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## **Trabajo Fin de Grado**

Victims, Perpetrators, and Third-Generation Quests: The  
Traumatic Legacy of the Holocaust in Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*  
and Rachel Seiffert's "Micha"

Autor/es

**ALEXANDRA POPA**

Director/es

**MARÍA JESÚS MARTÍNEZ ALFARO**

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS/ESTUDIOS INGLESES

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The word trauma was first used in the field of medicine in the seventeenth century to refer to a *physical* injury. In the nineteenth century, psychologists like Jean-Martin Charcot started to foster the study of *psychic* trauma, but it was not until 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged the traumatic syndrome and coined the term “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”. The concept has been shaped by a history of wars, racism, natural disasters and other collective catastrophes, as well as by private experiences like the sexual and domestic abuse of individuals. There have been a rising number of publications in the last decades dealing with the concept of trauma and its representation, to the point that it can be said to have become a recurrent object of study in different fields such as psychology, science, history, literature and the arts.

Contemporary trauma theory emerged in the early 1990s and was developed by some prominent scholars that have exerted a great influence on the field of literary criticism, such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman (Pellicer-Ortín<sup>223</sup>). What has come to be referred to as literary trauma theory explores the sometimes divergent but ultimately enriching relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, and, even if trauma theory has evolved across disciplines other than psychoanalysis, the relevance of the latter cannot be denied. Thus, one of the pioneering theorists in the field, Cathy Caruth, privileges psychoanalysis in her works, but also incorporates elements from philosophy and political theory, among others. As she puts it, this pathology consists in a belated response to an event that the individual could not process or interpret at the time of its occurrence precisely because of its traumatizing nature, that is, the individual was not consciously present at the moment and,

consequently, is not aware of his/her trauma (4). The traumatic experience is remembered through repeated “sensory and emotional flashbacks”, hallucinations and nightmares (Bloom 207). These repeated pathological symptoms point to the enigmatic core of trauma: “the delay or incompleteness in knowing, [...] an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event” (Caruth 5, emphasis in the original). In other words, the trauma victim will repeatedly experience the same event in very much the same way and, as a consequence, the distinction between past, present and future is disrupted. According to Dori Laub, the traumatic event does not belong to “‘normal’ reality”; it rather embodies an “otherness” characterized by “no beginning, no ending”, which points to the patient’s timeless perception because the past disturbingly and repeatedly haunts the present (“Bearing Witness”, 69).

In the context of trauma narratives, the Holocaust figures prominently. Holocaust trauma has affected survivors and their descendants, who have often turned to writing to convey their experiences. Literature has been part of the struggle for meaning carried out by Holocaust victims and has therefore been an aid to (their) survival. After years of “latency”,<sup>1</sup> there was a desperate need among the survivors to tell their stories and to keep alive the memory of the offense. However, the survivors had to face the impossibility of testimony, the difficulties inherent in telling. Drawing on the studies of Dutch psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, Bloom states that trauma is especially characterized by the decline of the brain’s dominant hemisphere of “verbal memory”, while the non-dominant —the “nonverbal visual and sensory-emotional” one—becomes more active (204). Since human beings are mediated by language and trauma prevents the victim from putting it into words, the consequence is the impossibility of fully

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<sup>1</sup>Latency, also called “incubation period”, is a Freudian term that refers to “the period of time that has passed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms” (Freud 4893). Here I am using it to refer to the immediate years after the Holocaust, when silence was the norm.

giving testimony. In spite of this, verbalizing the repressed event is crucial because only through narrative can the victim work through his/her trauma.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Holocaust survivors encountered difficulties in finding the right words or the right time to give their testimony of an event not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence and that was impossible to be held in “*thought, memory and speech*” (Laub, “Bearing Witness”<sup>63</sup>, emphasis in the original). The genocide was so terrifying that the survivors sometimes wondered whether there would be someone willing to listen, not to mention the fact that the subject was considered taboo by some and inappropriate for literary representation. But when survivors began to write about their experiences, their works were welcomed as an effective means for people to assimilate history and remember those that could not bear witness, those that were left behind.

