment dire? Je ne sais pas, moi. Ils se sont complètement *réalisés*. Ils se sont *accomplis*. Ils donnent tous l'impression d'avoir touché au but, de l'avoir saisi. Comme si leur main tendue avait enfin cueilli quelque fruit

¹¹⁵Genghis Cohn elucidates :

Pour le punir, j'ai trouvé un petit truc assez marrant. Je lui fais le coup de la bande sonore. Au lieu de me tenir simplement là, en silence, devant lui, avec mon étoile jaune et mon visage couvert de plâtre, je fais du bruit. Je lui fais entendre des voix. C'est surtout aux voix des mères qu'il est le plus sensible. Nous étions une quarantaine, dans le trou que nous avions creusé, et il y avait naturellement des mères avec leurs enfants. Je lui fais donc écouter, avec un réalisme saisissant – en matière d'art, je suis pour le réalisme – les cris des mères juives une seconde avant les rafales des mitraillettes, lorsqu'elles comprirent que leurs enfants ne seraient pas épargnés. Ça fait au moins mille décibels, une mère juive, à ces moments-là (17-18).

suprême... L'absolu. Je dirai ceci : à ma connaissance, on n'a jamais vu pareille expression de bonheur sur un visage d'homme. Pas sur le mien, en tous cas. Ça vous laisse rêveur. (56)

Those responsible for the murders in the city of Licht turn out to be Lily, a beautiful nymphomaniac who represents culture and who is unable to reach a state of sexual satisfaction, and Florian, her gardener, who embodies death itself. Her name represents a tension, « [d]ans Lily se déchiffrent le mot anglais qui désigne la fleur de lys et, par déformation calembouresque, le démon féminin de certaine tradition rabbinique, Lilith » (Kauffmann, "La danse" 80). It is this relationship between death and culture, between beauty and evil that is repeatedly explored throughout the novel. According to her husband, Lily,

[est] un être d'une sensibilité exquise, une nature d'élite [...] Elle ne vivait que pour la culture [...] Wagner! Beethoven! Schiller! Hölderlin! Rilke! Voilà ses seuls amants. Elle a inspiré nos plus grands poètes! [...] Ils ont tous chanté sa beauté, sa grandeur, sa noblesse, son âme immortelle! On la donnait en exemple à la jeunesse des écoles! Elle inspirait, bien sûr, de grands amours, mais cela se situait toujours au niveau de l'esprit. Je vous dis, Lily n'avait qu'un rêve, qu'une aspiration, qu'un besoin... La culture.... (77-78)

However, the German and privileged benefactor of culture is placed in direct contrast to the Jewish and underprivileged victim of culture; indicating a shift in time perspective.

La culture. Au moment où nous creusions notre tombe, alors que le SS tenaient déjà les mitraillettes prêtes, j'avais demandé à mon voisin de tombeau, Sioma Kapelusznik, ce qu'il en pensait. Je m'étais tourné vers lui et je lui avais demandé s'il pouvait me donner une bonne définition de la culture, pour que je sois sûr de ne pas mourir pour rien, de laisser peut-être un patrimoine derrière moi. Il m'a répondu, mais tous ces gosses qui braillaient dans les bras de leurs mères – les mères qui tenaient leurs enfants étaient dispensées de creuser leur tombe – ont d'abord couvert sa voix... Alors, tout en creusant, il s'est rapproché de moi, il m'a fait un clin d'œil, et puis il a dit : « *La culture, c'est lorsque les mères qui tiennent leurs enfants dans leurs bras sont dispensées de creuser leurs tombes avant d'être fusillées.* » C'était une bonne *khokhmé* et nous avons

bien ri tous les deux. Je vous dis, il n'y a pas de meilleurs comiques que les comiques juifs. (78)

The previous quotes highlight the way in which Nazi ideology was indeed contradictory as it mixed high culture with sheer barbarism.¹¹⁶ However, the relationship between culture and death is broadened in the text as Gary focuses not only on the Jewish question but on all of humanity. This laughter is a result of explosive truth whereby there exists “a surprising relief from the burden of hypocrisy and conventional lies” (Reik 213):

... Vous voulez que je vous dise, Cohn ? Vous êtes démodé. Vous faites vieux jeu. L'humanité vous a assez vu. Elle veut du neuf. Vos étoiles jaunes, vos fours, vos chambres à gaz, on ne veut plus en entendre parler. On veut autre chose. Du neuf. On veut aller de l'avant ! Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belsen, ça commence à faire pompier ! Ça fait le Juif de papa! Les jeunes, ça ne leur dit plus rien du tout. Les jeunes, ils sont venus au monde avec la bombe atomique, ils ont des soleils dans les yeux ! Pour eux, vos camps d'extermination, ça fait pedzouille ! Ils en ont assez de bricolages ! Ils en ont soupé de nos bricoles juives, de nos petits pipis ! Cessez donc de vous accrocher à votre magot, à votre petit capital de souffrance, d'essayer de vous rendre plus intéressant que les autres. Les privilégiés, les peuples élus, il n'y en aura bientôt plus. Ils ont deux milliards, mon ami. Alors, qui cherchez-vous à impressionner, avec vos six millions?

Touché. Cette fois, il a visé juste. Je suis obligé de reconnaître que je manque de capital. Lily est au-dessus de mes moyens. C'est une très grande dame, une princesse, elle a le droit de se montrer exigeante. Je ne fais plus l'affaire. Je suis victime de l'inflation. Je me sens soudain ruiné, diminué. Tout ce que j'ai si péniblement économisé au cours des siècles ne suffit plus. Aujourd'hui, elle peut avoir cent, cent cinquante millions en appuyant simplement sur un bouton. Des milliers d'immeubles, des villes entières. Je suis complètement dévalorisé, démonétisé, je n'ai plus cours. Je ramasse péniblement ce qui reste de ma dignité et de mon importance, je me retire dans un coin et je boude. Elle ne veut plus de moi, très bien. Elle veut les Chinois, très bien. Je sais ce que c'est. C'est l'antisémitisme, voilà ce que c'est. (103-104)

All of Lily's victims, like Genghis Cohn, die with their asses bared. By making the correlation between beauty, suffering and, ultimately, death, Gary may be suggesting that suffering leads to beauty and to cultural productions:

¹¹⁶ German playwright and Nazi Poet Laureate, Hanns Johst, in his play *Shlageter* wrote, “Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning!” (Act 1, Scene 1).

Je me souviens soudain que de la souffrance du Christ, des milliers de salopards ont tiré de très belles œuvres. Ils s'en sont régalés. Même en descendant plus bas, je me rappelle que des cadavres de *Guernica*, Picasso a tiré *Guernica* et Tolstoï a bénéficié de la guerre et de la paix pour son *Guerre et Paix*. J'ai toujours pensé que si on parle toujours d'Auschwitz, c'est uniquement parce que ça n'a pas encore été effacé par une belle œuvre littéraire. (188-189)

This is perhaps why Lily can never be satiated and why humanity may in fact be doomed. Here, Gary may be suggesting that horror is the inspiration for and is elevated by artistic production, negating the brutality of reality to a certain degree.¹¹⁷ And for Lily, there will never be a horror large enough to produce the grandest work of culture.

While glaring contrasts offer a plateau for humour so do other stylistic devices. In her article, “Gallows Humor and Jewish Humor: A reading of ‘The Dance of Genghis Cohn’, by Romain Gary,” Judith Kauffmann attempts to pinpoint “specific Jewish characteristics” of humour (99) in this novel. She chose the following excerpt, a conversation between Cohn and Florian, as a base for her conclusions:

Nous rions tous les deux. Un partenaire idéal.
 — J'en connais une autre, dit Florian, encouragé. Au cours d'un pogrom, la femme de Cohn est violée sous les yeux de son mari par les cosaques. D'abord, ce sont les soldats qui lui passent dessus, puis leur officier survient et se l'envoie aussi. Alors, Cohn dit : « Vous ne pouvez pas demander d'abord la permission, vous, un officier ? »
 Je me marre.
 — Formidable, dis-je. J'adore notre folklore.

¹¹⁷ While a discussion can, should, and has taken place in regards to realism and representation in relation to art and horror, the author seems to be suggesting that a correlation does exist. While *Guernica* is mentioned as a representational work of horror, Genghis Cohn prefers realism when it comes to exacting revenge:

As a punishment I've worked out an amusing little trick [...] I play for him, with stark realism—when it comes to art, I'm a stickler for realism—the screams of the Jewish mothers a few seconds before the machine-gun bursts, when they finally understood that their children wouldn't be spared. At a moment like that, a Jewish mother can make a lot of sound, at least a thousand decibels.

You should see my friend Schatzen bolt up in bed then, his face ash-gray, his eyes bulging. He hates noise (9).

Though a serious discussion, the debate regarding artistic representability in relation to horror between realism and abstraction becomes humorous from the perspective of a *dybbuk* tormenting his killer.

— J'en connais encore une...

Je l'interromps poliment. Je ne vais tout de même pas passer mon temps à écouter notre Histoire. Je la connais sur le bout des ongles.

— Vous avez dit Cohn? Quel Cohn c'était?

— Bah, vous savez, c'est toujours le même.

— Ce n'était pas le Cohn de la rue Smigla?

— Non. C'était le Cohn de Nazareth.

Je ris.

— Mazltov. Félicitations. Vous avez une mémoire.

— *Zu gesundt.*

— Tiens, vous parlez yiddish?

— Couramment.

— Berlitz?

— Non. Treblinka.

Nous rions tous les deux.

— Je me suis toujours demandé ce que c'est, au juste, l'humour juif, dit-il. Qu'est-ce que vous croyez?

— C'est une façon de gueuler.

— À quoi ça sert?

— *Le pouvoir des cris est si grand qu'il brisera les rigueurs décrétées contre l'homme...*

— Kafka, dit-il. Je sais, je connais. Vous y croyez vraiment?

Je lui cligne de l'œil et nous rions tous les deux.

— Cette histoire de cosaques que vous m'avez racontée... Vous avez dit Cohn? Ce n'était pas Leiba Cohn, de Kichenev? C'était mon oncle, et ça devait être lui parce qu'il m'avait raconté la même histoire. C'était sa femme que les cosaques avaient violée sous ses yeux. Elle avait eu un enfant après cette aventure et mon oncle, qui était lui aussi très rancunier, s'était cruellement vengé des *goïms* russes. *Il avait traité l'enfant comme son propre fils et en avait fait un Juif.*

Florian est complètement écœuré.

— Quel salopard, alors! On n'a pas idée de faire ça à un enfant.

— Oui, nous sommes une race impitoyable. Nous avons déjà crucifié notre Seigneur Jésus, paix à Ses cendres.

— Pardon, pardon, vous essayez toujours de tout garder pour vous! Rien pour les autres... D'une avidité! Le pape Jean XXIII a déclaré que vous n'étiez pas coupables.

— Non? Alors, depuis deux mille ans, c'était pour rien?

— Pour rien, pour rien... Vous ne pensez qu'à faire des affaires!

(215-217)

Within this excerpt, several theories of humour come into play, primarily those that stress incongruity and superiority in humour production. Moreover, according to Kauffmann's

categorization, this excerpt contains “two Jewish jokes,” “three groups of puns,” “two exclamations in Yiddish,” and a “definition of Jewish humor” (“Gallows Humor” 100).

The use of Yiddish, in both this excerpt and in the text in general, is as humorous as it is alienating. Cooking vocabulary, insults, the waving off of the evil eye, and “echo-combinations” all heighten Cohn’s Jewishness. Additionally,

by speaking Yiddish, by using this basically familiar language, [one] is part of the intimacy of the Jewish people, and [one] take[s] part in this essential complicity, Jewish Destiny. Humor develops to its best in this climate of connivance and familiarity (101).

Kauffmann points out that while the above deals with what she calls “*direct* manifestations of Yiddish” (*Ibid.*), there exists also an “*allusive* presence in the English or French adaptation or parody of Yiddish clichés” (102).

Moreover, Kauffmann explains that humour also comes in the form of repetitions which, “account for elementary mechanisms of humor. But the fact that they are linked to Yiddish gives them a special dimension of complicity and intimacy” (*Ibid.*). Examples of this repetition include, « C’est de l’antisémitisme, voilà ce que c’est » (Gary 104 and 301), « Des affaires comme ça, je n’en souhaite pas à mes meilleurs amis » (242), « Des offres comme ça, je n’en souhaite pas à mes meilleurs amis » (146), « Une tête pareille, je ne souhaite pas ça à mes meilleurs amis » (18), « Le subconscient, je ne souhaite pas ça à mes meilleurs amis » (44), « La résurrection, je ne souhaite pas ça à mes meilleurs amis » (188), « Des affaires comme ça, je n’en souhaite pas à... » (306), as well as the reliance upon proverbs and quotations such as, « comme on dit en yiddish, l’insulte à la souffrance » (57), « Il y a, d’ailleurs, en yiddish une expression qui vient du droit romain : *le mort saisit le vif* » (30), « Comme on dit en yiddish, ce n’est plus de l’amour, c’est de la rage » (219-220), and, finally, « Nous restons là tous les deux à écouter,

comme l'a écrit un poète yiddish, *les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne...* » (164-165).¹¹⁸ Thus, humour is a result of both content and style.

