Israeli Holocaust memory in a short story by Etgar Keret

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Abstract

This article examines "Shoes" a canonical short story by Israeli author Etgar Keret, part of the new wave of Israeli authors that came of age in the 1990s, Renowned for his micro-fiction, the best-selling author often visits the theme of the Holocaust, dissecting the complex emotions of guilt and confusion the Holocaust stirs and evokes in young Israelis. The tale, which employs a postmodern sensibility to deconstruct the theme of Holocaust memorialization and education in Israel, especially amongst Jewish teens, features a third-generation protagonist. Employing his trademark mordant humour, it furnishes readers with an irreverent and quirky, though sensitive integration of Shoah traces within everyday scenarios, and as an essential part of daily life.

It is hardly surprising that the story "Shoes," by Etgar Keret, which forms the basis for this paper, was published in Israel of the 1990s. As the era of first-generation stories slowly reached its terminus, it was in the 1980s and 1990s that vigorous second-generation Holocaust fiction came of age as a genre of indirect cultural memory and matured into a fully-fledged literary genre as authors began to add their unique voice to this weighty and painful subject matter. Haunted by what happened to the Jews at a time before they were born, though they possess no personal testimony to this new constituency, descendants and non-descendants were unrestrained by the constraints and taboos that shackled their predecessors in making art out of the atrocity. Today, this outpouring continues unabated.

Motivated by a powerful impulse to keep the Shoah legacy alive and unforgettable—and to honour the memory of the apocalypse—their literary response and engagement with the Holocaust often subverted or reoriented norms and narrative boundaries in exploring the enduring impact of this tragedy and explored the national and universal lessons that could be learned. Taking the Shoah beyond the war, they situate their themes in a broader context as well as wrestling with the task of writing adequately about the catastrophe that engulfed European Jewry. Treating it as a vicarious past meant that these artists, though struggling with the impossibility of words to communicate the lingering questions and effect of the Holocaust, showed that the attempt must be made. Their passionate writing becomes even more timely and necessary given that, in the near future, they will be the critical sources in educating and transmitting the memories and knowledge of the survivors.

To be sure, the overwhelming sense that permeates second-generation engagement with the Holocaust is that as the survivors grow old and their numbers dwindle, their legacy and experiences have much to teach us and cannot be ignored: "With distance—and doubtless imitations—has come the ability to confront at last the ugly, cruel and contagious abandonment of morality that erupted in the middle of the century and of a civilisation emblematic of human progress," Gerald Jacobs writes, "with distance, too has come a willingness to engage the creative imagination with that same period of history in order to search for meaning, warning or consolation" (Jacobs, 1998: 67). Temporally removed from Hitler's war on the Jews,

Israeli litterateurs offered different vantage points and angles in mourning those they did not know, and pushing back the crippling fetters of the chasm that yawns between the ever-incomprehensible catastrophe and their own biography. Struggling with questions of identity, faith, and God and the appropriate frames for remembrance, they have contributed—through a variety of voices, perspectives, and creative imagery—to a body of work that details the anguish of the sons and daughters of survivors or Israelis growing up in a post-Shoah Israel. Invariably, probing these energetic, often wildly creative and powerful constructions of the Shoah reminds us that writing about this calamity gnaws at the very heart of speaking about it. In not avoiding the pain of the past or participating in the process of any suppression, the next generation reminds contemporary society of the function of memory and its vital role.

In several ways, second-generation texts serve as testament to the fact that within Israeli and Jewish culture, literary representations of the Holocaust have transcended generational, tribal, or national limitations. Above all, it allows the reader to imagine what happened and allows the author to bring facts of the Holocaust to life with stunning intensity in a way that ideology and philosophical abstractions cannot. If before, the state was the storehouse of aggregate memory, enlisting its institutions in service of a singular narrative that dictated the terms for local memory of a specific experience — the Holocaust — this debilitating coherence no longer exists. In fact, the idea of an indisputable version or narrative has been challenged and absolutely dismantled. No doubt, the psychological legacy is a key theme of the second-generation corpus. Rather than a focus on the grand theological or philosophical questions about the Shoah, writers zero in on: "…areas that a young Israeli writer can approach directly and faithfully on the basis of his authentic life experience…how are echoes of the Holocaust audible in Israeli life today, especially in the lives of young people? Do the children of survivors undergo some special experience different from their peers? What does the survivor generation look like to the children? (Holtzman, 1992: 24-25).

