

Generic Hybridity in Perpetrator Descendant Writing

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In this article, we will contrast the use of fiction and nonfiction in depictions of Holocaust perpetrator descendants. Both fiction and testimony of the Holocaust have, historically, been treated with a significant degree of suspicion, especially by historians, who have viewed them variously as fallible sources of memory, unreliable objects of historical interest, or outright affronts to historical truth. Reinforcing the heavy criticisms by the likes of prominent Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, whose objection to Holocaust fiction has been well-documented, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's concern that the memory of the Holocaust was being shaped "not at the historian's anvil, but in the novel's crucible" is a case in point.¹ Despite these established conflicts, researchers have acknowledged the overlaps between the two generic forms. James E. Young, for example, notes that "[f]ar from transcending or displacing the events of the Holocaust, the governing mythoi of these writers are actually central to their experiences."² Arguing something similar in his defense of survivor testimony, Tony Kushner writes:

[T]he mythologies created within individual life stories, rather than being seen as an inherent weakness, have been celebrated as one of their great strengths. Using insights gained from psychology and literary and cultural studies, the construction of life story has become increasingly sophisticated. How a person puts together their life experiences in a coherent way tells us

1 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 98.

2 James E. Young, "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs," *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (1987): 403–23, 407.

as much about their life now as about their past, for all are bound together in creating the individual's identity.³

In other words, the blending of fictional and nonfictional forms can itself be instructive, producing meaningful dialog about the nature of memory, the representation of trauma, and the ability of non-mimetic forms to encapsulate extreme experiences. In the following discussion, we aim to show that it is precisely through the melding of imaginative and documentary elements that meaning is produced in texts by and about the children and grandchildren of those responsible for the Holocaust, even—or especially—where these works are categorized as either fiction or nonfiction.⁴

This generic hybridity is particularly apt as a representational mode in the narratives of perpetrator descendants, whose lives and experiences are defined by liminality, their position betwixt and between culpability and innocence, love and condemnation, continuity and discontinuity. In the literature we discuss here, culpability is experienced not as a transgression but as an affect. It is this transposition that is most clearly represented through the hybrid form. The temporal—indeed, generational—distance from the atrocities committed by their forebears is at odds with their perceived connection to them. Erin McGlothlin frames this as a form of original sin, a “mythical legacy” in which descendants “are born into a state of disgrace” and whereby “the legacy of the parents’ crimes is rewritten as an allegorical narrative in which the innocent children, representing the plight of all humankind, are born into a world that is already fallen and must immediately assume responsibility for and somehow make good the catastrophe that precedes their birth.”⁵ The quasi-biblical dimension of this legacy revolves around the arena of familial conflicts and threatens to deflect attention from the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. This friction between the personal and the historical takes on a specific form in the case of perpetrator descendants, where the transformation of veritable wrongdoing into affective responsibility is played out, a transition that is at the center of all attendant literature.

3 Tony Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 275–95, 282.

4 See Or Rogovin's discussion of the term ‘perpetrator,’ *Created in the Image? Holocaust Perpetrators in Israeli Fiction* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024), 20–24.

5 Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 25.

This body of work is often problematically referred to as *Väterliteratur* or *Familienliteratur*, a phrase that poses challenges because, as McGlothlin argues, in “the transformation of *Täterliteratur* [perpetrator literature] into *Väterliteratur* [father literature], the focus on Germany’s historical crimes in the Holocaust gives way to a concentration on the mundane, transhistorical struggle between the generations.”⁶ Susanne Luhmann concurs, stating that such accounts “do not merely correct a historical record. [They] also [stage] a family drama. And the family dynamics [...] cannot help but obscure, and even upstage, the business of setting the record straight.”⁷ How this manifests in individual cases is of course varied, but for many perpetrator descendants, the conflict is rooted in the tension between the figure of the parent, grandparent, sibling, and other relatives as a source of love, security, and family identity on the one hand, and that same figure as capable of inflicting untold pain and misery on the other.

