

## Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels.

The origin of a story is always an absence.  
Jonathan Safran Foer

Born into a family started by the children of survivors, we talked about life. What came before was not so much unspoken as it was relegated to all that was past. And yet somehow, despite this, I cannot recall a time when I did not understand in my blood, that above all else the one thing I must do was remember. But remember what?  
Nicole Krauss

The painful ramifications of the Holocaust, as a watershed event in human history, extend well beyond the generations that actually lived through it – or perished because of it. Much groundbreaking research has already been done on the psychological condition of the children of Holocaust survivors – the so-called “2Gs” (members of the second generation) in the words of Melvin Jules Bukiet.<sup>1</sup> However, what few commentators have considered so far is the impact of the Holocaust on the later generations – those who were neither themselves, nor their parents, directly affected by the war, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this traumatic past. While their existential position could be construed – rather facilely – as merely the next step in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, their ontological status is sufficiently different from that of the second generation to require a different terminology if one wishes to describe their cognitive and affective situation. What I particularly wish to consider here is how that situation influences the literary work of third-generation Jewish American authors – specifically Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), and Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love* (2005) – as they try to recreate a devastating past that lies beyond the pale of their own experiences. The novels of third-generation authors, I argue, are haunted by what Jacques Derrida called traces, the spectral elements that are at once concealed and discernable within the text as absent presences. In Foer’s and Krauss’s work, such traces occasion the seemingly illusory attempts by characters, as well as by their authors, to undo the past via fiction and keep history at bay.

### 1. The Generations That Come After

Few today would dispute the process of a trans- or intergenerational transfer of trauma<sup>2</sup>, though members of the second generation might flinch at the very idea of such a transmission of traumatic memory. Eva Hoffman notes:

As with ‘trauma,’ or ‘second generation’ itself, I half balk at the phrases and their implicit reification of tenuous, intricate, and, yes, rich internal experiences. For much of my life, I would have dismissed the underlying notion as well, and with considerable impatience. For who, after all, wants to think of oneself as traumatized by one’s very parentage, as having drunk victimhood, so to speak, with one’s mother’s milk? And yet, the phrases do refer to real phenomena. For of course, the conditions of survivors’ lives, their psychic states and scars, could not but affect or infect those around them, their children most of all (60-61).

These “children of the Holocaust,” as Helen Epstein calls them, tend to suffer – less outspokenly – from some of the symptoms that affect their parents, ranging from depression, grumpiness, nightmares, and panic attacks based on irrational fears, to obsessive compulsive behavior, over-protectiveness, emotional numbing, and feelings of guilt.<sup>3</sup> One mechanism to account for this intergenerational transfer of trauma is “empathic unsettlement” or a *virtual*

experience of trauma which, according to Dominick LaCapra, affects every willing listener to testimonies about crises (125). Needless to say, the children of survivors, those closest to the victims, will be most amenable to such empathy. In fact, the incessant confrontation with stories about the European horror can unsettle the children to such an extent that they even live and act out their parents' past *vicariously* via an unwholesome process of over-identification (LaCapra 125).<sup>4</sup> A transfer of trauma via empathic unsettlement evidently requires some form of testimony. However, such a testimonial transfer is not a *sine qua non* for the occurrence of intergenerational effects. The mere condition of being raised in a family burdened by trauma proves sufficient for an impact on the offspring. In fact, when Holocaust victims will not or cannot bear witness, the corollaries for the next generation may be even worse and more outspoken due the obsession that arises with the black hole, the hidden horror in their family history. As Dina Wardi points out: "Their [parents'] silence left a terrible vacuum in the children's hearts, and they had no choice but to fill it with fantasies and dreams that they wove out of fragments of information" (187-88).<sup>5</sup>

While a transmission of trauma to the third and later generations is not very likely on the basis of these mechanisms – except perhaps, as some geneticists believe today, via an additional mechanism: that of a purely biological or "epigenetic" transfer<sup>6</sup> – the generations after the second do seem to share the former's obsession with a past they never experienced. One should be wary, however, of an uncritical application of the term "trauma" to describe the condition of the third and later generations – one needs to respect the ontological difference between victims who actually survived a traumatic event like the Holocaust or other crises, and later generations who were never directly confronted with such events. An equation of their respective experiences would erode the very concept of trauma, turning it into an almost meaningless catch-all category that includes both lived and imagined experience. Needless to say, this would not only do a great disservice to the concept of trauma, but there is also the danger that survivor trauma itself is thereby demeaned. While the second generation can still be called traumatized, not by the Holocaust itself but by its after-effects (a re-traumatization by their traumatized parents), this is no longer the case for those later generations whose psyches are not damaged by growing up in a dysfunctional family. Because of these significant differences between first, second, and later generations' responses to the Holocaust, one needs a new terminology to distinguish the third generation's unsettlement, which inevitably relies on the imagination, from the actual experiences of the first generation. That is why Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is such a useful tool to describe the situation of the generations that come after, those to whom the term "trauma" can no longer be applied unproblematically. Postmemory, Hirsch explains, is

a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterizes 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 (22).

It is, in other words, an obsession with a past that one never experienced but that continues to haunt one's existence. While Hirsch coined the term specifically in reference to the second generation's mnemonic activity, I believe it achieves additional pertinence as the generational distance grows and the personal connections to the events of the *Shoah* become increasingly diaphanous. Whereas members of the second generation are no longer witnesses to *events* but witnesses to other witnesses (that is, secondary witnesses to their parents' testimonies), those of the third and later generations can only witness *documents* (written or filmic) or any other

surviving artifacts, as the actual witness survivors are swiftly disappearing. As a result, third generation members increasingly become what Norma Rosen, some time ago, called “witnesses through the imagination” (10).