Furthermore, humour arises from the association of Berlitz with Treblinka and of the Cohn from Smigla Street with the Cohn from Nazareth (Kauffmann, "Gallows Humor" 101). Sarcasm and gallows-humour offer a moment of levity despite the seriousness, for in the story of the collective rape, humour emphasizes the barbarity of supposed European civility. The officer is criticized "for not behaving as a gentleman" (Kauffmann 104) and as such, European civility and morality are being attacked. Moreover, the "[a]pparent self-disparagement and self-aggression are actually forms of self-defence" (104). This anecdote is one of the many which condemns European sensibilities and pokes fun at the notion of propriety, since cleanliness, culture, and civility are touched upon frequently. For instance, when Baron von Pritwitz, Count von Zahn, Commissar Schatz and Genghis Cohn have a discussion about Lily's activities, the following conversation ensues:

— Lily? Mais elle ne rêve que de paix.

— C'est le rêve le plus sanglant, vous devriez le savoir. Je vais vous prier à mon tour de répondre à une question. Comment se fait-il, qu'entouré de cadavres — il en avait partout, dans le parc, d'après votre jardinier — vous ne vous soyez aperçu de rien?

— Je ne regardais si bas, Commissaire. Je n'avais d'yeux que pour Lily. Sa beauté était telle qu'elle cachait tout. On ne voyait qu'elle. Oui, c'était une beauté aveuglante. Je l'aimais, je la respectais. Je ne cherchais pas la petite bête. J'avais en elle une confiance illimitée.

— Vous avez tout de même dû remarquer qu'il y avait quelque chose qui n'allait pas? Qu'il y avait chez elle... des recoins obscurs?

— Je vous en prie!

¹¹⁸ These lines are from Paul Verlaine's poem, "Chanson d'automne." The first three lines were broadcast on June 1, 1944, by the BBC, to indicate to the French Resistance that Operation Overlord (which was the code name for the invasion of the Normandy beaches) was to commence. Moreover, in this instance, "[t]he 'Yiddishization' of respectable, well-known and established values of western civilization leads to the immediate devaluation of these values" (Kauffmann 102).

— Des recoins obscurs et nauséabonds où il se passait de drôles de choses?

— Monsieur le Commissaire, quand on est un gentleman, il y a certains recoins obscurs où l'on ne regarde pas.

— Vous fermez les yeux, quoi.

— Je l'aimais. Je ne la guettais pas d'un œil critique, sceptique, cynique, méfiant.

— Des morts dans tous les coins et vous ne voyiez rien.

— On nous l'a caché. On nous tenait dans l'ignorance. On nous a trompés.¹¹⁹ Nous savions bien qu'il y avait quelques excès, mais nous ne connaissions pas les détails. Et d'ailleurs, je ne suis pas encore convaincu. Il y a une part très grande de propagande.

— Mais c'était sous votre nez, dans votre parc! [...] Vous ne pouviez pas vous promener sur vos pelouses, rêver au clair de lune, sans marcher sur des corps!

— Mon ami vous a déjà dit qu'il n'a jamais fait de politique, intervient le Comte. Lorsque vous trébuchez sur des cadavres, vous savez bien qu'il y a là quelque chose dont il ne faut pas se mêler. (132-133)

Apparently, being a gentleman means wilfully not knowing and not looking at an upsetting reality. The Baron only has eyes for his wife/Culture, even if he has to pay a tremendous price. This attitude echoes the countless European bystanders who did not know or wilfully ignored knowledge of “certain” events.

The second “joke” is the reaction of the husband. Instead of rejecting the child, Cohn raises the child as his own – meaning as a Jew. For Florian, this “is a dreadful punishment to cast the destiny of the Jews upon an innocent baby” (Kauffmann, “Gallows Humor” 105), but indeed it is Cohn who has the last laugh. The resolution of this episode reflects a witticism recorded by Ringelblum, “The Jewish revenge: The Jews are very forgiving” (153). Not only is Cohn’s response positive, for “it is,” as Kauffmann points out, “an extraordinary message of hope and love” (“Gallows Humor” 105), it is

¹¹⁹ In the English translation the following line was added, “Names like Auschwitz, Treblinka, we never heard of them until after the war” (95). In the English version, the link between these murders, the Holocaust and the general response is emphatically correlated and not just implied as in the French version.

also triumphant and perversely revengeful for his response could be understood as the following:

You don't care for *me* as a Jew. Now I deny *your* existence as a Goy. I'm your equal. Moreover, I leave you far behind me for unlike you, I don't destroy. I build, even though I have to cohabit with horror, in order to realize that creation. (*Ibid.*)

Perhaps, this is the true definition of culture and civility. In this instance, humour arises from sarcasm and from Florian's hyperbolic disgust. Florian is not being ironic, yet irony is present for the attentive reader. Moreover, it arises from the aggression turned against the self. According to Reik, Grotjahn admits, "that the masochism of the Jewish witticisms is only 'a mask,' but he does not show the face behind the mask. He does not attempt to demask the joking Jew" (220-221). Yet, in this instance, I firmly believe that the character of Cohn does unmask for in his sarcasm and masochism he sheds a very critical light upon society and its various members. He provokes even as he disparages. His character psychologically represents the oscillation "between a subservient and a haughty attitude" (Reik 233).

Within the novel, other sources of humour come from the ridiculousness of names. For instance, the name Tsatsa Sardinensfish brings a smirk to the reader's face. In the English version of the novel, more so than in the French version, Genghis Cohn educates the reader regarding the origins and the results of such names:

When we came to Germany, Poland, and Russia, we called ourselves 'son of Aaron,' 'son of Isaac,' 'son of Abraham.' We were still the people of the Bible. And the local authorities had lots of fun inventing witty names for us. *Goldkopf*, goldenhead, *Briskin*, the circumcized one. *Gedanke*, many thanks. *Sutchkin*, little son of a bitch. Et cetera. There's nothing like a good laugh. Montaigne, the French thinker, wrote that 'laughter is a deeply human trait.' (Gary 27-28)¹²⁰

¹²⁰ In the French text, the humour is more sarcastic and not as exaggerated. In fact, the language used is sickeningly sweet:

Functioning in a way which is comparable to Yiddishisms, these names create complicity between the reader and the protagonist (who may be an extension of the author) and amongst the Jews themselves. They indicate continuity as in the case of Cohn (in the story of the rape) but also reflect a historical condition. From a factual and historical perspective, Reik explains that, “[o]fficials, especially those of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, often chose ridiculous or even vulgar names so that the new name-giving sometimes amounted to name-calling. Jewish wit often used these names as material for satire” (163). As such, through the character of Genghis Cohn, Gary is able to comment upon historical truth while making the reader laugh. As Cohn states, “[t]hese names surely seem ridiculous to you and they have made Eastern European Jewry a laughingstock for generations. There are still some people who feel that Hitler has merely wiped out a lot of ludicrous names” (Gary 27).¹²¹

In the end, Cohn, the Jew, is invited into the brotherhood of humanity but at a terrible price. For him, his yellow star affirms his identity as Jew and victim. However, in the end, as he unwillingly enters the brotherhood of humanity, the star disappears and in its place the victim could very well become the perpetrator:

Je me métamorphose, je me transfigure, mon nez se retrousse, ma lippe
de Judas disparaît, mes oreilles se rangent, je murmure vite un *kaddish*

Évidemment, les Allemands trouvaient qu’il nous fallait des patronymes moins vagues. Ils nous en ont distribué généreusement, avec beaucoup d’esprit. Et comme ça, du jour au lendemain, et à ce jour-là, nous nous trouvons affublés de noms grotesques qui prêtent à rire. Le rire est le propre de l’homme” (38).

Worth mentioning, while the English version of the text attributes this quote to Montaigne, this quote actually belongs to Rabelais and can be found in *l’Avis aux lecteurs de Gargantua*.

¹²¹ In her discussion regarding this text, Kalisky also points out the meaning of the other characters’ names: Schatz meaning treasure in German is also known as *Hauptjudenfresser* « bouffeur de Juifs en chef », he works in the city of Licht (light), and is assisted by Inspector Guth (good) and Hübsch (pretty) in trying to discover and apprehend the murderers, Florian (flower) and Lily « héritière de la Lulu de Wedekind et inspirée de la Lilith de la tradition juive » (161).

pour moi-même, je cherche à tâtons mon étoile jaune pour me rassurer : plus d'étoile jaune. Ça y est. Cette fois, c'est vraiment la fraternité.

— *Gvalt! Gvalt!* Je ne veux pas! Le ghetto, où est le ghetto?

Rien, plus de ghetto, plus une bouche d'égout.

— *Gvalt!* Je ne veux pas!

— Cohn! Vous êtes un homme!

— *Mazltov!* Félicitations! tonne une voix, là-haut, très haut.

— Vous êtes un homme!

— Non! Tout mais pas ça! Hitler, où est Hitler? À moi! À moi, Hitler, Goebbels, Streicher!

— Un homme!

— Non! J'ai mon honneur, moi!

Un dernier espoir, une ruse suprême, un dernier argument, les mânes de mon maître Rabbi Zur de Bialystock veillent encore sur moi :

— Non, vous essayez de me rouler, ce n'est pas encore la vraie fraternité, il manque encore quelqu'un...

Mais non, et je reste bouche bée : cette fois, il n'y a plus rien à espérer. Cette fois, on est au complet : je vois en effet un Noir immense, en tenue léopard, la jugulaire au menton, qui fonce vers nous, toutes voiles dehors, l'arme au poing. Il n'est pas content du tout, il est même furieux, il en veut :

— Et moi ? Attendez-moi! J'ai les mêmes droits que tout le monde!

Ils lui font de la place. Schatz lui serre la main, lui passe sa croix gammée : il est ému. Il n'y a plus de doute : c'est vraiment la fin du racisme. Les Noirs pourront enfin être antisémites, les Juifs pourront être nazis. Il n'y a plus rien à espérer, je suis fraternisé. *Gvalt!* (337-338)¹²²

Even though the plot of the novel is far more complex, the ending, particularly in the French original, brings about a plausible resolution, as “[t]he related specific account of the soul’s transmigration [turns out to be] a figment of the author’s imagination, but the circumstances in which this bizarre event occurred are recorded in historical documents” (Pfefferkorn 78). Ultimately,

Gary devised an unorthodox narrative mode to convey this facet of the writer’s experience, using occasional abrupt shifts between speakers or parenthetical dialogues to address the relationships between author and

¹²² For Reik:

Jewish jokes funnel into one essential insight: the acknowledgement of a singular ability of self-assertion and self-preservation in spite of an overwhelming world of enemies. In defiance of destructive and hostile powers surrounding them, the Jews maintained their mysterious identity. As long as the Jews live an authentic life and do not disavow their heritage, that identity will be maintained (242).

characters. As the characters comment on their status vis-à-vis one another and the author, we witness a confusion of selves as they struggle to sort out a topology of voices. Who inhabits whom? Who speaks through whom? (Schoolcraft 84)

As such, the author positions himself in his own work, turning this ludicrous, highly experimental novel into a quasi-autofiction.

According to Ralph Schoolcraft, this text, for Gary “displays a double desire: to affirm publicly his Jewish identity and to discover *for himself* precisely what it means to him to be Jewish” (83). In 1966, Gary and his wife, Jean Seberg, visited Poland where Gary fainted in front of the memorial dedicated to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. As such, “We [the readers] are led to understand that the entire novel has played itself out in his mind during his fainting spell, like an elaborate, highly charged dream, a personal revelation that immediately transforms his sense of identity” (84).

Though Gary’s mother, Nina Owczinski, was Jewish, thus making Gary, from a Halakhic standpoint, Jewish as well, he “was refused a listing in the *Who’s Who of World Jewry*: ‘Those cuckolds sent me a letter in which they awkwardly explained that I don’t possess the characteristics necessary to be considered Jewish,’ comments Gary (qtd. in Schoolcraft 90). However, at the end of the novel, Gary’s narrator makes it very clear that he identifies himself, and is identified by others, as a Jew:

- Il a fait ses humanités ici, dans le ghetto...
- Ah! Nous ne savions pas qu’il était juif...
- Lui non plus. (352)

In Ansky’s play, the *dybbuk* motif calls into question the changes occurring within the Hasidic society. As one character notes, “[i]n the old days, when a man of wealth and

fine family wanted a husband for his daughter, he didn't look for money or blue blood, but only for nobility of character" (39). Perhaps, if Sender had done so, the sin of the father would not have reigned down upon his daughter. In the case of Genghis Cohn, the use of the *dybbuk* and the reliance upon Yiddish words provide not only a point of comfort but also a point of departure from the traditional use of this foil. Indeed, in Gary's novel, humanity itself is called into question and the *dybbuk* "exact his revenge by telling jokes to his former tormentor instead of terrifying him" (Baron 140).