The Holocaust has also inspired writers who have no personal connection with the events and who have tried to represent an episode of our recent history that transgressed all limits and that could seem to challenge or even transcend our imagination. As to Holocaust fiction, some voices were raised against it for considering that it was immoral and that it trivialized the event, but I would agree with those others that saw it as necessary for the same reasons as survivor testimony, and as a complement to it. Apart from the works by victims and the descendants of survivors that were haunted by their parents’ traumatic past —sometimes leading to what is known as “transgenerational transmission of trauma”<sup>3</sup>— more and more writers came to share in the collective memory of the Holocaust because of what it meant not only to the victims themselves, but also to the entire human race. These writers play the role of

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<sup>2</sup> “The survivors did not only need to survive in order to tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive.” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 63)

<sup>3</sup> According to Volkan, “when an older person unconsciously externalizes his traumatized self onto a developing child’s personality [...] the child absorbs their wishes and expectations and is driven to act on them. It becomes the child’s task to mourn, to reverse the humiliation and feelings of helplessness pertaining to the trauma of his forebears” (in Kellermann 8).

“vicarious witnesses”, which is also important when it comes to representing and negotiating Holocaust memory (Zeitlin, “The Vicarious Witness”6). It is understandable that the figure of the victim should be more recurrent in Holocaust fiction than that of the victimizer. Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* (1992) is in this line. But, as the diverse contributions to Jenni Adams and Sue Vice’s edited volume —*Representing the Perpetrator in Holocaust Literature and Film* (2013)— suggest, there has recently been a “turn to the perpetrator” which frames works like Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room*(2001) and the imaginative projects of other authors who, like her, choose to deal with the perpetrators and their personal or collective traumas in the light of related issues such as Germany’s national shame and guilt by association.

Although testimonies seem to be more reliable and have received less criticism, Holocaust fiction becomes all the more necessary if one considers that someday there would no longer be direct witnesses that can tell their stories. Fiction can recreate the plights of victims, perpetrators, and their descendants by resorting to similar strategies, as we will see when analyzing Yolen’s *BriarRose* and Seiffert’s “Micha” (one of the stories in *The Dark Room*). There is usually in fiction, as in testimonies, an emphasis on the difficulty in finding the right words to express what defies verbalization, there are gaps and ambiguity, and there is also the paradox of mixing aesthetic pleasure and horror, or the problematics surrounding the reader’s involvement and his/her empathy. These works present fictional characters and plots, but they are always inextricably linked with history. They try to depict the traumatizing nature of the events they recreate, conveying the effects of trauma by resorting to fragmented narrative voices, incomplete stories, disrupted chronological time, conflicting emotions, silence and muteness, repetitions and, in the case of the two narratives to be analyzed here, also an intermingling of the verbal and the visual, of words and photographic images, more prominent in Seiffert, but also present in Yolen’s work.

This essay focuses on the plight of the third generation and on how they negotiate the burden of the past. My analysis is aimed at showing the points in common as well as the particularities of each narrative, one focused on the victim's and the other on the perpetrator's side of the events. In the case of Yolen's *Briar Rose*, the protagonist is the granddaughter of a Holocaust victim determined to find out about the past of her grandma Gemma —a traumatized survivor who was never able to tell about her experiences, except through a distorted version of the tale "Briar Rose". In the case of Seiffert's *The Dark Room*, I will focus on the last of the three novellas that make up the book, "Micha", which deals with the title character's attempt to discover the extent of the involvement of his grandfather Askan in the crimes of Nazism. The narratives depict characters —belonging to both the second and third generations— in a post-Holocaust period, when the events and traumas of the past are still present in culture and society and contribute to shaping their identities as descendants of victims (Yolen) or perpetrators (Seiffert). The differences between the two generations are easily perceived in both texts. The second generation silences the past of their parents and deny the traumatic experience, thus making for the formation of a "phantom" that is passed on to the next generation.<sup>4</sup> The third generation feels more intensely the burden of their family history and, in contrast with the second generation, the young are driven by the urge to know about the past and break the silence. The reader can see their evolution and, with it, the process of working through the trauma affecting their families, as will be explained more in depth in what follows.

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<sup>4</sup>I am relying on Nicolas Abraham's notion of the "phantom", which refers to a "secret buried alive" in the previous generation's unconscious and which disturbingly haunts the young (173).