In literature that revolves around the descendants of those responsible for the Nazi genocide—encapsulating their emotions, experiences, and memories—the connection between the individual subject and the crimes with which they are indelibly associated is set at a remove; heredity and history are thereby interwoven in complex and challenging ways that then often go on to form foundational aspects of the identity of subsequent generations. Vital questions of continuity, inheritance, and culpability are represented aesthetically in the examples we discuss through generic hybridity. In these cases, the line between fiction and testimony is blurred, a technique that points the reader to the very processes at work in literary accounts; in so doing, our examples draw attention to the tensions that are specific to perpetrator generations. While our chosen novels are anchored in factual intertexts, the memoirs use imaginative or artistic elements to supplement gaps in the historical record. This produces a generic hybridity that emphasizes the absences, discontinuities, and slippages that define the perpetrator-descendant experience.

6 Ibid., 19.

7 Susanne Luhmann, “Filming Familial Secrets: Approaching and Avoiding Legacies of Nazi Perpetration,” *New German Critique* 38 (2011): 115–34, 116.

Fiction

Discussions of the perpetrator-descendant experience understandably tend towards testimonial accounts, including documentaries, memoirs, and interviews, a number of which have been published or released in recent decades. These include Helga Schneider's *Let Me Go: My Mother and the SS* (*Lasciami andare, madre*, 2001/2004), Katrin Himmler, *The Himmler Brothers* (*Die Brüder Himmler: Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte* 2005/2007), Chanoch Ze'evi's *Hitler's Children* (2011), Malte Ludin, *2 or 3 Things I Know About Him* (*2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiß*, 2005/2007), Niklas Frank, *In the Shadow of the Reich* (1991), Sigfrid Gauch, *Traces of My Father* (*Vaterspuren*, 1979/1996), and Uwe Timm, *In My Brother's Shadow* (*Am Beispiel meines Bruders*, 2003/2005). Psychologists and journalists have also contributed to our understanding of the impact the legacy of perpetration had on descendants' lives through interviews and psychological studies.⁸ The central question we will be asking here is what happens when the ostensible immediacy of these accounts is removed and when these issues are translated into fiction. In these cases, the authorial pen is set at a remove so that, while in testimonial accounts affective responses are experienced as complex emotional and psychological states of mind by those concerned, in fiction, this affect is reimagined as a narrative construct. We will explore these issues in relation to three vastly different texts: Jackie French's *Hitler's Daughter*, an Australian text aimed at younger readers, published in 1999, Elie Wiesel's *The Sonderberg Case*, first published in France in 2008, and Annette Hess's *The German House* from 2018. Although these texts are different in many ways, together, they offer striking insights into the status of fiction and its ability to encapsulate the perpetrator-descendant experience. As we will show, all three texts reflect authorial anxieties about the potential of fiction to capture the horrors of the past by foregrounding processes of displacement and performativity.

Hitler's Daughter focuses on a group of children telling each other stories as they wait for the bus in the rain. As Anna tells the supposedly fictional story of Hitler's daughter, who, she claims, escaped to Australia after the war and

8 See, for example, Stephan Lebert, *My Father's Keeper: The Children of Nazis: An Intimate History of Damage and Denial* (London: Abacus, 2000); Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989).

shared her story with her granddaughter, Mark, the focalizing character, expresses his apprehension about what he perceives as the fictionalization of “real” history:

“But...,” objected Mark. He tried to explain. “But we can’t have a story about something that’s not real.” “Why not?” demanded Ben. “Fairies aren’t real, are they?” “No, of course not. But...” [...] “But...” Mark stopped. It *did* seem different somehow to make up stuff about a real person. But there was no way he could put his feeling into words.⁹

At the same time, the veracity of the story is constantly called into question. On the final page, Anna unconvincingly affirms: It was “only a story. Just pretend. That’s all.”¹⁰ Yet it is clear that Mark—in many ways an embodiment of the reader—suspects its truthfulness and that Anna is in fact Hitler’s granddaughter. The line between fiction and nonfiction is thereby blurred, allowing for a lingering hesitation on the part of the listener-characters. As a result, the reader is pointed to the constructed nature of the narrative and challenged to consider the implications of the opacity that occurs as a result.