Much of the humour in Gary's work arises from the personae – Genghis Cohn. He is a comedian, and so, his delivery and his actions are comedic. Additionally, the language of the text, the conflicting narratives, the orality of the novel and the literary trope of the *dybbuk* work together and result in a hilariously profound text. It is not just the character that adds levity but also the content. Antithetic in nature, this work along with the protagonist turns "everything upside down" (Reik 208). Reik further stipulates that:

Jewish jokes unmask not only the futilities of conventional societies and the ironies of life, but create their own truth in the spirit of an '*immoralisme bienveillant*' when they tell with delight the complete and unvarnished truth. They surprise by the moral courage and the nonchalance with which they brush aside the preconceived ideas and lies of a hypocritical society. They mark only a moment of explosive truth, do not shed an enduring light upon conditions and people, but a flashlight that suddenly glares and glimmers. (215-216)

Thus, one can read the character of Genghis Cohn to be the embodiment of the joke. It is he who criticizes, haunts, badgers, and torments not just Schatz but all who read the text. It is through his character that society is attacked and that our understanding of historical events is questioned. If Genghis Cohn verbally transforms anti-Semitic or philo-Semitic

discourse into Jewish humour, by turning it on its head, then the inhabitants of Radu Mihăileanu's *shtetl* do the same thing, both verbally and visually.

In his article, "Laughter amid Catastrophe: *Train of Life* and Tragicomic Holocaust Cinema," David A. Brenner recognizes that comedy and its disassociation with factual, historical events "leads some to be anxious that a trivialization or banalization may take place" (261) as well as a "historical amnesia" (261). Yet, Mihăileanu, director and screenwriter of *Train de vie*, "maintains that as a member of the second generation, he seeks in his film to preserve the memory of the murdered European Jews" (Brenner 262), thus countering the threat of a cultural forgetting but not necessarily of a historical one. The film then becomes an homage to the past.¹²³ In his discussion regarding Jewish actors, Reik suggests that:

... in his representing different characters, the schnorrer and the banker, the rabbi and the poor widow, he [the actor] not only actualizes experiences of his own early childhood, but also the vicissitudes of people who were near to him whom he incorporated or introjected into himself. I would guess, furthermore, that in the characters he depicts in his stories, and whom he vividly portrays in gestures, modulations, manners of speech and facial expressions, he brings to life many potentialities, various vicissitudes that were not lived out, possible attitudes and actions that were not taken, but could have been taken [...] I would not hesitate to theorize that the story-teller or actor, in playing those many parts, revivifies vicissitudes of his ancestors among whom were certainly schnorrers and rabbis, Talmud-scholars as well as criminal a.s.o.
(183-184)

¹²³ In their discussion of Mel Brooks's remake of *To Be or Not To Be*, Joan Latchaw and David Peterson argue that his film acts as a type of *zikaron* (reminder) for, "Brooks adapts Purim's themes and theatricality, drawing from both the Megillah and *Purimspieln* [humorous plays staged on Purim], to remember the events of the war" (196). *Train de vie* functions in a very similar way, as in this film, like in *To Be or Not To Be*, "the characters attempt to collaborate against tyranny, by themselves adapting *Purimspieln* theatricality and techniques. Here we see that their reversals of fortune, a key theme from the Megillah, necessitate reversals of roles, a key theme from *Purimspieln*, in order to survive" (198). Moreover, echoes of Purim can also be found in the characters' names, the reliance upon costumes and disguise, and the hope and desire for redemption.

While somewhat lengthy, the above quote could perhaps contextualize the creativity of *Train de vie*. Reik's reasoning and logic regarding actors could perhaps be extended to directors and screenwriters – an acknowledgement of Yiddish culture and life, a remembrance of things past. Thus, the film can be understood as a revivification of the past which, unlike other comedic Holocaust fictions, rejects a Hollywoodesque redemption.

Concerned with neither historical accuracy nor truth, *Train de vie* then acts as a “requiem for the Shtetl” (Baron 145), as it relies upon traditional literary and cultural tropes and stock characters which can be found in the works of Yiddish writers such as Sholom Aleichem and in the infamous works relating to the Chelmites. One such character is the *schlemiel* and his presence allows the story to unfold because “only a village simpleton could contrive such a crazy story while being in a death camp” (140).¹²⁴ However, it also relies upon reversing standard iconic images of the Holocaust – and it is here that humour arises. In order to save themselves, Schlomo suggests that the Jews carry out their own deportation. As such, these quasi-Chelmites buy a train, don Nazi garb, and act as guards. “Like the inane inhabitants of Chelm, the wise men of the town approve of Shlomo's scheme. After all, is Shlomo's plan anymore preposterous than the notion that a civilized country like Germany would liquidate European Jewry?” (150)¹²⁵ While the inhabitants go through tremendous effort to stage their own deportation, they use symbols of death to affirm Jewish life. For instance, “[t]hey affix swastikas on each

¹²⁴ According to Wisse, “the schlemiel is... used as the symbol of an entire people in its encounter with surrounding cultures and its opposition to their opposition.... Vulnerable, ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement and self-preservation, he emerged as the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential victim (*Schlemiel* 4-5).

¹²⁵ For Wisse, “[s]tories of Chelm, showing up the folly of its inhabitants, usually follow a single pattern—when a problem must be solved, the Chelmites come up with a formula that is theoretically correct, but practically absurd” (*Schlemiel* 10).

wagon to conceal the mezuzahs nailed onto the sliding doors” (151). And so, the train of death becomes not only a train of life but also a train of revenge.

In his observations, Lawrence Baron states that, “*Train of Life* invokes the stock characters and harebrained schemes found in much Yiddish literature about the *shtetl* to enable a village of doomed Jews to evade their oppressors” (15). Often compared to Elie Wiesel’s Moshe the Beadle, in *Night*, Schlomo is both the fool and the genius. He is the one who brings news of the Nazi atrocity to the village, but rather than tell the story he calls for the Rabbi and then rolls on the ground as though in a crazed fit. It is Schlomo who suggests that the villagers stage their own deportation. Since he is known as “le fou,” Schlomo’s idea is initially met with resistance, as one man says, « qu’ils nous deportent d’accord. Mais qu’ils se fatiguent un peu ». Renouncing their initial resistance, the villagers give their most prized possessions to raise the necessary funds, yet, this serious moment is underscored as Schlomo, in true schlemiel fashion, presents the Rabbi and the accountant with – an apple. While Schlomo acts the fool, the accountant also plays his part by writing “1 apple” in the ledger, confirming that in this film, stereotypes are taken to the extreme and everyone in this village is a stereotype.¹²⁶ Yankele, for instance, when asked to become a German, says, « Pourquoi moi? Je suis déjà comptable et j’ai un ulcère. Un vrai allemand n’a pas d’ulcère. » And, Schlomo, when asked why he is « le fou, » replies, « Par hasard. Je voulais être Rabin mais la place était prise. Comme il manquait un fou je me suis dit, sois le fou si non c’est eux qui vont devenir... » Similar to

¹²⁶ In his discussion of Jewish black humour, Maurice Charney asks, “Is there a distinctive style for Jewish black humor?” (189) And he responds with the following explanation:

Writers on Jewish themes have strongly emphasized the central voice of the *schlemiel*. The downtrodden *schlemiel*, a victim of awkwardness and bad luck (*schlimazel*), establishes a perspective from which we see the world. He is the little man with grandiose visions, who is able, through ironic and defensive humor, to transcend his metaphysical condition (189).

the humouristic techniques utilized by Gary, stereotypes, in the film, are used to comment upon society while highlighting the absurd. But it is more than that. In the medium of film, humour is not only linguistic but also visual. For instance, Schtrouf, the driver of the train, relies on a manual to teach him how to ride it but looking at it upside down, the train goes backwards as opposed to forwards.

Moreover, both *La danse de Gengis Cohn* and *Train de vie* suggest that there is also a complex relationship between Jew and Nazi, between victim and perpetrator. Cohn and Schatz are in such a complex relationship; both are stuck in the subconscious of the author and one creates and exists because of the other. In Mihăileanu's film, many of the Jewish villagers are reluctant to play Nazi roles, as this would be sinful; and tensions arise. When Esther, the village beauty, tells her father that she wants to marry Mordechai's son, her father responds with, « Quoi? Le fils d'un Nazi? Tu ne penses pas que je vais accepter dans ma maison le fils d'un Nazi! » He then goes on to say that not only is he a Nazi, but also a Communist... A complete oxymoron in terms of ideology and political leanings, but he is both, and as such, a threat to the rest of the deportees. And when Mordechai says, « Je suis chef. C'est moi qui décide », and goes on to say that being a German is one who merits it, one who has made the effort, then Mordechai the Jew does indeed behave like an officer. He is called a Nazi by Yossele, the Rabbi's communist son.¹²⁷ As such, Nazi and Jew are united and each member of the village

¹²⁷ Genghis Cohn remarks that « Les Juifs font d'aussi bons soldats que les Allemands, et je vais le lui prouver » (317). Further on, his transformation becomes physical as, «... mon nez se retrousse, ma lippe de Judas disparaît, mes oreilles se rangent, je murmure vite un *kaddish* pour moi-même, je cherche à tâtons mon étoile jaune pour me rassurer : plus d'étoile jaune. Ça y est. Cette fois, c'est vraiment la fraternité » (337). By behaving like the enemy, all traces of the "Jewish Star" vanish. The distinction between Nazi and Jew disappears in the name of fraternity. However, in *Train de vie*, Mordechai and the other SS officers retain the physical appearance and rituals of being Jewish. Under the uniforms they wear *tzizit katan*, when they pray their heads are covered with « un chapeau Nazi », and when boarding the train, Mordechai kisses

plays a stylized role. Moreover, when the Nazis interrogate the mayor of the town, he responds by asking the Germans if they will become the new Jews in order for business transactions to take place. Pierre Sorlin seems to believe that Mihăileanu implies that, “victims are not prevented from changing into hangmen” (146) and by that logic hangmen could eventually become the new victims. Contrary to this perspective, Jon Morris offers another interpretation: that “Mihaileanu seems to suggest that the need for a mask far outweighs the implications the mask itself might have” (42) and that “[u]ltimately, if there is one element which ties the passengers in Train de vie together, that transcends the masks they wear – ‘Nazi’ and ‘Jew’ alike – it is their Jewish humor” (43). In fact, upon closer scrutiny, the danger for the mask to unravel is indeed a cause for humour. For instance, when the train is stopped by real Nazis, Mordechai’s Nazi uniform rips as he gives the Heil Hitler salute and he slowly has to pull up the fringes of his *tzizit katan*.

Captivatingly, it is not just the Jews who mask themselves but also the Gypsies. While many texts relating to the Holocaust omit the suffering of “another” both in this film and in the novel, Mihăileanu and Gary show a link between the Jews and the Gypsies – in terms of cultural similarities and sharing the same fate. In Gary’s text, Cohn jokes that:

Lorsque Hitler avait ordonné l’extermination des romanichels, on dit que des très nombreux *tzigoïner* avaient eux-mêmes tué leurs femmes et leurs enfants, volant ainsi les SS de l’unique satisfaction qu’ils pouvaient puiser de leur contact avec une race inférieure. Les tziganes volent tout, c’est bien connu. (47)

the Swastika which has a mezuzah hidden underneath. These soldiers then become the other of the other - twice alienated and removed.

In the text, humour is a result of perpetuating stereotypes, whereas in *Train de vie*, the Gypsies think like the Jews and while the Jews try to reach Palestine with the train, the Gypsies try to reach India with a convoy of trucks. Both groups rely upon masking and deceit in an attempt to survive. Even though Baron believes that the “inclusion of gypsies as fellow victims [in *Train de vie*] not only reflects a growing awareness of the Third Reich’s attempt to eradicate the Sinti and Roma but also protests their persecution in post-communist Rumania” (152), Yehuda Bauer makes a very interesting point which is that although the official policy towards Gypsies appears to be the same policy which was implemented against the Jews, the parallel “is more apparent than real.” Ultimately, both Gary and Mihăileanu use humour in the form of exaggerated stereotypes in order to include “the other” within a Holocaust discourse.

Casting aside questions of representation, one needs to also look at, in the words of Brenner, the “pre-postmodern genealogy” (269). Genghis Cohn was inspired by Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Babel as well as the legend of the *dybbuk*, whereas, *Train de vie* relates back to the story of Chelm and the Holiday of Purim:

[t]he film also draws on the *purimshpil*, the theatrical piece that generally involves a masquerade and that is virtually inseparable from Ashkenazic observances of Purim. Most obviously the prominence of the names Esther and Mordechai in the film should give one pause to consider that Purim – the holiday commemorating the Jews’ deliverance from Haman and which is closely associated with the *Book of Esther* – is being explicitly evoked. (Brenner 269)

Both *La danse de Genghis Cohn* and *Train de vie* rely upon literary tropes which were predominately absent during the Holocaust as a basis for both laughter and for reminiscing. Both these works succeed because they are in the realm of the imaginary. Genghis Cohn exists in the mind of the author and the text unfolds during a fainting spell.

