# Relocated from an Elevator to a Cattle Car: Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Thane Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible*

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Abstract
*This article analyzes Thane Rosenbaum's short-story cycle / novel-in-stories* Elijah Visible *in which the fragmented postmodern protagonist Adam Posner is profoundly affected by the traumatic legacy of his parents. Although with each story his identity is modified, the experience of this American Adam is framed by the feeling of being relocated in space and time. It is shaped by postmemory, to use Marianne Hirsch's concept characterizing the vicarious witnessing of the traumatic past. Being immersed in the Holocaust, Rosenbaum is at the same time aware of its unspeakability; he knows that words may fail to transport the reader to the scene of the crime. Despite his obsession with the Holocaust, Rosenbaum stresses his conviction that the Holocaust should not be the sole formative element of Jewish identity for his generation. The present article attempts to illuminate the mediation of traumatic experience between two generations and to show that the intergenerational transmission of trauma complicates relationships between survivors and their children, who have often felt burdened by the survivors' silence about the Holocaust, resulting in the alienation of the post-Holocaust generation from their parents.*

Keywords
Thane Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, short stories, Jewish American fiction, the Holocaust, survivors, children of survivors, transmission of trauma

As a child of Holocaust survivors, Thane Rosenbaum (born 1960) represents the "second generation" of authors[1] who reflect the historical trauma of the Nazi genocide from a new perspective. Having only vicarious experience of the tragedy of the Jews in World War II, these authors' writings provoke an ethical question concerning their moral right to portray the Holocaust. Does their postmemory[2] justify their decision to write about events they did not themselves experience? Since these writers were never actually in the concentration camps, they may appear to be on "slippery moral terrain,"[3] potentially

1 This term has been adopted, particularly by clinical psychologists and therapists, to describe the experience of people who, unlike their parents, did not witness the Holocaust directly but were nevertheless affected by their parents' experience of the terror of genocide. The expression "post-Holocaust generation" is also used.

2 The term "postmemory" was coined by Marianne Hirsch to imply the relationship between the generation that lived through the trauma and its descendants. The prefix "post-" may be misleading, as it is not meant to suggest the stage of "past memory," the process of forgetting. As Hirsch elucidates, "postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22. It is "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (ibid.). Descendants adopt the traumatic memories of their predecessors as their own; thus they identify with them. They result from the (trans)generational transmission of trauma. The most common mediator of this transmission is family, though this transfer can be realized in a broader social context via collective memory. In the mediation of trauma, Hirsch ascribes a special importance to photography. See also Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 103–128.

3 Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 59.

exposed to accusations of the literary exploitation of the Holocaust, or the "Americanization of the Holocaust", as Hilene Flanzbaum termed the appropriation of the *Shoah* by Americans in her book of the same name.[4] Cynthia Ozick was aware of this ethical problem when she claimed that the Holocaust should remain the domain solely of non--fiction in order to meet the demands of authenticity. Yet even she broke her distrust of the fictional representation of the Holocaust when she published her book *The Shawl*, in which she addressed the suffering of Jews in the concentration camps directly.[5] On the one hand, her unwillingness to "aestheticize" the Holocaust is understandable; on the other, as an artist she must have realized the emotional charge of fiction and its potential. In a round table discussion recorded in the collection of essays *Writing and the Holocaust*, Ozick addressed the issue: "In theory, I'm with Theodor Adorno's famous dictum: after Auschwitz, no more poetry. And yet, my writing has touched on the Holocaust again and again. I cannot not write about it. It rises up and claims my furies."[6]

The writers of the second generation are aware that the memory of the appalling atrocities cannot be based only on the stark language of facts and statistical data. However, this does not mean that they ignore historiography, testimonies and numerous documents bearing witness to the suffering of Jews and other victims of World War II. The reverse is true: since they have no direct experience of the disastrous event, to a large extent they depend on the extensive historical research. These facts, however, serve only as a point of departure for their imagination.[7] The authors also realize that silence, which could lead to the erasure of a significant part of historical memory, is hardly an acceptable response to the Holocaust.

