

Articles

Limitations as Possibilities: Uri Orlev's Holocaust Narratives for Children and Young Adults

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Relating to his experience as a survivor writing about the Holocaust, Uri Orlev—the most esteemed Israeli author of Holocaust literature for young readers—observes,

I don't know if writing about the past helps me to get over it. What I do know is that there is no grown-up way to talk, tell, or think about the things that happened to me. I have to remember them as if I were still a boy, with all the strange details—some funny, some moving—that childhood memories have and that children have no problem with. As a grown-up, I can't imagine my own children living through what I did. I can't even begin to think about it without cutting off the thought. It's like walking very carefully on a frozen lake. If I were to take a sudden step—I mean, if I were to think of what happened then as the 65-year-old man I am today—the ice would break and I would tumble through it without being able to climb back. (*The Sandgame* 55–56)

This quote from Orlev's autobiographical children's book *The Sandgame* indicates a self-aware insight crucial to our understanding of his narratives. In it, the author reveals himself as a self-conscious grownup whose depths are bared precisely in the recognition of his limited ability to remember and recount as an adult. The depiction of the delicate oscillation between childhood/adulthood and awareness/nonawareness in Orlev's narratives, and the means by which it enables personal and ideological coping with the traumatic past, lie at the heart of this essay.

Born Jerzy Henryk Orłowski in Warsaw in 1931, Uri Orlev survived the Holocaust with his younger brother—first in the Warsaw Ghetto, then in hiding, and finally in Bergen-Belsen. When the war ended, the two youngsters made their way to British Palestine, settling on Kibbutz

Ginegar.¹ Orlev's first publication was a lyrical autobiography for adults, *The Lead Soldiers* (1956); two other adult books—*Until Tomorrow* (1958) and *The Last Summer Vacation: Stories* (1968)—followed in its wake. After these early works, Orlev dedicated himself to children's literature, the first of his children's books appearing in the mid-1970s. He only began writing about the Holocaust for a young audience in the early 1980s, after he had established a reputation as a children's author, with nine published books and many Israeli prizes to his name. Today, he is one of Israel's most esteemed children's writers and the most prominent author of Holocaust literature for young readers. His children's books have also received critical acclaim worldwide, as indicated by the numerous awards and prizes they have won. He is also the first—and thus far, the only—Israeli children's writer to have received a Hans Christian Andersen Gold Medal, awarded by the International Board on Books for Young People in 1996.

In recent years, the discourse regarding the literary representation of the Holocaust has largely revolved around issues relating to trauma and atrocity: how can the unspeakable—which by definition defies construction as a “closed,” causal narrative and precludes the drawing of any meaning from events—be written about?² Children's literature seems to lie beyond the bounds of this discourse, as the cognitive and emotional limitations of its audience demand that the stories they read are structured, coherent, carry a clear plot, are optimistic, have a good ending, and convey a lesson—or at least a “making of sense.”

As Hamida Bosmajian and Adrienne Kertzer both argue in their discussions of children's Holocaust literature, writing for children necessarily restricts or restrains representation of the atrocity, since the educational requirements imposed on children's literature and the need to protect the child lead many to assert that children must be spared from exposure to its horrors. Children's Holocaust literature is thus generally distinguished from that meant for adults by the fact that “what is distressing is softened and what is traumatic is made coherent . . . what is often regarded as unrepresentable becomes factual” (Kertzer, “Problem” 254).

Both scholars nonetheless acknowledge that children's literature can indeed address the Holocaust; the very restrictions the subject imposes paradoxically make it possible for the author to deal with the material: “The very limitation of the reader enables the narrator to shape experience into a story that the narrator can bear to tell” (Kertzer, *My Mother's Voice* 136–37). Children's Holocaust literature thus is not only

governed by the age of its reading audience, but also forms a medium through which its writers can deal with their own traumatic memories: "In choosing to write for young readers about the Holocaust, the author, as a narrator and as a person struggling with traumatic memories, may conceal or limit the site of atrocious history with reader-protective strategies that intend to spare the child but also enable the author to censor, sublimate, deny, or release personally experienced traumatic events" (Bosmajian xv).

I would like develop this argument by suggesting that children's Holocaust literature also serves as a cultural expanse within which both writers and readers can process its trauma, meeting the cultural need to understand the event called the "Holocaust" by framing it within an organized pattern, giving it meaning and providing educational lessons. The cultural role expresses itself also in the critical and active response to present ideological conditions, children's literature serving as a channel for such a response. Children's Holocaust literature thus provides possibilities of representation that serve the needs of both children and adults.

