Possessed by Postmemory: Thane Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the short story cycle *Elijah Visible* by Thane Rosenbaum, who represents the second generation of American writers responding to the Holocaust. Rosenbaum focuses on what is termed the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The paper attempts to show how the fragmented identity of Adam Posner, the protagonist of the cycle, has been shaped by the legacy of his parents' Holocaust experience. It draws on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and follows the author's approach to his protagonist's appropriation of the Holocaust which results in his obsession with cataclysmic wartime experiences. The paper also examines Rosenbaum's attitude to the silence surrounding the Holocaust and its effects. It explores how the repression of the tragic family history as a defense mechanism leads to the alienation of children from their parents and profoundly complicates their mutual relationship. Furthermore, gaps and blanks in the knowledge of the past, together with the impossibility of fully grasping the original trauma, fuel the protagonist's imagination. This imaginative investment also forms the main character's postmemory and contributes to his feeling of being relocated in space and time—his "cattle car complex", to quote the title of the initial story of Rosenbaum's book.

Keywords: second generation; Thane Rosenbaum; the Holocaust; postmemory; children of survivors; transmission of trauma

In my analysis of Thane Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible* (1996), I aim to demonstrate the diversity of approaches by this representative of the second generation[1] to the original traumatic experience of parents-survivors and to his own postmemory. These diverse approaches are embodied by the different variants of the protagonist in the individual stories—variants who bear the same name but reenact the traumas of the protagonist and his parents in different ways. To capture the complexity of Rosenbaum's expression of the fractured postwar identity of the

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[1] This term designating the children of Holocaust survivors was adopted by clinical psychologists and therapists. At times I use the term "post-Holocaust generation" in cases when I do not intend to distinguish between the second and the third generation.

children of Holocaust survivors, I focus on the ways in which the author presents his central character and the psychological tensions that accompany him; I address the reasons for his intergenerational conflicts with his parents and their mutual alienation. Furthermore, I explore the problem of the authenticity of the second generation's attitude to the Holocaust and religious faith, as depicted in Rosenbaum's stories. Despite the thematic diversity of the stories I analyze here, one of my objectives is to explore their interconnectedness, the interplay of the elements that help Rosenbaum in his imaginative re-creation of the dark past and in the reflection of the postmemory of his own generation.

The identity of the second generation has been profoundly shaped by the original trauma of their parents. Since they were born after World War II, they did not witness the Nazi genocide at first hand, and thus their experience of the tragedy is only vicarious. Yet this cannot diminish the darkness of their perspective, because their lack of the direct experience their parents had, and often their limited knowledge of the historical trauma of the Jewish people, restricted to secondary sources, only serves to deepen their own traumas, reinforced by their feeling of guilt about the fact that "they were not there." This guilt, in its extreme form, may give rise to their obsessive desire to witness the Holocaust, in contrast with the inaccessibility of their parents' traumatic experience. While the survivors distinguish three stages of their life—"before," "during" and "after" (often trying to erase the second stage through the repression of their traumatic past)—their children know only "after."[2] As writings of the second generation show, the lack of the previous stages of their parents' experience in their own life may be burdensome. It is heightened by the survivors' silence about the Holocaust, which makes their past mysterious and stirs the imagination of the children of survivors.[3]

The fact that these writers were born after the Holocaust brings us to an ethical question about their authority to depict events they have not actually lived through—although in the light of the diversity of approaches from which this event is represented and re-created in terms

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[2] It is telling that one of the novels by a significant writer of the second generation, Melvin Jules Bukiet, has the title *After* (1996).
[3] Despite certain generalizations, it is important to realize that Holocaust survivors and their children cannot be viewed as a monolithic group. The experience of each of them is indubitably unique.

of genres, and the incredible proliferation of books on this topic, this question may seem outdated. And yet, being one generation removed from Auschwitz, the writers of the second generation often face their own creative doubts about their competence to respond to the Holocaust. Andrew Furman writes that they move on a "slippery moral terrain" (2000: 59). There is always a danger that they may be accused of the literary exploitation or trivialization of the Holocaust.[4] But despite Cynthia Ozick's conviction (which she has put aside in several fiction books) that the Holocaust should be represented only in non-fiction,[5] second and already third generation writers feel a strong compulsion— and even an obligation—to enter the past and address the memory of their (grand)parents' experiences which they have never witnessed.

Since their identity and imagination have been deeply affected by the previous generation's trauma, it would be wrong to interpret their literary attempts to depict the suffering of Jews as a mere aestheticization of the Holocaust. Being haunted by the ghosts of their family members' past, they regard writing about their great tragedy as a moral imperative. As Thane Rosenbaum, a child of Holocaust survivors himself, confesses:

> I had and continue to have no idea of the specific horrors that my parents experienced and witnessed, and so I write entirely out of the imaginative realm. I feel compelled to write about what I don't actually know, as a way to at least participate in my family's story—if not as an eyewitness, then as a creative caretaker. Writing about Jewish themes is an extension of that impulse. (2005: 248)

For Rosenbaum, the process of writing is "the complex untangling of the fears that had once belonged to [his] parents but now had been passed on to [him]" (2005: 242).[6]

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[4] This ethical problem is discussed in books such as *The Americanization of the Holocaust* by Hilene Flanzbaum, (1999), Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (2000) and Lawrence L. Langer's *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (2006).
[5] See Cynthia Ozick's "Roundtable Discussion" in *Writing and the Holocaust* (1988: 271-289).
[6] Not all critics are complimentary of the literary production of some representatives of the second generation. For example, Ruth Franklin is very critical of some elaborate literary works that are "driven by ambition, guilt, envy, or sheer narcissism" (2011: 216) and calls it "Wilkomirski-ism", alluding to the fraudulent autobiography of Benjamin Wilkomorski *Fragments*.