Considering this problem of the moral authority of the second generation to write about events which they did not witness directly, we should bear in mind that the representatives of this generation usually do not depict the Holocaust itself, but instead focus on the experiences of the children of survivors in America. The focus is on these people's response to the effects of their own trauma in the post-war era. Their strategy of distancing themselves from the time and site of the original trauma of their parents enables them to establish an authoritative narrative voice with many autobiographical features, as it draws on their own personal experience. As Victoria Aarons asserts, "[t]he very hesitancy, then, in recreating scenes from the camps or the ghettoes, direct portrayals of Nazi brutality and extermination, suggest fears of appropriating that which really doesn't belong to writers of another place and generation."[8]

Children of survivors are usually characterized as being different, unique, "the others." In my view, we should be cautious of the kind of simplified generalizations that may be found in some psychological studies which tend to ignore the individuality of these children, the diversity of their personalities. Yet the children of survivors themselves acknowledge that they feel a special affinity when in each other's company. This affinity

4 Hilene Flanzbaum, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

5 Ozick's book consists of two parts – the short story "The Shawl," published originally in the *New Yorker* in 1980, and the novella "Rosa," which was also published in the *New Yorker* in 1983. Both parts were published together under the title *The Shawl* in 1989 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

6 Cynthia Ozick, "Roundtable Discussion," in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 284.

7 See, e.g., the documentary sections of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, which include maps, diagrams, sketches and other descriptive figures relating to the Holocaust. *Maus*: *A Survivor's Tale*. *Part I: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), *Part II: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1991).

8 Victoria Aarons, *What Happened to Abraham?: reinventing the covenant in American Jewish fiction* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2005), 134.

is caused by their sharing of the same or similar experiences. What many of them have in common, according to their testimonies, are feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, insecurity, marginality, incompetence and even guilt resulting from their absence from the atrocities experienced by their parents. These feelings may be caused by their over-identification with their parents' traumatic experience, in other words by the appropriation of their parents' identity, as though they themselves had survived the concentration camps. Their sense of "otherness" was well described by Helen Epstein in her book *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."[9] Epstein's resolution to "set out to find a group of people who, like [her], were possessed by a history they had never lived"[10] points to the process which has come to be termed the intergenerational transmission of trauma.[11]

Intergenerational or transgenerational transmission of trauma is a rather controversial issue, as some scholars question its very existence. Instead of trauma transmission, they speak rather of re-traumatization, pointing out that children's trauma is caused by their growing up in dysfunctional families with flawed parenting.[12] Yet a substantial body of studies, plus the personal testimonies of the descendants of survivors, indicate that this phenomenon cannot be simply disregarded. The term *per se* implies the impact of trauma experienced by parents on their offspring. Clinical and sociological research has shown that parents' PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) need not be restricted only to them, but can be passed on their descendants.[13] This can happen even if the experiencer of the original trauma represses his/her traumatic memory and keeps silent about it. As Marita Grimwood suggests, "[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."[14] Natan Kellerman speaks about "an absorbing of the psychological burdens of the parents and sharing their grief and terror."[15] In the process of projective identification, the children of survivors identify with the parents' trauma, re-experiencing it regardless of the lack of the direct accessibility to the original traumatic event. The transfer of the survivors' trauma affects the psyche of their children and usually has a negative impact on their interpersonal relationships and brings about serious identity problems. The centrality of the Holocaust in the life of survivors deeply influences their children's behavioral patterns and turns their preoccupation with this historical trauma into all-consuming obsession.

9 Helene Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (1979; New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 16. Epstein, born in Prague in 1947, was herself a child of survivors of several camps.

10 Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust* , 14.

11 If the transfer of trauma takes place across more than one generation, particularly from grandparents to grandchildren, we speak of the transgenerational transmission of trauma. In the fields of psychology and psychiatry, the terms "multigenerational" or "cross-generational" transmission are also used.

12 See Philippe Codde, "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three American Novels," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 57.4 (Winter 2011): 689. Yet, even the failure in parenting is usually connected with the original trauma of parents.

13 See M. Gerard Fromm, ed., *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations* (London: Karnac Books, 2011) and Simon Gottschalk, "Reli(e)ving the Past: Emotion Work in the Holocaust's Second Generation" *Symbolic Interaction* 26.3 (2003): 355–380.

14 Marita Grimwood, *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

15 Natan P. F. Kellermann, *Holocaust Trauma: Psychological Effects and Treatment* (New York: iUniverse, 2009), VII.

This is exactly the case with Adam Posner, the protagonist of Thane Rosenbaum's short-story cycle *Elijah Visible* (1996).[16] The unifying elements of all nine short stories of the cycle are not only the main character, a child of survivors, but also traumatic memory and postmemory of the Holocaust, as well as the use of silence as a defense mechanism and an alternative postwar response to the annihilation of the Jews. Adam Posner, this postmodern fragmented, mosaic character, has modified identities in the individual stories; in each story he is of different age and has a different profession. He is presented as a lawyer, an artist, a university teacher, and in the final stories regressively as a child. In addition, the settings differ from story to story – some stories are set in New York City, while others – depicting Adam's childhood and youth – take place in Miami Beach, Atlantic City and the Catskills. Although his identity varies, in all the stories Adam's experience is shaped by the trauma of his parents, who transmit it (often unintentionally) to him. His existence is determined by their tragic past, which affects his behavior and complicates his relationship with his parents, who remain silent about their suffering during World War II. Rosenbaum's choice of the biblical name of Adam for his central character has a certain significance; as Alan Berger notes, 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."[17] This name thus implies expulsion from the world of safety to the unknown world of doubts and uncertainties. Andrew Furman sees in the name a symbolic "rebirth or regeneration"; in his view, throughout his stories Rosenbaum explores the possibility of continuity.[18] In my opinion, the central character's name also suggests his rite of passage, the process of transition from the stage of innocence to that of maturity, albeit in a reversed narrative progression.