The novel makes use of a second form of transference that further highlights the tenuous line between fact and fiction. The story being told at the bus stop is Anna’s, yet it is Mark—one of the other children—who is seen to grapple with the affective issues normally associated with perpetrator descendants. He asks both his parents about Hitler; he corners his father to ask what he should do if he had committed such evil deeds; and he asks Mr. McDonald—his teacher—if “kids have to be like their parents”: “say someone’s father did something really evil... like Hitler, or Pol Pot, would their kids be evil too?”¹¹ These questions are typical of perpetrator descendants and are alluded to in the majority of memoirs and documentaries on the topic. Yet, here, it is not the owner of the story who is asking them; this renders the questions hypothetical, reduces their emotional and psychological impact, and leaves them at a remove from their point of origin.

There are thus two displacements at work here: The first is the process of storytelling, which complicates the relationship between the fictional and non-fictional elements and creates distance between the narrator and the protagon-

9 Jackie French, *Hitler’s Daughter* (London: HarperCollins 2001 [1999]), 7.

10 *Ibid.*, 121.

11 *Ibid.*, 61.

onist. The second happens through the character of Mark, who in some ways appropriates Anna's story, almost taking on the 'affective afterlife' as his own concern. Meanwhile, Anna's own attempts to come to terms with her legacy (as the story implies) are limited to her telling of the story. Affect thus remains a narrative concern more than an internal or psychological conflict.

Wiesel's *The Sonderberg Case* tells of the trial of Werner Sonderberg—a German man accused of murdering his uncle—who later transpires to be his grandfather, following a row while walking in the mountains. The grandfather was a committed and unrepentant Nazi who was despised by his son, and who comes to find the grandson he calls “[his] last chance, maybe [his] last pride.”¹² The grandfather is, however, unceremoniously dismissed by Werner, who simply responds: “You were mistaken [...] I repudiate you. I disown you. In my own way I disinherit you. I extirpate you from my life; I erase you from my memory.”¹³ Following this exchange and the realization that “[he] lived for no one [...] and for nought,” Hans—the grandfather—dies by suicide.¹⁴ These events lead to the trial, where Werner stands accused of his grandfather's murder.

The court case is covered by the narrator, Yedidyah, a Jewish descendant of Holocaust survivors and drama critic, who approaches the trial as a piece of theater, with all the actors wearing the required costume and performing their allocated role. In this vein, the narrator tells the reader that “trials *are* like theater. All those who participate in them are playing a part.” He goes on to say: “In a criminal trial, especially with a jury, there's always suspense and drama. That's why the readers are interested in it.”¹⁵ In much the same way that *Hitler's Daughter* uses storytelling as a mechanism to draw attention to the constructed nature of the narrative, *The Sonderberg Case* highlights the same performativity through its symbolic use of the theater.

The narrative voice is also revealing in this respect: For most of the narrative, the story is told in the first person, narrated by Yedidyah, who plays the role of spectator and commentator on the events of the trial. His position as interpreter of events is doubled in that he interprets them for both the readers of his report in the internal world of the narrative, and for the readers of

12 Elie Wiesel, *The Sonderberg Case*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Knopf 2010 [2008]), 168.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 65.

Wiesel's novel. Yet, at various points, the text also jumps without warning into a third person narration. While still focalized through Yedidiah, this switch turns him into a character within Wiesel's story (rather than narrator of his own), drawing the reader's attention to his status as fictional construct. This complicates the reader's relationship with the narrator/protagonist, creating additional distance that might also remind the reader of the essential fictionality of the work.

This is especially important in the context of Wiesel's own somewhat ambivalent views on the idea of Holocaust fiction, especially that written by those who did not experience the genocide firsthand. In an article in *The New Yorker* in 1989, for example, he argued: "The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so."¹⁶

Part of the issue for Wiesel, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, is the status of the author; later in the article, he writes: "Newcomers to this history appoint themselves experts, the ignorant become critics. They give the impression of knowing better than the victims or the survivors how to name what Samuel Beckett called the unnamable, and how to communicate the uncommunicable."¹⁷ Some of this anxiety is built into *The Sonderberg Case*. For example, upon learning that his son is going to pursue a career in the theater, the narrator's father says: "Don't forget, son, theater is just theater and nothing more. An illusion lived in the present."¹⁸ A few pages (and many years) later, the protagonist is still seen to be grappling with the relationship between fiction and reality. He tells the reader: "I never stopped wondering: How can the enactment of representation be changed into living truth?"¹⁹ Much of the text is based on the intricacies of this relationship between fiction and reality.