In *Train de vie*, the viewer realizes, especially at the end, that the tale which had unfolded is nothing but a dream, a vision shared by a fool. “His is a tale told by a fool, full of fanciful thinking, eulogizing a community and culture that no longer exists” (Baron 152). The viewer is told that the majority of deportees who stayed in the Soviet Union became Communists, others went to Palestine – especially the Gypsies, others went to India – the majority of them were Jews. Schtroel ended up in China while Esther, we are told, makes it to America and mothers many children. Though the audience hears Scholomo say, « Voilà, c’est ça la vraie histoire de mon *shtetl* », the audience sees something else – something jarring and incongruent. And the movie ends not in laughter but in tragedy, with Schlomo trapped behind barbed wire dressed in concentration camp uniform. Though the visual element of this movie heightens the levity, it also punctures the fairy-talesque quality of the narrative. As the film progresses, it becomes evident that the “hegemonic representations of the Shoah are regularly deconstructed and revealed as contingent” (Brenner 262). Unlike other Holocaust films, which offer a redemptive narrative, “Mihăileanu privileges a main comedy that, by virtue of its conceit, is engaged with undermining and re-signifying stereotypes” (Brenner 262).¹²⁸ And yet, despite the trauma, Schlomo uses the absurd and humour to resist an imposed state of exception for he maintains his dignity by retaining his ability to dream (Pell 95).

From a literary standpoint, “in Yiddish fiction, antirationalism is offered up in a more specific context, as the only adequate response to an irrational onslaught of events” (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 13), and the *schlemiel*, “never sought to make a distinction between

¹²⁸ It is not just characters which are scrutinized in this film but the genre itself for the ending of *Train de vie* is “a conscious attempt to shock and traumatize the viewer as opposed to offering [...] the cathartic experience typical of other Holocaust films” (Morris 40). Jon Morris continues to explain that this film “ruthlessly exposes our misperceptions, our presuppositions, our desires, and particularly our expectations of Holocaust films” (*Ibid.*).

fact and illusion [and], [w]hen the realities are insufficient, he turns to illusions” (*Schlemiel* 20-1), thus explaining Schlomo’s vision. From an emotional viewpoint, according to one interview, the goal of this movie is, in the words of Mihăileanu, to “depict the tragedy of the Holocaust using the language of comedy, to use comedy to strengthen the tragedy. Laughter after all is another form of crying” (qtd. in Brenner 267). This movie can then be understood as a type of *Purim Shpiel*, whereby the figure of the *schlemiel* or the Purim fool enhances the contrast between the *shtetl* and the *lager*; “epitomiz[ing] a national condition,” while attacking the supposed intellectual aspects of this culture with a foolish tale marked by innocence and buffoonery (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 9). *Train de vie* could be understood in a context which does not seek to trivialize history or the gruesome aspects of the trauma but instead, pays “tribute to fundamental human values; love, friendship, solidarity, devotion to duty” (Sorlin 143). Ultimately, with the disappearance of *shtetl* life and many of its inhabitants, *Train de vie* forces the viewer to question “whether it is sensible to go on mourning” (Sorlin 147) while looking at a broader issue – namely, must remembrance for a life that was and is no more always be presented as a dirge? Within the world of fiction and fantasy:

Schlomo triomphe de la barbarie nazie non pas seulement parce qu’il résiste à l’enfermement en s’évadant dans une histoire imaginaire, mais, plus fondamentalement, parce que cette histoire, reçue par le spectateur, assure que le souvenir heureux la communauté ne sera pas effacé. Là est la vraie victoire du héros : sa capacité de transmettre une mémoire du bien à l’intérieur-même du mal historique. (Fevry 333)

In relation to the Holocaust, humour highlights the pathos and the harmlessness of the individuals affected by the war while emphasizing the absurdity of the whole thing. In the end, comedy about the Holocaust acts as a restorative, for laughter, particularly Jewish

laughter, is one of superiority and relief – the Nazis have lost despite the millions of dead Jews.

Another writer who resurrects the characters of Yiddish literature is Nathan Englander. In his 1998 short story, “The Tumblers,” the inhabitants of Chelm reappear within the context of the Holocaust. Similar to the inhabitants found in Yiddish lore, these naïve and klutzy citizens of Chelm present a different view of reality:

Gronam’s logic was still employed when the invaders built the walls around a corner of the city, creating the Ghetto of Chelm. There were so many good things lacking and so many bad in abundance that the people of the ghetto renamed almost all they had: they called their aches ‘mother’s milk,’ and darkness became ‘freedom’; filth they referred to as ‘hope’ – and felt for a while, looking at each other’s hands and faces and soot-blackened clothes, fortunate. (28)

For these modern-day Chelmites, language becomes unstable, devoid of meaning. And if Yiddish fiction presents antirationalism as being “the only adequate response to an irrational onslaught of events (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 13), then Englander highlights this ironic way of thinking by placing these Chelmites within the context of the Holocaust – a unification of “two seemingly incompatible genres” (Wilson 113), a dissonance which even Englander acknowledges. His story commences such: “Who would have thought that a war of such proportions would bother to turn its fury against the fools of Chelm? Never before, not by smallpox or tax collectors, was the city intruded upon by the troubles of the outside world” (27). As such, “[i]n this story, we have a postmodern plot wherein the schlemiels of Chelm are confronted, face to face, with the Holocaust” (Feuer and Schmitz 109).

In addition to the great division between historical reality and aesthetic freedom, a further division can be found within the story itself as the two groups of Chelmites, the

followers of Mekyl and the followers of the Mahmir Rebbe, represent not only the diverging rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shamai (Wilson 116), but two modes of understanding and interpretation. These groups represent two ways of decoding reality – the historical and the fictional, the actual and the magical. For instance, when informed of an upcoming resettlement in which “only essential items were to be taken on the trains” (Englander 30), the Mekyls interpret “essential items” to mean “everything one would need to stock [an unfurnished] summer home” (31) whereas, “[t]he rabbi of the Mahmir Hasidim, in his infinite strictness (and in response to the shameful indulgence of the Mekyls), understood ‘essential’ to exclude anything other than one’s long underwear, for all else was excess adornment” (32). In a comical twist of fate, the followers of the Mahmir Rebbe end up on the “wrong train” and instead of being shipped off to death, they board a gentile train “of showmen” (36), in which they are mistaken for acrobats even though they are nothing more than *schlemiels*:

The Chelm story, though, offers a new world, a new logic, and a new possibility for representing the unimaginable. Just as Englander can create this Chelm story as a possibility, the Chelmites can project their own desires onto reality. The city of Chelm, itself, works as a metaphor for fiction. It is a self-contained universe where words can construct new identities and new possibilities. (Wilson 117)

This jumbling of reality “is a common part of Chelm folklore” (Wilson 118) and it allows for the suspension of reality and makes way for optimism. As one Chelmite reasons:

If the good people of Chelm could believe that water was sour cream, if the peasant who woke up in Mendel’s bed and put on Mendel’s slippers and padded over to the window could believe, upon throwing back the shutters, that the view he saw had always been his own, then why not pass as acrobats and tumble across the earth until they found a place where they were welcome? (Englander 43)

Simple, in that they take everything at face value, for the remaining Chelmites, the disappearing Jews become a magical act filled with horror and wonder but without elements of the grotesque.

And the Jews?’ asked Mendel. ‘What trick is performed with the Jews?’ ‘Sleight of hand,’ she said, splashing the table with her drink and waving her fingers by way of demonstration. ‘A classic illusion. First they are here and then they are gone [...] For a moment the magician stands, a field of Jews at his feet, then nothing.’ She paused for dramatic effect, not unaccustomed to life in the theater. ‘The train sits empty. The magician stands alone on the platform. Nothing remains but the traditional puff of smoke. This trick he performs, puff after puff, twenty-four hours a day.’ (Englander 40)

Illusion is at odds with reality and the disappearing Jews are presented as a feat of magic and not as a scathing indictment upon humanity. And that is perhaps where the levity in this story can be found; that the events of this narrative, “allude to the ultimate horror within the terror of the grand, it is merely a performance, literally and figuratively, of the degradation of Jews during the Holocaust” (Osborne 134). In the end, this is but a work of fiction - it is not real and so the reader is permitted to chuckle at the foolish inhabitants of Chelm. According to Wisse, “Chelm jokes ridicule sophistry, or sterility of thought, which is dissociated from practical experience” (*Schlemiel* 11); in his short story, Englander creates a unique vantage point for registering responses to the unfathomable” (Wilson 113):

[Mendel] looked at the Mahmirim as he thought the others might. He saw that it was only by G-d’s will that they had gotten that far. A ward of the insane or of consumptives would have been a far better misperception in which to entangle this group of uniformly clad souls. Their acceptance as acrobats was a stretch, a first-glance guess, a benefit of the doubt granted by circumstance and only as valuable as their debut would prove. It was an absurd undertaking. But then again, Mendel thought, no more unbelievable than the reality from which they’d escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews. (42-43)

Englander's Chelmites invert the reality of their experience: in other words, their "absurd interpretation of experience may permit optimism, whereas a rational explanation will never lead beyond despair" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 12-3). As such, instead of responding to their situation with hopelessness, this group "continue[s] to misrepresent reality the way the people of Chelm do in the classic stories, but the reality they miss is now of course horrific; they understand the loss of the other Jews to be a great trick..." (Behlam 99). Like the alternate meaning of words, Englander presents an alternate meaning to the train; and fiction allows for an alternate ending to history.

But it is not just these tumblers who are fooled, so too is the audience watching their performance. Thus, levity arises not just from their performance but also from the audience reaction:

Look,' said the voice. 'They are as clumsy as Jews.' There was a pause and then singular and boisterous laughter. The laughter echoed and was picked up by the audience, who laughed back with lesser glee – not wanting to overstep their bounds. Mendel looked back to the Rebbe, and the Rebbe shrugged. Young Shraga, a natural survivor, took a hop-step as if to continue. Zahava moved toward the widow Raizel and rested a hand on her shoulder.

'More,' called the voice. 'The farce can't have already come to its end. More!' it said. Another voice, that of a woman came from the same place and barely carried to the stage.

'Yes, keep on,' it said. 'More of the Jewish ballet.' The fatuous laugh that followed, as with the other, was picked up by the audience and the cavernous echo so that it seemed even the wooden cherubim laughed from above. (Englander 54)

Signs are misread, reread, interpreted and misinterpreted. Signifiers do not match the signifieds and identity is misplaced and layered. Alexis Wilson points out that, "just as one word can perform different functions, even the identity of a person can masquerade as something other than itself," (117) allowing the Mahmirim to be mistaken for acrobats who only look like Jews to the audience members. This is a common trope in this literary

tradition (Wilson 118), in which “uncertainty over one’s identity, and the identity of others, is a common part of Chelm folklore” (118). In the end,

The outcome of the of the Mahmirim’s experience on the train, as well as the supposed outcome of the Mekyls on the death trains, is both believable and unbelievable, both imaginable and unimaginable at the same time. The story of “The Tumblers” becomes suspended somewhere between psychological conceivability and disbelief, and Englander uses the language of magic to emphasize this paradox. Something beyond belief appears to have happened, but how exactly it has happened is inexplicable – not only to the reader, but to the characters in the story as well. (Wilson 116)

Despite the fact that these audience members and these acrobatic Chelmites remain oblivious to the reality, the reader does not, for as the narrator remarks at the end of the story, “But there were no snipers, as there are for hands that reach out from the cracks in boxcar floors; no angels waiting, as they always do, for hands that reach out from chimneys into ash-clouded skies” (Englander 55). Thus, “[t]he facticity of the Holocaust is juxtaposed throughout this story with the ‘benighted’ innocence of the tumblers, until, through the narrator’s voice, it intrudes to close out not just this story, but the shtetl culture that would produce this storytelling tradition” (Behlman 99). And yet, the ending is ambiguous allowing for both an acceptance of the horror while providing a space for partial hope – that these few remaining Chelmites are still alive. For now.

Throughout Jewish history, humor has been a mechanism of survival during difficult circumstances, and the Chelm joke is part of this tradition. Indeed, such stories originated while Eastern European Jews were living in poverty in the shtetls, surrounded by anti-Semitism. (Wilson 121)

Though the ending may have an ambiguous resolution for some, for others, “Englander’s narrative makes explicit the shame of the schlemiel’s survival [...] He shows that the schlemiel is not simply associated with an approach to reality. It is also associated with a negative stereotype about Jews being failures” (Feuer and Schmitz 110). Yet, the idea of

the Jew being a failure is debatable. The very fact that Englander returns to the stories of the *shtetl* may indicate that the cultural schism created by the Holocaust is bridged even though it is the Holocaust which “truncated a fictional world. Chelmites, the innocent victims of all the injustice in the world, embody a sort of tragic loss. Like an Eden, Chelm moves from innocence to knowledge, from life to death, and the Holocaust is the breaking point in this story” (Wilson 121).