Rosenbaum clearly shows that the complicated relationship between Adam and his parents is a direct consequence of the survivors' Holocaust experiences and their traumas, which impede their capacity to establish satisfying human relationships. Adam's parents are depicted as emotionally unstable and inaccessible, 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,"[19] and although the little boy's behavior towards his parents seems insensitive, the reader understands the reasons for his subconscious search for a substitute family. The text cogently reflects transmission of trauma at a very young age at a time when the small boy's still developing postmemory is inducing his feelings of displacement and estrangement. Adam secretly dreams 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

16 Some critics classify this book as a novel. Even the author himself (together with his editor Robert Weil) speaks of a "novel in stories." See Derek P. Royal, "An Interview with Thane Rosenbaum," *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 1 (2007): 6–7. In my view, however, the most appropriate generic term is "short-story cycle," considering its structuring. See e.g. Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1971), James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short--Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004) or Martin Pilař, *Podoby českého povídkového cyklu ve XX. století* (Ostrava: Filozofická fakulta Ostravské univerzity, 2008).

17 Alan Berger, "Mourning, Rage and Redemption: Representing the Holocaust: The Work of Thane Rosenbaum," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 19 (2000): 9.

18 Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers*, 64.

19 Thane Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 170.

lighten the burden passed on to him by his parents. In some of the stories set in the protagonist's childhood, Adam's parents are overprotective (due to their harrowing experiences); in the story "The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights" their paranoia and bleak view of the world teach Adam to constantly remain alert to potential dangers. Aaron Hass explains this phenomenon as follows: "Having stood at the entrance to death, perhaps on many occasions, survivors continue to feel unusually vulnerable. This 'death anxiety' is the source of repeated warnings of impending danger. Relatively innocuous, everyday activities may be perceived as lethal hazards."[20] Most importantly, Adam's parents are presented as characters with a lack of empathy who are inclined to manipulate him. This is another reason for the tension which creates insurmountable barriers between them.

Rosenbaum is aware of the ethical problem of the appropriation of the Holocaust by the second or the third generation as the result of over-identification with the survivors – so typical of postmemory – and thus he presents his protagonist from a certain distance. His critical stance toward the post-Holocaust generation's psychological immersion in the genocide is expressed particularly in the stories in which Adam becomes totally obsessed with the Holocaust. Rosenbaum conveys this criticism through a satirical and ironic tone, most distinctly obvious in the story "Cattle Car Complex." At the same time, the author invites us to feel empathy with his main character, as he sees an even graver danger in the repression of memory, in the silence which results in the erasure of the traumatic past. In Rosenbaum's stories the survivors' silence surrounding their past compels Adam to fill in the gaps in his knowledge of the parents' tragedy; this need to fill the void, together with the transmission of trauma, are the real causes of his obsession with the *Shoah*. A lack of knowledge about his parents' mysterious past kindles his fantasy and relocates him to the site of horror as if he had been in Auschwitz or Treblinka himself. Simultaneously, his awareness of not having been there results in feelings of incompetence, and ultimately also of guilt. Rosenbaum convincingly shows that the intrusion of the Holocaust imagery that haunts his protagonist's everyday life is caused by the transfer of his parents' trauma to his psyche. Adam is in the position of a man trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle while knowing that some of them are missing. The lack of relevant pieces of information about the family's traumatic history creates a hole in his life that is difficult for him to fill. In the story "The Pants in the Family," Adam, looking back on his experience with his parents, painfully realizes that their mysterious past will never be unearthed because of their unwillingness to confide in him. His contemplation is filled with regret at a missed opportunity:

> I wanted to know more about what had happened to him [his father] 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. [...] [T]he actual details of his life – the real adventures, not the imagined horror – were beyond my grasp, and his inclination to tell.[21]

The author's criticism, however, is aimed especially at the inauthenticity of his characters' Jewish identity caused by their ignorance of the past. Rosenbaum calls attention to their alienation from Judaism after Auschwitz, pointing to the negative effect of the

20 Aaron Hass, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 30.

21 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 48.