Not surprisingly, Jewish American authors of the so-called “Post-Roth generation” (Zakrzewski xx) – also named, somewhat gratuitously, “the New Yiddishists” (Sax) – authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Judy Budnitz, Dara Horn, and Joseph Skibell, among others, revisit almost obsessively the traumatic histories that took place before their time. William Deresiewicz reads this tendency rather negatively as occasioned by the fact that

American Judaism has long been beset by a deep sense of banality and inauthenticity. To the usual self-contempt of the liberal middle class is added the feeling that genuine Jewish life is always elsewhere ... The most visible of the current generation of self-consciously Jewish novelists appear to be avoiding their own experience because their own experience just seems too boring. What is there to say about it? Better to write about a time or place where there was more at stake.

Even if Deresiewicz’s interpretation of these authors’ psychological motives is correct, I’m not sure his assessment qualifies as the scathing criticism it is intended to be. Should Jewish novelists really peer into their own umbilici when such a rich though devastating history is staring them right in the face? Are they not, by contrast, morally obligated to commemorate the many lives that were lost before they were born – an ethical imperative expressed in this article’s second epigraph by Krauss? Indeed, each of the Jewish authors mentioned here responds to this ethical imperative to commemorate, and its immediate effect is the haunting of their novels by traces, by spectral presences whose lives were lost because of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> These elusive characters and traumatic historical events are evoked but never looked at directly; they are metonymically resuscitated in an attempt to counter the frustrating inevitability of destructive historical processes.<sup>8</sup>

## *2. Everything is Illuminated*

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s postmodernist classic, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), a Jewish American novelist named Jonathan Safran Foer tries, with the help of his Ukrainian translator Alex, to locate the woman who presumably saved his grandfather Safran from the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* that razed the Ukrainian shtetl of Trachimbrod. This autobiographically inspired story originated from Foer’s own travels to the Ukraine just after his junior year at Princeton (Codde “Transmitted” 64-65). Although Foer managed to locate the site of Trachimbrod, all that was left of the shtetl was a memorial stone in a vacant field, just a bleak trace of an erstwhile vibrant Jewish community. For lack of any tangible evidence to corroborate the story about his grandfather, Foer decided to indulge in a postmemorial invention of the lives lived and lost in Trachimbrod, and this became his critically acclaimed bestseller *Everything is Illuminated*.

The invention of Trachimbrod’s checkered history starts with the imaginative creation of Brod, Jonathan’s earliest ancestor, and it culminates in the tragedy that destroys not only the entire shtetl, but also grandfather Safran’s family. Jonathan does not really *know* any of this, of course, so he starts imagining his grandfather’s life on the basis of the latter’s diary and pictures: convinced that he sees teeth when he looks at his grandfather’s baby pictures, Jonathan presumes that his grandfather was not properly breastfed, *therefore* he received insufficient amounts of calcium, *therefore* the calcium was drawn from the bones in his

grandfather's right arm, which subsequently went limp, and he *therefore* provoked older women's commiseration and became the sexual toy boy of dozens of mistresses (165-66). Needless to say, none of this is mentioned in the grandfather's diary; these are just Jonathan's preposterous leaps of imagination. What we see happening here is Foer's metafictional staging of his own artistic project, as he shows the hand of the novelist at work during the postmemorial invention of his characters' lives on the basis of a few material remnants.

The pivotal event in Safran's life, and equally the emotional center of the novel, is the destruction of the Trachimbrod shtetl when it is bombed by the Nazis. What is remarkable about this scene is that, even though it constitutes the novel's traumatic core and it is clearly the object of Jonathan's quest, it is not represented in Jonathan's narrative, or at least not directly. As Safran and his pregnant wife, Zosha, sit on the banks of the river Brod to watch the yearly Trachimday Festival, the Float Queen ritually throws sacks into the air, and then the scene suddenly becomes frozen in time because it coincides with the exact moment when the first bombs hit the village. The traumatic scene itself is not represented; instead Jonathan suspends the moment and substitutes its description by a series of dots stretching over two pages (270-271), the only traces of an already vanished event, thereby creating an absence, a void within the novel itself to suggest the trauma's inexpressibility in language. In this remarkable scene, Jonathan tries to stall time in order to give the hopeless residents of the shtetl an opportunity, a second chance, to escape their impending doom: "They [the sacks] stayed there.....[...] They hung as if on strings.....[...] There is still time ....." (270-71). Needless to say, Jonathan's efforts to alter their fate are to no avail, as the scene continues with the cataclysm's immediate aftermath: "After the bombing was over, the Nazis moved through the shtetl" (272). History inevitably runs its course, and Foer stages the novelist's frustration at his powerlessness to change it.<sup>9</sup>

The bombing of Trachimbrod is not simply absent from the text, however; it is an absent presence, as indicated by the series of dots, but also by other traces in the novel. For indeed, we do find out what ills befell Safran when the bombs hit the shtetl, but only in the most mediated form imaginable. Safran and his wife, who is nine months pregnant, dive into the river to escape the raging firestorm, and again a new baby is born in the river Brod (as was the case with Jonathan's earliest ancestor), but then the mother's exhausted body sinks to the bottom, dragging along the newborn life by the umbilical cord, which happened to be missing in the case of his ancestor. However, as with all events in the novel, the ontological status of this incident is highly questionable, as layer piled upon layer of discourse separate the readers from the historical event: the "description" of the bombing is really a predictive dream – that is, an invention – recorded by Brod in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, which is in turn invented by Jonathan in his inset novel within Foer's own (autobiographically inspired) novel. As such, neither the characters, nor we as readers, are ever allowed a direct, unmediated impression of the disaster, but merely a distant glance at the after-effects of events that resonate only in their traces.