Although imagination plays a crucial role in the second-generation writers' fictional re-creation of collective losses, this does not mean that they disregard historiography, testimonies and numerous documents concerning the "Final Solution." As a matter of fact, many authors openly admit that they conduct extensive research of historical facts about the Holocaust; however, these facts often serve as a point of departure for their imagination. In Rosenbaum's words, they are "stuck between two seemingly contradictory worlds: the artist who places no restriction on the imagination and can therefore do whatever he wishes with history; and the child of Holocaust survivors, who owes everything to history, and whose writing is both an act of creation and of memory" (2005: 244).

It is important to realize that most of the authors of the second generation do not depict the Holocaust itself, but instead focus on its aftermath. They concentrate on the experiences of the survivors' children growing up in the shadow of their parents' tragic past. In doing so, they respond to the effects of their secondary trauma in the postwar world. Their strategy of distancing themselves from the time and place of their parents' original trauma enables them to establish an authoritative narrative voice with many autobiographical features, as it draws on their personal experience. This experience includes typical problems of the children of survivors living in the shadow of the Holocaust. It is necessary to add that the tendency to employ contemporary (often traumatic) events as a parallel to the crimes of the past can also be observed in the works of the third generation; this is understandable, considering the increasing temporal distance from the original trauma.[7]

Wilkomorski has become a prototypical survivor-impostor who faked his imprisonment in concentration camps.

[7] Despite many overlapping features of second and third generation literature, there are already studies attempting to distinguish between the works written by the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Among them, we can name the most recent books *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction* (2016), edited by Victoria Aarons, and *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (2017) by Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger. They emphasize the widening abyss between survivors' direct witnessing of the tragic historical events and their grandchildren's mediated memory of these events, leading to a different

Although we should refrain from simplified generalizations of the category of "children of survivors," which often tend to ignore the diversity among them, even they feel that they are different from children whose parents have not experienced the Holocaust, that they are "other," which leads to problems in interpersonal interactions. On the other hand, they acknowledge that they feel a special affinity in each other's company. Their testimonies reveal certain common traits, such as feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, insecurity, marginality, incompetence and guilt stemming from their absence from the historical events experienced by their parents. Their gloomy view of life and prevailing pessimism are related to their (over)identification with their parents' trauma, and with victimhood in general. Their sense of "otherness" is aptly captured by Helen Epstein in her memoir *Children of the Holocaust*: "All of our parents, the ones who had come to America after the war, were eccentric in my eyes. They were not like Americans, and we children were not like other American children" (1988: 16).

The second generation can also be called the generation of postmemory. The term "postmemory," coined by Marianne Hirsch, expresses the response of a generation which has never experienced the original trauma of Holocaust survivors to "an inaccessible past that was never one's own" (Codde 2010: 69). As Hirsch states, it "is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (1997: 22). Postmemory is not fueled by direct recollections; a lack of personal experience of somebody else's past is compensated by imagination, which fills gaps in a person's knowledge of the past, and by the cultural memory of collective trauma. Although the term postmemory is not without problems (as it seems to imply a time after or beyond memory, and hence a state of oblivion), in fact it has proved to be a very useful concept, as it distinguishes memory acquired from personal experience of an event from vicarious memory which is passed down to the following generation(s).

In the context of the post-Holocaust generation, postmemory is acquired through the intergenerational and transgenerational transmission of trauma. This term points to the impact of trauma experienced by (grand)parents on their offspring. In other words, generations which have

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narrative perspective, and a heightened employment of imagination as "a substitute, a placeholder, for memory" (Aarons 2016: 22).

never been exposed to a traumatic event can "inherit" the trauma of their ancestors and share it. Naturally, the most common medium of this transfer is the family, particularly in the case of intergenerational transmission, whereas in the transfer of trauma across more than one generation, the role of cultural memory increases. Some theorists, instead of trauma transmission, speak rather of re-traumatization, pointing out that children's trauma is caused by their growing up in dysfunctional families.[8] However, most Holocaust scholars admit that the parents' original trauma leaves, to a greater or lesser extent, an imprint on the personality of their offspring. For example, Marita Grimwood claims that "[c]hildren growing up with relatives who have direct experience of, say, the Holocaust, might themselves present symptoms which are in some way symptoms of trauma" (2007: 8) and Natan Kellerman writes about "an absorbing of the psychological burdens of the parents and sharing their grief and terror" (2009: VII).