Holocaust literature of the second generation has been labelled a, "call to the imagination of a people to repair the work of reality—to recreate a destroyed world by infusing meaning into the very events that destroyed it—what else could be more moving?" (Rosen, 1992: 47). The power of stories written by those called "witnesses through the imagination" is that they furnish readers with the keys of awakening and experiencing the trauma their forebears experienced. Put differently, it is precisely because novelists produce mean-ng by connecting and linking things, in the context of the Holocaust, that fiction is able to communicate and broaden the Jewish experience in a pro- found, yet sensitive way. It is for that reason that one must not resist creatively tackling the topic of the Holocaust despite the obstacles strewn along that journey. As one critic notes, writers and readers alike must make available a space in their consciousness for the "second life" that stirs in our soul when we encounter the intense images of that event "so that we can move as far as it is given to us to do so, into the pain and hence the meaning of the Holocaust—that, too, is a kind of memorial." (Rosen 1992: 53).

In considering the broad stylistic spectrum by the post-war group of Israeli novelists, one must probe the devices and tropes employed in such figurations of writing. Involved in this undertaking is a focus on ethical concerns related to such responses. The reason is that the outflow of Shoah

writings, with its admixture of stylistic fiddling and new modes, seems to, "test implicit boundaries and to raise not only aesthetic and intellectual problems, but moral issues too" (Friedlander, 1992: 2,3). Doubtless, any attempt to enter this heart of darkness and to depict the destruction of European Jewry in *belles lettres* challenges, "our traditional conceptual and representational categories" (Friedlander, 1992: 2,3).

Current novelists must contend with the central paradox of crafting their stories from material that not only exists outside their own personal experience but also requires them to transcend their own reserves of imaginative re-creation. Finding the proper modes of rewriting the unthinkable in modern literary terms and techniques remains an arduous challenge to the artist: "Holocaust reality limits rather than liberates the vision of the writer… who ventures to represent it. It abnormalizes the normal." (Langer, 1998: vii–xix)

Primarily, by confecting a story composed of authentic aspects and aesthetic inventions, and by plunging backwards to a time beyond their own life, authors risk the charge of tilting the genocidal reality to manipulate a reader's emotions. Indeed, the fictional constructs of second-hand cartographers, mapping out their own renderings (as the "bearing-witness" generation does) can transgress the sanctity of real events by rupturing their factual integrity—especially since they depend on the partaking of transmitted memory and mediated imagination. A related moral concern is whether wordsmiths who spin tales for their audience with the intended aim of moving and exciting the reader are benefiting from the victim's grief. A literary record of the Holocaust, set forth in heightened prose and with intense emotionalism, may indeed depend on the sensational and dramatic for its success. Still, the positive effect of second-generation Holocaust literature cannot be understated:

> The stories… fulfil first and foremost a personal, mental need, a catharsis of the author. At the same time, however, they also satisfy collective needs… The stories… help and are helping, primarily, to change the personal, familial and national group of terms, from feelings of cowardice and offence to understanding and empathy of the situations of humiliation to which the victims were subjected and their sustaining of humanity at the very bottom… Instead of the shame, the repression, the reservations, a much better understanding of the parents' generation has developed, as well as an ability to identify with them…the stories have brought about not only an opening of a real dialogue with the parents' generation and the past, with the "there" and "then", but chiefly with ourselves. Through the works of the second generation, the terms "Jew" and "Israeli" assume their deep and profound meaning among the generation as a whole. The isolated personal memory of the past becomes a collective one, part of a combined Israeli and Jewish identity. (Govrin, 1985:9-10).