I shall thus discuss how children's literature serves as an appropriate form of expression for representing the Holocaust, by forming an arena within which readers and writers alike can actively and constructively come in terms with the Holocaust events. In this regard, Dominick LaCapra's distinction—borrowed from Freud's psychoanalytic insights into trauma and applied to historical research—between "acting out" and "working through" trauma is helpful. "Acting out" refers to a state of being in which an individual is "haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (21). "Working through," on the other hand, is "a process in which the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present and future" (143), and thus allows him/her to become "an ethical and political agent" in the present (144). Because the two forms of memory are not clearly distinguished from one another, they "may always mark or be implicated in each other" (150).

This distinction helps me to illustrate how Orlev's decision to write children's literature allows him to both act out and work through his experiences and survival. First, I will describe the liminal aware/unaware state of his protagonists, which serves as a transitional space that allows him simultaneously to be "possessed by the past" and to write children's literature. I will then examine the various genres of

children's literature Orlev employs in order to demonstrate the ways in which children's literature helps him understand, process, and eventually work through his own survival experience. Finally, I will discuss his attempt to work through the Holocaust experience by critically responding to contemporary ideological-political issues regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

My discussion will focus on three of Orlev's books for young readers (eight- to twelve-year-olds): *The Island on Bird Street*, *Run, Boy, Run*, and *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun*.³ The protagonist in each of these books is a Jewish child faced with the task of surviving—either with his family or completely on his own—in a hostile physical and/or human environment. *The Island on Bird Street* (1981) is the story of Alex, an eleven-year-old Jewish boy who remains alone in the ghetto after all the Jews have been taken away by the Nazis in *aktions*, because his father has promised that he will return. While waiting for him to come back, Alex finds a place to live in a half-destroyed apartment block. Various adventures meet him along the way: he saves Jewish partisans from a German soldier; makes contact with members of the Polish communist underground who help Jews; and even makes friends with a girl from the Aryan side of the city. The book ends with his father's return to the ghetto, and the two then joining the partisans.

Unlike the fictional *The Island on Bird Street*, *Run, Boy, Run* (2001) is a biography based on the childhood story of Yoram Friedman; it tells the story of Srulik-Jurek, who loses his mother in the ghetto and finds his way to the Polish countryside, where he tries to survive on his own. The book follows Srulik-Jurek as he constantly tries to evade the Nazis, wandering from village to village and working for Polish farmers or foraging alone in the forest. When he injures his hand, the Polish doctor refuses to treat him and he thus loses it. Although he denies his Jewish identity when the war eventually ends, he finally makes his way back to the town where he was born and enters a Jewish orphanage.

Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun (2010)—the biography of Eli Zeniak—is set in Kazakhstan rather than Poland, the protagonist and his family fleeing eastward after the German invasion of Ukraine. After the war, they return to Europe, and finally immigrate to Palestine. Regarding these three volumes as stylistically and thematically homogenous, I will examine them as a single unit.

The Protagonist's Liminal State

The novels discussed here share an oscillation between concealment and exposure—an understanding of reality and a stubborn resistance against acknowledging it. This feature is embodied in Orlev's choice of the child as protagonist. In *The Island on Bird Street* and *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun*, the young boy is also the narrator, while in *Run, Boy, Run* the narrator represents the boy-protagonist's perspective.

Despite Orlev's assertion that the only way he can deal with the events of the past is to "remember them as if I were still a boy," as a grownup he has no "authentic" access to his child-self's inner consciousness. As Naomi Sokoloff notes, "No grown writer can speak authentically in the name of childhood or in the voice of a child, for inevitably there exist disparities between grown-up narration and the experience of youthful characters. The sensations and perception of childhood are to some extent always irretrievable to memory and articulation" (*Imagining* 3).

Orlev's protagonists' internal world must thus of necessity consist of an imagined landscape: a fictional entity deriving from memories on the one hand, and on the other the cultural conventions that determine what a child is, how s/he views the world, what s/he is able to absorb, and his/her cognitive and emotional limitations. Both of these aspects are also bound by the constraints imposed by the available literary models (Sokoloff, *Imagining* 3–21).

Orlev's decision to make his protagonists children appears to derive from his authorial desire not to deviate from the fixed split-consciousness topos. Children's literature serves as a particularly appropriate forum for expressing the transitional space/state, not only because the child-narrator has a very limited understanding of the world, but also because the writer is free to allow him this ignorance. As part of children's literature, Orlev's characters can dwell in the liminal state between child and adult—the space between comprehension and incomprehension.