Postmemory and the transfer of trauma between two generations play a crucial role in Thane Rosenbaum's debut book *Elijah Visible*. Though some critics classify this work as a novel—and even the author himself and his editor speak of a "novel in stories" (Royal 2007: 6-7)—I argue that the most appropriate generic term is "short story cycle," if we take into account its structuring. It consists of nine interrelated short stories, linked by the central character of Adam Posner, a child of survivors, and addresses themes of traumatic memory and postmemory of the Holocaust. A motif that also recurs in the short stories is that of silence about this historical trauma. This silence functions as a defense mechanism and an alternative response to the tragedy of the Jews. Another unifying theme is the alienation of the young generation of Jews from Judaism, yet also, concurrently, this generation's quest for its Jewish roots, sought in traditions. All the stories follow the protagonist's maturation and may be approached as stories of initiation, albeit in a

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[8] See Philippe Codde, "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three American Novels" in *Modern Fiction Studies* (2011: 689) or his essay "Postmemory, Afterimages, Transferred Loss: First and Third Generation Holocaust Trauma in American Literature and Film" in *The Holocaust, Art, and Taboo: Transatlantic Exchanges on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Representation* (2010: 68). Nevertheless, ineffective parenting may be seen as an effect of the parents' trauma experienced in the past.

reversed narrative progression.[9] Even the name Adam, similarly to Nick Adams in Hemingway's short story cycle *In Our Time* (1925), symbolically supports reading these stories as being about the process of initiation. On the other hand, Andrew Furman sees in the name a symbolic "rebirth or regeneration" (2000: 64). In Furman's view, throughout his stories Rosenbaum explores the possibility of continuity. Similarly, Hannah A. Komy maintains that the name suggests "the possibility of new beginnings embodied in the members of the second generation" (2004: 282). The author's choice of the biblical name is viewed from a slightly different perspective by Alan Berger, who notes that Adam, "the first human being God creates becomes the first post-Auschwitz human. Far from inhabiting a Garden of Eden, however, this second-generation Adam lives in an anti-Edenic universe" (2000: 9).

Despite being a unifying element, the protagonist Adam Posner is not a single unified character. Rosenbaum's fragmentated representation of the survivors' son corresponds to the psychological state of traumatized man, and generally of trauma per se. In each story the identity of this postmodern mosaic-like character varies; not only does his age vary, but he is variously portrayed as a lawyer, an artist, a university teacher, and, in the final stories, Rosenbaum regressively portrays him as a child. This discontinuity, so reminiscent of the disruption of Jewish communities by the Holocaust, is reinforced by the changing settings, which differ from story to story. Some stories are set in New York City, while others— focusing on Adam's childhood and youth—take place in Miami Beach, Atlantic City and the Catskills. Adam's multiple identity enables Rosenbaum to convey multiple responses of his generation to the genocidal terrors his parents had to endure—as well as to its own traumas. The fragmentation of the protagonist's identity also corresponds with his mental instability and his overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and incompleteness, which are the after-effects of the familial discontinuity caused by the losses during the war.

Even though the protagonist's identity is modified, what unites all the stories is Adam's post-Holocaust experience, shaped by the trauma of his parents, who transmit it (often unintentionally) to him. His

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[9] The initial stories feature the main character as an adult man, while the final stories present him in his childhood.

despondent and brooding existence is determined by his parents' traumatic past and their inability to empathize with his plight, which is obviously an effect of their post-traumatic stress disorder. Adam's complicated relationship with his parents, as depicted by Rosenbaum, features all the typical traits described in various testimonies and works of fiction. Aaron Hass, in his book *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation* (1990), deals with these traits in detail, using case studies to point out the survivor generation's overprotectiveness, hypercriticism, emotional inaccessibility (he uses the expression "unavailability"), fear, mistrust, lack of empathy with their offspring, pessimism, and what Hass terms "death anxiety" (2001: 25–30). All these features create boundaries which can also be found between Adam and his parents. Moreover, the chasm between them is deepened by the parents' silence surrounding their suffering during World War II. Rosenbaum unambiguously sees this silence about the Holocaust as counterproductive, resulting in the protagonist's estrangement and feeling of displacement.

Reading through the individual stories, it becomes clear that the traumatic experiences of Adam's parents impede their capacity to establish a satisfying relationship with him. His parents are portrayed as emotionally unstable, turned inward, as people who have by and large failed in their parenting. Their pessimism and omnipresent anxiety contribute to the gloomy atmosphere pervading their home. In the story "Lost, in a Sense," Adam's dysfunctional parents are characterized as "creatures of the night, of darkness, of another world" and "unfit parents," whose "suffering became too great—for them and [him]" (Rosenbaum 1999: 170), and thus little Adam, in the oppressive atmosphere of his home, is intuitively searching for a substitute family. He is secretly dreaming about adoptive parents, eventually finding a surrogate parent in his friend's father, Mr. Isaacson, who, unlike his biological father, is able to enjoy everyday life and discover beauty and the sublime in the most ordinary things. In his friend's house he finds a safe sanctuary which helps him to lighten the burden passed on to him by his parents. However, as the author suggests, the process of postmemory that the small boy is going through induces his feelings of displacement and estrangement.

Non-constructive overprotective parenting is well illustrated in the story "The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights," in which

Adam is portrayed as a traumatized child of pre-school age who is hopelessly excluded from the collective in a kindergarten as a consequence of his parents' apocalyptic upbringing—attempting to inculcate in him the art of survival as if the Holocaust could happen again at any moment. Brought up in a state of constant anxiety, he is perceived as an odd child—"the Other." His otherness stems not only from his flawed upbringing, but especially from his experience of being a child of survivors—an experience that deeply affected his psyche and traumatized him already in his pre-school years. Due to his stigmatizing difference, the boy has problems engaging in social contacts with his peers, resulting in his sense of not belonging and feelings of inferiority. Rosenbaum presents the protagonist's otherness through an inconspicuous detail—though this detail is telling, and underscores the reason for the boy's isolation. It is manifested in his different reaction to the bedtime stories told in the kindergarten, since, unlike the other children, he has developed an untrusting attitude toward tales with happy endings, obviously under the influence of his parents' Holocaust experience. As the author says, "[h]e had his own stories […] His stories were real, the endings monstrous" (1999: 192).