Born in Israel in 1967 to Polish survivors of what he once called, "the black hole of the Holocaust" (O'Keeffe, 2015), Etgar Keret's father survived, "by living for almost 600 days in a 'hole in the ground' outside a village in Poland" (O'Keeffe, 2015). Keret has achieved acclaim as a short story writer,

film director, and teacher of creative writing both in Israel and in the United States. His fiction has been described as magic realism and postmodernist, which simply means that he borrows from Kafka, Dante, and Kerouac, and blends the fantastical with everyday life. His great theme is the utter aloneness and alienation we all have felt at one time.

This wildly inventive author and creator of comics has man- aged to become a cultural icon and hero to a whole generation of Israelis, captivating the troubled nation with his razor sharp, subversive tales that sometimes run to only 50 words. His books have been translated into 42 languages, and his short stories routinely become best-sellers on release. They have also been adapted into 40 movies that have won the Israeli Oscar or garnered prizes from international film festivals.

Labelled as, "The voice of Young Israel," (Grant, 2005) Keret is such a literary celebrity that there are young writers mimicking his bag of bold writing tricks. Keret began writing as a journalist for local magazines; his first collection of stories—*Tzinorot* (*Pipelines*), published in 1992—became an instant best- seller. Subsequent books—such as *Ga'aguai le-Kissinger* (*Missing Kissinger*, 1992), *H-Keytana shel Kneller* (*Kneller's Happy Campers*, 1998) *Anihu* (*I Am*, 2002), *Pit'om Dfika ba-Delet* (*Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, 2010), cemented his status as Israel's most successful postmodern writer. In 2016, he was awarded the Charles Bronfman Prize and the Italian Adei-Wizo Prize for his memoir *The Seven Good Years*.

Keret has hit a nerve with Israel's veteran writers, such as A. B. Yehoshua, who don't find his fast, tough prose, especially appealing. In fact, Yehoshua has attacked Keret's outrageous writing, saying that he avoids grappling with the big picture issues in favour of trendy urban self-analysis. But it would seem that Yehoshua refuses to accept that Keret is interested in people, rather than in the grand national questions. Keret believes he infuriates authors like Yehoshua because the Keret style, "…doesn't derive from any Israeli tradition" (Temkin, 1999). He adds, "I'm different from everything the mainstream here knows, and they don't know how to digest me. I don't think I am influenced by any canonized Israeli writer. Because they can't really connect to my writing, they refer to me in clichés" (Temkin, 1999). And though the literary establishment now regards his work as part of the Hebrew canon, Keret cares little for such recognition. It has not pre- vented him from winning the Prime Minister's Award for Literature or travelling to Poland with former Israeli President Shimon Peres to dedicate that country's newly established Holocaust Museum.

As a child of Holocaust survivors (his mother was a child in the Warsaw Ghetto), this unprecedented catastrophe naturally informs his writing. Growing up in Israel of the 1970s in the shadow of the Shoah and surrounded by the remnant that settled in the Jewish state, he says he felt, "a crippling sense of insignificance—his experience dwarfed by what his parents had endured, "I would bump into a wall and I wouldn't cry, because I'd say, 'You just bumped into a wall. Smile to your mum and make her happy" (Naparstek, 2005: 71). In another interview, he revealed that, "Everything I write, is a strange projection of my limited life experience." (Krull, 2015). Certainly, Keret has a tendency to focus on small, intimate details and marginal events in

the life of a child or an ordinary person, limited by emotional immaturity or education, that illuminate weighty moral, ethical, or political problems.

Keret represents the second-generation, a group of artists far removed from the cataclysm, who observed the genocide from a distance, and who grew up in a state draped in the onerous garb of the Shoah. Refusing to forget the evils of the past, some are coming to terms with their family's and their own nexus to the Holocaust, some are healing, and some are trying to make sense of the vast sea of despair. Their prose is a sounding board to an eclectic range of cultural and political sensibilities, as well as emotional chronicles, that broaden and transcend the traditional themes of the genre. In varying degrees, by making a sizeable impact on the literary map, they dispel any notion that that the tremor of Nazi Germany ended after the war, weaving several thematic strands together in writing about how difficult it is coming to terms with this catastrophe, and the same time underlining significant changes and attitudes to this subject-matter.