Like in *Hitler's Daughter*, the complex questions of guilt that arise in relation to perpetrator descendants are offset as a result. The first we see of it in *The Sonderberg Case* is when Werner Sonderberg enters his plea to the court: "Guilty...

16 Elie Wiesel, "Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory," *The New Yorker*, June 11, 1989. Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory - The New York Times (nytimes.com), <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/movies/art-and-the-holocaust-trivializing-memory.html>, accessed October 10, 2024.

17 Ibid.

18 Wiesel, *The Sonderberg Case*, 18.

19 Ibid., 23.

and not guilty.”²⁰ This refrain is repeated in the final lines of the book, where it becomes clear that the ambiguity of the defendant’s plea in relation to the trial may also be read as a metaphor for the affective guilt felt by many perpetrator descendants; at one point, Werner declares to his grandfather: “Hitler, in his will, expressed his wish to punish the German people by turning Germany into a mountain of rubble. But what you did is worse: you took revenge on us, your descendants. Because of you, all of you, though we were born long after the atrocities, we feel guilty.”²¹ Earlier, he also notes that he will “bear this kinship like a burden. Worse—like a curse.”²² Clearly, then, Werner is grappling with the emotional and psychological ramifications of his familial history. Yet, for the most part, the ambiguity of his guilt is displaced onto a murder trial, the events leading up to which (that is, the death of the grandfather) serve as a final means of severance from an ancestral past which, in fact, Werner remains unable to escape, even at the end of the novel. Since the reader is left to assume that the “guilty but not guilty” plea relates specifically to the charge of murder, its psychological function is obscured. From this perspective, the performativity of the trial and its connections to the theater take on new meaning, becoming an arena in which this displacement can occur.

Similar motifs can be found in Annette Hess’s *The German House*. Published in 2018, the story tells of a young German/Polish translator, Eva Bruhns, working at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, who would come to discover that her own family are deeply implicated in the Holocaust. In much the same way as *The Sonderberg Case*, the trial is rendered in language of the theater: the offices of the prosecution are described as having an atmosphere resembling “backstage at the theatre shortly before the curtain rises on a world premiere”²³ and the trial itself takes place in an auditorium “typically used for Carnival programs, sports banquets, or touring theatre productions.”²⁴ The performativity of the “show” is centralized, once again drawing the reader’s attention to the thin line between reality and fiction.

Eva begins to learn of the atrocities of the Holocaust through the events of the trial, first through its coverage in the media and then as part of the prosecu-

20 Ibid., 74.

21 Ibid., 166.

22 Ibid., 165.

23 Annette Hess, *The German House*, trans. Elisabeth Lauffer (London: HarperCollins, 2020 [2018]), 32.

24 Ibid., 62.

tion team—a trajectory that inspires the publisher's blurb to bizarrely describe the novel as "a harrowing yet ultimately uplifting coming of age story."²⁵ It is only later that Eva learns that the acts of perpetration that are being tried also implicate her parents. As it transpires, her father had been a member of the SS and served as a chef in the officer's mess at Auschwitz; the whole family had lived together in the SS quarters of the camp.

Like in the previous examples, processes of displacement are prevalent. First, and most obviously, Eva's role as a translator means that she is charged with rendering the experiences of others in words of her own. In the context of the family drama that ensues, this process can be understood as symbolic of the postmemorial "translation" of the Holocaust narrative from someone else's history into an essential part of her own story.

After a long period of awkward silences and deflections, Ludwig, Eva's father, finally sighs and asks Eva what she would like to know, but the subsequent conversation takes place off-screen, recalled by Eva in the following paragraphs after she has already left the house and is taking the streetcar to the prosecutor's office. Direct speech is thus replaced by a kind of mediated discourse, producing narratological distance and separating the reader from the standoff that ensues.