Adam's otherness culminates in his unnatural reactions during a school trip to a local police station. The policemen's uniforms put him on alert because he spontaneously associates them with injustice and the abuse of power. In the police precinct house, he turns into an unmanageable child who "had not been to the battle, but yet his soul feared the enemy—*some* enemy" (Rosenbaum 1999: 198). A school psychologist is aware of the cause of Adam's distrust of people and the outside world, but she knows she is unable to help him because, as she says, "[t]he parents have turned this poor little boy into a concentration camp survivor, and he wasn't even in the camps!" (Rosenbaum 1999: 200). They have affected the child's sense of identity, leading to a loss of his separate sense of self. Being urged by his wary parents to test his abilities to survive, Adam reenacts their Holocaust past as a burdensome legacy that comes at the cost of his own full life as a child. His traumatic dissociation manifests itself in his temporal and spatial displacement when the site of his native Washington Heights metamorphoses into Nazi Germany, posing threat and danger for him.

Although Aaron Hass asserts that "[s]urvivors, more than their offspring, are prone to unrealistic and excessive reactions to seemingly

innocuous stimuli" (2001: 31), Rosenbaum's story implies that such inadequate responses to these stimuli, the events triggering unwanted associations, may be intense even among the second generation, even though the members of that generation are unaware of their cause. Adam's fear and alertness confirm that "[a]uthority figures in uniform and dogs are the most common symbols likely to arouse anxiety from a previous time" (Hass 2001: 31)—not only among survivors but also among their children. Here the second-generation protagonist is presented as a victim of the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma, but at the same time of his parents' post-traumatic stress disorder, which has paralyzed him and proved to be counterproductive.

What pervades Rosenbaum's stories is silence about the tragic past, which the author views as the main cause of the estrangement between the Holocaust survivor and the second-generation child. The survivors' unwillingness to share their personal history with their children is brought about not only by repressive mechanisms, but also by the unutterable nature of the Holocaust. In the story "The Pants in the Family," Adam wishes to uncover his father's mysterious past, of which he has only a fragmentary knowledge; however, he runs up against his father's reluctance to talk about the traumatic events in his life. As the narrator-protagonist confesses:

> I wanted to know more about what had happened to him during the war. It was always such an impenetrable secret—my parents, speaking in code, changing the passwords repeatedly, keeping me off the scent [...] There was never the occasion to catch them off guard, ask the big questions, holding out for something other than that familiar silence. [...] the actual details of his life—the real adventures, not the imagined horror—were beyond my grasp, and his inclination to tell.
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> (Rosenbaum 1999: 48)

This occasion occurs on the Atlantic City pier, a place which is special for Adam because as a small child he experienced his own trauma there, when his father abandoned him for a short time and he got lost in the crowd. Now, a long time after this incident, this site of a double loss—both in a physical and spiritual sense—seems to be the most appropriate place for finding the path to each other. Walking along the boardwalk together, emotionally attached to each other after the recent death of Adam's mother, the curious son attempts to break the silence and make his father, this "refugee with the haunted past" (Rosenbaum 1999: 43), tell his stories from the war. But even though the father regrets his

inadequate parenting and the silence that filled Adam's childhood, he is reluctant to return to his traumatic past and his responses to the son's questions are only elusive. For him it is too late for a full establishment of a normal father-son relationship. The whole story is imbued with a sense of painful loss. As the father tells his son: "I was lost, and then I gave it to you" (Rosenbaum 1999: 51), pointing to the transfer of his trauma. The frustrated Adam does not know that it was his last chance to learn about his father's Holocaust experiences; soon after their walk, his father dies of a heart attack—on the same boardwalk. The synecdochical image of the pants, with which the story closes, symbolizes the emotional unity finally achieved between Adam and his father, and the father's passing of the burden of life onward to his son.

In *Elijah Visible*, Rosenbaum has not avoided one of the recurring second-generation themes, the crisis of Jewish identity in the post-Holocaust world. His stories suggest that the alienation of his characters from Judaism and Jewishness was influenced by the disruption of the Jewish continuity—caused by the Holocaust, which brought unimaginable losses to Jewish life. After the Nazi genocide, many survivors lost faith in life and its values, including religious values. Moreover, having been transplanted to America, it was difficult for them to continue Jewish traditions. After so many atrocities in Europe, the suppression of anything Jewish became a protective strategy in their new environment, a way to make their children's life easier regardless of the religious freedom they enjoyed in the New World. It is no wonder that Rosenbaum's second-generation characters are mostly assimilated Jews who identify with victimhood rather than with being Jewish. The fact that the Holocaust is the only symbol of Jewishness for numerous American Jews is unacceptable for him, and thus he pictures his assimilated Jews in an ironic tone. His criticism is aimed especially at the inauthenticity of his characters' Jewishness, caused by their ignorance of the past.