The jokes, novels and films which show the ridiculousness of the Nazi regime infuse this tragedy with a redemptive spirit. “[F]rom an artistic point of view the claim that Auschwitz is beyond art means a terrible admission that our culture has been incurably maimed by the Nazi horrors” (Avisar vii). In the end, history and art merge in the act of transmission and reinterpretation, and laughter becomes – amidst the ashes of the dead and the burdens of memory – a partial *tikkun* (healing), an affirmation of humanity, and the ultimate revenge. In regards to humour present during the Holocaust, Lipman points out that:

[t]he indigenous brand of humor that developed in response to Nazi persecution and genocide veered from the accustomed path of Jewish jokes. Absent were the stereotyped figures, the *schnorer* {beggar}, the *shadchan* {matchmaker}, the *shlemiel* {klutz} and the *shlamzl* {fallguy}, and the bookworm rabbi. In lieu of familiar characters, historical or fanciful, Jewish jokes from the Holocaust period featured any number of protagonists who represented the fate of all: an Abraham or a Rudenstein or simply ‘a Jew.’ (193)

Yet, these particular types resurface within the context of a post-Holocaust aesthetic and serve the same function as they did prior to the Holocaust – they become the fodder for levity and laughter while voicing complaint and criticism about systematic injustices and communal abuses. By returning to a pre-Holocaust aesthetic and by placing these figures within the context of the Holocaust, the cultural schism and subsequent displacement

created by the war is both acknowledged and lessened in comedic narratives such as these:

annoncent un tournant radical dans la perception de la Shoah. L'accueil favorable qu'elles reçoivent auprès du public accrédite même l'idée qu'en cette fin du vingtième siècle la société est prête à accepter des représentations du judéocide qui allient le comique au tragique et qui et qui, de manière plus générale, font la part belle à la fiction. (Fevry 323)

However, in order for these fictions to be comedically successful and non-threatening from a factual or historical point of view, it is not sufficient that the audience has, in the words of Sébastien Fevry, « une certaine connaissance de l'événement » but that « le renversement soit annoncé comme tel » (325). In his estimation, « [s]i l'écart n'est pas ostensiblement mis en scène, les comédies de la Shoah risquent de manquer leur objectif et de ne pas susciter le rire » (*Ibid.*). Yet, that fear cannot be applied to the three works examined in this chapter. For Gary, the events are very clearly unfolding in the author's mind, as discovered by the end of the novel, Mihăileanu refuses a conventional happily-ever-after narrative and closes the film with a silent Schlomo standing behind barbed wire, and Englander's short story reduces the imagined city of Chelm to nothing more than dust and ashes. Thus, all three works rely upon humour and symbols of levity to not only create moments of laughter but to also jolt the reader/viewer who has allowed him/herself to be swept up and captivated by the unfolding fiction. Each artist constructs or conceives an impossible scenario allowing for humour to be infused into the context of the Holocaust without threatening historical integrity. In the end, as Pell points out:

... regardless of final outcome, the protagonists resist being dehumanized. By stretching reality and relying on artifice, they deal with the unimaginable horror with even greater imagination, 'for in a world of death the spectacle of life defending itself is open to unusual perspectives' (Des Pres qtd. in Pell 95)

CHAPTER 4

Holocaust? *Vat* Holocaust??

Popular art is an accessible medium able to project a version of reality that differs from the one that is distilled in traditional discourses, principally in conventional politics and the media. The idea is *not* to produce a new ‘truth’, but to offer a choice between representations of social facts, to allude to another imagination, so that the parties are able to catch the glimpse of another horizon at the other side of the mirror.

Jean-Louis Durand

Ultimately, this chapter aims at exploring how popular art and unconventional fictional narratives problematize, expose and rebel against a prescribed ideology and tone when dealing with the memory and representation of the Holocaust. While many late 20th-century artistic productions relating to the Holocaust focus on the magnitude of the tragedy while trying to capture historical truth and deal with questions of memory, novels such as *La danse de Gengis Cohn* and films such as *Train de vie* are, for some, shocking in that they introduce a sub-genre to post-Holocaust literature and film – *light comedy*. Other second-generation comedians use humour to explore the dynamics between themselves and their survivor parents. This humour changes over time. For those who lived the Holocaust, jokes were made regarding actual circumstances. For children of survivors, humour, tinged with sadness, is found in the parent-child dynamic as well as within their own attempts to negotiate with a shadowy past. For outsiders and grandchildren of survivors, humour in relation to the Holocaust tends to focus not on actual events but on memory and the politics of memory.

In the relevant 2004 “Survivor Episode” of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Season 4, Episode 9), the term ‘survivor’ is called into question. Solly, a survivor of the Holocaust,

meets another survivor, Colby Donaldson. Only that Colby is a “survivor,” or else a contestant of the reality-show *Survivor: The Australian Outback*. When Larry David the main character, asks the Rabbi to bring a survivor to dinner, the Rabbi brings a quasi-celebrity.¹²⁹ Over dinner, while Colby impresses the guests with his bravery and tales of possible danger, Solly counters, in a heavily inflected English accent, saying, “I’ll tell you that’s a very interesting story. Let me tell you, I was in a concentration camp! You never even suffered one minute in your life compared to what I went through.” Instead of agreeing, Colby tries to argue that he too is a survivor for he spent 42 days with few rations and no snacks in a region which has 9 out of 10 of the world’s deadliest snakes in it. Upon hearing the word snacks, Solly becomes incensed and replies, “Snacks, vat you talking snacks? We didn’t eat. Sometimes for a week, for a month...” As the competition between these survivors escalates, Colby complains that there was no gym and that once he wore out his sneakers, he was condemned to wear flip flops, which “slip on the ground, on the dirt”. They compare notes about the heat versus the cold, about the lack of washrooms, about the lack of toilet paper and then Colby asks, “Have you ever seen the show?” To which Solly answers, “Did you ever see our show? It was called the Holocaust!” And then Colby explains how he was so close to winning the cash prize but due to back-stabbing he got kicked off the show. Solly explodes and yells, “You don’t know vat you are talking about survivor. I am a survivor!” which is echoed by Colby who yells, “I am a survivor!” A shouting match ensues which ends with Solly accidentally

¹²⁹ This indicates a reversal and humour is caused by incongruity. In most Rabbi jokes the community is mocked for its ignorance and the Rabbi is critical of his flock. In this instance, the Rabbi is subtly criticized for being “too American”.

spilling gravy on Larry.¹³⁰ While the humour in this episode arises from misunderstanding (on the part of the Rabbi which furthers the irony) and from the absurd comparative suffering between survivor and survivor from a contestant hoping to win a million dollars versus an unwilling victim who fought for his life, there is also a seriousness which needs to be addressed in regards to words and their meaning.

In his testimony, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi addresses the limitations of language and, by extension, the shortfalls of transmitting experience, thereby frustrating understanding:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger’, we say ‘tiredness’, ‘fear’, ‘pain’, we say ‘winter’ and they are all different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer. (123)

Whereas some may view this episode as being base or tasteless, others could interpret it as a reminder that as time passes, as the shock of the Holocaust fades and, as new realities appear, terms are being wilfully and unintentionally (mis)appropriated. Since the word ‘survivor’ is becoming synonymous with a reality-TV show, one could perhaps infer that the word will eventually take on a completely different meaning: the ‘survivor’ will become dislocated from this historical event. Thus, the language for survivorship is

¹³⁰ Another element of humour is when David Larry, speaks to Solly in a thick Yiddish accent, saying “Ve vill have a delicious dinner”. Dan Ben-Amos suggests that:

By introducing accent into their anecdotes, the narrators do not laugh at themselves altogether, but rather ridicule a social group within the Jewish community from which they would like to differentiate themselves. These jokes serve the second generation in a dual capacity: they constitute a verbal means of social differentiation from the parental group and affiliation with the peer society of American born youth (125).

Yet, in this instance, an accent is used not only to mock but to also bridge a gap, to make Sol feel more comfortable and to make Larry appear more Jewish.

being called into question while the need for the language of memory is being highlighted.

Another comedian who calls memory into question is Sarah Silverman. In her film *Sarah Silverman: Jesus Is Magic* (2005), which is a cross between taped sketches, musical numbers, and stand-up comedy, Silverman appears to be a politically incorrect ditz who starts off a loser and ends up a star. No group is spared from her biting, oftentimes bordering on racist, comments. There is one brief scene that, for the purpose of this thesis, must be focused upon – the telephone conversation between her and her niece:

“Aunt Sarah, did you know that Hitler killed sixty million Jews?” And I corrected her and said, “I think he is responsible for killing six million Jews.” And she said, “Oh yeah, six million, I knew that. But seriously, what is the difference?” [To which Sarah replies,] “The difference is that sixty million is unforgivable, young lady!” But kids, you know. Try to figure them out and you can’t. They’re kids.”

And while the viewer and the audience laugh at her niece’s indifference and flippancy, levity, combined with seriousness, can be found in what some call “the numbers game”.

The sobering implication of this skit is that six million is no longer a large enough number to warrant either interest or rage. Despite the offhandedness, or maybe because of it, and for better or worse, shows such as this one and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* keep the Holocaust present, not in a historical context but, in a cultural one. Laughter then can be used to minimize tragedy but it can also be used to explore the event itself and also the way in which the event is remembered.

Additionally, presenting or discussing tragedy in an unimposing manner such as in a comic strip can allow the subject matter to be broached in a non-threatening and overwhelming manner. *Edge City* for instance, is a comic which examines the life of a

middle-class Jewish American family. Published daily, this comic, over the course of two weeks, examined the (dis)connection between the Holocaust and memory. Colin, a typical third-grader forced to go to religious school, learns about the Holocaust and, being handed a memorial candle, is told, “We’re supposed to light them so we don’t forget the victims of the Holocaust.” And when asked by his father if he intends do so, the child responds, “If I remember.” (Wednesday, April 11th 2012) It is only when meeting a survivor and listening to his story that history becomes real and the candle is lit.¹³¹ Though not funny per se, the medium is associated with levity and while an adult may roll his/her eyes at this storyline, the simplicity of the narrative combined with the cartoon-like figures and realistic background allows the reader, particularly a younger one, to be drawn into the story without being overwhelmed by the horrors of history. Moreover, this episode, dealing with remembering, makes a very valid point as Colin remarks, “[i]t was hard to imagine millions of people who died way before I was born.” (Saturday, April 28th 2012) Thus, new ways of confronting history and tragedy must be explored and the cartoon is one such channel which proves useful in engaging with the younger generation.

Another example of using the comic to teach is *The Search*. Tintinesque in style, *The Search* details the Nazi period through the experiences of the Hecht family, and is narrated by Anne Hecht. Throughout the comic narrative, she describes to her grandson, Daniel, and his gentile friend, Jeroen, Hitler’s rise to power, her family’s escape from Germany to Holland, their internment, her parents’ deportation, her escape and finally the

¹³¹ Though I do not entirely agree with Ellen Fine’s assertion, “[t]o listen to a witness is to become one” (qtd. in Alan L. Berger, “Bearing” 253), the act of listening to a witness does personalize the event and creates in some cases a moral imperative to *at least* acknowledge the horror if not commemorate it.

aftermath of the war.¹³² Dates and facts are presented, as are divergent responses to the rise of Nazism. Created by a team of experts under the auspices of “The Anne Frank House”, in the Netherlands, and in cooperation with the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam, this 60 page comic allows the Holocaust to be presented in a way that is emotionally and cognitively accessible to children. In an interview with the *New York Times*, writer Ruud van der Rol explains that, “[t]here are no piles of bodies, because we knew from experience that this could block children from dealing with the whole subject”. Thus, the events are neither sanitized nor made so horrific that the reader is either emotionally detached or psychologically scarred. While the focus of this comic is the importance of memory and transmission, the events and characters are *truthful*, but not the *truth*.¹³³

I would like to briefly discuss two other artists in regards to the incongruity of either form and/or context in relation to the Holocaust and the manipulation of truth. The first is Alan Schechner and his piece, “Self Portrait at Buchenwald: It’s the Real Thing” (1993).

¹³² In a sense, *The Search* offers an alternative to the Anne Frank story as Esther Hecht escapes the roundup, the death camp and the fate of her parents. This Anne survives. While telling her story, Esther laments, “I have nothing to remind me of them... I can barely remember their faces...” (58), and, in a quasi-resolution, Helena van Dort, Esther’s non-Jewish childhood friend, presents Esther with a photo album that she had managed to recover from the Hecht’s home once they were deported.

¹³³ Since the story is a fictional one, many schools in Germany, Holland, Hungary and Poland for example view this comic as a supplement to history lessons and not as a replacement of history. While concerned with personal narratives, the authors also included the following overarching war chronicle: “Nearly 6 million Jews were murdered. This is known as the Holocaust, or Shoah. But millions of others, including Roma and Sinti, Poles and Russians, also died in these camps” (57).