## II. JANE YOLEN'S *BRIAR ROSE*

One of the most repeated quotations in the context of the Holocaust and its literary representation is Adorno's famous dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (in Weil 90). What Adorno meant is that the Holocaust is incompatible with something that gives pleasure, such as the aesthetic pleasure of poetry/literature. Later on, Adorno modified his statement and more and more support was given to the view that, through literature, one can make sense of this incomprehensible event, bring it "to the human realm and [...] give the tortured person back his human form" (Weil 90-91).

In *Briar Rose*, Yolen approaches the Holocaust by resorting to the fairy tale genre, as already suggested by the novel's title. It may seem problematic to deal with the Holocaust through a fairy tale, but fairy tales and traumatic experiences are far from being unconnected. Fairy tales have been regarded as "escapist or satanic or useless" (Hanlon 140), but there are also scholars, such as Bruno Bettelheim and Jack Zipes among others, that insist on their having a therapeutic value. They reveal the patterns of our psyche, help to cope with fears and terrors, and are an aid to transformation—the pattern of the hero's quest which many of them present may be associated with the process of healing.

Fairy tales are told and retold, passed from one generation to the next. In Yolen's novel, the retelling of the tale "Briar Rose" ("Sleeping Beauty") by Gemma to his granddaughters relates the repetition of fairy tales to the repetition of trauma. The timeless (mythical) time of fairy tales is linked in the novel with the way in which Gemma remains trapped in the past: she transforms the tale to voice her experience but remains unable to tell about it otherwise, and thus unable to close the chapter on a past that is made (compulsively) present every time she retells the story. Her survival is, in a sense, predicated on her ability to find a means of expressing her

trauma, narrative being in that way part of her working through process. And yet, she seems incapable of connecting her favorite tale with a past she does not seem to be fully aware of, but that haunts her unconscious. When she dies, her granddaughter Becca will start an investigation into Gemma's past in order to fill in the gaps and arrange the information chronologically, which will finally show the tale to be an indirect account of the traumatic experiences that have affected Gemma and her family for decades. In this way, Yolen succeeds in preserving the memory of the Holocaust past in the present and finds a way of escaping, when telling the story, the harsh details that are part of it. Unlike other genres that favor directness, the fairy tale genre employs metaphors, symbols and indirect depictions, which make it an appropriate means to both tell about and soften the incomprehensible horrors of the Holocaust. Just as Gemma created her own version of "Briar Rose" in order to indirectly narrate her experience in Chelmno and cope with her trauma, so does the novel recreate traumatic events that are brought closer to and simultaneously kept at a safe distance from the reader (Landwehr 158).

Yolen's novel is divided into three parts entitled "Home", "Castle" and "Home Again", which echo Campbell's structure of the hero's quest.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the first and the third sections alternate two narrative threads: 1) in the even-numbered chapters and narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, there is Rebecca Berlin's quest into the past of her grandmother, which she begins shortly after the latter's death; 2) the odd-numbered chapters, written in italics, consist of fragments of the fairy tale "Briar Rose" as compulsively told and retold by Gemma to her granddaughters —Shana, Sylvia and Becca— at different times of their lives. These chapters, where Gemma is the homodiegetic narrator, function as flashbacks in relation to the even-numbered chapters. Even if the time and place of Gemma's story-telling change, the

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<sup>5</sup>"The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*, which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth." (Campbell 28)



tale remains the same. This changelessness through time (somehow evocative of the past made present of trauma, repeatedly and in the same way) contrasts with Becca's investigation moving forward, which gradually throws light on what is behind Gemma's tale. For its part, the second section of the novel deals with the narration of Josef Potocki, another Holocaust victim who tells Becca about the war and the time he spent with *Ksiezniczka*,<sup>6</sup> Becca's grandmother.

Having explained the structure of the novel, I will deal with these three storylines in what follows, focusing first on Gemma's version of the tale, then on Becca's quest and, finally, on Josef Potocki. I will explain, in this way, Gemma's traumatic experience and its transmission, until the third generation is finally able to decipher the trauma told through the tale, thus closing the chapter on the past and rescuing it from oblivion with the help of the also traumatized survivor Josef Potocki.