In a second confrontation, Eva's mother, Edith, sits her down and (directly) defends her husband: "You can't do this to your father.' Eva remained silent, and Edith continued, 'It was twenty years ago. By the time we realized what was happening there, it was too late. And we're no heroes, Eva. We were afraid – we had young children. People didn't speak up in those days. It can't be compared to how things are now. [...] We never hurt anyone.'"²⁶ Here, Edith is seeking some kind of comfort or assurance from Eva, but Eva simply does not respond. The next time we see Edith—only a page later—she is called as a witness for the defense. Thus, the family drama that had begun to play out at home is transposed back into the court setting, depersonalized and placed back within the context of a wider German guilt. The confrontations with Eva's family are first deferred, then shown indirectly, before finally taking center stage at the trial itself.

In all three texts, performativity becomes an essential motif: the way that stories are told, enacted, and lived is the central concern. In some ways, this reduces the ethical and psychological complexities of perpetrator descendants

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 289

to the role of narrative. Yet, seen from another angle, we might understand this narrativization as a metaphor for the perpetrator-descendant experience, whose own stories are simultaneously their own and not their own, and who are simultaneously the authors of their own lives and the characters in someone else's story. Combined with the various techniques of distancing and displacement that we have mentioned, these fictions encode anxieties around representational limits, pointing readers to processes of narrative construction and highlighting the transition from the historical guilt of the previous generations to the experience of inherited and felt culpability in the lives of their offspring.

Nonfiction

Our next examples are nonfiction writings in English by third-generation perpetrator descendants. The destabilizing discovery and recounting of this lineage is highlighted by the Anglophone context, where reckoning with a heritage of wartime crimes is not the norm. This contrasts with recent works from a German perspective, including Jennifer Teege's *My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me* (*Amon: Mein Großvater hätte mich erschossen*, 2013/2015), about the eponymous Amon Goeth, and Eline Jongsma's short Instagram-based documentary in English, *His Name is My Name* (2022), a fourth-generation perspective on her great-grandfather, the Dutch Nazi Party activist Gerrit Jongsma.

The memoirs to be discussed here are part of a growing corpus of English-language works whose narrative quest is that of determining the level of forebears' participation in Nazi-era crimes. These range from Martin Davidson's *The Perfect Nazi: Unmasking my SS Grandfather* (2010) and Serena Katt's graphic novel *Sunday's Child* (2019) in the UK, to the New Zealand-set *Strawberries with Hitler* (2000), Helga Tiscenko's book about her war criminal father, also the basis for a documentary film of the same title (Amy O'Connor, 2011).

Our examples here all emerge from a North American context: Rita Gabis's *A Shooter at the Banquet* (2014), Linda Kinstler's *Come to This Court and Cry* (2022), and Juliya Šukys's *Siberian Exile* (2017). Each text is about a writer trying to establish the nature and extent of wartime crimes committed by their grandfather.²⁷ The authors have elements of their heritage in common: all were born

27 As Helga Schneider's memoir suggests, although female forebears are not entirely absent, they are much less widely represented. Serena Katt's graphic memoir about her

in the USA or Canada, even if their parents or older siblings were not. Gabis and Kinstler have both perpetrator and Jewish forebears, Gabis's last name that of her Jewish father. For Gabis and Kinstler, therefore, the generic overlap between Jewish heritage memoir and perpetrator descendant confession embodies the psychic conflict they recount. Although both texts are *sui generis*, Gabis's registering a debt to Daniel Mendelsohn's influential Jewish family memoir *The Lost: A Search for the Six Million* (2006) is an indication of her own work's orientation, while Kinstler's, as we will argue, takes up the more detached stance of political journalism. Šukys's memoir testifies to a third version of what Violeta Davoliūtė calls "incommensurable subject-positions" of these kinds, the division between celebrating and condemning her forebears also reflected by the form of the text.²⁸

Gabis and Šukys write about a Lithuanian heritage, Kinstler Latvian. This consonance in terms of "locality" is also historical,²⁹ testifying to the greater availability of archival material and the gradual development of national self-reflection in the post-communist era. In addition, as Davoliūtė points out, the individual quest in each case acknowledges the terrible "intimacy" that often characterized Holocaust-era murder in Eastern Europe (541). For each, the Baltic state background with its particular Holocaust remembrance culture increases the difficulty of establishing the truth of the grandfather's actions. These works are therefore self-conscious meditations on the process of research and uncovering, making them, as Angela Findlay puts it of her memoir about her Wehrmacht-general grandfather, "historical detective stories" rather than finished products.³⁰ Although all three of our examples are nonfiction, each uses imaginative elements to supplement what is missing from the historical record.