[Fig. 4]

In this digitally manipulated photograph, the artist, holding a can of Diet Coke, stands among inmates who are lying in bunk beds, imposing his presence on the famous 1945 photo taken by Margaret Bourke-White. The image may look silly to some, shocking to others, and profound to a certain few. Schechner's art, according to one artist and theorist, "has reworked the Holocaust into a new set of interpretative paradigms and this re-signification relates to the crime of the Holocaust, though it enters into an unstable process of interpretation, re-contextualization and semiotic disorder." (Imperato par.2) The convergence of past and present is visually highlighted, but what exactly does it mean? How can it be understood? Alessandro Imperato, quoting Walter Benjamin, writes that this "image works like an allegorical ruin." (par. 4) While the photo is not humorous, the incongruity, between the historical image and the imposed one, acts in a manner similar to humour – it startles the viewer (perhaps because of its very nature – photomontage or because of the content) and makes a statement. The title, both ironic and

reflective, is asking the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the “real” but also the commodification of horror.¹³⁴ According to Naomi Stead:

A new aesthetic, or more pointedly a subversion of aesthetics, is unveiled by the arbitrary processes of decay. In the dialectical image is also revealed the new ways of seeing produced by new technologies and materials. For Benjamin, it is through such violence that the present can be revealed to itself. (par. 8)

If, as Benjamin believes, criticism is an act of violence which provides a space for revelation, then humour, like allegory, functions as a bulldozer by destroying beauty and the symbolic in order to attain truth, or at least provide space to contemplate a new truth.

Another contemporary artist, who literally plays with form, forcing the viewer to question the relationship between the message and the medium, is the Polish born artist Zbigniew Libera. His project, *Correcting Device: Lego Concentration Camp* (1996), consists of a limited edition (three) seven Lego box-sets of various concentration camp structures and items; an entire concentration camp (complete with an entry gate, gallows, guards, and inmates marching), a crematorium replete with smoke billowing out of three chimneys, a guard beating an inmate:

... medical experiments, another hanging, and a commandant, reminiscent of something more from the Soviet *Gulag* than the Nazi concentration camp system, as he is bedecked with medals and wears a red hat. Some faces on both inmates and guards are slightly manipulated with paint, to make mouth expressions turn down into sadness for the inmates, and upwards in some form of glee for the guards. The last box is one full of possessions, the type of debris painted by other artists and inspired by the vast array of loots collected by the S.S. in the Kanada warehouses at Birkenau. (Feinstein, par. 9)

While some question the use of pop art to depict a concentration camp universe feeling that it cheapens and trivializes the event and the gravity of this experience, the concentrationary world is only portrayed as a photograph, an image on the box. One

¹³⁴ The slogan “It’s The Real Thing” was used by Coca-Cola in 1948, 1968, and again in 1970.

should note that, “the suggestion of the possibilities of constructing a concentration camp also suggests the antithesis—the construction of something else with the same materials. One may also take *Lego* as a starting point for analyzing aspects of violence in existing toys....” (Feinstein, par. 15) In addition, John Baichtal and Joe Meno interpret this LEGO set as, “a statement by juxtaposing innocence of a child’s toy with the horrors of genocide” (160). Yet, what that statement is, is never made clear. Either way, while extremely controversial, projects like these spark and maintain debate, for they make the viewer question the nature of evil (along with the construction of the concentration camps) as well as the role that art plays in the transmission and transformation of historical events.

In his discussion regarding the unsayability of Auschwitz, which is a synecdoche for the Holocaust as a whole, Giorgio Agamben questions why extermination should be given a mystical status. (*Remnants* 32) Agamben posits, “[t]o say that Auschwitz is ‘unsayable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence as one does with a god. Regardless of one’s intentions, this contributes to its glory” (*Remnants* 32-33). As such, silence is not an acceptable response. And while many individuals are cautious and delicate in terms of linguistic expression and visual representation in relation to the Holocaust, gravity and solemnity may also be interpreted by some to be as a type of adoration – tears instead of silence.¹³⁵ While silence can be seen as adoration, the appropriation of the term Holocaust can be seen as a type of

¹³⁵ A similar quandary is discussed at length by Bauer; the difference is that he, unlike Agamben, discusses the mystification of the Holocaust from a historical perspective and not a linguistic one. As he says:

if what happened to the Jews was unique, then it took place outside of history, and it becomes a mysterious event, an upside-down miracle, so to speak, an event of religious significance in the sense that it is not man-made as that term is normally understood. On the other hand, if it is not unique at all, then where are the parallels or the precedents?
(31)

desecration. That is why a novel such as Tova Reich's *My Holocaust* (2007) is so important and so dangerous.

While Reich does not poke fun at the Holocaust, she does use biting satire to expose and criticize those who have capitalized (emotionally and / or financially) on the Holocaust. Her message is very similar to Norman Finkelstein's, for both believe that the Holocaust is "an internally coherent construct [... which] has proven to be an indispensable ideological weapon," which allows "the most successful ethnic group in the United States [to acquire] victim status" (Finkelstein 3). Yet, the way Reich presents her point of view undermines the gravity of Finkelstein's form, producing a satire which is as equally critical and scathing, thus retaining the crux of the content but not the form.

Part One of the novel entitled *The Holocaust Princess* introduces the reader to an obnoxious father-and-son team, Maurice and Norman Messer (meaning knife in German), who run a business called "Holocaust Connections, Inc." By using sarcasm, faulty logic and grotesque exaggeration, their ethics and priorities are called into question and condemned. For instance, when Norman's daughter, Nechama, joins the Carmelite convent situated on the perimeter of Auschwitz, his thought process turns such:

Jesus, this could even impact their business, their lifestyle — you hear that, Mrs. Messer, hello? How is it going to look? he demanded of the wife in his head: Holocaust Heiress Dumps Jews. It was an emergency damage-control situation requiring a rapid response. He had to figure out some way to market this negative to their advantage, to turn it around — something like, you know, the ongoing trauma of the Holocaust, the continuing threat to our survival, the Holocaust is not yet over, et cetera et cetera. (7)

Though the name Nechama means 'to comfort,' she makes her family uncomfortable:

"There's a Christian Holocaust going on as we speak," she declared at dinner in the presence of one of these guests, "and as a Jew who could have been turned into a lampshade, I cannot in good conscience remain a

silent bystander.” She brought home a Chinese graduate student who described how he had been beaten and tortured because of his membership in an underground church. She brought home a Sudanese lab technician whose family had been burned or sold into slavery for practicing their faith [...] “Any guy who wants her will have to show torture marks,” Arlene [her mother] said. “What for is she fooling mit the goyim?” Maurice complained to Norman. “Where do you think Hitler got all his big ideas from about the Jews, tell me that? And the pope, you should excuse me, his holiness, what was he doing during the war—playing pinochle?” “They’re trying to hijack the Holocaust,” Norman wailed. “Christians are not—I repeat, not!—acceptable Holocaust material. This is where we draw the line.” They tried to wean her from this new fixation by offering her a partnership in their business—complete control of the Women’s Holocaust portfolio: abortion, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, rape, the whole gamut—but she wasn’t buying. “The Christians are the new Jews,” she said. “Christians have a right to a Holocaust too. Since when do Jews have a monopoly? That’s the problem with Jews. They think they own it all, they never share.” (23-24)

The above quotation is both humorous and disturbing in tone and context. Disturbing for Nechama has a point, many around the world are tortured, abused and persecuted because of religious intolerance. However, humour can be found firstly by her family’s response to her new found cause and because of reversal; normally, it is the Jew-as-other who must be protected. Moreover, the idea of fighting over the Holocaust as though it was a mystical event, which must be shared among the other nations, is grotesque and disconcerting. Yet, various causes clamour for this title.¹³⁶ Marketed correctly, any

¹³⁶ In addition to the PETA campaign, Reich mentions the Gynecological and Menstrual Holocaust, the African-American Holocaust, the Native American Holocaust, “[t]he Children’s Holocaust, the Gay and Lesbian Holocaust, the Christian Holocaust, the Muslim Holocaust, the Tibetan Holocaust” (244). As well as:

[t]he holocausts, past, present, and future, of nations too numerous to list, from Cambodia to Chechnya, from Russia to Rwanda, from Kosovo to Kurdistan, from Armenia to east Timor, *plus* Ecological and Environmental Holocausts, the impending Nuclear Holocaust, the Herbal Holocaust targeting marijuana and other fruits and vegetables, the Endangered Species Holocausts of plants and animals from bluegrass to baby seals, from bladderpods to lesser long-nosed bats, *plus* the personal and private Holocausts of our brothers and sisters everywhere on this earth [...] (244-245)

Interestingly, Sabine Sielke remarks that by “[r]edefining slavery as a kind of holocaust, African-Americans insist on a shared history of oppression to expose the parallel strategies of extermination such as burning and medical experiments. Thus they take issue with Jewish exceptionalism and amplify the severity of their own suffering” (96). The above list strikes the reader as being both funny and serious, it

disaster can become the new Holocaust. After all, “Make Your Cause a Holocaust” (15) is the motto of the Messers’ “fashionable” Holocaust business.

Yet, thankfully, it is not just the Jews who are criticized by Reich’s acerbic vision. The “*goyim*” are also blamed for their insensitivity. While Nechama cannot understand why a giant “twenty-six foot wooden cross” at Auschwitz would/could be considered offensive, Arlene, her mother, thinks, “The Crusades. The Inquisition. Pogroms. Blood libels. The Holocaust” (29). Thus, while Nechama’s heart bleeds for the persecuted Christians, she appears to be oblivious to or forgetful of the Christian persecution of the Jews. Moreover, Nechama, in her new found spiritualism, Christianizes the Holocaust by interpreting it in a very religiocentric manner. In her opinion, “what everyone needs to realize now, if we’re going to get beyond this, is that each Jew who was murdered in the Holocaust is another Christ crucified on the cross. When I pray to Him, I pray to each of them. I pray every day to each of the six million Christs” (29). In a twist of problematic irony, Jews who, over the centuries, were hounded, tortured, and killed for being Christ-killers become, in this young nun’s opinion, not just martyrs but Christ-like sacrifices, a simulacrum six million times over. And besides, why and how exactly should one get beyond the Holocaust? Reich’s facetious, sarcastic tone, along with her *mishmash* of characters build up a complex maze, which forces the reader to question and dissect

not only calls the term “Holocaust” into question but also questions and problematizes the recognition and ownership of suffering. Contrary to this, in his discussion of Christopher Lasch’s *The Minimal Self*, Rosenfeld states that:

...Lasch was right to call attention to the pernicious effects of this tendency. He recognized that the ready appropriation of ‘Auschwitz’ as a convenient symbol for common anxieties had unfortunate psychic and social consequences, among them the normalization of atrocity and the artificial elevation of the ‘victim’ as a privileged cultural type (34).

Moreover, “[w]hen every instance of human distress is transfigured as another ‘Holocaust,’ the Holocaust itself tends to become less real, little more than a figure of speech – its moral claims diminished rather than enlarged by metaphorical extension” (Rosenfeld 150).

notions relating to experience, memory, ownership of memory, transmission and manipulation of memory and conflicting religious responses to the Holocaust.

Part Two of the novel, “Camp Auschwitz,” is crass and startling. Similar to Gary, who presents the truth by shocking the listener/reader through an outlandish character, sarcasm and hyperbole, Reich’s grotesque characters and tone function in the same manner with similar results. The difference is that Gary questions and criticizes Western (Christian) culture for allowing such an event to occur, whereas Reich criticizes not the event itself but the way in which the event is financially and emotionally perverted by all. North American Jews, such as Maurice, are presented as being morally and ethically bankrupt,¹³⁷ while others, such as Bunny Bacon, are simply historically unaware, or even vacuous¹³⁸; the Poles are accused of being exploitative while the Israelis are presented as being insensitive¹³⁹, the Catholics are insulting¹⁴⁰, the Mormons are depicted as being

¹³⁷ While trying to convince Gloria to donate a large sum of money to the Holocaust Museum, Maurice says:

Over one million gassed Jews in Auschwitz processed and mass-murdered like a factory is the same thing like seventy-five thousand Poles, most of them political prisoners, given the dignity of being shot one by one at a wall if they weren’t lucky enough to starve to death first? How can you compare? Believe me, Gloria darling, there’s no contest. We Jews win this one hands down! And this so-called Execution Wall, this black wall, this wall of death, or whatever name they want to give it—I’m telling you, Gloria darling, this wall is not your wall, this wall is special for the Poles and the pope. I got a bigger and better wall for you, and I’m not talking here from the Great Wall from China. The wall I’m talking is your wall, a Jewish wall—the Founders’ Wall in our museum, the million-dollar donors’ wall—your personal wall, Gloria darling, where you can have a personalized plaque of your own, that’s the wall where you belong! (52)

¹³⁸ As a universalist and as the newly appointed head of the museum’s education department (thanks to her mother’s large donation to the museum) Bunny believes that memory is both the greatest revenge and victory:

Really really remembering *all* of the eleven million victims, including the five million others. Roma and Sinti, formerly known as Gypsies. Political prisoners, formerly known as Soviets. And also, of course, our good friends and hosts, the Poles, formerly known as Polacks. And finally, gays, yes, we must never forget gays—formerly known as fruits, faggots, and fairies, homos and dykes, queens and queers (186).