One of the most significant elements that Orlev employs in this regard is the age he attributes to his protagonists, most of whom are in the prime of their childhood. Alex in *The Island on Bird Street* is eleven/twelve. Eight when *Run, Boy, Run* begins, Srulik-Jurek is eleven when it ends; Eliyosha is five when *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun* opens and eleven when it concludes. These ages not only partially match Orlev's personal biographical details, but also correspond to the developmental period in which, although capable of thinking logically and forming

concepts, children still lack abstract-perception skills. Orlev's characters are thus children who, although linguistically able to articulate their experiences, do not truly understand them. Paradoxically, however, they have words to describe what they do not properly grasp.

While *The Island on Bird Street* ends on an almost natural developmental note, with Alex's father finally arriving and ending his son's long wait hiding in the ghetto, neither of the other two works ends with the termination of the war or corresponds to a major turning point in the protagonist's life. Although Srujik-Jurek in *Run, Boy, Run* ultimately rediscovers his lost Jewish identity, the book does not fulfill the reader's hope for a good ending; the fact that he meets his sister is only mentioned as an aside in the postscript. The conclusion thus appears random—perhaps even hasty. *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun* ends at an even more arbitrary juncture; having found his way back from Kazakhstan to Europe and thence to Palestine, Eliyosha leaves the kibbutz and moves in with his mother in Tel Aviv. This novel thus closes neither with the end of the war nor with Eliyosha's integration into his new society and culture.

The most crucial factor determining each book's termination point thus appears to be the end of the protagonist's childhood; none of them reaches puberty. This element is most prominent in the closing scene of *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun*, wherein, in a manly gesture, Eliyosha relieves his mother of the satchel she is carrying and shakes the hand of the kibbutz member who parts from him "like men do" (241).

The protagonists' childlike half-aware/half-comprehending state allows and enables Orlev to present a childlike interpretation of reality. An excellent example of this device occurs in *The Island on Bird Street*, in which Alex seeks to give childlike explanations of potentially violent events. Thus when he hears the Germans discover the bunker in which a group of Jews are hiding, he tells the reader:

There was a sharp explosion. Plaster fell on me from above. For a panicky moment I thought the whole top floor would collapse on me. Then there was silence. And then a sound of screaming and wailing that seemed to come from deep in the earth. Followed by shots, which sounded near. *I prayed that they were just warning shots fired outside the bunker.* (81; italics added)

Alex suggests to the reader—and to himself—a comforting interpretation of the event: perhaps no violence had taken place in the bunker; maybe the Nazis had only fired warning shots. In this way, Orlev ex-

ploits his protagonist's status as a child, along with that of his readers, in order to avoid having to deal as an artist with a very brutal reality.

Orlev's protagonists also refuse to face reality with respect to personal traumatic events. In telling us how his mother disappeared, for example, Alex says: "Mother still hadn't come back. She had gone to visit some friends in Ghetto A and never returned. That was a week ago, or maybe a week and a half. I didn't count the days, because it would have made me too sad" (1). This direct and candid admission of inability or unwillingness to discuss his mother's absence and quick shift to another subject are made possible precisely because the narrator is a child.

The characters' feelings about the disappearance or death of their parents are similarly muted in the other two novels, being described very concisely, briefly, and/or indirectly. Srulik-Jurek's response to the fact that his mother vanishes during a food-search expedition is particularly significant in this regard:

Srulik stood wringing his fingers, just like his mother did when she was worried or desperate. He didn't know the way home. He looked around as though in a fog. Everything was still the same. The houses and windows on both sides of the street hadn't changed. People continued to walk busily on the sidewalks. The soccer game in the empty lot was still going on. Even he, Srulik, would have looked to someone else like the same boy. Yet inside he felt as though the bottom had dropped out of himself. He pulled himself together and ran to join the boys playing by the wall. (*Run* 6)

Srulik's feelings are intimated only via his bodily gestures and the voice of the external narrator. He himself is unaware of his transformation, incapable of dealing with the event on an emotional level. In order to avoid becoming aware of what is happening, he flees to the refuge of the boys' game. Srulik's description not only exemplifies the way in which Orlev chooses to depict his protagonists as unaware of and/or unwilling to face reality, but also the fact that he perceives this child-like incomprehension as the only way to cope with such experiences.