In the story "Romancing the *Yohrzeit* Light," Adam, here an abstract expressionist painter, neglects religion and avoids visiting synagogues in his neighborhood on the Upper West Side "as though they were virtual leper colonies" (Rosenbaum 1999: 17). Reminiscent of Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy, he dates only *shikseh*, non-Jewish girls, and eschews kosher food. His paintings have no relation to Jewish identity, and even his appearance is non-Jewish. He is often reproached for his ignorance

by his religious mother, with whom he has a rather uneasy relationship. The main plot, however, is set on the first anniversary of his mother's death, when Adam, out of remorse for having neglected Judaism (coinciding with his alienation from his mother), decides to commemorate her by the ritual of lighting a *yohrzeit* memorial candle. Rosenbaum's incisive criticism of the inauthenticity of Adam's Jewish religious faith is conveyed through satire and grotesqueness: first Adam cannot find a required *yohrzeit* candle and he eventually buys it in the most unlikely place—a Korean store; then he cannot light it because he breaks the matches; and to top it all, he does not know how to pray *kaddish* as it "remained a mystery, like a foreign language" (Rosenbaum 1999: 23). The emptiness of Adam's religious faith is enhanced by the motif of the unexpected visit of his attractive Swedish girlfriend Tasha, who interrupts his ritual mourning, offering to make love on the table on which the candle stands. The flame of the candle, extinguished by Tasha, suggests an aborted honoring of the memory of the mother. The story's final scene, depicting a traditional Swedish celebration of Christmas, leaves Adam totally confused and uprooted. He resembles a wandering Jew, homeless in his own apartment, religiously and culturally dislocated. The story leaves an open question—did the protagonist intend to express his reverence for his mother or just to clear his conscience and attenuate his guilt? Furman finds another dimension in the story, asserting that "[a] Jewish identity, Rosenbaum suggests, should not be rooted solely in one's remembrance of the European atrocity but in the rich legacy of Judaism that was almost completely snuffed out in the catastrophe" (2003: 1023). The ambiguity of the protagonist's relation to his religion and culture, manifested by his revolt against them and his attempt to restore traditional Jewish ritual, reveals the rupture of continuity caused by the Holocaust, and simultaneously reveals Adam's painful quest for identity.

The negative consequences of the second generation's ignorance of Jewish heritage and its indifference to the legacy of the Holocaust are explored in the title story "Elijah Visible." Hand in hand with the materialism promoted by the pursuit of the American Dream, this ignorance leads, in Rosenbaum's treatment of this topic, to the disintegration of the family and the general decline of old traditional values. All these negative features are exemplified by the post-Holocaust generation of the Posner family, which is "a far cry from the family's

origins in Poland" and which represents "a new generation of fragmented legacies, American torchbearers skilled in the art of cultural compromise" (Rosenbaum 1999: 89). The break-up of this family is recounted against the background of the celebration of Passover organized by Adam's cousins. Adam is disgusted by the formal, mechanical performance of the rituals of the Passover Seder and perceives them as a mockery of the feast. When Sylvia, one of his cousins, is reading (or, better to say, mumbling) Hebrew scripture phonetically, for the others this is "a seance of incomprehensible words, the mother tongue of orphans in the Diaspora, pig Latin for nonkosher Jews" (Rosenbaum 1999: 89). Instead of the traditional Hebrew song "Dayenu," his cousins are listening to music by Elvis Costello, performing the rituals to the rhythm of aerobics and davening to the beat of British punk. The table where an observant Jew would expect candles is covered with fashion magazines, while children, ignorant of the meaning of Passover, are chasing one another through the rooms. The frustrated Adam, to the others' astonishment, protests: "We've made the Seder meaningless. We're not really Jews. [...] We should all go back to Egypt and beg the Pharaoh's forgiveness. We should have never left in the first place if this is where we were headed. We were better off as slaves. It's time to repent our sins" (Rosenbaum 1999: 93). In his resentment he goes even farther, regarding the emptiness of the whole feast as a successful completion of the Nazis' goals. Rosenbaum attributes the reasons for the characters' complete alienation from Jewishness and their confusion over their identity to the silence of their parents' generation, now dead, who "concealed everything from [them]" (1999: 102). Through Adam he characterizes his generation as "witnesses to nothing but the silences, and the screams," facing up to "a flashing mirror of missing faces [...] a group photograph of a large family with ghosts standing in for those no longer of this world" (1999: 95).

In Derek Royal's interview with Rosenbaum, the author emphasized his need for rescue, redemption, reconciliation and generally for optimism (2007: 4). Although Elijah the Prophet, who is expected to return in difficult times to help Jews in their misery, does not appear (even though the participants of the Seder dinner, in the spirit of tradition, keep the door open and save a cup of wine at the table for this messianic harbinger of redemption), the story's ending offers a certain hope. The reader learns that the savior Elijah is on his way to America—

in the visible form of the Posners' Belgian distant cousin Artur, a survivor of the Holocaust, whose mission is to restore the family's continuity and the memory of those who have perished in the Nazi genocide.

On the one hand Rosenbaum is critical of the suppression of the memory of the Holocaust, causing the traumatic past to become erased; on the other hand he warns against another extreme—the appropriation of the Holocaust by the children of survivors as the result of their over-identification with the victims of the "Final Solution." Ruth Franklin speaks of "identity theft,"[10] and Rosenbaum too depicts an obsession with the Holocaust as unhealthy, having a harmful impact on his protagonist's life. Yet the author shows empathy with his protagonist, as he knows that the impossibility of directly experiencing his parents' trauma, so emblematic of postmemory, stirs Adam's imagination and causes his psychological immersion in the genocide. In Rosenbaum's stories, the parents' silence surrounding their personal history compels Adam to fill in the gaps in his knowledge of the parents' suffering; this need to fill the void, together with the transfer of trauma, are the real causes of his obsession with the Holocaust. In uncovering his parents' unknown past, the protagonist has to undergo a long, distressing journey of torment, since "Holocaust stories, generationally transferred, characteristically and inevitably are incased in silence, […] enacting the very absence they evoke" (Aarons 2016: xiii). "An imaginative investment and creation," to use Hirsch's terminology, substitutes for a lack of personal experience, and hence of memory (the survivors' offspring can remember only what they have been told or what they have read about the original trauma). As Melvin J. Bukiet, another distinguished writer of the second generation, has said: "For anyone who wasn't *there*, on either side of the barbed wire, Jew or German, thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of imagination. All we know is how little we know" (2002: 16).[11]

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[10] See the title of the chapter "Identity Theft: The Second Generation" in her monograph *A Thousand Darkness. Lies in Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (2011: 215-234).