The focus of Rita Gabis's *A Guest at the Shooter's Banquet* is summed up by its subtitle: *My Grandfather's SS Past, My Jewish Family and a Search for the Truth*. The search concerns Gabis's maternal grandfather Pranas Purnas, who was a

German grandmother, the counterpart to *Sunday's Child's* focus on her grandfather, attempts to understand the level of Ingeborg's commitment to Nazism within a domestic context, available to view on her website, <https://serenakatt.co.uk/Ingeborg-s-Reise-I-mage-copy-1>, accessed August 25, 2025.

28 Violeta Davoliūtė, "Agonistic Homecomings: Holocaust Postmemory, Perspective and Locality," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 3 (2022), 539–50, 539.

29 Ibid.

30 Angela Findlay, *In My Grandfather's Shadow: A Story of War, Trauma and the Legacy of Silence* (London: Bantam, 2022).

chief of police under the Nazis at a time when 8,000 Jews were murdered at the Poligon camp in Lithuania. Following the memoir's title, its horrifying central symbol is a celebratory banquet after a mass killing in 1941. Gabis's grandfather Puronas almost certainly took part, so that the 'guest' of the title could be him, or even Gabis herself, implicitly invited to watch.

The text opens with a prologue recounting Gabis's pair of recurring dreams, in one of which she is trying to flee a deathly menace, and in the other, she is herself the killer, whose terrible secret is already known, animating her sense of dual heritage. As its opening with a dream suggests, the text is a compendium of documentary and affective material. We follow the perpetrator descendant's emotional and literary responses to the material she gathers, including a Sebaldian use of documentary photographs and literary experiments indebted to her experience as a poet. Gabis reproduces a Google Translate version of a Lithuanian document, resembling Heimrad Bäcker's *transcript* (1986) in its poetic repurposing of perpetrator utterance. The "strange mishmash" of this passage is a metonym of her book as a whole, with its gaps, errors, and chilling hints: "a telephone operator who heard on this day and has since was ... 1941 saugumas ... not mentioned ... something about my grandfather ... shooting ... 7000, 200 ... testified ... when ... gone ..."³¹

Continuing the technique of enlisting the form's figurative properties, the nature of Gabis's search is conveyed even at the level of individual sentence structure. In instances such as this, different eras and discoveries are layered within a single statement, revealing the difficulty of reaching a resolution: "After the war, during a KGB interview, the same Bronius Gruzdys whose Poligon testimony I had read in the postflood [apartment] rental, a man who was also a Shaulist, told Captain Buglan, chief investigation officer of [...] Smersh, which would morph back into the KGB, that my grandfather was discharged from the military into the reserves 'allegedly for excessive drinking'."³² As Gabis concludes of the grandfather figure from her childhood, "I have to create my own record of him" out of a "ghost knowledge."³³ Although his guilt cannot be proved, the textual accumulation and its experimental techniques imply it.

Linda Kinstler's *Come to This Court and Cry* follows the author's journalistic expertise in its effort to combine a factual account with personal detail by

31 Rita Gabis *A Guest at the Shooters' Banquet: My Grandfather's SS Past, My Jewish Family, A Search for the Truth* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 27.

32 Ibid., 185.

33 Ibid., 217, 319.

“chart[ing] the failures, victories and silences of law alongside those of my relatives and their neighbors and friends, dead and alive.”³⁴ Kinstler’s grandfather Boris, with whom, as she says, she shares a “patronymic,” was a member of the notorious Arajs commando, which carried out the murders of Jews and others in wartime Latvia. Like Gabis, Kinstler conveys the ‘intertwined’ nature of survivor and perpetrator descendants through emphasizing the detail of her heritage. Kinstler describes recognizing her own features in those of her perpetrator grandfather, yet was brought up to follow her Jewish mother’s religious practice.