In announcing Keret as the 2016 Charles Bronfman Prize recipient in recognition of his work conveying Jewish values across cultures and imparting a humanitarian vision throughout the world, the international panel of judges noted, "In a dangerous world, Etgar Keret portrays people who have the capacity to empathize with the other, to hear the other, and to find compassion for the other. He counters dehumanization and inspires his readers with warmth and humour and original thinking. He encourages others to make the world a better place and translates the lessons of the Holocaust to a new generation" (Freer Cashman, 2016: 16).

It is from the collection of short tales, *Missing Kissinger*, that the story "Shoes"[1] is drawn, and which forms our discussion here. Keret has expounded on the central import in "Shoes":

> It's a story about the difference between a mausoleum kind of memory and the memory that you own and is always with you. This is the kind of difference between the memory I have of the holocaust from my parents and the memory I have from school of the holocaust. My dad once said to me 'we had some horrible experiences, but the first time I ever kissed a girl was during these years. We live through these years, we didn't experience them as symbols, we had happy days sometimes, we didn't know that life could be better.'" (in Lalor, 2003)

In the same interview, Keret defended his employment of humour in dealing with a subject such as the Holocaust: "If I don't use humour, I revert to pathos very easily," he says. "And the thing with pathos is that it is clichéd, and it is not effective for communication, and humour is a way of self-criticism, of showing that you are in the system but out of the system, it is two-tiered thinking" (Lalor, 2003).

On another level, "Shoes" is meditation about the difficulty, or perhaps inability, of young Israelis to profoundly grasp their parents' and grand-parents' Holocaust experience. It is no accident that Keret chose the title "Shoes" for a story about remembering the Holocaust in modern Israel. Shoes have become such an iconic and jarring artifact of the European genocide and the horror of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis. One of the most

sombre monuments on display at the Auschwitz death camp is a huge glass case that contains mounds of ownerless shoes that were once worn by the victims. The forlorn shoes are, literally and figuratively, a living testimony to the cruelty of the oppressors and the momentous responsibility that present generations have in bearing witness to the hallowed memory of the dead.

Additionally, the text probes such grand issues as private acts of memorialization versus collective remembrance, generational and intergenerational memory, the ethics of fictionalising genocide, and the various modalities of coping in the modern Jewish state. Certainly, Keret moves away from the Hebraic-Zionist political paradigm that dominated Israel in its first decades of existence, to a more creative, albeit provocative to some, that is reflective of contemporary Israeli zeitgeist, and which demythologizes older frames and dynamics of commemorating traumatic history. As we show, Keret's story argues that there is not a single or clear version in the typology of responses within the Jewish-Israeli orbit of transmission and monomialization of the atrocity, and that a more emphatic tone is warranted so as to engage with the third and fourth generation. In short, Keret is proposing a radical reconfiguration and a rethink in relation to the problematics of Holocaust remembrance in Israel as a civic, ossified ritual, and advocating for its liberation from crippling conventional discourses. As one commentator opined, in relation to "Shoes":

> It isn't, in Keret's stories, that the Holocaust is treated with impropriety but rather that, for the school children who are some of his protagonists, it is a past violence that shares place with the violence of the present. It is as if Keret were asking: How does one "remember" what is, in fact, ongoing (war, strife, terror)? And what becomes of remembrance when it is a daily ritual? (Andre, 2002: D29).

The story begins as the schoolboy narrator and his class visit the Museum of Volhynia Jewry as part of the annual pilgrimage to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. On the bus, the narrator reflects on who suffered more, East European or Oriental Jews, dramatizing the hierarchical claims to pain and victimhood that persist among Israelis, along the lines of ethnic and cultural background: "…I felt very important. All the kids in the class except me, my cousin, and another boy, Druckman, were of Iraqi origins. I was the only one with a grandfather who died in the Holocaust" (Keret, 2001:55). It is precisely this sense of uniqueness that spurs the young man to later touch a black and white cardboard photograph of a survivor.