This idea recurs throughout the novel as an important structuring motif: Jonathan's story of Trachimbrod opens with a tragic accident when Trachim B's wagon presumable dives into the river Brod but the three potential witnesses at the scene fail to witness the event, so the tragedy can only be reconstructed, inconclusively, on the basis of its traces: the flotsam that gradually floats to the river's surface. Like the women outside the synagogue who are not allowed a direct look at Brod, the neonate discovered in the river's rubble, because they have to observe the foundling through a hole in the wall, "they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views" (20). Needless to say, this parallels Jonathan's (and Foer's) quest to reconstruct his grandfather's life on the basis of the historical jetsam, the few scattered remnants that reached the later generations. The same motif is

repeated in the dream of the disembodied birds, equally recorded in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*:

You will remember when a bird crashed through the window and fell to the floor. You will remember, those of you who were there, how it jerked its wings before dying, and left a spot of blood on the floor after it was removed. But who among you was first to notice the negative bird it left in the window? Who first saw the shadow that the bird left behind, the shadow that was better proof of the bird's existence than the bird ever was? (38)

After the accident, when the body of the dead bird is removed, the only proof of what happened is the void, the emptiness in the window pane, the trace of a presence that is already absent, and it is only on the basis of these traces, these after-effects, that one can approach the disaster in all its mediation.<sup>10</sup> A final variation on this motif pops up in Jonathan's letters to Alex, letters that are absent from the novel, and whose content can only be reconstructed on the basis of Alex's epistolary responses to Jonathan's missing letters – that is, again on the basis of such traces. Here as well, the readers are manipulated into the third generation's cognitive position vis-à-vis an impenetrable past as they literally become witness to incomplete and questionable documents, instead of witnesses to unmediated historical events.

While Foer demonstrates the illusory nature of Jonathan's endeavor to change the past in the scene of Trachimbrod's tragic finale, the real significance of this theme lies elsewhere: on his trip through the Ukraine, Foer is accompanied by Alex Perchov, his hilarious translator who has only passing knowledge of English, and Alex's anti-Semitic grandfather, equally named Alex. What the journey reveals is not the woman who saved Jonathan's grandfather, but the man who was betrayed by Alex's grandfather. In a brilliant stream-of-consciousness which graphically recreates a posttraumatic testimony in its total breakdown of syntax and punctuation (247-52), Alex's grandfather reveals that he was really a Jew, named Eli, who lived in the neighboring town of Kolki and who was forced into what Primo Levi called the "gray zone" (36) when he had to betray his best friend, Herschel, to the Nazis in order to save his own family.<sup>11</sup> And this is where the theme of despair about the past's immutability achieves its true significance: having just been apprised of his grandfather's betrayal, Alex now begs Jonathan to change his story, to not reveal his grandfather's complicity in the murder of the Jews of Kolki: "(You could alter it, Jonathan. For him, not for me. Your novel is now verging on the war. It is possible.) He is not a bad person. He is a good person, alive in a bad time" (145). Just as Jonathan tried to change in his story what he knew to be the fate of the Jews of Trachimbrod by giving them just a little more time to escape the imminent disaster, Alex begs him to change the awful act he knows his grandfather will commit if Jonathan's story continues: "I parrot: Grandfather is not a bad person, Jonathan. Everyone performs bad actions. I do. Father does. Even you do. A bad person is someone who does not lament his bad actions. Grandfather is now dying because of his. I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good" (145). Alex thus wants to spare his grandfather the humiliation and the painful confrontation with his past actions, but Jonathan rejects Alex's appeal for clemency, and as a result the grandfather indeed commits suicide.<sup>12</sup> What Foer suggests, in other words, is not so much that writers can have an impact on the past – he clearly shows the illusory nature of this attempt – but rather that we should be careful in our representation of the past in historiography, memoirs, and fictional forms of narrative, because of its impact on the future. The task of the novelist, in other words, does reside in the future, but via the past; indeed, as Alex points out: "With writing we have second chances" (144). Had Jonathan been willing to grant Alex's request, its effect could have been a reconciliation between two members of the third generation – Alex on the perpetrator side;

Jonathan as a descendent of the victims – but Jonathan, the protagonist, rejects such a rapprochement, while Foer, the author, suggests the obtuseness of his fictional double's position when he clearly makes Alex the moral center of the novel.<sup>13</sup> As Alex meekly suggests: "In a different world, we would have been real friends" (26). Foer finally literalizes the idea – that all his characters desperately but fruitlessly pursue – of rewriting history in order to turn a bad history into something good, when he shows grandfather Safran and his favorite mistress, a young gypsy girl, use newspaper clippings about the war in Europe, and these two representative members of the Nazi victims (Jews and gypsies) literally turn them into passionate love notes:

*Meet me under the wooden bridge, and I will show you things you have never, ever seen.* The "M" was taken from the army that would take his mother's life: GERMAN FRONT ADVANCES ON SOVIET BORDER; the "eet" from their approaching warships: NAZI FLEET DEFEATS FRENCH AT LESACS; the "me" from the peninsula they were blue-eyeing: GERMANS SURROUND CRIMEA; the "und" from too little, too late: AMERICAN WAR FUNDS REACH ENGLAND; the "er" from the dog of dogs: HITLER RENDERS NONAGGRESSION PACT INOPERATIVE ... and so on, and so on, each note a collage of love that could never be, and war that could. (233)

Yet even here, Jonathan consciously thwarts the fulfillment of Alex's dream that historical horrors can somehow be redressed and turned into something good: Safran enters his fatefully short marriage and the gypsy girl, like Alex's grandfather, "slit her wrist with a knife that had been made dull carving love letters" (239).