However, Kinstler uses a different textual strategy from Gabis’s to represent the absence of knowledge. Her book cannot constitute an account of her grandfather, about whom very little is known. Rather, it focuses on someone else: the so-called Hangman of Riga, Herbert Cukurs, the colleague of Kinstler’s grandfather during the war, who was assassinated by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad in 1965. Kinstler combines descriptions of her background while acknowledging its actual focus: “in the process of learning about my own family story [I have been] researching the Cukurs case.”³⁵

This focus is a substitute, yet also a marker, for the absence of the very historical record the book seeks to establish, making Cukurs a proxy for Kinstler’s grandfather Boris. Although the “almost certain” culpability of both men goes “far beyond a reasonable doubt,” as Kinstler puts it, it is hard to establish their crimes to make a guilty verdict likely in court.³⁶ Embodying this bold technique of recording and highlighting absences is Boris’s record card at the Ludwigsburg Nazi documentation center, which, after great effort to consult it, Kinstler finds to be blank. Neither Cukurs nor Boris was ever seen, in a phrase used repeatedly in both its figurative and actual senses, “pulling the trigger,” despite their documented presence at murder sites.

We might see a clue to the text’s aspiration in Kinstler’s viewing the Cukurs case as a “ghostly successor” to the “world trial” of Adolf Eichmann: While Mossad captured Eichmann to be put on trial, its agents instead killed Cukurs. This gives the additional sense that Kinstler positions herself as a latter-day version of Hannah Arendt, and her book as a version of *Eichmann in*

34 Linda Kinstler, *Come to This Court and Cry: How the Holocaust Ends* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), xix.

35 *Ibid.*, 11.

36 *Ibid.*, 54.

Jerusalem (1963). Even if her grandfather's story is elusive, Kinstler constructs herself in relation to anatomizing it.

The third example of a North American text which incorporates and attempts to examine a wartime European forebear is Šukys's *Siberian Exile*. Šukys describes herself as a Canadian author of creative nonfiction, which she teaches in the USA, at the University of Missouri. Her memoir is the most concise and seemingly direct of the three, its creative aspects of a nonfiction account nonetheless apparent.

Šukys recounts her own evolving emotions at the discoveries about her Lithuanian paternal grandfather Anthony, made while she was planning a biography rather of his wife, her grandmother Ona, and the latter's survival of the Gulag. In 1941, Ona was deported without her family to work on a Siberian farm, the separation from her husband seemingly a tragic historical mishap. Yet Šukys's research uncovered a "devastating" causal connection and filled in what turned out to be silences in a family memory in an émigré community. Anthony's wife, it emerged, was punished for his crimes.

Ona was arrested because of her husband's membership of the Iron Wolf, a right-wing Lithuanian nationalist group of a kind to which all three grandfathers here belonged. By contrast to the absence of documentation characterizing the other two memoirs, Anthony's KGB file is full of incriminating evidence, stating that he fled to North America to avoid prosecution for war crimes. Šukys's own birth in Canada came about for that reason. She finds out that her grandfather was appointed police chief in Lithuania in 1941, and at the very least "oversaw" the massacre of almost all the Jews of the town of Naishtot (or, as she calls it, Newtown) that year. In a version of Kinstler's conclusions, Šukys declares outright that, "regardless of who pulled the trigger," it is no consolation if Anthony did not personally take part. Where Kinstler distances herself from Boris through the figure of Cukurs and her journalistic narrative voice, Šukys sees her findings as her personal hubris: "Perhaps the discovery I made about who my grandfather Anthony had really been and how my grandmother had unwittingly paid for his sins is my penance for taking a kind of pride in Ona's victimhood."³⁷

From her Canadian perspective, even if located in the USA, Šukys confronts the untruths of family myth and connects the murderous European history to that of the displacement of indigenous people. However, the text's structure

37 Julija Šukys, *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 4.

tells a different story. Although Anthony's terrible history is related first, that of his wife Ona, and indeed Šukys's pride in her grandmother's survival in Siberia occupies at least half the book. This focus serves to reverse the family myth, prompting Šukys's claim that the tragedy was not Ona's deportation to Siberia but Anthony's escape. She concludes that it would have been better if Anthony had been deported to Siberia with his wife, and not faced with the "choice," as she puts it, to "become a cog" in the machinery of murder.