These scenes of "framed silence," in Lydia Kokkola's phrase, "draw [the] readers' attention to the abyss of silence where the text places the Holocaust" (26), relieving the reader of the burden of exposure to facts too terrible to bear on the one hand, and signifying the presence of omissions on the other. Instead, each reader is being invited to fill in the gaps according to his or her age and/or capacity.

These examples demonstrate the split consciousness Orlev's characters exhibit. While knowledge of the dangerous world in which they live is necessary in order to survive, this very knowledge threatens to overwhelm them. His protagonists remain in a state of partial, almost preconscious, awareness—the only way that can they gain a sense of normality, despite its unreality.

Orlev's narratives are also characterized by the fact that they are virtually bereft of any adult perspective. They contain no summarizing or interpretive narrator, no dominant adult voice overshadows that of the child, and only rarely do they offer a retrospective viewpoint. The child's outlook is neither validated nor corrected by a grownup, nor does Orlev address the adult reader behind the child's back, seldom adducing his child-characters' limited consciousness in order to defamiliarize reality or reveal its horror or absurdity.⁴ Unlike adult literature, which uses child characters in order to "stress the incomprehensibility of the events" (Sokoloff, "Childhood" 265), Orlev's protagonists are dedicated to allowing both reader and writer to keep the events at arm's length—both physically and emotionally. Similarly, he refuses to imbue his texts with two separate meanings, one for the child, another for the adult. Children's literature legitimizes this move because it does not demand (although neither does it preclude) a level of comprehension beyond that of the child.

Understanding Survival

Children's literature also allows Orlev to make use of the adventure novel—a genre particularly suited to the theme of survival—as a tool for understanding diverse aspects of his Holocaust experience. He thus opens his autobiography for children, *The Sandgame*, with the question he is asked by his son, "Daddy, how did you get away from the Germans?" (3)—a query he can only answer by employing a metaphor. In Poland, he tells his son, they used to play a game in which they would toss a handful of sand into the air and try to catch the grains on the back of their hand, announcing, "So many children will you have!" On the next throw, they turned their hands palm up, this time calling out, "This many will die in the forest . . . be run over . . . die of the plague . . . be poisoned." Likening himself and his brother to the grains of sand, he takes his son to the sandbox on the playground and teaches him the game. "And then I explained that it was like that with the Germans. They kept throwing us into the air and a great number of us died, but

my brother and I landed safely each time. And each time it was a different story, and a different adventure" (4).

Orlev deals with the theme of survival in *The Lead Soldiers*, his autobiography for adults, as well as in other books that are ostensibly not autobiographical. While this recurrence appears to represent the compulsive repetitive "acting out" of traumatic scenes (LaCapra 21), it may also be understood in terms of Orlev's need to understand/explain his own survival, whether through his personal story or those of others. At the same time, it exceeds the personal dimension by helping the reader to understand the very possibility of survival.

Orlev also makes use of the robinsonade, the literary genre named for Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) that focuses on protagonists' efforts to cope with and survive severe physical or human challenges. All three novels discussed here fall into this genre, with *The Island on Bird Street* alluding to it explicitly in its title.⁵ In line with the characteristics of the genre, which places an emphasis on the physical-practical aspect of survival, Orlev separates his protagonists' survival experiences into a multitude of small, primarily physical, actions depicted in graphic and technical terms. He frequently includes a description of the construction or assembly of the devices used by the protagonists, such as the makeshift bird trap in *Run, Boy, Run*:

Marisza undid her braids and plucked two long hairs from them. Laying them on the ground, she tied a small loop at the end of them. Then she made a slipknot by passing them through the loop. "See? You put a hair in the grass and tie the other end to a stem. Then you scatter crumbs. The birds are so dumb that they step into the loop. It tightens when they try to get away." (55)

Like the accounts of the preparation of the hideout in *The Island on Bird Street* and the hunting and food-gathering methods in *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun*, this detailed description resembles the precise instructions of a do-it-yourself manual. These detailed narratives appear to compensate for the virtually total absence of emotional descriptions, and perhaps may even be intended to obscure the latter, by embodying a logical—almost technical—attempt to explain how survival was possible. Within this framework, Orlev portrays the most fundamental, even trivial, physical activities required for human survival. These are precisely the means that do ensure survival, however, as Orlev indicates by his attention to specifics: how Alex arranged his hideout, obtained food and drink, kept warm during the cold Polish winter, occupied

himself during the long hours of hiding, kept himself clean, and, of course, took care of his most fundamental of bodily functions:

Once a day, in the morning or evening, I'd slip into a building next door, but since I didn't dare make noise by flushing the toilet so near my hideout, I simply went to the bathroom in the general mess and hid there to keep looters and informers from guessing that someone lived nearby. That was my daily adventure. There was no choice. (*Island* 87)

The elaborate and minute details of human existence in this and other descriptions in Orlev's works not only help the reader understand the survival experience, but also "desacralize" it, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out in their discussion of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. By challenging "at once the sacredness (the unspeakability) of death and the sacredness of the deadness (of the silence) of the witness . . . the pointed and specific questioning [the film makes] resists, above all, any possible canonization of the experience of the Holocaust" (219). In this sense, Orlev's narratives employ precise, minute details of what under other circumstances would have been regarded as trivial, trifling, trite items, in order to transform the memory of the way in which he survived into something "speakable" and—in a certain sense—comprehensible and fathomable.

Run, Boy, Run presents survival as an acquired skill that demands the ability to learn and adapt. When it begins, Sruлик-Jurek lacks all the knowledge necessary to stay alive: he does not know not to take his pants off in front of Poles (they would see he is circumcised and therefore Jewish); he cannot find his way around in the woods; he is unfamiliar with Polish customs; and he has no clue about farming. From the outset, not knowing his own address, he cannot return home to his mother. Orlev details the way in which Sruлик overcomes these obstacles so that he can survive: finding his way around the forest using moss; crossing himself like a good Catholic Polish boy; not removing his clothes in front of others; hunting small birds and slinging stones at partridges; learning how to light a fire with the help of a magnifying glass; not acting spoiled but eating whatever is available, and taking any kind of job that comes his way.

Several characters serve as his instructors. Little Yossele teaches him the usefulness of a shard of broken glass and advises him not to bathe with Poles; a Polish farm woman shows him how to feed the farm animals and draw water from the well; another woman catechizes him to

help him become a devout Catholic Polish boy; the girl with whom he herds cattle shows him how to hunt small birds (and explains about “the birds and the bees”); and the nursing sister at the hospital demonstrates how he can wash himself with only one hand. Srulik’s father gives him a Polish name and instructs him to ask poor people for help and run to the water when dogs chase him—advice that he heeds on several occasions.

While Srulik-Jurek does not always successfully implement what he has learned, his persistence, his willpower, and a long, patient training period eventually come to his aid. As part of his survival techniques, he practices hunting partridges and memorizing his invented identity. The determination to learn becomes even more important when he loses his hand and must learn how to do everything all over again from scratch: to run while keeping his balance, shower, eat, and work. His willingness to learn and improve and his perseverance and determination are exemplified in everything he does. Thus, for example, he learns how to tie a rope one-handed:

His favorite occupation was playing with the rope. Using his mouth and feet, he taught himself to tie and untie knots. One day he decided to climb a tree. He heaved one end of the rope over a branch, knotted the two ends, and pulled himself upward. On his first try he slipped and almost fell, grabbing onto a branch at the last second. But after a day of experimenting, he found a system that worked. If he ever had to return to the forest, he would be able to sleep in the trees again. (*Run* 116–17)

Srulik’s compulsive repetition of every action—such as the tying and untying of the rope here—is made possible largely due to the fact that he relates to the experience as a game. In other words, Orlev’s books represent survival as a type of game—and games as a form of survival. In this way, the distinction between life and play becomes blurred. This theme is repeated in each of the three books and represents a distinctly autobiographical element: Orlev and his younger brother played with lead toy soldiers throughout the war, giving rise to the title of *The Lead Soldiers*. His characters’ habit of regarding survival as a game derives directly from the fact that they are children, who are prone to viewing life—even the war—as an adventure. As Orlev notes in *The Sandgame*:

I liked to read about heroic grown-ups or children who went through all kinds of ordeals until everything turned out all right.

. . . The more I read, the more I envied the heroes I read about. Why didn't anything ever happen to me? And then the war broke out, although even then it took me a while to realize that it was happening to me. (19)

Orlev's perception of survival as a "game" and of war as an "adventure" also serves him as a means to work through his experiences. According to Winnicott, play creates a "resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" (3). In our literary context, play not only enables Orlev's protagonists to detach themselves from reality, but also allows the writer to dissociate through his writing.

Orlev thus answers the questions of what survival is, and how it can be understood, by stressing both physical and emotional aspects. In practical terms, survival consists of everyday activities that require wisdom, technical skills, and an ability to learn, adjust, and adapt to new situations. Emotionally, it demands optimism, a lack of awareness, and the ability to experience reality as a game or adventure.