The children are warned not to touch any of the exhibits on the wall, yet the boy violates that prohibition when he touches the photograph of a skinny old man. When a female classmate of the narrator points out her friend's transgression, he replies, in an angry tone and with proprietary conviction, that the picture is of his grandfather and therefore he is allowed to break the rules. It is therefore probable that already at the opening of the story the grandchild takes a particular interest in his ancestor, and may see in this photograph an emotion or detail about the Holocaust that all his parents' and teachers' comments hitherto have not been able to impart. It appears that the picture comes to represent the absent grandfather that he knows very little about since his mother is reluctant to speak about her dead father. We glimpse a sense of

this discomfort when, a few weeks later, the mother mishandles—or perhaps purposely avoids—the opportunity to deepen the discussion about her father when the boy mentions him in relation to the shoes bought in Germany.

In asking whether the Museum of Volhynia Jewry symbolizes "tradition, the establishment, hegemonic culture, or the presence of the past in the future and our responsibility to the past,"(Katsman, 2005: 21), Katsman asserts that the institution, in how it functions in the story, resembles more closely a "cemetery, an exhibition of deceased objects" (Katsman, 2005: 21). He then posits that the contact the young boy makes with the image is the first step in, "…reviving the objects. The caressing of the photograph is a childish, naïve gesture, but at the same time it is an ethereal flash of ethics...this touch means accepting responsibility and accepting the face of the old man" (Katsman, 2005: 21). Katsman further maintains that through that simple, moral act, the boy imbues the past with a new meaning, divorced from the hierarchy of the museum and the multitude of artifacts placed on its shelves. It is not unreasonable to argue that only by ignoring the official rules of the museum and its ritualistic, abstract ceremony—which does not awaken or generate any empathy—and by breaking the reverential and petrifying rules imposed by the state, that the boy finds the route to bond and identify with the victims. In many ways, Keret rejects the rigid boundaries of statist memory in favour of personal memory. In that context, the author has responded to critics who have accused him of treating the Holocaust with disrespect by declaring, "It's not your memory; it doesn't belong to the nation. It belongs to me" (Jaggi, 2018).

After the screening of a movie showing Jewish children pushed into a truck and gassed, the students are introduced to a survivor who has been invited to testify about his ordeal. The old man pleads with the students not to buy German goods since, "…underneath the fancy wrapping there are parts and tubes that they made of the bones and skin and flesh of dead Jews" (Keret, 2001:57). As he listens to the speech by the former concentration camp inmate, the young man embraces the plea by the old man, flavouring his ruminations with deadpan humour: "…I thought to myself it was lucky we had a made- in-Israel refrigerator at home. Why look for trouble?" (Keret, 2001:57). It is of note that within the confines of the museum, the school students are twice issued with a negative imperative: first, not to touch any of the exhibits on display and then, not to purchase German-made products.

Two weeks later, his parents, who have returned from an overseas trip, have bought him a pair of German *Adidas* sneakers. Throughout, Keret remains nonjudgmental, as we come to sympathize with the young hero. The perspective is comical when the young narrator feels superior to his second-generation parents and his older brother, since the purchase of the shoes seems to indicate to him that these authority figures in his life are unaware of the truth revealed in the memorial speech by the guest speaker. To be sure, the narrator is utterly convincing and sincere in his quest to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive and to honour the survivor's plea. At first, he takes issue with the present, shrewdly attempting to remind his mother about the origins of the shoes, hoping that he can manage to avoid wearing the sneakers and to stir within his mother what he believes is her inert Holocaust consciousness:

"'They're from Germany, you know,' I told her, squeezing her hand gently. 'Of course, I know,' Mom smiled, 'Adidas is the best brand in the world.' 'Grandpa was from Germany, too,' I tried to give her a hint. 'Grandpa was from Poland,' Mom corrected me" (Keret, 2001:58). The brief conversation with the mother can be read as the second generation's repudiation of any attempt to impose Holocaust memory on their lives. Perhaps she chooses not to dwell on the painful past, namely, the murder of her father, so as not to upset her young son.