Holocaust in rupturing the Jewish continuity. The idea that the Holocaust is the only formative element of Jewish identity for many Jews in America is unacceptable for him, though as his stories indicate, he is forced to admit that this is the reality – a paradoxical reality, considering the fact that the extermination of Jews "took place thousand miles from America's shores."[22] Rosenbaum represents Jewish discontinuity through the characters of assimilated Jews who avow their Jewish faith and claim their Jewishness only formally.

Such inauthenticity is vividly depicted in the title story "Elijah Visible," in which the sensitive Adam is irritated by the formal, mechanical celebration of Passover. He perceives all the rituals of the Passover seder dinner, prepared by his cousins, as a mockery of the feast.[23] Instead of traditional Hebrew songs like "Dayenu," his cousins are listening to music by Elvis Costello, performing the rituals with 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 the children, ignorant of the meaning of Passover, are chasing one another through the rooms. For them, the delivery of the Jews from enslavement in Egypt is of little interest, since it lacks the dramatic charge of computer games. While the cousins' postmemory is almost erased, Adam remains attached to the family history. Yet, even his immersion in the past is not sufficient. The reader witnesses a disintegration of the post-Holocaust generation of the Posner family; the Posners are now "a far cry from the family's origins in Poland," and they are characterized as "a new generation of fragmented legacies, American torchbearers skilled in the art of cultural compromise."[24] Rosenbaum makes it clear that it is the silence of the generation of their parents, who are now dead, that lies behind their children's alienation from their Jewish roots and neglect of the family legacy. Adam appears in conflict with the other members of the family over a letter from their distant cousin Artur in Antwerp, the last living Holocaust survivor in the family. Their cousin wishes to visit them and to restore the family's continuity which has broken by the previous generation. Artur wants them to remember the mass murder of the Jews because the loss is too enormous to be forgotten. As he says in his letter, "[y]our children should know what happened. They must continue to remind the world."[25] While Adam wants to accept him, his materialistic cousins interpret Artur's wish as a mere calculating attempt to extort money from them. An ostensibly personal conflict turns into a conflict of different values, a clash between memory and forgetting, between spirituality and the materialism promoted by the pursuit of the American Dream, between rebirth and indifference. Although 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 Elijah the Prophet (who is to return in hard times to help Jews in their suffering), the archetypical messenger of God and Messiah's harbinger of redemption does not come. And yet there is a certain hope for the Posner family: the savior Elijah is impersonated by the cousin Artur (who hence assumes visible form), who is already on his way to America.[26]

22 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 2. Novick states that Holocaust survivors and their descendants form only 1 percent of the American population and attempts to explain why "[t]he Holocaust, as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity [...] has filled a need for a consensual symbol" (7).

23 Efraim Sicher explicates the motif of the feast in the story as "the vulgar travesty of ritual at a Passover *seder*." See Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005), 141.

24 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 89.

25 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 97.

26 In Royal's interview with Rosenbaum, the author points out his need of rescue, redemption, reconciliation and generally of optimism. He says: "The novelist in me seemingly rebels against the pessimism of my

An estrangement from Jewishness and Judaism also characterizes Adam Posner, now an abstract painter, in the story "Romancing the *Yohrzeit* Light." Adam neglects religion and keeps away from the synagogues in his neighborhood on the Upper West Side "as though they were virtual leper colonies."[27] Dating only *shikseh*, non-Jewish girls, and avoiding kosher food, he seems to be a literary brother to Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy. His art has nothing to do with Jewishness, and even his appearance is non--Jewish. For his late mother Esther, a Holocaust survivor with whom he had an uneasy relationship, he was a renegade, a traitor to her tragic experience. She does not realize that his alienation from his nation stems from her silence, her repression of tragic memories. As in the title story, Rosenbaum is critical of the concealment of trauma as the main cause of the young generation's alienation from Jewish traditions. But, similarly to Passover seder in "Elijah Visible," the whole scene turns into a travesty of the ritual.

Adam's remorse for having neglected Judaism (and for his alienation from Esther) culminates on the first anniversary of his mother's death, when he decides to commemorate her by the ritual of lighting a *yohrzeit* memorial candle.[28] From this moment on, the story of Adam's mourning takes on the qualities of the grotesque; since it is almost midnight, he cannot find the required *yohrzeit* candle, and eventually he manages to buy it in the most unlikely place – a Korean store. Then he cannot light it because he keeps breaking matches, and to top it all off, he does not know how to pray *kaddish*, as it "remained a mystery, like a foreign language. The Hebrew vowels and consonants just wouldn't come. He may have once known them, but no longer. Lost somewhere in some cavern of memory."[29]