¹³⁹ Shimshon, an Israeli educator, forced to take Israeli teenagers to Auschwitz thinks to himself:

He would take them back to the hostel to cool down. And then tonight they would all go to that convenient little shopping center that that thoughtful and enterprising Polish developer had the brilliant idea of developing within a stone’s throw of this death camp theme park—to bring a measure of normalcy to this miserable tourist town with mass

self-serving¹⁴¹, and fake witnesses/testimonies (Benjamin Wilkomirski) are treated with the utmost respect and authority. It is through this hodgepodge of characters and opinions that Reich comments upon the phony and self-serving interest each group has in either claiming the Holocaust as their own or inserting themselves within the Holocaust discourse.

In the third section of this text, “Lessons of the Holocaust,” the setting shifts from the death camps in Poland to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C. Yet, the juggling of finances and politics in regards to memory remains a constant. For instance, the Chinese become miffed as the Tibetan Holocaust is being acknowledged, which is quickly rectified by implementing “a Chinese Holocaust program scheduled for the thirteenth of the coming December, the anniversary of the day in 1937 when the Rape of Nanking by the Japanese began...” (197). However, Maurice worries that by recognizing this event, the Japanese would want “a program for the Japanese Holocaust on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima” (197). In addition

murder as its main and sole attraction. They would eat cheeseburgers and fries at the fast-food restaurant, and after that they would sweat all of the sick stuff out in their systems at Disco Auschwitz, dancing until daybreak in defiance of mortality (62).

¹⁴⁰ As a nun of the Carmelite order expounds to Norman:

“We built this without the help of a single zloty from the Jews,” she declared. “If the Jews had even one drop of decency and gratitude, they would have financed it entirely, as it was they who forced us to move five hundred meters from the camp, it was they who exiled us from our convent where we were best situated to offer our prayers on behalf of the souls of their dead brethren of the Jewish persuasion” (130).

¹⁴¹ This is evident during a cultural exchange/dialogue between Maurice and Congressman Jedediah Jaspers, from Utah, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee:

... I am happy to report to you that, to date, among the late Jews who have been privileged to receive posthumous conversion into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we are proud to count [...] every single victim of the Holocaust whose name is in our genealogical records—and you can bet your life that there are plenty of names on our charts, we’re targeting all six million or however many you’ve got—including that beautiful and spirited little gal that everyone has such a great big crush on, Sister Anne Frank, who, I might add, no longer belongs to you alone but to all of us, to all of mankind, to the entire universe (158).

to criticizing the overarching use of the term Holocaust, Reich also disparages the use of certain key words:

History, memory, conscience, ethical, moral –“peepee words,” was how Norman characterized them to Maurice [...], “pieties and platitudes.” But for Maurice they were juicy words, words that never failed to thrill, they were all-purpose words that formed a great pool into which you could dip, and however many times you dipped you always came up looking refreshed and good. (202)

Moreover, the Holocaust Museum itself becomes a problematic symbol of warped power and memory and is described as “a Jewish power testicle” and a “proud circumcised Jewish cock erect in the body politic of the country” (205).¹⁴² Though the image is humorous in its bite, the ramifications are less than funny. In fact, when, in an absurd episode, the Holocaust Museum is taken over by Universalists, the true ramifications of a federally funded Holocaust Museum is made clear:

‘Brothers and sisters, rejoice! The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is liberated. The Holocaust has been returned to the people. All Holocausts are created equal. United Holocausts, the umbrella group for all Holocausts, known and unknown, past, present, and future, has occupied this infrastructure. The occupation will continue until equal representation is given to all Holocausts, public and private, personal and global, animal, vegetable, and mineral. The Jewish Holocaust will be apportioned an equal place among all other Holocausts, no better and no

¹⁴² On a serious note, critics have questioned the appropriateness of erecting “a museum of this kind on the Washington Mall, close to Jefferson and Lincoln Memorial, at a site that celebrates the achievements of the American nation” particularly since the Holocaust is not an American experience (Sielke 82). Moreover, some ask why the Holocaust Museum is “integrated into a museological landscape devoid of a museum of American Indian history or of slavery”? (*Ibid.*) Yet, its presence “documents the double role of the United States as both hesitant observers and active liberators. It simulates the places of destruction by reconstructing elements of Holocaust architecture and infrastructure” (88). Furthermore, while the museum acts as traditional form of preserving memory, it also “adapts strategies of the so-called anti-monument movement...” (*Ibid.*) Finkelstein too believes that “[i]ts presence on the Washington Mall is particularly incongruous in the absence of a museum commemorating crimes in the course of American history” (72). He also believes that the museum was constructed for several political reasons not having to do with memory such as “placat[ing] Jewish contributors and voters [who were] galled by the President’s recognition of the ‘legitimate rights’ of the Palestinians” (73). Moreover, he suggests that memory is perverted or at least manipulated for the content of the museum “mute[s] the Christian background to European anti-Semitism so as not to offend a powerful constituency,” “downplays the discriminatory US immigration quotas before the war, exaggerates the US role in liberating the concentration camps, and silently passes over the massive US recruitment of Nazi war criminals as the war’s end” (*Ibid.*).

worse, no more and no less in the universe of Holocausts [...] Remember, when it comes to Holocausts, a laboratory rat is a force-fed chicken is an endangered-species whale is your grandma.¹⁴³ Brothers and sisters, take back your Holocaust!’ (235)

Similar to Genghis Cohn who was forced to join the tapestry of humanity by losing his distinctive yellow star, the group, United Holocausts, forces Maurice and all he represents to lose his privileged position of other by incorporating their individual Holocausts into his.¹⁴⁴

Finally, in “The Third Generation,” the fourth part of this wickedly hilarious novel, the confrontation continues as do the accusations. The LEGO conceptual art installation which “asked you to consider how history and truth and evil are plastic” (319), was being played with by children. Imagine the horror! In the end, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum becomes the United States **Holocausts** Memorial Museum, an indictment of all. And while Reich relies upon incongruity, irony, sarcasm, parody, Yiddishisms, puns, absurd situations, and grotesque characters to create humour, condemnation is always present – present in the historical facts that are included,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ A parody of Gertrude Stein’s “A rose is a rose is a rose,” the law of identity in the above quote is either broken or perverted. If the true identity of a thing/person/item cannot be recovered then all is indeed lost. Thus, the tautology is politically correct but highly problematic for it equalizes that which is unequal.

¹⁴⁴ In his discussion against the mystification of the Holocaust, Bauer believes that if one was to “view the Holocaust as just another case of man’s inhumanity to man, to equate it with every and any injustice committed on this earth [...] to say that the Holocaust is the total of all crimes [...] is an inexcusable abomination based on the mystification of the event. On the other hand, to view it as totally unique is to take it out of history and out of the context of our everyday lives, and that means opening wide the gates for a possible repetition” (37-38). In discussing the problematics of amalgamating The Holocaust with the struggle for civil rights in America as is presented by “The Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance” in Los Angeles, Rosenfeld echoes this sentiment:

America’s social problems, for all their gravity, are not genocidal in character and simply do not resemble the persecution and systematic slaughter of Europe’s Jews during World War II. To mingle the victims of these very different historical experiences, therefore, is ultimately to widen the conceptual base of the Nazi Holocaust to the point where it begins to metamorphose into that high-sounding but all but meaningless abstraction: ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ (690).

¹⁴⁵ In his book review, David Margolick feels that the sandwiching of facts “between satire so crude is repugnant” (par. 7).

present in the exploitation of tragedy, present in the tension between politics and memory. But this is where the danger lies:

At a time when morons and bigots say the Holocaust never happened, or that it wasn't such a big deal if it did, the business of publicizing and exploiting the mass murder of European Jewry for political, financial or institutional gain is something we Jews would rather not discuss, except among ourselves. Reich has taken this taboo and built an entire novel – wickedly clever and shocking, tasteless and tedious, infuriating and maybe even marginally constructive – on it. (Margolick, par. 3)

In the end, when the humdrum of the absurd is silenced, the narrator articulates the difficulty associated with time remembrance:

It is my calling to keep their cries acute in my ears, not so loud that I am benumbed, not so even that I grow complacent to the disturbance, not so soft that I become corrupted by the illusion of distance in time, in place, in fortune, but always piercing, jagged, present, like stigmata eternally renewing themselves between my eyes, perpetual pain, with no escape into oblivion, and no relief. (Reich 320)

While Reich's intentions do seem honourable, the cover of her novel depicts exactly what she rallies against. Likened to a child's board game, there are concentration camp-like LEGO figurines on the cover, as well as the concentration camp gate which, instead of reading "Arbeit macht frei," reads "A Novel," suggesting perhaps that, once the reader enters Reich's universe, the games will begin. Thus, the marketing of her text as well as the text itself become as problematic as the exploitation she disparages.¹⁴⁶ Either way, humour is used to examine both the discourse of memory as well as the method of memorization. While there tends to be much mockery, even masochistic self-mockery in the novel, this can be interpreted as a desire to shed off "otherness" as this disparagement

¹⁴⁶ Journalist Amy Klein, in her book review, asserts that, "Reich is mining a terrible situation for laughs, but at the heart of her novel she's got a more serious point to make: While there may be no business like *Shoah* business, she says this may be one business that's bad for the Jews" (par. 6). However, literary critic Herta Newman asks a very important question which tends to be glossed over and forgotten, stating, "Yet beyond these precarious and inevitably political issues, is the far more insidious consideration as to whether it is at all possible to effectively memorialize a human tragedy so vast in scope and inexpressible in nature as The Holocaust" (24).

may indicate a “process of assimilation and integration into the new society. By laughing at traditional Jews, the transitional type [“who emerged from the ghetto but did not shed its culture”] would like to associate himself [or in this case herself] with the social majority” (Ben-Amos 118).

Moreover, it is only fair to mention that Reich’s husband, Walter Reich, was the “director of D.C.’s Holocaust Museum from 1994 to 1998. His departure came in the aftermath of a public relations disaster set into motion by a botched [governmental] attempt to have Yasser Arafat visit the institution” (Sanders). Ultimately, Walter Reich resented using the museum for a photo opportunity and some readers could interpret his wife’s novel as both a cautionary tale and a vengeful one. And though Reich does not make this personal connection apparent in her novel, she does question the propriety of such an idea by poking fun at it.¹⁴⁷

Another work which combines aesthetics, Auschwitz, and memory is called “KAMP.” Described as a mixture between “theatre, music, video, sculpture and puppetry” (Cohen, par. 3), this play is staged by a small Dutch group called Hotel Modern in which 3 000 wire and plasticine figurines inhabit a “36-by-33-foot model of Auschwitz” (par. 1). Patricia Cohen describes the setting as being comprised “mostly of plain corrugated cardboard, includ[ing] barracks, guard towers, crematoriums, gas chambers with buckets of gas pellets, a dining hall for the guards, a train and tracks, and

¹⁴⁷ This is so distasteful that Reich spends five pages mocking the idea that a terrorist would or could become reformed by “learning the lessons of the Holocaust” (206). Reich continues, “Maurice regarded this as one of his sacred missions, his personal Sponsor a Sociopath campaign...” (206) In fact, these terrorists and tyrants “were the visitors that Maurice was targeting in his Teach a Terrorist program — specimens labeled by the unimaginative as beyond redemption, for example, Osama, or Saddam, or the late Yasser...” (208). Thus, the heavy sarcasm combined with Maurice’s overly optimistic, tunnel vision elicits laughter based on derision and condemnation.

the notorious gateway sign, ‘Arbeit Macht Frei,’ ‘Work Makes You Free.’” (par. 10) The images are simultaneously filmed and projected on a large screen. There is no dialogue:

just sound effects, of the trains coming and going, of people aimlessly shovelling the earth, of steel doors clanking shut, of Zyklon B being funnelled into the gas chamber, of drunken SS men singing marching songs in the casino, of a truncheon beating a sick, exhausted slave worker over and over, until there is nothing left of him but a few broken sticks wrapped in rag. (Buruma, par. 4)

The reviews are mainly positive as Ian Buruma explains:

It works, I think, precisely because of the artificiality, the stylization of the performance. The details evoke reality, often to horrifying effect, without trying to mimic it. Puppets can seem more real than actors, because they leave more to our imagination. Stripped of his striped camp guard, the naked puppet becomes transparent, as he is pushed into the gas chamber with the others, looking terrifyingly vulnerable. No dialogue or action is needed to illustrate the atrocity of the scene. Actors can never re-enact what happened in a place like Auschwitz, at least not realistically, because what happened cannot be recreated. The more we aim for a realistic portrayal of such extreme violence, the more likely we are to produce a form of kitsch. (par. 5)

The presentation covers many aspects of life in Auschwitz, from soup time, to the orchestra, to the beating of a fallen prisoner, to an inmate committing suicide by throwing himself into the electrified barbed wire. Yet, as journalist Jordana Horn points out, the Jewish element has been completely erased from Auschwitz. In her article she writes:

There are no spoken words in the production – and the written words the program does use to describe this installation and show are ill chosen. ‘Auschwitz is a dark icon of the modern era, a mythical catastrophe,’ the program states. Excuse me? Mythical? ‘What occurred there is difficult to believe, sometimes even for those who experienced it,’ the program continues. ‘In KAMP, Hotel Modern attempts to re-enact the historical reality.’ There is no mention at any point of Jews, Judaism, or the attempted annihilation of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. The Jews have been utterly erased. Ironic? (par. 4)

While many testimonies deal with the inadequacy of language, one would or could assume that silent representation, not re-enactment, may be the best approach when

dealing with the Holocaust. However, if the intent of such a show is to educate, how effective is it if the Jewish question is completely ignored? When asking, what “does KAMP have to offer by way of insight into the Holocaust?” (Horn, par. 8), the answer is two-fold. From an artistic point of view, the set, the figurines, the manipulation of sounds and situations are effective, eerily so. From a historical point of view, the show is banal, at best, for “KAMP’s observation seems to be that Auschwitz was a place where really, really bad things happened” (Horn, par. 8). While not at all funny, the medium alongside the content, brings to the fore questions related to meaning, memory, and entertainment.