Imparting a Message

The attempt to work through the Holocaust constructively manifests itself in the educational intent of Orlev's work, which, although not explicitly expressed, is strongly implied. This facet is largely responsible for establishing his books as "children's literature," the use of didactic framing possibly being the strongest demand made of children's Holocaust literature and that which most clearly and sharply distinguishes it from literature intended for adults.

In an interview following the publication of *Run, Boy, Run*, Orlev stated: "I believe that there are always good people and bad people, in all nations and in all circumstances. And there are also bad people with a little bit of good in them" (Zonder; my translation). His description of human nature changes from book to book, the variations reflecting his development as a writer. *The Island on Bird Street* is the simplest and most organized of the three books in this regard. At the beginning of the story, Alex explains that his uncertainty about the way he should treat people is due to the contradictory messages he received from his parents as a young boy. While his father upheld the principle of "respect him, suspect him," his mother told him that "If you treat people with an open heart and a trustful manner, they will help you"; he concludes that

It depends on the situation. An intelligent person knows when to follow one rule and when to follow the other. But I wasn't thinking so much of the specific way one should behave. I was thinking of the feelings that one should have in one's heart. And the heart should have kindness and love in it. That doesn't mean you always have to act on them. Certainly not when you're facing a murderer with a skull on his uniform. (31)

Despite his confusion, Alex manages to convey to the reader that both of his parents were right. As he struggles to survive, he interacts with various types of people, some devious, some trustworthy. The good are not necessarily Jewish: some Poles are willing, at great personal risk, to help Jews; while some Jews, such as the Greens, steal food from children. The child-reader is thus given to understand that people cannot be classified by race or origin but must be judged by their actions and attitudes toward others. This conclusion is not explicitly spelled out in the book, however, and it remains unclear whether Alex, as a child himself, fully understands it.

Things are far less clear and the world much more chaotic in *Run, Boy, Run*, in which one of the central themes is Srulik-Jurek's search for outward clues to help him identify a person's character—a skill essential for survival. Although he keeps looking, human reality is far too complicated for him to succeed. He meets good and bad Jewish children, good Polish farmers and cruel ones, a doctor who refuses to treat his hand and one who helps him escape from the hospital, kind Polish children as well as those who want to turn him in. Even families have both good and bad members. While a Polish farmer wants to turn Srulik-Jurek in to the Gestapo, his wife lets the boy escape. Even Nazi soldiers are not necessarily "bad"; similarly, the Jews who find Srulik-Jurek after the war are not axiomatically "good."

More than once, Srulik-Jurek wonders how it is possible to tell bad people from good ones on the basis of their outward appearance. Although his father's last words to him were "Always go to the poor. They're more willing to help" (64), Srulik-Jurek discovers that wealthy people can be just as kind and that it is sometimes better to approach them: "He looked at the pretty woman. She didn't look so poor to him. She just looked very sad and lonely. Maybe, he thought, sad, lonely people could be trusted just like poor ones" (74). The reading of people's hearts, he discovers, is a daunting task, very few trustworthy indicators being available. Kindness and malevolence not having any

external signs, they cannot be predicted in advance. More importantly, human beings are not simply one or the other. One of the farmers who adopts Srulik-Jurek beats him when drunk; another lets the boy sleep on a sheepskin rug, but slaps him for infesting it with lice and orders him to pick them out. And rather than killing Srulik, the Nazi officer takes pity on him and allows him to work for his acquaintance-mistress as a servant.

Both moral and immoral conduct derives from various sources. Some of the people Srulik-Jurek meets are consciously motivated by ideological considerations; for example, the “pretty woman” whose family is killed by the Nazis feels it her moral duty to take care of him. Some people show mercy and are willing to help out of sheer humanity or religious commitment; others are prepared to take risks only as long as they themselves are not endangered or stand to gain something. The book thus blurs the distinction between good and bad, presenting a complex picture of human nature.