### 3. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

While Foer already shows a remarkable empathy for the radically Other in his first novel – for the Jew forced into the gray zone – such empathy reaches a surprisingly new level in his second novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), where this Jewish American author, descendant of Holocaust victims, asks us to commiserate with the fate of the *German* population during WWII. *EL&IC* is not primarily a novel about the Second World War, though. It really focuses on Oskar Schell's story about a precocious nine-year-old boy whose father was killed, two years earlier, in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. What haunts Oskar is not only his father's death, but particularly his inability to pick up the receiver when his father called him from the burning towers, a decision he is unable to impart to his mom: "That secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into" (71). Although this novel was hailed (and just as often criticized) as one of the very first 9/11 novels, the book does not really deal with that historical tragedy either: not only is Oskar unable to mention the disaster's name – he keeps referring to it as "the worst day" (11) – but the novel literally looks only at the national trauma's aftereffects, emblemized in the mourning process of one individual child.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most memorable – and controversial – scenes in the novel occurs when Oskar, not unlike Jonathan in *Everything is Illuminated*, tries to undo time and make his father return to safety. In his fantasy world, the nine-year-old manages to circumvent history and keep its painful ramifications at bay. Oskar's imaginative endeavor takes both a verbal and a visual form: first, he imagines time moving backward by telling the story of his last moment with his father, the moment of his final bedtime story, in a reversed order: "He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from 'I love you' to 'Once upon a time...'" (326). Visually, Oskar achieves a similar effect by

reversing the sequence of a number of pictures of a man falling or jumping from one of the twin towers – a man Oskar imagines to be his father – and by reversing the order of this flipbook, he manages to make the victim soar upwards, back to safety, undoing what was in reality a certain death. This move is foreshadowed in the similar, Vonnegut-like attempt by Oskar's grandmother, a survivor of the bombing of Dresden, to undo the conflagration of this "Florenz an der Elbe": "In my dream, all of the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward, like the second hands of the clocks across Dresden, only faster" (307). By inserting descriptions of the bombings of both Dresden and Hiroshima, Foer again foregrounds the problem of the moral gray zone, which also features conspicuously in *Everything is Illuminated*, by juxtaposing America's victim status in 9/11 to the other side of its Janus face: its perpetrator side in the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. Like Alex's grandfather, Foer suggests, the US have also entered the gray zone, thereby complicating beyond easy resolution or closure the ethical dilemmas of responsibility and guilt.

The Dresden episode immediately also introduces what I consider the most important absent presence in this novel: Simon Goldberg. Oskar's grandfather, Thomas Sr., is a Dresden citizen who eagerly awaits his future with Anna, his fiancée who, like Safran's Zosha, is pregnant when the firebombs begin their deadly descent. Thomas Sr. loses his fiancée and their unborn child in the raging Dresden inferno, and many years later, he marries Anna's sister in New York, when both survivors are just looking for an acceptable compromise to alleviate the pain of losing their fiancée and beloved sister. In their apartment, the survivors create "Nothing Places" that allow them to suffer one another's company, "nonexistent territories in the apartment in which one could temporarily ceased to exist" (110), which at the same time enable them to act out the losses, the emptiness, the void that pervades their lives.

Shortly before Dresden is bombed, Thomas meets a friend of his future father-in-law, a mysterious man named Simon Goldberg, "a disheveled man whose curly hair sprang up in every direction, whose glasses were bent, whose white shirt was stained with the fingerprints of his print-stained hands" (126). Currently unemployed – due to the anti-Jewish Nuremberg legislation, it is safe to assume – Goldberg is intrigued by Thomas, talking to him, "as if only the two of us existed" (126). Anna's father offers to provide shelter to Goldberg, and as Goldberg "let out a cry like a wounded animal" (127), Thomas makes love to Anna behind her father's garden shed.<sup>15</sup> Then Goldberg suddenly disappears from Thomas's life as well as from Foer's narrative, literally leaving behind only a single trace of his existence in the form of a written document: on the very eve of the bombing, Thomas receives a letter from Simon Goldberg, posted from Westerbork, the Dutch transit camp to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor. In the letter, Simon states: "For reasons that need not be explained, you made a strong impression on me. It is my great hope that our paths, however long and winding, will cross again" (215). The readers of Foer's novel probably wished, however, that Goldberg did explain this fascination, for his motives are far from clear. What accounts for the attraction between a Jewish intellectual and the Dresden citizen who knows that Goldberg is hiding from the authorities?