The inauthenticity of Adam's religious faith, which is a recurrent subject of Rosenbaum's incisive criticism, culminates in the unexpected visit of his Swedish fashion model girlfriend Tasha, who insensitively 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 the aborted honoring of the memory of Esther. The demonstration of Adam's spiritual dislocation is rounded off by Tasha's decision to prepare a traditional Swedish celebration of Christmas. Whereas the Christmas celebration with Swedish carols, decorations and traditional meal reminds Tasha of home, Adam feels lost, homeless in his own apartment, an uprooted Jew, religiously and culturally relocated. His identity is blurred. The story leaves the 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."[30]

Rosenbaum's stories present his second-generation protagonist as a victim of the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma. Adam inherits the legacy of his parents' trauma from his early childhood, as illustrated in the cycle's final story

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personal philosophy of the nature of atrocity. The fiction writer, the storyteller, wants to leave a lesson, something to savor and preserve, a gift to his or her reader – some essential goodness or hope, even if it is something considerably less than a happy ending" (Royal, "An Interview with Thane Rosenbaum," 4).

27 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 17.

28 These candles are lit on the anniversary day of the death of a close person. They are expected to burn for 24 hours. They can be also lit on some holidays, e.g. on Yom Kippur, but their function is the same – to mourn the death of the deceased.

29 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 23.

30 Andrew Furman, "Thane Rosenbaum," in *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work. Volume II*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), 1023.

"The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights." Here Adam is a traumatized child of pre-school age, haunted by his parents' past and their apocalyptic upbringing, concentrated on the art of survival. He is brought up in a state of constant anxiety, as if the Holocaust could restart at any moment. Such an upbringing has unwanted consequences; at the kindergarten Adam appears to be isolated, deemed an odd child, viewed as "the Other." He becomes neurotic and restless (I am tempted to say a child version of Woody Allen), and extremely vulnerable due to his fragility. Used to listening to his parents' dismal stories, Adam views the teachers' happy-ending fairy tales with distrust. Rosenbaum explicitly attributes his woes to his inheritance of his parents' trauma: "Now their son seemed to know the horror, as though he had been with them – the entire experience coded in his brain, forever."[31]

Adam's otherness manifests itself in his odd, unnatural reactions. He panics during a school trip to a local police station. He instinctively does not trust policemen in their uniforms, because he sees "not much difference between shirts that were brown or blue."[32] For him policemen are his enemies, putting him on alert because he subconsciously associates their uniforms with injustice and the abuse of power. He is transformed into an unmanageable child who, at one moment, even kicks a policeman in the shin and creates commotion in the police precinct house. Although Aaron Hass asserts that "[s]urvivors, more than their offspring, are prone to unrealistic and excessive reactions to seemingly innocuous stimuli,"[33] Rosenbaum's story shows that such an inadequate response to these stimuli may be intense even among the second generation, even though the members of that generation are unaware of its 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"[34] – not only among survivors but also among their children. Rosenbaum evidently attributes the boy's unnatural reactions and distorted interpersonal functioning to the transmission of trauma, resulting in adopting his parents' behavioral patterns.

Although a school psychologist knows the cause of Adam's hysteria, she realizes she is unable to help him because, as she tells her colleague, "[t]he parents have turned this poor little boy into a concentration camp survivor, and he wasn't even in the camps!"[35] They have affected the child's sense of identity, which leads to a loss of his separate self and absorption of his parents' traumas. It is obvious that the parents' traumatic past paralyzes the child. They incessantly warn him, keep him on the alert and test his ability to survive in an emergency. He is taught to be independent, not to trust anybody. Rosenbaum, however, shows the counter-productive nature of the parents' behavior, resulting in Adam's feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and lack of self-confidence. He becomes a projection screen for their pathological behavior; their own phobias are internalized by him, hence becoming his own. In this story, the neighborhood of Washington Heights merges with Nazi Germany, and the present merges with the past. Time regression explains why Adam, after a miserable walk through the streets of Washington Heights in a winter blizzard, finds at home "two naked bodies... shuddering in the darkness. Two pairs of terrorized eyes – the withering remains of the master race."[36]

31 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 197.

32 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 198.

33 Hass, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, 31.

34 Haas, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, 31.

35 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 200.

36 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 205.