This counterfactual idea reveals that this memoir is not so much about the murder of Lithuanian Jews, but rather a family reckoning from a Canadian vantage point. That émigré perspective generated the myths about an "over-valued" past, in Šukys's words, and she asks: What would life be like "in which the only place I am from is the place I happen to be?"³⁸ The North American dream of successful integration itself generates the suppression of a perpetrator history.

All three works use their English-language composition to embody the location of the perpetrator descendants outside the memorial context of a perpetrator nation or one that was occupied during the war. As the German-born but U.S.-based Nora Krug puts it of her graphic memoir *Heimat*: "If I had stayed in Germany, I would have never thought of writing this book."³⁹ Leaving Germany, she implies, defamiliarized the Nazi era and its personal implications, leaving her—as it does for Gabis, Kinstler and Šukys—free to devise her own memorial form. While the hybridity of Krug's life-writing consists of "mix[ing] words and images," the duality in the memoirs is that of a self-conscious generic fusion.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The nonfiction works we have discussed here use aesthetic and fictive techniques to supplement the historical gaps that are highlighted in each case. They are, thus, in Irene Kacandes's phrasing, para- or meta-memoirs infused with

38 Ibid., 163.

39 Nora Krug, *Heimat: A German Family Album* (London: Particular Books, 2018).

40 Arnaud Schmitt, "Introduction," in *Hybridity in Life Writing: Combining Text and Images* (London: Palgrave 2024), 10.

speculation and substitution.⁴¹ Gabis's statement stands for all three: the "brutality of the larger past" can only be redeemed by the effort to "make the past manifest" in this new setting.⁴² In the North American present, the granddaughter becomes, in part, a chronicler, rather than an inheritor, of the atrocious past. Hybridity in Holocaust-related literature is usually taken to refer to shifts between fictional genres, as critics argue is the case, for instance, of the Polish author Joanna Rudniańska combining "parable, realism and post-modern fairy tale" in her novels for children.⁴³ But the memoirs go further in blending the ontological modes of fiction and nonfiction. They do so as a means of representing a painful past that has been only partially retrieved.

By contrast, the fictional examples are reluctant to approach the problems of affective and inherited guilt directly. In this way, the novels may be said to encode authorial anxieties about the status of fiction and to reflect the experiential distance of the narrative voice from its subject matter.⁴⁴ Rather than incorporate these uncertainties into the narrative structure, as Linda Hutcheon argues is the case for instances of historiographic metafiction, the novels sidestep the central questions about perpetrator descent.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is rather the memoirs which make the failure to reach any resolution, in relation to the descendants' self-image or historical conclusions, the text's content. This use of literary, or even fictive, techniques to tell a documentary story evidences a hybridity exceeding the term's basic sense of "blending, mixing and combining" genre codes.⁴⁶ Rather, the memoirs use the techniques of fiction for their nonfictional exploration of postmemorial family autobiography, not just stylistically but for occasions where factual certainty breaks down. Perhaps an even greater aesthetic repurposing of factual sources, following

41 Irene Kacandes, *Daddy's War: Greek American Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

42 Gabis, *A Guest*, 21.

43 Mateusz Świątlicki and Dorota Michułka, "Unburied Practices of Memory: The Holocaust and the Polish–Jewish Relations in Joanna Rudniańska's *Kotka Brygidy* (2007) and *XY* (2012)," *Children's Literature in Education* 54 (2023): 555–569, 555.

44 See Or Rogovin, "Mechanisms of Defense and Narrative Authority in Holocaust Fiction: Imagining the Perpetrator in David Grossman's *See Under: Love*," *Symposium* 78, no. 3 (2024): 189–203.

45 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 105–23.

46 Anne Mäntynen and Susanna Shore, "What is Meant by Hybridity? An Investigation of Hybridity and Related Terms in Genre Studies," *Text & Talk* 34, no. 6 (2014): 737–58, 738.

the model of the memoirs, could enable fiction about perpetrator generations to achieve a balance between narrator and event.

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