Perhaps a possible answer lies in the coded message Thomas sends his wife many years later in the US when he tries to communicate to her over the phone. Muted by his traumatic experiences, Thomas desperately hits the keys of the phone dial to explain to his wife what "the sum of my life" (269) would amount to. What follows is two pages of a numerical code that is nonsensical and hence undecipherable – which emphasizes Foer's point about the unreliability of documents; this message is in fact as unreadable as the totally blank pages or the black pages that Thomas and his wife produce when they write down their life stories – except for the first two sentences, which read (after decoding): "My name is [3,5,4,3,2,5,8,6] and I just arrived at the airport. I need to find [6,7,3,4,6,5,3,5,7]!" (269). The

name he gives himself in this excerpt is, quite surprisingly, not Thomas Schell but Elie Blum. In other words, in an astute intertextual reference to his first novel, Foer again has the name Eli(e) pop up to reveal the character's true identity.<sup>16</sup> Might this perhaps explain Goldberg's fascination with Thomas? The fascination is clearly mutual: several years later, Thomas imagines seeing Goldberg again in a bookstore in New York, like a specter returned from the dead. Thomas acknowledges: "the more I looked at him, the more unsure I was, the more I wanted it to be him, had he gone to work instead of to his death?" (279). Like Jonathan, like Oskar, and like Oskar's grandmother, Thomas conjures up an alternative past, thereby granting the Jew at Westerbork a different fate than what he is clearly doomed for, enabling him to re-enter the story as an absent presence, a ghost haunting the lines between the text. Shortly afterwards, Thomas's account ends in the nearly total blackness of pages sated with ink, blotting out anything but the darkness of death. As such, the Holocaust and particularly the fate of the Jews, which at first sight seem quite surprisingly absent from this novel (which instead focuses on German civilians suffering at the hands of the allied forces), reenters the novel with a vengeance as an absent but very disturbing, haunting presence that immediately contextualizes the bombing of Dresden in all its historical specificity.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. *The History of Love*

Nicole Krauss, whose grandparents also managed to escape the Nazi Judeocide in Eastern Europe though they lost nearly all of their relatives, introduces in her bestselling novel *The History of Love* (2005) some fascinating variations on the very themes that resonate in the work of her husband, Jonathan Safran Foer. In an essay called "On Forgetting," Krauss once explained:

When I interviewed my grandmother once, she made me turn off the tape recorder when she told me how her father was rounded up and taken to a field outside of Nuremberg where he was forced to kneel down and mow the grass with his teeth, or described the camp on the border of Germany and Poland where she last saw her parents. For a long time I didn't understand, but now I think I do. She was saying remember, yes—but not the terror, not how they tried to destroy our dignity and suffocate our hearts. Remember the life, she was saying. *Remember how we lived.* (www.randomhouse.com)

This ethical imperative to commemorate, I argue, lies at the very heart of *The History of Love*, not only influencing the lives of the characters, but also and more significantly, making up the very core of Krauss's own project as a writer.<sup>18</sup> Both the characters in her novel, and Krauss as a novelist, are deeply involved in the creation of absent presences, resuscitated remnants of lives lost in the *Shoah*. The historical figure that really hovers over the novel, haunting even its deepest recesses, is the Polish modernist writer Bruno Schulz, who was shot in the ghetto of Drohobycz. As Jonathan, Thomas Sr., Oskar, and Oskar's grandmother try to manipulate time to undo a dreadful history in Foer's novels, as Art Spiegelman desperately tries to restore his dead mother's voice in *Maus* after Vladek burned her diaries, as Cynthia Ozick makes Bruno Schulz live on in his (non-existing) offspring in *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987), as Philip Roth evokes Schulz as a ghostly presence in *The Prague Orgy* (1985), and as the Israeli novelist David Grossman invents an alternative history for Schulz in his famous "Bruno" chapter in *See Under: Love* (1989), Krauss uses fiction to reverse history and preserve Schulz's voice against all odds.

Like *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Krauss's labyrinthine novel presents the quest by youngsters, 15-year-old Alma Singer and her brother Bird, to learn more about the



life of their deceased father. At the same time, in a parallel plot, a Polish Holocaust survivor and writer, Leopold Gursky, tries to find out about his son's life, the recently deceased author Isaac Moritz. However, even more than about children looking for lost fathers or fathers looking for lost sons, the novel is really about the search for a lost manuscript, for a missing text. In the early 1940s, the aspiring Polish writer Leopold Gursky wrote a novel called *The History of Love* wherein each female character is named Alma, after his girlfriend Alma Mereminski. On the eve of Poland's invasion by the Nazis, Alma emigrates to the US, and Leopold entrusts his manuscript to a friend, the Polish aspiring author Zvi Litvinoff, just before the latter flees to Chile. Then disaster strikes and Leopold's native village, Slonim, is destroyed by the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*. To everyone's knowledge, this ends Leopold Gursky's life, so Alma marries someone else in the US. In a desperate attempt to impress his fiancée, Zvi Litvinoff, the inferior writer, steals the Yiddish manuscript of his dead friend, translating it into Spanish, and passing it off as his own work to great acclaim. Because his fiancée, Rosa, suspects as much, she destroys the original manuscript in a seemingly accidental flooding of their house. Many years later, Alma Singer's father picks up one of the few remaining copies of Litvinoff's Spanish book in a used bookstore in Buenos Aires and sends it to his wife, a professional translator. Both fall in love with this book, and name their daughter after every female character in the book. One day, Alma Singer's mother receives a request by a mysterious stranger, Jacob Marcus, to translate this Spanish book into English, because a long time ago, his mother used to read to him from a book called *The History of Love*, and he hopes that this is the book Alma's mother mentioned in an article. Jacob Marcus, we learn much later, is really Leopold's son, Isaac Moritz, whose mother, Alma Mereminski, had received pieces of the manuscript included in the letters that Leopold kept sending her from Slonim until that fatal day. Leopold, however, did survive the war, and because Bird becomes convinced that Leopold is really Alma's father, he sends Leopold the English translation made by his mother. As a result, after the most egregious peregrinations, octogenarian Leopold Gursky finally discovers on his desk in New York City the English manuscript of a book he had written in Yiddish more than sixty years ago and that he was convinced had been lost shortly after the war. Needless to say, this highly mediated, unreliable document is no more than "a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of the original, which no longer existed" (111). This is, in short, the logical and chronological reconstruction of a story that Krauss presents via interweaving and fragmentary strands of narrative that have vertiginous and bewildering effects on the reader.