The novel begins with Gemma being asked by her little granddaughters to tell them "again" the story of "Sleepin Boot" (Yolen 3), which advances Yolen's successful incorporation of the notion of trauma into a fairy tale by alluding to repetition, as well as to the disrupted chronology of a past that is not past reflected in Gemma's beginning of the story: "Once upon a time [...] which is all times and no times but not the very best of times" (Yolen 4). As the only thing Gemma tells about the past is contained in her tale, her granddaughters will be her only witnesses. Silence about the past defines Gemma's relationship with her own daughter: it is not clear how much Gemma forgot and how much she silenced to protect those she loved, but when Gemma was alive, her daughter never asked her about her past, and, in this way, what Bar-On calls a "double wall" of silence (328) was built between them (the survivor does not tell, the descendant does not ask).

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<sup>6</sup> Polish word for "princess".

Out of Gemma's three granddaughters, Becca is the only empathic listener. Her elder sisters fail as witnesses, regarding Gemma as a senile woman with an "obsessive-compulsive" behavior (Yolen 13, 31). Bearing witness involves a process of "*re-externalizing*" and reliving the traumatic experience, and if there is not "the intimate and the total presence of the *other*", which is the listener, the level of testimony is not reached" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 67-70, emphasis in the original). This listener can "feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within" (58), which is what Becca will do.

As mentioned above, resorting to indirectness by means of metaphors and other rhetorical devices makes the process of testimony possible and bearable. In Gemma's tale, there is a "*badfairy*", but she wears black boots and "*silver eagles*" on her hat, which makes her a representation of the Nazis. She comes and curses the "*princess*" and all her relatives and community. Gemma is herself the princess and the curse stands for the implementation of the extermination plan but also, I would say, for the traumatic pathology that Gemma suffers from, for the legacy of the Holocaust that has affected survivors and their descendants. The "*mist*" and the "*sleep*" brought about by the bad fairy refer to the death by gassing of so many camp inmates. The princess was "*not able to wake up for a hundred years*", which evokes the long-lasting effects of trauma. There is the already-mentioned sense of timelessness when Gemma glosses that a hundred years is "*forever*" (Yolen 34, 44, emphasis in the original): she will never be able to fully recover from her past and others did actually sleep forever in the sense that they lost their lives before the Germans were defeated.

The castle where the princess is trapped and where "*a briary hedge began to grow, with thorns as sharp as barbs*" represents the death camp of Chelmno, known as the *Schloss*, which means castle in German because there was a castle there in real life which the Nazis converted into their base camp during the war. Furthermore, Gemma says that "*no one cared to know*

*about the sleeping folk inside*” (Yolen 58-59, emphasis in the original), which emphasizes the responsibility of those who made the Holocaust possible not only by actively contributing to the deaths of many, but also by doing nothing when something could have been done. A prince comes to the castle, and resurrects Briar Rose with a kiss. As we will later learn from Josef Potocki, a homosexual who joined a group of partisans near Chelmno, he was the one that found Gemma in a mass grave, half dead, and breathed into her mouth to keep her alive. She woke up with no memories at all, except for the fairy tale “Briar Rose”, so he called her *Ksiezniczka*. Josef plays the role of the prince and he also stands for the figure of the witness/survivor who has seen the deaths of many and must tell their stories to the world, since he feels responsible for keeping alive the memory of those that did not survive (Yolen 19). By making the prince a homosexual, in love not with Gemma but with the partisan she begins a relationship with, Yolen gives another twist to the traditional tale. Gemma’s love is killed and she, already pregnant, manages to get forged papers and escape to the States. In Gemma’s retelling of the tale, there is accordingly no reference to the prince living “happily ever after” with the princess and her baby (Becca’s mother). Moreover, when Gemma says that “happily ever after means exactly what it means” (Yolen 239), the idea that is conveyed is that this applies only to the world of fairy tales, and not to the more real, and infinitely harsher experiences that she tells through a tale that is not quite a fairy tale, but her version of one in order to narrate traumatizing events that cannot be narrated otherwise.

Becca will have to struggle with her grandmother’s traumatic experience and finish the process of working through that she started but never completed. Suspecting that there is more to the tale than it seems, she decides to find out what lies beneath its surface in order to give Gemma’s life-story the closure that she was looking for until she died. Her adventure takes the

form of a quest that begins when, on her deathbed, her grandmother assures her that she is Briar Rose, the princess of the tale, and makes her promise that she will find the castle.