Yet, ultimately, it is apparent that she prefers to block and suppress that flow of memories that may disrupt the convenient patina of silence that she has adopted about this uncomfortable subject. Reminded of her father, she becomes sad for a moment, but that fleeting melancholy swiftly disappears. For her son, there is no ambiguity as to his mother's lack of empathy or understanding about the need for Holocaust commemoration, as we hear his thoughts about this key sequence: "I realised there was nothing doing. Mom didn't have a clue. She had never been to Volhynia House. Nobody had ever explained it to her. For her, shoes were just shoes and Germany was Poland. I let her put the shoes on me and didn't say a thing. There was no point in telling her and making her even sadder" (Keret, 2001:58).

The kinship with the survivor, and by extension with the grandfather, is amplified when the boy first looks at the shoebox. To him, the box resembles a coffin, and he anthropomorphizes the white shoes with the three blue stripes by likening them to dead Jews lying in repose. Further, as he wears the shoes, he notices the "pale hide covering my feet" (Keret, 2001:58), and immediately recollects the words of the old man. Likewise, when he touches the shoes' blue stripes, he associates them with the exhibit of the thin, old man that he dared touch in the museum, and the stripes echo the tears that ran down his cheeks "…like the divider lines you see on a highway…." (Keret, 2001:56).

As he touches the shoes, the boy imagines the shoes to be his dead grandfather, and is concerned about treading on them or kicking the soccer ball: "I tiptoed slowly towards the door, trying to put as little weight as I could on the shoes…At the beginning of the game I still remembered not to kick with the tip of my shoe, so that it wouldn't hurt grandpa." (Keret, 2001:59). His reluctance to wear the shoes dissipates as he plays with his friends in the park. As he scores a goal, he not only feels comfortable, but believes that his grandfather is pleased with his performance on the field. Indeed, his initial principled opposition has given way to pride since the sneakers have oddly become connected to the unknown grandfather and have been recon- structed to exemplify intimacy: "'Some goal, eh?' I reminded grandpa on the way home. 'The goalie didn't know what hit him.' Grandpa said nothing, but judging by the tread I could tell that he, too, was pleased" (Keret, 2001:59). The shoes become a means for the boy to bond with the absent grandfather and fulfil a buried desire to recover an erased biographical family detail that has deliberately been expunged or hidden by the mother.

In the course of this offbeat and caustic tale, Keret presents an unusual moral twist that very few authors are likely to give us, avoiding the clichés of contemporary Israeli discourse. He convincingly limns the multiplex and labyrinthine emotional terrain evoked by Holocaust Memorial Day in young

Israelis. The narrator oscillates between feelings of confusion, guilt, and—finally—pride, reminding us that there are no right responses to Holocaust memorialization and identification. It is in that spirit that Yael Feldman contends that the authors of the second generation reject:

> …the collective model of representation that they inherited from their parents and cultural mentors. Rather than finding 'the necessary link' that this model aspires to, contemporary writers seek a subjective encounter with the experiences that the ideology of this model suppressed. That they thereby undermine the historical closure assumed by that model is only too obvious (Feldman, 1992: 238).

In a way, the young boy and his peers (who represent the third generation) are asked to walk in the shoes of those whose lives ended prematurely and tragically. Keret employs the motif of the shoes as a bold and subversive device to tackle the contentious and, for many, sacred issue of Holocaust monumentalization. Repeatedly, the shoes prompt the central protagonist to relive and recall the admonition ventured by the survivor in the Museum of Volhynia Jewry, namely, that German goods are made from the flesh of dead Jews. The considerable question as to whether to wear the shoes or not, or more specifically, whether to step on them, becomes the novel dilemma that the boy has to confront and ultimately resolve.