Another project in which art intersects with memory and history is a 2010 video which was posted on YouTube, and soon after went viral. Filmed by his daughter, Jane Korman, a survivor, Adolek Kohn, and his family dance to the song “I Will Survive.” They dance in Auschwitz and in Terezín and in Dachau, they dance in front of The Maisel Synagogue (which, the viewer is informed, was “Hitler’s intended Museum of the Extinct Race”), they dance in front of The Absent Synagogue, they dance in front of The Lodz Ghetto Memorial, and beside train tracks and cattle cars; they dance. Not out of disrespect for the dead, but to celebrate life. This family, with their laughter and gaiety fulfil Švenk’s prophecy of one day “laughing upon the ghetto ruins.” Thus, it is not just laughter which keeps the Holocaust present in everyday discourse but also new social media which provides a forum to present, debate, explore, and grapple with unconventional types of remembrance, commemoration, and even, in certain cases, celebration. Ultimately, according to Louis Kaplan:

The transgressive quality of Holocaust humor raises the question of the limits of humor – where what is ‘funny’ exchanges places with what is ‘sick.’ But all humor that matters moves its audience out of the comfort zone in order to force a consideration of more questionable areas of

human experience. Thus, it becomes clear why Holocaust humor would be an anathema to discourses of closure and containment. The authoritarian reading of the Holocaust as a discourse of gravity and its attempt to repress Jewish humor and render it taboo seeks to take the anarchic weapon of contestation and provocation out of circulation. However, Jewish Holocaust humor is a testament to the politics and the pleasures of popular culture even in the most extreme and perverse of circumstances. Its strategy for surviving in the face of death contrasts with the cult of death at the center of Holocaust monumentality. (344)

Thus, in the end, these multiple humoristic responses to tragedy reject the proscribed modes of memory. Within the testimonies, the work of the second generationers, as well as all those individuals who grapple with the meaning and magnitude of the Holocaust in a non-traditional discourse, “laughter offers an anarchic antidote to the reigning death cult...” (L. Kaplan 345) At the same time, in many instances, humour reaffirms humanity, highlights the absurdity of the Holocaust, mocks the oppressors, and forces us to honestly explore notions of politics and memory without dehistoricizing the event.

CONCLUSION

A Look to the Past, A Glimpse to the Future

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx began with the now famous line, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (97). In his “Early Writings” Marx also asserted that:

History is thorough and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form to its grave. The last phase of a world-historical form is its *comedy*. The Greek gods, who already died once of their wound in Aeschylus’s tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, were forced to die a second death – this time a comic one – in Lucian’s *Dialogues*. (247-248)

Taken together, the above quotes seem to suggest that for Marx, history does have what David Archibald calls “discernable patterns” and that these “patterns emerge in artistic representations of the past which are ultimately represented in comic form” (116). The question then becomes “Why?” And Marx explained, “So that mankind may part happily with its past” (248).

And yet, in relation to the Holocaust, farce is both a soothing hand and a giant yawp. Its presence does fit into Marx’s interpretation of history, but the pattern is somewhat distorted. During the Holocaust itself, in the ghettos, in the transit camps, and in the concentration camps, humour acted as both a psychological balm and, in certain instances, a physical necessity. Only, its presence was subdued and overlooked in many testimonies. For the children of survivors, levity became the answer to the sob. It allowed parents to interact with their children and it allowed children to both internalize and reject the trauma of their parents’. For others, the acknowledgement of the comedic creates a

space in which the tragedy almost becomes secondary to the artistic representations surrounding it. In a conflict between form and function, questions regarding the politics of memory and the erosion of events are placed in the fore. In his discussion, comparing films which deal with the Holocaust influenced by the fantastic (such as *Train de vie*) versus films which tend to approach the Holocaust in a neo-realist style (such as *Paisà*), Pell concludes that those films, and by extension all artistic representation, striving for realism, “become a monument” (92):

A monument, when first erected, is powerful. It will be placed in a square for all to see; as they pass by, people will cry or revere, meditate or comment. Yet over time the same monument will fail to provoke thought or remembrance in the minds of those who grew up with it as a simple fact of their urban architectural experience – no more or less important than a park bench or a fountain, at best an easily recognizable meeting place. One stops looking for monuments for what they represent, and, in so doing, one neglects one’s duty to remember. One forgets why, or for whom, a monument was erected; rather what is noticed is the monument’s accumulation of rust, graffiti, and pigeons. It no longer recounts, so a revitalization is needed: one which may not resemble its forerunner, but which will make the overall historical monument of the past a more vibrant part of the present, to be recollected and analyzed. (92-93)

And though there is urgency in the telling and retelling of the events of the Holocaust, in order for the adage “Never Again” to be upheld, “the monumental significance of the horrific events of the Shoah might tend to overshadow the whole reason why survival is important in the first place: to celebrate the beauty of life....” (*Ibid.*). Thus, there is a shift from tragedy to comedy; ironically though, what needs to be acknowledged during this transition is that the desire to keep history alive oftentimes interferes with the facts of history which get lost by the indifference shown by various historical periods as well as changes in the mode and content of transmission.

Ultimately, humour during and after the Holocaust did and does exist. To ignore its presence in the Holocaust would be a silencing of the victims and indicate a judgment on our part since it goes against prescribed modes of telling. For some, the inclusion of humour within testimonies lessens the tragedy, reduces the horror, and, to be very frank, provides fodder for the naysayers and the Holocaust deniers. Yet, to exclude humour from the testimonies would amount to robbing the victims of their individuality, of their identity and would whitewash their experiences. That would be an even greater tragedy.

Chapter One of this thesis examined various aspects of the comic and proved that jokes were made and told in the ghettos and camps for different purposes. While not all of the humour was high-brow and confrontational, jokes did exist and this aspect of the Holocaust needs to be recognized. One feature which would be interesting to explore is to survey a variety of testimonies divided by the decades to see how frequently or infrequently jokes are incorporated. Differences would be found and I suspect that the reason for this is that the nature of testimonies shifted during the decades, reflecting the need of the survivors to tell their stories as well as the desire of the public to receive the testimonies.

Chapter Two focused on the impact the Holocaust had on the children of survivors in relation to their parents. Complex, amusing, and heart-breaking, the children of survivors both internalize and reject the shadow of the Holocaust, a subject which was just touched upon but could be further developed and shaped in so many ways. A comparative work exploring this theme in fictional novels would include Arnon Grunberg's *Blue Mondays* (1997) and Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights* (2007).

Another way of correcting or coming to terms with the geographic and cultural fissures of the Holocaust is by resurrecting the rich cultural personages of Yiddish fiction and folklore. Though the focus of my thesis is humour and levity in relation to the Holocaust, as discussed in Chapter Three, future interrogation regarding this resurrection in relationship to the Holocaust would be most interesting and would be substantiated by novels such as Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), Thane Rosenbaum's book *The Golems of Gotham* (2002), and Angel Wagenstein's work *Isaac's Torah* (2008).

Finally, Chapter Four of this project is more complex, for the purpose of humour and levity is once again explored, while challenging the Holocaust memory. The politics surrounding Holocaust memory and various modes of representation are highlighted and criticized and incongruity is found in both the form and the content of the works examined. Literary works such as Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* (2011) touch upon this topic by resurrecting an iconic figure (Anne Frank) and mass media such as YouTube videos, Tumblr and pop culture bring the issue of merriment, Holocaust and memory into a heavy and heated debate.

While this thesis does prove that humour and the Holocaust are oxymoronicly compatible, it also, I hope, explains and explores the nuances within the levity as there is, in the construction of the thesis, a shift from the reality to the fictional; from the historical, to the psychological, to the cultural, and to the political. Humour within the political system countered an imposed state of exception, and within the ghettos, transit camps, and concentration camps, acted as a defence mechanism as well as a social, historic, and psychological commentary. Moreover, if, as so many survivors testify, the

concentration camp functioned as an institution whose goal it was to break both body and spirit, then humour, like faith, rebelled against this imposed erosion of humanity. And though there existed a slew of factors which decided life and death, the desire to maintain and share humour and levity, indicated the attempt to live without a guaranteed result.

Today, it too acts as a social commentary by offering an antidote to Holocaust fatigue or burnout which borders on indifference. And the fault lies neither with aesthetics nor with representation alone but with the erosion of memory and the ebbing away of the initial shock. As Langer asks:

What will happen, for example, when the specific details of the atrocities at Babi Yar and Auschwitz are forgotten, when their associations with the Holocaust have passed beyond historical memory and they become mere place-names as obscure to their audiences as Borodino¹⁴⁸ and Tagliamento¹⁴⁹ are to Tolstoy's and Hemingway's readers today? In time, in other words, the boundaries separating the historical moment from its imaginative rendition will be blurred, and it will no longer matter so much whether fictional facts, tied to the actual deeds of history, have become factual fictions, monuments to artistic vision that require no defense or justification, but stand or fall on the strength of their aesthetic mastery of material. ("Fictional Facts" 76)

The normalizing of Holocaust references and the perversions of them are oftentimes comical, yet, caution must be paid, as its acceptance could indicate a cultural naïveté bordering on carelessness or a genocidal comfort. On the flip side, Holocaust lingo and references may prevent this genocide from fading into the strata of history. If, as Jean Améry argued, "No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*" (16), then perhaps, *Seinfeld's* "Soup Nazi" and various episodes of *Family Guy* could bridge popular culture with history, could turn laughter into tears, could transform levity into

¹⁴⁸ The Battle or Borodino was fought on September 7, 1812, between Russia and France.

¹⁴⁹ The Battle of Caporetto began on October 24, 1917, between the Austro-Hungarian army, which was supported by German troops, and the Italian army. It ended on November 19, 1917. The river is mentioned in Hemingway's 1929 novel, *A Farewell to Arms*.

gravitas. But that is a big perhaps, and admittedly, a dangerous one. Essentially, in the bid to make the Holocaust palatable, caution must be paid as:

The need to make the Holocaust appear more harmless than it was has many roots, and hence, many branches, leaves, and blossoms. Its efforts to sweeten the bitter fruits of mass murder will have to be monitored for decades, and perhaps generations, if we are to prevent what happened from slipping into a vague limbo of forgetfulness, a footnote to contemporary history instead of the central historical moment of our time, and perhaps of all time. (Langer, "What" 184)

Initially, when commencing this thesis, I was excited – the topic was hip, cool, not touched upon by too many and both relevant and irreverent at the same time. However, as the research and chapters progressed, a shift occurred as proving that humour existed during the Holocaust was easy, but the ramifications of this levity became more complex, particularly from the 1990s onwards. The claim that the Holocaust entered everyday discourse through mass culture is true and has (I hope) been proven. But, to say that this normalization will ensure that the Holocaust will never be forgotten demands a great deal from society. For instance, it demands not only the watching of *Curb your Enthusiasm*, but the willingness to then read Primo Levi, Imre Kertész or Charlotte Delbo in their discussion of language and the limits of it. It demands an exploration beyond the laughter; it demands an acknowledgement of the pain. As Rikle Glaser, an inhabitant of the Vilna Ghetto wrote:

The Jewish Laughter
 Contains so much pain.
 When weeping is of no help,
 One laughs as much as he can,
 Although the heart would cry with pain.

We are laughing
 As long as we will live
 Let your laughter sound far
 So hope the time is near,

When you will laugh
From the depth of your heart always.
(qtd. in Lipman 145)

History does not have to be at odds with comedic fiction for the former presents events as they were while informing the present. The latter then becomes « le véhicule narratif idéal pour annoncer une promesse de bonheur et réintroduire, par le biais du rire, une certaine forme d'élasticité dans nos mémoires, c'est-à-dire une ouverture au présent et à l'avenir » (Fevry 335). After all, Marx was right – history does repeat itself – first as tragedy and then as farce. Much gets lost in this process but only until the next tragedy, but only until the next masterpiece, but only until the next farce...

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