Ultimately, *Run, Boy, Run* conveys a series of positive didactic lessons, clearly promoting human equality despite the differences between people. When Srulik-Jurek first meets Werner, the German soldier, and tells him how his family has been murdered, Werner says:

“It’s just my luck to have caught a blond, one-armed Jewish boy. What is a blond, one-armed Jewish boy? He’s only a boy. And what am I? I’m only a soldier” . . . Werner went on talking. Jurek didn’t understand very much. Here and there he made out a word. God. People. What will be the end? (119)

Significantly, Orlev places the book’s central lesson in the mouth of a German soldier. Such a representation is very rare in Israeli children’s literature, which prefers to preserve a sharp ethical distinction between (good) Jews and (bad) Germans. Werner’s statement, which points to the fact that people should be judged as human beings rather than on the basis of their ethnic origin, echoes throughout the whole book. And while Srulik-Jurek fails to understand Werner’s words, their meaning is repeated on several further occasions, most notably on the final page of the book. When he leaves the Polish Christian Kowalskys, who had cared for him during the last part of the war, to regain his identity in a Jewish orphanage, Pan Kowalsky reminds him that the Jews’ God is “the same God as ours” (183).

The most optimistic of the three books—and the only one to refer explicitly to current political concerns—is *Homeward from the Steppes of*

the Sun. In contrast to the other two novels, this is not an ordinary work of Holocaust fiction; it depicts Jews fleeing to Soviet Muslim republics, and its plot is not set against the usual landscape of Holocaust literature—the ghetto, the forest, or hiding places. It thus deviates from the majority of Israeli children's books, which rarely address the events of the war in Europe outside the immediate context of the destruction of the Jews.⁶ However, here Orlev deals with the same themes as in his other two novels.

One of the book's central themes is the encounter with other cultures. Eliyosha escapes with his mother and siblings from the Ukraine to Kazakhstan, where he learns to respect the Kazakh people and culture. His experience teaches him—and the reader—that each culture is the best possible and most logical adjustment to a specific set of circumstances. Although unindustrialized and technologically undeveloped, the Kazakhs possess a wisdom accumulated over the ages and a familiarity with a physical environment that has not always been benevolent. Eliyosha thus has no reason or justification for disrespecting or patronizing them. And in the context of the present day, the fact that the Kazakhs are Muslims adds a political edge to this insight.

Eliyosha's childish perspective allows him not to judge the Kazakhs, but to learn to treat them with respect. Trying to take a shortcut when fishing, he falls into the freezing water and calls out for help in Kazakh rather than Russian, his mother tongue. The only one to hear him is Jumbulat, who had taken an instant dislike to him. When Jumbulat reaches him, Eliyosha says, "I thought you weren't coming," to which Jumbulat replies, "I had to . . . because you were screaming in our language" (91). When Eliyosha uses the native language, Jumbulat recognizes that he does not feel superior to the Kazakhs but wants to become an integral part of the community.

Eliyosha and his family survive in Kazakhstan due to their ability to make friends with the local people and their willingness to help them, which in turn gains the latter's assistance. The family's journey—first to Kazakhstan, then back across Europe, and finally to Palestine—is one long encounter with people. While all are different, Eliyosha finds a way to connect with everyone, either through play or by shared efforts in overcoming hardship. The book thus conveys that everyone can find something in common with another person, even without a shared language.

In the novel's final section, Orlev describes the family's arrival in Palestine and Eliyosha's efforts to integrate into the kibbutz, whose

Eurocentric members are intolerant and unwelcoming to immigrants. This view of the Israeli culture of the 1940s and '50s, when many Holocaust survivors and Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries arrived, has become prevalent over recent decades in Hebrew literature for youth and adults.⁷ Its effectiveness in *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun* stems from the comparison it suggests between the kibbutz and Kazakh society: the patronizing attitude exhibited by the kibbutz members stands in stark contrast to the mutual tolerance and acceptance between Eliyosha's family and the Kazakhs.

This part of the novel is also the most political, containing material that is relevant to contemporary Israeli society, particularly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. On his way to the kibbutz with the member who has come to pick him up, Eliyosha sees an Arab plowing his land with a horse:

“Like in Kazakhstan,” I said enthusiastically.

“They don't have tractors like ours,” she said. “That is primitive agriculture.”

“A farmer walking behind the plow is more beautiful than a tractor,” I dared to answer.

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“It seems more real and true. Like in Kazakhstan and the Ukraine.”

“What rubbish,” she said. “You just can't tell the difference between primitive and modern agriculture. Agricultural machinery has totally changed the farmer's life.”

“Yes, like in Germany,” I replied, remembering the farms I had seen when we walked toward the destroyed town of Ulm. She glared at me.

“Don't talk about the Germans. We've suffered enough from them already.” (189–90)

Eliyosha's experience in Kazakhstan enables him to appreciate Arab culture. The disparity engendered by the arrogance and intolerance he encounters on the kibbutz indicates to the reader that stereotypical labeling of the other, and cultural condescension in the name of progress or racial superiority, are not to be associated exclusively with the Germans. The link Eliyosha makes between Jewish and German agricultural methods, which so irritates the kibbutznik, vividly exemplifies the fact that all cultures can be intolerant.