The Adam Posner of one of the strongest stories of the cycle, "An Act of Defiance," is a university teacher at Hunter College in New York, where he teaches an elective course called "The Holocaust in the Modern World." His obsession with the Holocaust is apparently the result of the transmission of trauma, though this transmission is more cultural in nature[37] – through the large body of scholarly books on the Holocaust by which he is surrounded in his small New York apartment. Despite his vicarious knowledge of the Holocaust, mediated through literature, it is evident that Adam's obsessive study of the tragedy of the Jews compensates his need to fill a void, caused by his parents' repression of their memories. Their silence surrounding their past arouses Adam's curiosity and stirs his imagination in his urgent desire to uncover the tragic part of his family history and to find out what he has missed. It is not only the gap in his knowledge of his parents' history, but also the impossibility of fully grasping their trauma that arouses his imaginative investment, shaping his postmemory. However, imagination is merely a substitute for experienced trauma. From the very beginning of the story, Rosenbaum presents Adam's endeavor as unhealthy, and he lets his protagonist live in doubts. Notwithstanding his deep commitment to the subject of his studies, Adam doubts the meaningfulness of his undersubscribed course, in which he fails to engage his apathetic students. He is disgusted by their shallow and often plagiarized essays, at times demonstrating verbal anti-Semitism influenced by racial stereotyping. Concurrently he is aware of the negative impact of his research on his psyche. On the other hand, his bleak vision of life is inevitably shaped by his depressed parents and their "[s]ilent suffering."[38] In this respect, Adam's despondency cannot be reduced only to the cultural construction of historical trauma, nourished by his extensive reading of historiographies, but it should be seen in the context of the familial transmission of trauma between two generations.

The protagonist's solitary and routine-bound bachelor life is disturbed by the arrival of his Uncle Haskell from Belgium, the last living Holocaust survivor in his family (Adam's parents are already dead). Haskell entirely subverts his nephew's artificial construct of the survivor, acquired from his readings and enhanced by his parents. In his imagination, affected by the transmission of trauma, Adam has created his own image of the Holocaust survivor. As the first-person narrator of the story, Adam confesses: "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."[39]

However, instead of a gloomy man, "a walking ghost of horrors past,"[40] Uncle Haskell turns out to be a hedonist 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."[41] On the day of his arrival, Haskell goes out on a date with a woman; the next day he makes Adam ride a bicycle in tandem in Central Park and gamble at a casino in Atlantic City. In Catherine Hezser's view, Rosenbaum "is not so much concerned with subverting the image of the survivor as

37 We can speak of collective or national trauma in this case.

38 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 66.

39 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 59.

40 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 58.

41 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 62.

a moral hero, but challenges the other common image of the survivor as a 'living corpse', devoid of any energy and will to live."[42] According to Hezser, his stories "serve to de-sacralize the image of the survivor as martyr."[43] Since Haskell does not correspond with Adam's postmemory and his notion of the Holocaust survivor as a shadowy figure and an anguished victim (an image based on his academic research and his personal experience with his parents), 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. Thus he has never agreed with Adam's father's negativistic approach to life, imbued with silent suffering and mourning.

As a matter of fact, the uncle's mission becomes to cure Adam of the sadness and melancholy that are – in Haskell's view – utterly unjustified. Adam himself is aware of the spuriousness of his sorrow, "the handicap of an unwanted inheritance"[44] 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?"
>
> "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?"[45]

The expressions such as "legacy" or "pass on" used in Adam's arguments bespeak of his awareness of the intergenerational transmission of trauma – a process which, with the following generations, could be transformed into the transgenerational transfer. Yet the uncle's arguments are also convincing; through them 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. For example, Adam is notorious for coming late to his own classes. As an excuse to his students, he justifies his tardiness as a protest against the Germans, who are well-known for their punctuality. For this purpose, he paraphrases Adorno's famous dictum "there is no poetry after Auschwitz," proclaiming "[a]fter Auschwitz, clocks no longer have hands!"[46]

Haskell's therapeutic mission involves an affirmative approach to life, and thus he avoids talking about his traumatic past, much to Adam's displeasure. Yet his optimism and vitality transform Adam, having healing effects on him. Adam comes to realize his dissatisfaction with his lonely life in which he is stalked by shadows. He gradually comes

42 Catherine Hezser, "Shoah Survivors and the Second Generation in American Jewish Writing: Bernard Malamud, Rebecca Goldstein, Thane Rosenbaum," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2002): 156.

43 Hezser, "Shoah Survivors," 159.

44 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 63.

45 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 62-63.

46 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 60.

round to his uncle's positive view of life. One of the most effective lessons Haskell gives to his nephew takes place in Central Park, which becomes the symbolic site of Adam's transformation. While cycling together, they see a teenager rob a young girl of her bike. For the protagonist, this is the moment he always longed for – "righting an injustice. Championing the oppressed. Fighting off the bully."[47] It is his chance to take revenge for his parents, thus he has feeling of his "father's ghost" lurking "somewhere in the trees at the north end of Central Park."[48] After chasing and catching the thief, Adam wants to beat him up, and it is Haskell who reminds him that the young thief is not a Nazi. This craving for revenge is not uncommon among the post-Holocaust generation. Aaron Hass gives an example of a thirty-year-old Orthodox Jew, David, who made the following confession: "In my teens I was preoccupied with the Holocaust, Nazis, and taking revenge. I would picture myself walking into a bar, spotting a former Nazi, kidnapping him, and torturing him. I had trouble concentrating in school because of my preoccupation with Nazis and revenge."[49] The incident in Central Park relocates Adam to war-stricken Europe, in which he has a second chance at revenge; he wants to vindicate the suffering of his parents, for whom he functions as a symbol of restoration.