After Gemma's burial, Becca is given a mysterious box that her grandmother never showed to her family. The wooden box, decorated with briars and roses, contains some clues to Gemma's past: photographs, newspaper clippings, official documents showing other names Gemma used and a ring with the inscription "JMP 1928" (Yolen 31) on the inside. Now that she has a point of departure, Becca gets determined to solve the mystery.

Historical documents and photographs are recurrent elements in fictional works about the Holocaust. Since there is a polemical debate concerning authenticity and empathy, authors frequently recur to historical and reliable proof to demonstrate that their stories are not mere fantasy but are anchored in history (Landwehr 154). Nowadays, most of what we know about the Holocaust comes from survivors/witnesses' accounts and visual records, so we should agree that the latter have also helped in the development of "postmemory" (Hirsch 106). The photos and documents Becca finds are proof of a past that needs to be uncovered and that starts becoming an obsession for the girl. She is even haunted by some parts of Gemma's fairy tale, which she hears as an echo of her dead grandma's telling of it in the form of flashbacks and repetitions. The silence about the past of forebears is potentially as traumatizing for descendants as an overexposure to it. In the end, Becca has to admit that Gemma had a pathology and her way of coping with the effects that the silenced past may have on her is to try and find out what caused that pathology, that is, to unbury the past.

For that reason, she travels with her boss, Stan, to Fort Oswego (New York), which was a camp for Holocaust refugees in the 1940s, and there she meets another survivor, Harvey Goldstein, who, like Gemma, has his own personal trauma. The photo that Becca shows of her

grandmother “makes the old nightmares real” again because he also appears in it (Yolen 82), but Harvey does not remember or maybe does not want to remember anything.

Later on, Becca and Stan are able to find out that Gemma was interned in a Polish extermination camp, so she decides to go to Chelmno, where she is aided —like the hero is aided by helpers during his quest— by a young Polish translator, Magda, who helps her understand “the effects of the repressed horrors of Poland’s past” (Hanlon 156). The people in Chelmno are not willing to talk with her about their past, choosing silence instead. According to Horowitz, the traumatic nature of the event resulted in the displacement of human language to the point that it ended in silence (38), and this silence can pervade through time, affecting subsequent generations. Thus, silent characters, like Harvey and the villagers, are frequently present in Holocaust narratives in contrast with others like the village priest who talks with Becca, convinced as he is that putting traumatic events into words purifies one’s soul (Yolen 144).

Becca soon discovers that there was a castle in Chelmno, the *Schloss*, and that the camp was a place where the prisoners, including Gemma, were brought “only for death” (Yolen 146). It seems that the more we read about Becca’s quest, the more connections can be established between Gemma’s Holocaust past and the fairy tale she told, to the point that, in the end, both narratives fuse into one another and blend with the story of Josef Potocki, where present and past, fantasy and reality become one (Martínez-Alfaro, “Masking and Narrative Trauma” 195).

As pointed out earlier, the testimony of Josef Potocki —another helper figure— constitutes the second section of the novel, “Castle”. It is worth mentioning that he narrates his own story as a tale, an in the third person, a device which functions as a defense mechanism that allows him to detach himself from the traumatic events he recounts. At the same time, though, his narration also contains explicit descriptions of suffering, persecution and mass murder. He

tells how he saved Gemma by giving her the kiss of life after she was gassed and thrown into a mass grave. He also tells how Gemma married a partisan he was secretly in love with, Avenger, who died shortly after their marriage. Her amnesia and her circumstances account for her using different names: Genevieve Stein, Gilt Rose Mandelstein or Dawna Prinz, all connected with “Eden, fairy tale princesses, and rebirth” (Hanlon 159). In the end, when he learned that she was pregnant, he gave her his ring and let her use his surname, and Gemma fled to America as Eva Potocki.