The boy believes the story told to him by the survivor that the shoes are made of his grandfather's dead body, and yet he rationalizes this imaginary fact as part of his own revenge on his peoples' brutalisers by assigning his newfound prowess on the sports field as a way of pleasing the murdered relative. By his own admission, the boy is guilty of the sin of forgetting what the old man counselled against when he begins to kick the ball with the pointed end: "At the beginning of the game, I still remembered not to kick with the tip of the shoe, so that it wouldn't hurt grandpa, but after a while I forgot, just the old man at Volhynia House said people tend to do…." (Keret, 2001:59).

As the story concludes, the young boy has reconciled the competing pathways offered as appropriate forms of commemoration by preserving his bond with his grandfather, who he sincerely believes is part of the shoes manufactured in Germany. If the task is to never forget—as the old man maintains in his address ("People have short memories he said, but you won't forget. Every time you see a German, you'll remember what I told you" (Keret, 2001:56)—then the adolescent, in his whimsical and brash way, has fulfilled that vow. For Katsman, the evolution in the boy's sensibility and the intimacy he develops with the grandfather is nothing short of a modern miracle, especially since the hero overcomes and transcends the typical fettering and repressive signifiers of the Museum where his awareness in this subject is triggered.

In "Shoes," there is a glaring contrast between what is spoken about by the grown-ups, including teachers and eyewitnesses, concerning the terrible murders committed by the Nazis during the Holocaust and how it is understood by the young adults. On the one hand, when an elderly survivor rages against the Nazis and warns the schoolchildren in the hall not to visit Germany or purchase any German

products, the boy only remembers the most superficial points that make no sense to him. He accepts the old man's claims that he once strangled a Nazi in revenge, convinced by the anger in his eyes. His classmate Djerby claims the old man is lying, unable to imagine the witness ever having been young and so charged with fury that this action is plausible. Djerby's remarks encapsulate the crippling attitudes held by many native Israelis in the first decades of statehood, in which the European Jews were seen as passive weaklings who were led to their death like "sheep to the slaughter" and never offered resistance to their Nazi persecutors.

That the young narrator should go on a school trip to the Museum of Volhynia for lessons on the Holocaust signals a dimension of Jewish history that extends beyond his immediate situation and age of awareness. This region in north-western Poland, skirting and sometimes overlap- ping with Ukraine, was the site for many significant events in Jewish his- tory, such as the origins of the Hasidic movement, and the home of many important Jewish leaders, spiritual and lay. As well, this region resonates with Jews on a different level later in secular Jewish history as the site of pogroms, blood-libels, and other massacres. It is, in other words, a region soaked in bloodshed but also imbued with emotional ties for Polish and other Ashkenazi Jews. If the child narrator is tone deaf to all these resonances, intelligent adult readers cannot help but respond to the name of the Memorial Hall with powerful feelings.

Yet, at the same time, "Shoes" underlines the potential impact of survivor testimonies on young Israelis. It is of note that for years, the communal story of the Holocaust was that of the faceless mass of six million Jews, not of individuals who each had their own harrowing tale to narrate. The Shoah was compressed into the abstract number of six million, a generalizing model shorn of distinct and individual narratives that continuously erased the fragmentary nature of the atrocities. Although the initial delineation of the museum cues us to view it as alienating and cold—"Volhynia House was very beautiful and posh, all made of black marble, like millionaires' houses" (Keret, 2001:56)—it is obvious that the black-and-white pictures of the survivors and the impassioned speech by the old man prove more than just a cursory experience for the young man who refuses to participate in the collective process of suppression represented by his mother and father, who are wilfully oblivious or select the modality of silence. A contrary reading is offered by Naveh, who argues that the story, undergirded by satire and parody,

> …mocks the 'educational syllabus', the way it fulfils its aims, and reduces, cheapens and scorns the term 'second-generation' or 'the next generation' after the Holocaust'. The accomplishment of the boy in connecting with his grandfather is partly absurd since it is born out of series of mistakes. The visualization of the grandfather and his speech through the stupid conversation…are not, it would seem, a profound, conscious achievement (Naveh, 2002: 262).