[11] Ruth Franklin severely criticized Bukiet's anthology *Nothing Makes You Free* (2002), devoted to the writings of the descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors, for its appropriation of the Holocaust; in particular she attacked his introduction to this anthology, from which the quotation comes. Moreover, she

Since Adam's postmemory is unsatisfactory, in the story "An Act of Defiance," he compensates for the absence of the relevant information about the family's traumatic history by his extensive studying of the large body of scholarly books on the Holocaust which line his small New York apartment. He is a university teacher, frustrated by the blatant indifference of his apathetic students to his course "The Holocaust in the Modern World." From the very beginning, Rosenbaum presents Adam's obsession with the Holocaust as almost pathological and self-destructive. It plagues his personal life—the life of a despondent lonely bachelor who himself doubts the meaningfulness of his endeavor, despite his deep commitment to the subject of his studies. He is aware of the negative impact of his research on his psyche. His bleak vision of life is inevitably shaped by his depressed parents and their "[s]ilent suffering" (Rosenbaum 1999: 66). Notwithstanding the intergenerational transmission of trauma, his parents' repression of their memories means that his postmemory is primarily nourished by secondary sources (hence this transmission is more cultural in nature).

Rosenbaum questions Adam's unhealthy attachment to victimhood, his assumption of the role of the survivor, and—first and foremost—his distorted imagination that results from the impossibility of fully grasping the survivors' trauma. He reflects a kind of romanticizing of the Holocaust in his protagonist's mind. To point out the inaccuracy of Adam's Holocaust imagination, Rosenbaum has created an antagonist to his main character—an uncle named Haskell from Belgium, the last living Holocaust survivor in his family (Adam's parents are already dead). Before Haskell's visit to his nephew, Adam had created his own image of the Holocaust survivor. The narrator, now much more mature, admits the falseness of his glorified version of Holocaust victims, saying: "The Holocaust survivor as myth, as fairy tale, as bedtime story. I had created my own ghosts from memories that were not mine. I wasn't there, in Poland, among the true martyrs. Everything about my rage was borrowed. My imagination had done all the work—invented suffering, without the physical scars, the incontestable proof" (Rosenbaum 1999: 59).

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accused Bukiet and Rosenbaum of being "at the forefront of what is surely one of the most disturbing trends in contemporary Jewish literature" (2002: 216).

In reality, Haskell entirely subverts Adam's image of the survivor, an artificial construct, acquired from his readings and (in the past) enhanced by his parents. Instead of a gloomy man, "a walking ghost of horrors past" (Rosenbaum 1999: 58), uncle Haskell turns out to be a hedonistic man who enjoys life. He appears in stark contrast to the bleak, pessimistic vision of human nature embodied by Adam and his parents. As an embodiment of the celebration of life, Haskell goes against his nephew's stereotypes of the "lone survivor" and "the passer of the torch" (Rosenbaum 1999: 62). In Hezser's view, however, Rosenbaum "is not so much concerned with subverting the image of the survivor as a moral hero, but challenges the other common image of the survivor as a 'living corpse', devoid of any energy and will to live" (2002: 156). Since Haskell does not correspond with Adam's postmemory and his notion of the Holocaust survivor as a shadowy figure and an anguished victim, he feels betrayed and accuses his uncle of trying to forget the past. The uncle unambiguously rejects his nephew's interpretation of his devotion to life, regarding it as "an act of defiance" against resignation and death.[12] Thus he has never agreed with Adam's father's negativistic approach to life, imbued with silent suffering and mourning.

Uncle Haskell considers Adam's mourning and "silent suffering" utterly unjustified, and Adam himself is aware of the spuriousness of his sorrow, "the handicap of an unwanted inheritance" (Rosenbaum 1999: 63), knowing that the experience of American Jews is totally different, spared from institutional anti-Semitism, incomparable with the first-hand experience of survivors. Yet, in his dialogue with the uncle, he tries to defend his stance:

> "...You worry too much, Adam. Your father told me about you—too serious, brooding, not able to enjoy life."
> "My father said that? He should talk. Where do you think I learned it from?"
> "He was concerned about you. That's why I am here. Your father had an excuse for his suffering. What reason do you have to carry these sins around like bricks?"

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[12] In a way, the writings of the second and even the third generation itself may be perceived as an act of defiance. Victoria Aarons maintains that "[i]n writing in defiance of the atrocities of the past, contemporary literature opens up possibilities for hope—if not optimism, then faith in the making of alternate futures" (2016: 18). Despite his dark personal history, uncle Haskell is a man of hope, reconnecting his vision of the past with that of the future.