The result of Haskell's successful mission is Adam's embracement of a new vision of life. As the protagonist observes, "I... was beginning to enjoy myself. It was a different way to see the park, to spend the afternoon, to live in New York."[50] However, not only does Haskell vitalize Adam, he also revives Adam's university course, giving a fascinating lecture on his personal Holocaust experience for the students, who are absolutely stunned by his traumatic story. In addition, Haskell's story acts as an epiphany for Adam, as it reveals to him heretofore unknown facts about his father's past and explains the reasons for his silence, sadness and depression, which were the outcome of PTSD. The 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 introductory story of the cycle, "Cattle Car Complex," may serve as model fictional treatment of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Adam Posner, a lawyer, gets stuck in a broken elevator on the 17th floor after a long day working in a Manhattan high rise office building. In the claustrophobic space of the elevator, he feels strong anxiety, and despite his rational nature he starts to panic. As a son of the Holocaust survivors, he is transformed into a prisoner of war. His personal trauma gradually merges with that of his parents; he fails to detach himself from their trauma. His Kafkaesque metamorphosis into a prisoner in a cattle car bound for Auschwitz is a manifestation of his temporal and spatial relocation when he is transferred to a different time and space: "What had once been a reliably sharp and precise lawyer's mind rapidly became undone, replaced by something from another world, from another time, the imprinting of his legacy."[51] 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. Their postmemory is in essence formed by the transfer of their

47 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 75.

48 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 75.

49 Hass, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, 28.

50 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 74.

51 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 6.

parents' experiences to them, in other words by their "inheritance." This is how Adam comes to identify totally with the suffering of these 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.[52]

The mark of Adam's (over-)identification with his parents' transportation to the camps in cattle cars is his acting out of their trauma. His hysterical screaming is similar to the screams he heard from his parents at night. His identification with his parents' sufferings deprives him of the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is hallucinatory vision. Again, as in the other stories, the ordinary American reality turns into a European territory of terror in which the only goal is to survive. Any banal external stimulus departing from everyday ordinariness may trigger a nervous breakdown; the neurotic fear of Rosenbaum's protagonist is "so debilitating that the familiar, the customary and mundane even, metamorphose into contrivances of annihilation."[53] As a result of the transmission of Holocaust trauma, Adam's everyday situations are perceived as life-threatening events. With Adam's entrapment the malfunctioning elevator becomes a site of calamity, a scene of *Shoah*.[54] Re-enacting his parents' traumatic experience, he becomes a displaced person, lost in a world full of dangers. This displacement is mirrored in his spasmodic cries in the elevator, where he is transformed into a German Jew without a home:

> "Why should we be forced to resettle? This is our home. We are Germans! We have done nothing wrong! Nazis! Murderers! Nazis! [...] 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."[55]
>
> "Liberate us! We are starving! We are skeletons, walking bones, ghosts! Get us out of this hell!"[56]

Adam Posner is rendered as a tragicomic figure, and the grotesque situation in which he finds himself reflects Rosenbaum's critical distance from his protagonist. On the one hand, the author treats Adam with understanding and empathy for the children of survivors exposed to their parents' PTSD. On the other hand, Rosenbaum deprecates the appropriation of the Holocaust by the second generation and their excessive identification with the martyrdom of its victims, showing this tendency to be counterproductive and self-destructive. Although in Burstein's view "[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

52 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 5.

53 Aarons, *What Happened to Abraham?*, 153.

54 It is worth noting that the Hebrew word "Shoah," used instead of the more common word "Holocaust," means calamity, ruin, devastation.

55 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 8.

56 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 10.

he is living in the present, between stalled elevator and cattle car,"[57] the overall tone of the story indicates that there is an *authorial* distance from what is happening to the main character.

When Adam hears the voice of an Irish night security guard from the lobby, who is trying to help him escape from the elevator, he mistakes it for the voice of God – but with the prolongation of his entrapment, he regards the guard as a perpetrator. Actually, the Irish guard symbolizes a diminishing interest in the Holocaust and the forgetting of the entire tragedy. Due to his ignorance of the horrendous historical events, Adam's screaming is incomprehensible for him, a demonstration of madness. Rosenbaum evinces that this is the result of indifference to history – with the same harmful effects as the parents' silencing of their war trauma. According to Rosenbaum, "[t]here is no worse spiritual crime than forgetfulness and amnesia."[58] Silence means that "[t]he Holocaust fades like a painting exposed to too much sun."[59] On the other hand, a Russian immigrant taxi driver who was waiting for Adam does feel an understanding for him, because he is himself a Jew, sharing cultural memory with the main character. He knows that Adam's shrieks are not foolish babble, and attempts to return Adam to reality. He also explains to the confused Irishman: "This man in elevator is not crazy [...] It is world that is crazy; he is only one of its victims. Who knows what made him like this."[60]