On the surface of the story, the name of the sport shoes that the boy has longed for and which soon become a point of moral dilemma insofar as he is old enough to understand the comments made by one of the survivor speakers at the Holocaust Memorial Day assembly merely indicates a product from Germany that should serve as a reminder of the atrocities committed against the Jews. Taking literally, but not too deeply, the warning that anything

manufactured in Germany is likely to be made of the blood and bones of victims of the Shoah causes the boy to imagine that the pair of Adidas running shoes his parents have brought back from their trip to Europe is actually a remnant of his dead grandfather. The statement made in rage by the speaker at the memorial assembly that anyone who purchases or uses something made by the Germans is thereby acceding to the Nazi plan to exterminate all the Jews and turn their bodies into mere things was meant to be *hyperbole*—based on an extended figure of speech that col- lapses the distinction between a literal statement and a metaphorical one. Yet, it is also a form of synecdoche that takes a part for the whole —in this case, the generic name for a kind of apparel, for any and all things made by a German company. That declaration is understood in the boy's mind in such a way that the new shoes he puts on are a *fetish,* a symbolic object embodying the essence of his own ancestor, something that aids him in his prowess on the playing field and connects him with the consciousness and ghostly reappearance of his grandfather's body.

Several other factors are at play in regard to the Adidas shoes, though more problematically and obliquely. There is a historical ambiguity about the role the Adidas brothers and their factory played during the era of Nazi rule in Germany. Factors include how far they collaborated with the regime, their use of slave labor of Jews brought to concentration camps, and whether they were later were re-educated and rehabilitated. This is a personal and—as the boy's imaginary relations with the fetishized Adidas shoes further indicate—an emotional nexus, which is different from the historical lessons conveyed and the sense of moral outrage supposedly appropriate to the occasion of the Memorial Day events. A consequence of this suggested emotional bond between the grandfather and the grandson, one already dead and other growing to awareness of who and what he is as a Jew, is that the boy intuitively grasps that he is a child of Holocaust survivors, an heir to the promise of the State of Israel as a homeland and protective entity of Jews in the Diaspora: a promise that now that there is an Israel, there will never again be a Shoah since the Jewish state offers a shield to all Jews no matter where they are in the world and therefore something that he feels strongly enough to question his own parents' awareness of what all this means.

By bringing home the shoes that their son coveted, the parents have themselves transgressed the obligation to avoid anything made in Germany and, furthermore, for not realizing that the shoes are profoundly and intimately related to the grandfather who is perceived only as a cardboard photograph. However, the purchase of the shoes means that the grandfather can now be experienced as a living presence, one that imbues the grandchild with power on the sporting field and offers him some kind of supernatural protection, allowing him to break school rules.

Unlike his parents and older brother, and unlike the schoolteachers and other adults who try to bring to his attention the importance of Holocaust Memorial and of keeping the commandment of remembering, the survivor at the Museum of Volhynia speaks with an emotional intensity that the boy can understand, or thinks he can understand, as personal and visceral. The real man speaking in the hall, with all the passion of his experience, albeit mistaking the maturity of audience, is therefore more of a cardboard character in the story

than the narrator's grandfather, whose presence he feels as a gut instinct within himself, as a living force in the life of his family, and then comically as an animated spirit in the Adidas shoes he wears.

Most important, "Shoes" represent an attempt to undermine and deconstruct predominant Israeli assumptions about post-Shoah identity. Hence, the work questions the adequacy of the official and sacrosanct frameworks produced by the state to portray the Holocaust as well as presenting alternate ways to delineating the legacy of the Holocaust. In more ways than one, Keret betrays a gritty spirit of rebellion against the statist appropriation of the Shoah and a vigorous desire to denationalize the Holocaust narrative and reclaim its personal and intimate dimension. In other words, what is at play here is an effort to privatize the traumatic memories of individuals that were collectivized by the state.

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Endnotes

[1] I am using the English translation to be found in Keret, E. 2001. *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God and Other Stories.* New York: Thomas Dunne.

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