In the last three chapters of the novel we see Becca coming back home —echoing the hero’s return at the end of his quest—and admitting that she has discovered “most of the story, but not all” (Yolen 236), which takes us back to the recurrent gaps in trauma narratives. However, this “most of the story” is enough for her to continue the process of working through that her grandmother unconsciously began when she took refuge in a fairy tale. After becoming herself a witness to the events by means of first-hand testimonies by survivors, photographs, documents, and on-the-ground research, Becca feels that she has the right to publish Gemma’s story in the magazine she works for. Thus, she will further involve herself in the task remembering the victims, while she also gives her grandmother and her family the possibility to heal the wounds of the past. I would argue that the novel has a hopeful ending, which also resorts to fairy tale conventions in that Becca and her boss get involved in a romantic relationship and will “get to happily ever after eventually” (Yolen 237). The suffering caused by the traumatic past will not disappear overnight, but they are now better equipped to negotiate it and offer the next generation a life with no “phantoms” in it.

### III. RACHEL SEIFFERT'S "MICHA"

"Micha" is the third and last novella in *The Dark Room*, a work which depicts the different lives and perspectives of three generations of Germans living before, during and after World War II. It successfully portrays the evolution of the German nation through the years. As a half-German writer, Seiffert mixes her family's past (on her mother's side), historical research and fictional characters and events, focusing on the perpetrator's perspective. In the past, the figure of the victimizer was not a frequent object of literary representation, probably because it is easier to empathize with the victims and because the focus on Holocaust perpetrators was seen as morally unfair and risky, as there is always the danger of confusing understanding with exculpation. However, the last decades have witnessed a new interest in perpetrator trauma, as well as in the way in which "past acts of victimization can affect succeeding generations of the victimizer's family" (Martínez-Alfaro, "This is my Opa" 117). Seiffert's novel deals with the perpetrator side of the event in a way that avoids "falling into the equally treacherous alternatives of demonization or exculpation" (Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales" 216). In what follows, I will explain Micha's evolution in working through his family's trauma and his efforts to unbury a silenced past, as Becca does in Yolen's narrative.

In "Micha", as in the rest of the novel, the style reflects the difficulty inherent in narrating traumatic events, just as happens in testimonies. The heterodiegetic narrator is like a camera eye that produces a cold and detached narrative, but that conveys Micha's painful efforts to scrutinize the past and his failure to produce a coherent account of it. The narrative is fragmentary, made up of paragraphs which abound in ellipses and hyphens and which are separated from one another by blank spaces. Interior monologue, in italics, is interspersed with heterodiegetic narration, in roman type, and sentences are recurrently short. Seiffert's style has

been described as “photographic writing”, used as an “answer to the emotional paralysis experienced by the characters” (Tollance 293). Zeitlin refers to the ironic impartiality this style conveys as something that makes it easier to avoid the risk of falling into unnecessary justifications and explanations on the part of the descendants of perpetrators, as in Micha’s case (“Imaginary Tales” 223).

The action in “Micha” takes place in the late 1990s and deals with the third generation descendant of a Nazi perpetrator, Askan Boell (Micha’s Opa). A double wall of silence was erected between Askan and his children (Micha’s mother and uncle, representatives of the second generation), which Micha will try to pull down. Micha often asks himself “*why now?*” (Seiffert 228, emphasis in the original), which suggests that he feels confused about why he has this urge to know now and why he never asked before. In contrast with the second generation, Micha and his sister Luise are willing to break the silence of decades, even if they know that it will be disturbing. His family discourages them to do so because they do not want to change the (partial) image of Askan they have constructed. While Micha gets more and more engrossed with his research, Luise gives up because she wants to please her family and remember Opa as he is presented in the family album: a loving husband, father and grandfather.

Oma’s accidental mentioning that Opa Askan was a Waffen SS, together with a photo of of him that Micha steals from the family album, is what triggers Micha’s traumatic symptoms: flashbacks of his grandfather, nightmares and obsessive-compulsive behavior. Now that the secret is revealed, Micha starts feeling guilty, ashamed of his grandfather, and angry with his grandmother. He stops visiting her, distances himself from his family and neglects his German-Turkish girlfriend Mina (Seiffert 236). His life is disrupted and given a new center: finding out whether or not his grandfather was a murderer.