Alma Singer and Bird are both what Dina Wardi has described as "memorial candles": named after dead relatives, they are burdened by the charge to make up for the lives lost during the Holocaust. Alma's Hebrew middle name is Devorah, after a great-aunt who died in the Warsaw ghetto (an autobiographical element for Krauss), while Bird's middle names, Emanuel Chaim, refer to Emanuel Ringelblum and an Uncle Chaim "who died by the Nazis" (35). Both kids resent this memorial role: "Why do people always get named after dead people?" (176). One could argue that Krauss creates additional memorial candles via her novel when she has Leopold compose obituaries for authors like Franz Kafka and Isaac Babel, and, on a higher level, when she inserts pictures of her grandparents to make sure they are remembered. More important still, Krauss also creates in and via her novel a memorial candle for Bruno Schulz, the most interesting absent presence in *The History of Love*. The tragic story of Bruno Schulz is well-known. This Jewish Polish author, a reclusive writer and graphic artist living in Drohobycz, gained some renown as one of Poland's most original modernists on the basis of his two volumes of autobiographically inspired short stories: *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937). When Germany invaded Poland, Schulz was locked up in the ghetto of Drohobycz (currently in Western Ukraine), where he was protected by Felix Landau, a Gestapo officer who admired

Schulz's graphic work. Landau made Schulz paint a fairy-tale mural in his nursery room, and this mural became the subject of a great controversy after the war when Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Israel, shipped this mural to Israel without consent of the Polish authorities.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps afraid of the fate awaiting him, Schulz painted his own face, as well as those of his close friends and relatives, in the faces of the gnomes, fairies and Napoleon-like figures on the nursery wall in the ghetto, lest they should vanish from history without a trace. On 19 November 1942, Bruno Schulz was shot in the streets by a rival of Landau, Karl Günther, simply because he wanted to get back at Landau. After the war, Schulz acquired an almost mythological status when rumors started spreading that just before his death he had finished his first novel, *The Messiah*. Some claimed he was carrying it on him when he was shot; others claimed he managed to send it to Thomas Mann before he died, but the manuscript was never recovered (Goldfarb xiii).

In *The History of Love*, Krauss invents an alternative history for Schulz, by creating Leopold, a Polish Jewish author who is believed to have died during the war, but who suddenly pops up again in New York, alive and in possession of the manuscript that everyone assumed was lost. By creating Leopold, the more fortunate double of Schulz, Krauss uses the power of fiction to salvage the memory of Schulz and make him and his manuscript survive the war. Not surprisingly in the context of Schulz's desperate attempt to record a trace of his own existence in his mural, Leopold always "make[s] a point of being seen" (3), even posing as a nude model for a drawing class lest he should die unnoticed. This is consistent with Krauss's dedication of her book to her grandparents "who taught me the opposite of disappearing" (0). Apart from this more general reversal of the Schulzian story, there are also explicit references to Bruno Schulz in the text, as when both Isaac Moritz and Alma Singer start reading *The Street of Crocodiles*.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Bird is convinced not only that he is one of the *lamed vovniks*, one of the thirty-six righteous people in every generation, but that he is actually *The Messiah*. Moreover, the text of the inset novel, *The History of Love*, parts of which are reproduced in Krauss's novel, is clearly an attempt of Krauss to imitate the typical Schulzian style and, by doing so, prolong the life of Schulz's distinct voice. Indeed, while Schulz immerses his readers in the magic world of the "Age of Genius" (Schulz 129), Leopold, Krauss's Schulzian double, composes an equally magical account about the "Age of Glass" and the "Age of Silence" (61; 72).<sup>21</sup>

Quite remarkably, Krauss metafictionally stages within her novel her own postmemorial project to make Schulz survive. One day in New York, Leopold suddenly bumps into an old friend from Slonim, who was then equally an aspiring Jewish Polish writer, and who is named ... Bruno. They renew their friendship, Bruno moves into an apartment above Leopold, and the two become inseparable. Yet, only at the novel's finale does it become clear that Bruno is in fact Leopold's "*greatest character I ever wrote*" (249). In other words, though he seems to be situated on the same level as all other characters in this novel, Bruno really exists only as a figment of Leopold's imagination. In "reality," (i.e. the novel's fictional universe), Bruno died in 1941 in the Nazi attack on Slonim, but afraid of dying unseen, Leopold makes his friend survive the war in his imagination, exactly the way Simon Goldberg survived in Thomas Sr.'s mind, though in reality this Bruno character obviously shared Bruno Schulz's fate. In a great metafictional move, Leopold is imagining the survival of his Bruno Schulz-like character by re-creating Bruno, while Krauss is involved in exactly the same project by creating her own alternative history with Leopold, her own Bruno Schulz-like character. In that sense, Bruno and Krauss try to achieve what Jonathan, Thomas Sr., Oskar, and Oskar's grandmother try to accomplish in Foer's novels: an undoing of history by making victims of the *Shoah* live on in an imaginative, textualized form.