> "I have no choice," I said assuredly. "It's called legacy. The Holocaust survivor in
> me was passed on through the genes. Who knows how many generations it will take
> to cancel this virus from our blood?" (Rosenbaum 1999: 62)

Adam's defense suggests an inevitable acting out of his parents' trauma, contracted like a contagious disease, much to the displeasure of Haskell, whose aim is to heal his nephew, to make him reach the stage of working through. Interestingly enough, in Adam's defensive dialogue, Rosenbaum uses almost the same diction as Bukiet in the "Introduction" to the anthology *Nothing Makes You Free* when he notes: "Whatever wisdom others bring to it comes from the heart and head, but for us it's [the Holocaust and its legacy] *genetic*" (Bukiet 2002: 16, emphasis mine). Through the uncle's arguments Rosenbaum points to the inauthenticity of the second generation's obsession with the Holocaust. Similarly to the stories concerned with the inauthenticity of religious faith, Rosenbaum's criticism of the appropriation of the wartime trauma by the second generation is conveyed through a satirical tone. His stories contain many comic elements, and "An Act of Defiance" is no exception.

The uncle's mission to cure Adam of his sadness and melancholy is eventually successful. His affirmative approach to life is "infectious," and as a result of this view, at the end of the story, Adam embraces a new vision of life. The uncle's name "Haskell" may create associations with the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, which lasted from the late eighteenth century to the 1880s. Indeed, Haskell's mission enlightens Adam Posner and gives him new strength as well as self-confidence.

The most intense (over)identification with the survivors' trauma may be observed in the introductory story of the cycle, "Cattle Car Complex." Here Adam's transposition of the Holocaust to his own experience results in an enactment of his parents' trauma which he could not have gone through. Adam, now in the role of a lawyer, gets stuck in a broken elevator in a Manhattan high rise building. This banal accident triggers the protagonist's transformation from a child of Holocaust survivors into a prisoner of war. In the claustrophobic space of the elevator, he acts out the transport of Jewish prisoners to concentration camps. His Kafkaesque metamorphosis into a prisoner in a cattle car bound for Auschwitz bespeaks his temporal and spatial dislocation and mental derangement: "What had once been a reliable sharp and precise lawyer's mind rapidly became undone, replaced by something from another world, from another time, the imprinting of his legacy" (Rosenbaum 1999: 6). This

"legacy," or postmemory, brings about a surreal distortion of reality in Adam's mind; thus, to his horror, the elevator starts shrinking, which only accelerates his transfiguration. His hysteria reflects the relationship of the children of survivors to the traumatic events preceding their birth. The fact that postmemory is in essence formed by the "inheritance" of their parents' experiences explains why Adam totally identifies with the suffering of the victims of World War II:

> The legacy that flowed through his veins. Parental reminiscences had become the genetic material that was to be passed on by survivors to their children. Some family histories are forever silent, transmitting no echoes of discord into the future. Others are like seashells, those curved volutes of the mind–the steady drone of memory always present [...] Their [parents'] own terrible visions from a haunted past became his. He had inherited their perception of space, and the knowledge of how much one needs to live, to hide, how to breathe where there is no air. (Rosenbaum 1999: 5)

Adam's acting out of the survivors' transport in cattle cars testifies to his failure to distinguish between what is real and what is mere hallucinatory vision. American reality turns into a European territory of terror where the only goal is to survive. Therefore, in Adam's entrapment, the malfunctioning elevator becomes a site of calamity, a scene of the Holocaust in which the main character appears as a displaced person, lost in a world full of dangers. His traumatic dislocation is mirrored in his spasmodic cries in the elevator, reminiscent of the screams he heard from his parents at night:

> "Why should we be forced to resettle? This is our home [...] We are not animals! We are not cattle! There are no windows in here, and the air is too thin for all of us to share. You have already taken our homes. What more do you want? Please, give us some air to breathe." (Rosenbaum 1999: 8)
> "Liberate us! We are starving! We are skeletons, walking bones, ghosts! Get us out of this hell!" (1999: 10)

Adam's full possession by traumatic postmemory culminates at the end of the story, when the released "prisoner" is leaving the elevator, awaiting the fatal pronouncement "right" or "left," the words sealing the fate of real prisoners in camps during the selection upon arrival. This scene, in which he is unsure whether he is facing his liberators or tormentors, testifies to the total intrusion of Holocaust imagery into his mind and his failure to differentiate between memory and postmemory. His performative acting out of his parents' trauma suggests that the stage

of working through is still closed to him. The metamorphosis of an elevator into a cattle car returns us again to Helen Epstein, depicting an analogical experience of a child of survivors, confined in the claustrophobic space of a subway car:

> During the day, in the New York streets, it was hard to imagine where these thousands of people would go. It was in the subways at rush hours that I saw them again. I stood, my face pressed to the glass in the first car beside the engineer's booth, watching the signals in the tunnel. The Seventh Avenue local became a train of cattle cars on its way to Poland. I closed my eyes as the train rumbled from station to station, willing the conductor to disregard the red signals, to rush ahead at full speed and crash the passengers to their deaths before they reached their destination. There would be no burial. The passengers would vanish.
>
> (Epstein 1988: 19)

Janet H. Burstein claims that "[t]here is no narrative distance here to clarify the difference between second-generation postmemory and survivor experience, between Adam's hallucinatory experience of a past he never lived and the actual experience he is living in the present, between stalled elevator and cattle car" (2006: 66). This appropriation of the survivor's identity is exactly what disturbs Franklin, who reads this story as "the sort of second-generation wish-fulfillment drama [...] —the desire 'to witness the Holocaust as if one were there'" (2011: 228). Gary Weissman likewise takes a very cautious stance towards the efforts of the children of survivors to reconstruct the horrors experienced by their parents, and interprets Rosenbaum's story "Cattle Car Complex" as "a romantic fantasy staging the second-generation American Jew's transformation into full-fledged Holocaust victim" (2004: 15).[13] However, I would argue that we should not miss the overall tone of the story, which indicates that there is an *authorial* distance from what is happening to the main character. Adam Posner is rendered as a tragicomic figure, and the grotesque situation in which he finds himself reflects Rosenbaum's detachment from his character. Moreover, through the minor character of a Russian immigrant taxi driver, who is also a Jew,

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[13] In his book *Fantasies of Witnessing* (2004), Weissman does not conceal his reservations toward some terms that are widely embraced by Holocaust scholars, such as "second generation," "postmemory," "secondary witnesses," "vicarious witnesses," "witnesses through the imagination" etc. The reason for his resistance to these expressions is his endeavor to clearly distinguish between the categories of witnesses and nonwitnesses, survivors and nonsurvivors.