Even more prominently than in *Briar Rose*, photography is a key element in the narrative as the book's title itself already refers to the room where pictures are developed, suggesting also a figurative dark corner where memories and secrets are well hidden. Thus, photography stands for something that displays and hides at the same time. The pictures of Opa show the connection of the private sphere of the family with history, while they also link the past and the present. Other photos of Opa with Micha as a child represent something that is long gone but is still a source of remembrance, "the only secure evidence that attests to one's existence" (Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales" 225) or what Barthes calls the "*that-has-been*" (77, emphasis in the original). Having observed similarities between a video of Hitler and his pictures of Opa, Micha sees beyond the family album, and dismantles the family myth it represents. The detail that they have in common is that both Hitler and Opa averted their eyes from the camera, which the protagonist sees as a sign of guilt and shame. This detail can be interpreted in the light of what Barthes calls "*punctum*",<sup>7</sup> to the point that Micha starts to see his grandfather in an uncanny way as a consequence of the "inassimilable nature of traumatic content" (Ganteau 28): sometimes he is just Opa, but other times Micha sees a Nazi murderer. As Rau puts it, "'Micha' is about the difficulty of reconciling the private family album with the larger historical image of national guilt" (310).

"Micha" is narrated in seven sections<sup>8</sup> that comprise the protagonist's journeys from home to Belarus and back. Apart from illustrating the typical structure of the hero's quest, albeit in a fragmented way, these repeated journeys also convey the destabilizing effects of a trauma generated by the pervading secrecy over the past of Micha's grandfather and the impact of his

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<sup>7</sup> According to Roland Barthes, the *punctum* of a photograph is "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26). This element, a detail which has a subjective meaning, overwhelms the spectator and changes his/her first view and interpretation of the picture.

<sup>8</sup> 'Home, Autumn 1997', 'Belarus, Easter 1998', 'Home, Spring 1998', 'Belarus, Summer 1998', 'Home, Winter 1998', 'Belarus, Spring 1999' and 'Home: Spring'.

suddenly finding out about it. Led by his urge to know, he travels to the Belarusian village where Askan spent the last part of the war and meets Jozef Kolesnik —a Nazi collaborator who is not ready to talk about the past because of his feelings of guilt and shame, and who also averts his eyes from the camera when Micha takes a picture of him. It is only after Micha's second journey that he and Kolesnik, who can speak German, are able to have a conversation which, even if extremely fragmented, eventually leads to the mutual revelation of their secrets: that Micha is trying to find out about his Nazi grandfather and that Kolesnik first translated and then killed under Nazi orders. As Horowitz states, the most important weapon of the Nazis was language because it had the power to silence and annul a nation: what was atrocious was made to appear heroic through language and morally reprehensible acts were encoded in a vague idiom (157). In Seiffert's story, by contrast, Kolesnik tells (in German) without masking the truth, giving precise and direct answers on the massacre in which he participated because he has been ostracized all his life and eventually feels the need to tell, once and for all. Moreover, he does not seek forgiveness because, in the end, "who is there to forgive [him]?" (Seiffert 335). The Holocaust is often remembered as an event without a witness because, apart from the "delusional ideology" imposed by the Nazis, most witnesses were killed or traumatized in a way that made language ineffectual (Laub, "An Event Without a Witness" 75-81). In contrast with her husband, Kolesnik's wife Elena remains shrouded in silence. She considers herself a victim of both the Communists and the Nazis, who were equally cruel to her. Being the sister of a collaborator, and the wife of another, she hovers between the position of victim and perpetrator, and the fact that she does not speak German makes her unable to converse with Micha. Though Kolesnik once translates to Micha the little she is able to tell, she remains, most of the time, a silent witness to their conversations and her silence powerfully conveys her life-long suffering.

When the protagonist shows the old man the photo of Askan that he stole from his grandmother's family album, he does not get the answer he was looking for. To Micha's question "*did you see my Opa do anything?*" (Seiffert 362, emphasis in the original), Kolesnik replies that he never saw him killing any Jew, but that he remembers well those that refused to kill, and Askan Boell was not one of them. Although the answer is not as definitive as if he had seen Askan shooting, Micha goes back to Germany feeling the unbearable burden that his grandfather was a murderer or, in any case, someone that ordered others to kill which, for Micha, is very much the same.