Given that Leopold creates Bruno as a mere character, the reader immediately must doubt the ontological status of the entire text before his or her eyes. For, there are four

narrators in the novel, each identified by a distinct avatar: Leopold (a heart), Alma (a compass), and Bird (an ark), but also an unidentified, omniscient narrator, who provides all the background information on Litvinoff's life that isn't known to anyone (67-68; 187). Such an omniscient perspective seems highly problematic and inconsistent in a book by a third-generation author in light of the radical inaccessibility of a past mediated via narratives. The question is, however: is this narrator really omniscient? Given that this particular narrator's avatar is the picture of a book, it is safe to suggest that this seemingly omniscient voice is really Leopold's, the novelist within the novel, who one day discovers his translated manuscript on his desk, and on the basis of Rosa's introduction to this volume, an introduction that is "shadowed throughout, almost intuitively, with pauses, suggestions, ellipses, whose total effect is of a half-light in which the reader can project his or her own imagination" (66), starts *imagining* the history of the manuscript before it landed on his desk. Early in the novel, Leopold begs his best friend, "Forgive me, Bruno. My oldest friend. My best. I haven't done you justice" (6). Not surprisingly, the very first words of the unidentified narrator are also "Forgive me" (65). The suggestion is, then, that the real author of *The History of Love*, the text in the reader's hands, is really Leopold Gursky, as we know that he is indeed the author of *The History of Love*, the inset novel. In fact, when Zvi Litvinoff felt qualms about stealing Leopold's manuscript, he added to his book, against his publisher's advice, Leopold Gursky's own obituary, so that "All anyone had to do was turn to the last page, and there they would find, spelled out in black and white, the name of the true author of *The History of Love*" (189). If we indeed take up this invitation and turn to the final page of our book, we encounter that very same obituary of Gursky – which is Krauss's own way of indicating that the true author of *The History of Love* is Leopold Gursky indeed. This final sleight of hand in an already labyrinthine novel is a feat quite similar to Foer's move, at the end of *Everything is Illuminated*, to cast the reader in full epistemological doubt by means of the grandfather's suicide note. In the end, both novelists painfully bring home to the reader the complete impenetrability of a past drowned in layers of mediated discourse.

Because of their powerlessness in the face of the past, the creation of absent presences in the work of third-generation Jewish American novelists always involves an attempt to undo the past via fiction – an attempt which is obviously doomed from the start. Of course one cannot reverse the past in writing. But that is not really the point. For, these attempts at altering the past – at manipulating history – are successful after all, not so much in their impact on that past, but on the future. Serving a commemorative function, they might transform the world to come, in the hope that the *present* absences will not become mere absences by being forgotten. We can only hope, indeed, that the commemoration of past horrors has the power to obviate George Santayana's famous aphorism that those who cannot remember the past are condemned always to repeat it.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I'm thinking in particular of studies by Wardi, Epstein, Hass, and Dan Bar-On. For studies on fiction written by the second generation, see Berger, Grimwood, and Sicher. For more information on the problematic and arbitrary nature of the distinctions between generations, see the essay by Bukiet, who is himself a second-generation victim. In the same vein, Susan Suleiman provocatively suggests the term "1.5 generation" to refer to the children who managed to escape on a *Kindertransport*.

<sup>2</sup> For an exception, see Sigal and Weinfeld, whose clinical-statistical study revealed no evidence for second-generation symptoms. See also the article by Ernst van Alphen. Still, I agree with van Alphen's view that what happens is not so much a transfer of Holocaust trauma to the next generation, but rather a re-traumatization by being raised in a dysfunctional family.

<sup>3</sup> Good literary representations of parents traumatized by the Holocaust, and the effects on their children, are Art Spiegelman's famous graphic novel *Maus* (1986-91), Thane Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible* (1996) and *Second Hand Smoke* (1999), and Jessica Durlacher's Dutch novel *De Dochter* (2000; *The Daughter*).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most infamous historical example of such a vicarious experience in the context of the Holocaust, is the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, author of the fake memoir *Fragments* (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Wardi identifies an additional difficulty for the second and later generations: they often become "memorial candles," named by their parents after relatives lost during the Holocaust, and burdened with the daunting task to make up for the lost lives of these ghosts who haunt their lives.

<sup>6</sup> See the excellent BBC Horizon documentary on epigenetics, "The Ghost in Your Genes" (2005): <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1128045835761675934#>

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<sup>7</sup> The most interesting and most elaborate discussion of the importance of traces features in the work of Jacques Derrida, the founder and major proponent of deconstruction, who defined the trace as “the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site” (Derrida 24). Gayatri Spivak elaborates on this concept, quite significantly calling it “the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present” (xvii). In light of Derrida’s Sephardic Jewish background, it probably comes as no surprise that his early book *Dissemination* (originally published in 1972 as *La Dissémination*) features the opaque phrase “Il y a là cendre” (“There are cinders;” 168; repeated in the acknowledgements on p. 401), and this very phrase became the subject of his book-length essay, *Cinders* (1982; *Feu la cendre*), on the importance of the image of cinders or ashes in his work – the prototypical trace of those who perished in the *Shoah*.

<sup>8</sup> Other examples in third-generation Jewish American novels are Michael Chabon’s *The Final Solution* (2004) and Judy Budnitz’s *If I Told You Once* (1999), which also have the Holocaust as its most conspicuous absent presence. Good examples of second-generation novels are Melvin Jules Bukiet’s *After* (1996), which literally looks only at the Holocaust’s after-effects, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986-91), where Anya Spiegelman’s voice – Art’s mother, a Holocaust survivor who committed suicide – haunts the book as an absent presence.