Adam is seen as a *victim* of this crazy world—as shown in the driver's dialogue with an Irish night security guard who assumes Adam to be mad. This manifests the author's sympathy with his protagonist but not his assent to the appropriation of the Holocaust. As Marita Grimwood rightly observes, the writers of the second generation "respond to [the Holocaust's] ongoing effects in the present," making "no claim to firsthand experience of that period. Instead, it is the very absence of this experience that is often an uncanny presence in their writing" (2007: 3).

Figure 1: A cattle car in Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem © Stanislav Kolář

The fragmented character of Adam Posner and his postmemory also shapes the structure of Rosenbaum's book. The author's choice of the short-story cycle as a genre appears to be very appropriate, as it accords with the protagonist's incomplete postmemory experience and the nature of his trauma, inherited from his traumatized parents. Although each story has a different plot, the recurring character of the child of Holocaust survivors, the parents' repressed memory of atrocities during

the so-called "Final Solution" and the other motifs that form the key unifying elements of Rosenbaum's cycle underline one of the central features of trauma—repetition compulsion. Not only is this repetition expressed thematically by Adam's fascination with the Holocaust, leading to obsessive repetition, and by his reenactment of the trauma of his parents, but it is also manifested in the narrative techniques and even in the diction of the text. As I have already mentioned, each story and each Adam are variations on the same theme, which cannot be fully completed due to the inaccessibility of trauma, impeding its comprehension. These features determine the fragmentary nature of the cycle. As McGlothlin points out, "[t]he reading of each new story emerges as a kind of rereading of the previous one, and thus each story in *Elijah Visible* functions as a revision of the prior stories, but, importantly *not* their continuation. […] The narrative thus repeats itself–continually and compulsively, by beginning over again and again" (2006: 63). It is, however, important to note that at the same time, each of the stories— despite their common denominators—is unique, voicing a particular experience of what it means to be a child of survivors in different stages of life. Thus, the individual stories can be read as pieces independent of each other; only their intertextuality establishes the complexity of the second-generation postmemory in its diversity. The composition of the entire short-story cycle may invoke not only a return to the horrifying past of the survivors, but also to Adam's traumatic childhood; the stories, as has already been noted, are arranged in a reversed temporal progression, albeit not rigidly. Rosenbaum's effort to retell the story of the child of Holocaust survivors again and again, its repetitive nature, stems from the sense of incompleteness, connected with his inability to grasp his and his parents' trauma fully. Another feature of trauma, closely tied up with the repetition, is dissociation. In the stories, this feature is manifested in Adam's varying identity, his multiple personalities and the instability of the narrative voice, which shifts from the first person to a limited omniscient point of view (the latter prevails). Thematically it is expressed in the protagonist's detachment from his personality, most strikingly manifested in the initial story "Cattle Car Complex."[14] After all, this detachment, so characteristic of the writings

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[14] This aspect of Rosenbaum's book is elaborated in McGlothlin's monograph *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature* (2006: 57-61).

of the second generation, also characterizes the works of the subsequent third generation, becoming "a recurring pattern of identity formation, of affectively imagining oneself in others, others in oneself" (Aarons and Berger 2017: 25). In general terms, Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible* appears to be informed by theoretical concepts of trauma and its transmission, though they are by no means mere fictionalized theories. As a matter of fact, all the stories offer a true-to-life depiction of different variants of a single character and his postmemory, affected by his parents' experience of past horrors.

To sum up, in Rosenbaum's stories, imagination profoundly shapes the second generation's postmemory. The author presents a lack of knowledge of the dark family past, caused by the parents' silence about their experiences, as non-constructive because it leads his protagonist to an unhealthy obsession with the Holocaust. Rosenbaum's Adam Posner represents those people whose psyche has been polluted by the "second hand smoke"[15] of the death camp crematoria—to allude to the author's second book, which also relates to the Holocaust. In other words, his characters are scarred by the intergenerational transfer of trauma. The Holocaust itself is not at the center of Rosenbaum's work; he addresses the consequences of Holocaust trauma for the inner life of the survivors' children, trying to come to terms with the legacy of the horrors their parents experienced during World War II. At the same time, he recounts the rupture of continuity, caused by the Holocaust, manifested in disrupted family relations and the identity crisis that is accompanied by a sense of inauthenticity, especially in the approach to the Jewish religion. His work provides new ways and possibilities for imagining the unimaginable and for recovering and responding to the unexperienced trauma of the Holocaust, from the vantage point of the generation of postmemory.

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[15] Rosenbaum's second book *Second Hand Smoke: A Novel* was published in 1999. Also his third book *The Golems of Gotham: A Novel* (2002) addresses the Holocaust and its effect on the second generation, hence completing his triptych which explores the post-Holocaust world.

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