The climax of Adam's identification with the victims of the Holocaust happens 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 moving scene, in which Adam is unsure whether he is facing his liberators or his tormenters, testifies to his failure to work through the inherited trauma of his parents. His performative acting out of his parents' suppressed trauma suggests that the stage of working through is still closed to him – the stage in which "one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future."[61] It also bespeaks the total penetration of Holocaust imagery through imaginative investment into the mind of a man who has never actually experienced the events, but is wholly immersed in this dark part of human history. In this sense, "Cattle Car Complex" is a story about obsession caused by the intergenerational transfer of trauma, resulting in an unhealthy relocation in time and space. The metamorphosis of an elevator into a cattle car illuminates how Holocaust imagery shapes the second generation's identity, which 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

57 Janet H. Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing Since the 1980s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 66.

58 Royal, "An Interview with Thane Rosenbaum," 16.

59 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 5.

60 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 10.

61 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 22.

> 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.[62]

It is not the purpose of this study to interpret all the stories in Rosenbaum's cycle. Each of them, however, addresses the consequences of Holocaust trauma for the inner life of the survivors' children. The Holocaust itself is not at the center of Rosenbaum's focus; he is more interested in the inherited trauma of the second generation through intergenerational transfer. Adam Posner represents those whose psyche has been polluted by the "second hand smoke"[63] of the death camp crematoria. This is his response to the experience of survivors' children in the aftermath of the war. These individuals cannot make claims to the immediate trauma of their parents, but their lives have been shaped by the traumatic past. The representation of cross-generational family trauma from the vantage point of survivors' children enables Rosenbaum to convey the difficulties of the second generation's coming to terms with the legacy of these terrifying historical events. He points out the rather unhealthy effects of over-identification with the parents' trauma, leading to an obsession with the Holocaust which has a harmful impact on the protagonist's life. All the stories are interlinked by the powerful depiction of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its inauspicious influence on the relationship between children and their dysfunctional parents. On the one hand, Rosenbaum is critical of the parents' silence, remaining aware of the danger of forgetting the Holocaust, yet on the other he portrays Holocaust survivors with empathy, knowing that their silence is not only the result of the repression of trauma, but also of the inexpressible nature of their tragedy. Thus the survivors' past is impenetrable for their children; its secretive nature feeds the children's imagination, which may in fact be different from reality. Despite his empathic approach to the survivors, Rosenbaum does not support the parents' silence about the atrocities and their brooding preoccupation with depressing memories, regarding it as the cause of the alienation between generations and even an estrangement from Jewishness. After all, "[f]amily secrets always create distance and loneliness."[64] He seems to favor those Holocaust survivors who do not forget their suffering but at the same time do not put it on display. Their enjoyment of life is "an act of defiance," a form of resistance to death, because joining the "marchers in the army of the living dead," surrendering to sadness and depression, would be "a victory for the Nazis."[65]

Rosenbaum contributes substantially to writings of the second generation such as those by Melvin Jules Bukiet, Joseph Skibell, Art Spiegelman, Eva Hoffman, and many others. These authors test new possibilities of imagining the unimaginable and new ways of responding to the unexperienced trauma of the Holocaust from the perspective of the children of survivors. Through the reflection of their postmemory they attempt to convey their own post-Holocaust identity, with its special psychological burdens. Rosenbaum's work appears to be informed by theoretical concepts of trauma and its transmission. But it is necessary to stress that his stories are not mere fictionalized

62 Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*, 19.

63 Here I allude to Rosenbaum's second book *Second Hand Smoke: A Novel*, published in 1999. Also his third book *The Golems of Gotham: A Novel* (2002) relates to the Holocaust and its effect on the second generation, completing his triptych which explores the post-Holocaust world.

64 Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 129.

65 Rosenbaum, *Elijah Visible*, 66.

theories. Owing to the texts' autobiographical features, they offer a true-to-life depiction of different variants of a single character, and the mediation of traumatic experience between generations is grasped in an artistically effective manner. Moreover, in spite of Rosenbaum's concentration on the effects of trauma transfer, he does not forget that it is the Holocaust itself that has affected the family life of survivors' children. It shapes their identity and is often the cause of their mental dislocation. Therefore he persistently points out its devastating consequences, resulting in the sense of irretrievable loss which may paralyze life of the subsequent generations – generations of postmemory.

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A cattle car at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, Jerusalem (photo of the author).