In the last section "*Home:Spring*", we see Micha going to visit his Oma Kaethe after a long estrangement. He has taken some time to assimilate the fact that his grandfather was a Nazi perpetrator and, after he forgives him for being so and his grandmother for living under the pretense that he was not, Micha starts the process of working through. This last visit suggests that Micha is now looking towards the future rather than the past because this time he is not alone. He and Mina have had a daughter, whom he is now ready to introduce to her great-grandmother. The fact that the protagonist never visited her before, or that he never let her meet his child Dilan earlier, suggests that he was still caught in a process of denial, pain and silence. With the passing of time, though, he realizes that it is necessary to accept the past of his forebears because only in this way his daughter will not be affected by their secrets. The first step in working through a transmitted trauma is to negotiate and talk about what caused it. In this way, he takes the little girl to meet her past because secrecy and silence is what makes for the formation of a "phantom", according to Abraham's theory (171). In the last scene we see how, as Martínez-Alfaro observes, "Kaethe and Dilan, the past and the future, wave at one another and Micha makes their meeting possible, in the present" ("This is my Opa" 128). As in Yolen's work, there is hope in the end, though Micha's suffering is presented as more intense

and disrupting than Becca's. Both fail to find answers to all their questions, but both manage to cope with the past and go on with their lives.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Holocaust was one of the most traumatizing events ever. After a period of silence, the victims started to narrate their traumatic experiences in the first Holocaust narratives, which took the form of testimonies and *memoirs*. Yet the event was so unprecedented that it did not only affect the victims and their families, and so, it was also addressed by writers who saw it as part of our collective memory. A later development in the history of Holocaust representation has been the rising interest in the figure of the Nazi perpetrator, his descendants and even the figure of the ordinary German.

Holocaust fiction was questioned at first, but it kept on being written and was increasingly seen as a welcomed addition to other kinds of Holocaust literature. Authors like Yolen and Seiffert blend fictional stories and characters with historical events in order to depict the traumas that the Holocaust can cause in the victims, the perpetrators and their descendants. In *Briar Rose* and "Micha", the reader is shown the transgenerationally transmitted traumas affecting the main characters, who are marked by the silenced pasts of their grandparents. Willing to break this silence, each of them initiates a quest towards that traumatizing past in order to exorcise the phantom haunting their families.

Despite the differences between the two works, the impossibility, or rather the extreme difficulty of narrating traumatic events can be seen in both. This unrepresentability, according to Horowitz, functions as "a self-critique in the fictional narratives", which informs "the fabric and texture of the works themselves" (39). In *Briar Rose*, trauma is perceived as lying beneath the

fairy tale and its metaphors. Thus, characterized by indirectness, the fairy tale permits Gemma to verbalize her trauma without fully facing it. As to “Micha”, the events are narrated in a direct, unsophisticated and impersonal way that brings about a denunciation of conceptions of identity and origins (Tollance295), and that makes for reflection on the guilt felt by perpetrators’ descendants, who did not participate in the events, and even by the German nation as a whole. Moreover, both works present a fragmented structure full of gaps, silences, flashbacks and repetitions, typical of trauma narratives.

Photographs, videos and historical documents are also important elements in Holocaust fiction, since they are to the characters, as for us in real life, a window into the past. They are significantly present in the works discussed here, although they are more prominently so in Seiffert’s novella. According to Hirsch, unlike public images, “family photos [...] would tend to diminish distance, bridge separation and facilitate identification” (116). In this sense, Micha’s pictures of his Opa are much more a source of torment than the pictures of Gemma are for Becca. In both narratives, words, photographs, documents and personal belongings link the present and the past, providing the stories with a double temporal focus. Both works contain instances of characters giving testimony (Potocki in *Briar Rose*, Kolesnik in “Micha”) and both narratives feature, also, silent characters for whom the past is still too harsh to be talked about.

Yolen and Seiffert give voice to the traumas of several characters through multiple narrative threads and perspectives. They “reinforce the importance of the particular (as opposed to the general) stories that focus on the individual experience”, in contrast with the Nazi concept of the individual as merely a number (Ordonez 12). Through their investigation —presented as a quest— into their family history, the third generation of victims and perpetrators struggle in both narratives to find some closure to the traumatic past affecting themselves and their families, a past which is also part of history and, in that sense, it is our past as well. Yolen and Seiffert thus

place the reader within the experience of others, which is brought closer through fiction, while they also give him/her a chance to participate in the duty never to forget the Holocaust —an event that made for a rethinking of what it is to be human and what human beings can do, or bear.

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