Orlev's autobiographical accounts of the Holocaust are thus informed by a humanistic worldview of equality and respect toward other people, undermining stereotypical classification according to ethnic/religious origin, social class, or level of technological advancement. This insight is particularly acute in light of contemporary allegations, both within and outside Israel, of the force that the Israel Defense Forces use against Palestinians and the comparison of the IDF with the Nazis. Both right- and left-wing circles in Israel link the Holocaust with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in order to serve their own agendas.⁸ Over the years, the prevailing tendency in Israeli children's and young adult literature has been to present the Shoah as proof of the importance of the establishment of an independent, sovereign Jewish State (Darr 98–99). To date, *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun* is the first Israeli children's novel to link the Holocaust with the Middle East conflict from a left-wing political perspective. Here Orlev bursts the bounds of the discourse that Israeli children's literature has set for itself with respect to the Holocaust, and finds a way to work through his traumatic memories in the active, political sense LaCapra describes. On the basis of his past trauma, Orlev responds critically to present events, taking upon himself the responsibility for seeking change.

Conclusion

This article examines how children's and young adult Holocaust literature can serve as a means of dealing with trauma on both the personal and cultural levels. The analysis of three of Orlev's children's books provides an opportunity to demonstrate how this genre functions as a significant channel for acting out and working through trauma. On the one hand, Orlev's fiction allows the writer to remain within the bounds of the liminal child-consciousness, a state that does not require that the meaning of the events must be confronted, and which justifies his decision to refrain from attempting to depict indescribable situations. On the other hand, it plays a key role in his attempt to work through his past. The working-through project is also exemplified in the way in which he engages politically with contemporary Israeli reality. The "frozen lake" to which Orlev refers in the quotation at the beginning of this article can thus be identified as his children's literature, on which he treads so cautiously and carefully. While he does not remember or say more than he is capable of, he nonetheless is always seeking to move forward, engaging with the past in order to create a better future.

Notes

¹Orlev described his experience in *The Lead Soldiers* (1956), intended for adults, and two children's books—*The Sandgame* (1996) and *Last of Kin* (1996). The first two of these titles have been translated into English.

²See, for example, Adorno; Agamben; and Langer.

³Since there is no English-language edition of *Homeward from the Steppes of the Sun*, the quotations herein are my own translation from the Hebrew.

⁴Very rarely does Orlev exploit his characters' limitations in order to create a defamiliarization effect or provide the adult reader with more knowledge/awareness than the protagonist himself possesses. One example is Alex's description of "the crazy woman" in *The Island on Bird Street* (90–91). Via the binoculars he uses to observe the residents of the neighboring building on the Aryan side, Alex watches a woman who cleans her home every morning; then, after a night out from which she returns in the early hours of the morning, she begins her obsessive cleaning routine all over again. Alex's failure to make any connection between the woman's night-time activities and her obsessive daytime cleaning is one of the few times Orlev allows adults to read over the heads of both the child-protagonist and the child-reader. For a discussion of Orlev's narrative technique in *The Island on Bird Street*, see Shikhmanter.

⁵The book's protagonist also evinces affinities with Robinson Crusoe, with his mouse named Snow who "serves" him as Friday (Stern).

⁶The only other book available to Israeli children that deals with the fate of European Jews who escaped to Soviet Asian republics is Uri Shulevitz's picture book, *How I Learned Geography* (2008), which was translated into Hebrew in 2009. It was named a Caldecott Honor Book that same year.

⁷In the three years between the Second World War and the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and the period immediately following, hundreds of thousands of Jews—including displaced persons from Europe and immigrants from Muslim countries—found their way to Palestine/Israel. This wave—known as the "mass migration"—tripled the country's Jewish population. In the past two decades, much criticism has been voiced regarding the way in which immigrants were treated, many objecting to the melting-pot policy and attempts to erase their distinctive cultural features, as well as the arrogant attitude displayed toward them and the discrimination to which they were exposed. Israeli literature for adults and children alike reflects this critique, of which Orlev's description of the kibbutz attitude toward Eliyosha is an example. For further reading about the mass migration, see Hacothen; and Rozin.

⁸For the memory of the Holocaust in Israel, and the way in which it is used in the political discourse in general and in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular, see Ofer; and Zuckerman.

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