<sup>9</sup> Like elsewhere throughout this extremely self-reflexive novel – a genuine “received history” in James Young’s terminology (669) – Foer metafictionally stages his own position vis-à-vis the past when he has Brod look through a telescope to read about her future double rape, but despite this knowledge, she is incapable of escaping the course of her personal history. Similarly (though in a reversed temporal movement), Jonathan knows what will follow immediately after the bags are thrown into the air, but his foreknowledge cannot prevent the destruction; he is as powerless to alter the past as Brod is to alter her future.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of the void as a significant absent presence also features very powerfully in the scene when Brod can look at – and have sexual intercourse with – her husband, The Kolker, through a hole in the wall only (a clear reference to the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe). After her husband’s death, Brod cuts this hole from the wall, and wears it like a bead on a necklace, fully aware that “The hole is no void; the void exists around it” (139).

<sup>11</sup> Note that this entire confessional stream-of-consciousness is in parenthesis, which is an orthographical way to indicate a presence that is really absent. This wonderful passage also shows the transmission of trauma across the generations via empathic unsettlement (or even a vicarious experience of trauma): Alex is writing about his grandfather’s confession in a letter to Jonathan, but gradually the syntax breaks down and the voice of the grandfather takes over in a seemingly unmediated burst of memory where the past is relived through testimony. Then, Alex’s voice takes over again, but in the same posttraumatic stream-of-consciousness mode, suggesting that Alex’s voice has been affected by the devastating testimony. Expecting to find out about the history of Jonathan’s grandfather, Alex is traumatized by what he learns about his own grandfather’s objectionable actions during the war, and as a member of the later generations, he fully takes on his grandfather’s guilt: “he is stillguilty I am I am Iam IamI?” (252). Visually and linguistically, Foer manages to capture the moment when the trauma and the accompanying guilt skip to a later generation.

<sup>12</sup> However, in this intricate, multi-layered, and typically postmodernist tour de force, Foer raises doubt about the ontological status of everything. As a result, we do not even know if the grandfather really kills himself, as his suicide note (274) can already be read in Jonathan’s notebook composed during their Ukrainian journey, when they were still in the grandfather’s company (160). Hence, literally everything in this book could very well be invented by Jonathan Safran Foer, the novelist within Foer’s novel. Note also that grandfather’s suicide note ends with the words “and I will” (276), which is also written on one of the notes that

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floats to the river's surface after the tragic accident of Trachim B (8). This introduces a cyclical time pattern to the novel, corroborating the title of two of the novel's chapters: "The beginning of the world often comes" (8; 267).

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that Foer gives any clear-cut answers to this ethical dilemma; Foer raises a difficult issue but ultimately leaves the matter sufficiently unresolved for the reader to decide. For one might argue, of course, that the request by descendants of perpetrators to manipulate history borders upon Holocaust denial, and a denial of the historical horror would, for Jonathan, boil down to an extreme example of what Eric Santner calls "narrative fetishism" (144). Hence, Foer clearly leaves it open whether or not Jonathan's decision is commendable; whether or not one has a right to tamper with the reality of the past in order to redress the future.

<sup>14</sup> For a good discussion of Oskar's working-through process, see Verluys, and Uytterschout and Verluys.

<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, the gruesome reality of the Holocaust somehow gets intertwined with sexuality in both of Foer's novels. When some stray bombs intended for a nearby village hit Trachimbrod, months before its annihilation, Safran consumes his marriage with his new wife, and the sound of the exploding bombs provokes his first orgasm ever. As a result, the sexual act becomes strangely mixed with acts of violence.

<sup>16</sup> As I mention elsewhere (Codde "Philomela" 253), there are several possible explanations for this name-change: most obviously, it could reveal Thomas's Jewish identity, as the name Eli does in *Everything is Illuminated*. Alternatively, the German Thomas could give a false Jewish name here, to express his guilt vis-à-vis Jewish Holocaust victims like Simon Goldberg. An additional possibility is that the name is simply not supposed to make sense in order to emphasize that accounts about the past are truly undecipherable and that they can never provide a reliable access to past realities. As with Alex's English, things tend to get lost in translation.

<sup>17</sup> Note that, in 2010, Foer published his latest book, *Eating Animals*. Many devotees of literature probably felt disappointed that such a gifted novelist should devote years of his active career to work on a non-fiction book. Yet, given that *Eating Animals* actively tries to alter the ways we look at food – particularly meat produced by industrial farms – one has to admit that for an author like Foer who is so concerned with the impact of his writing on the future, his decision to write *Eating Animals* was ethically the most consistent thing to do. On the basis of my analyses of his novels, one could argue that *Eating Animals* is just the next logical step in Foer's ethical project.

<sup>18</sup> In "On Forgetting," Krauss reminisces: "Even as a child I was afraid of losing things, and so collected obsessively, preserved, wrote down, tried to save." Elsewhere she explains: "My grandparents didn't only lose their family, but also the places where they grew up and all the things from their youth. The fact that so many things get lost is one of the reasons why I became a writer in the first place. Ever since I was born, even before I existed, so many things have been lost that I feel a strong urge to fill all of this emptiness with fiction. As such, I do not write about the Holocaust itself, but about its aftershocks" (Visser; my translation).

<sup>19</sup> In 2008 Yad Vashem and the Ukraine signed an agreement that the murals remained Ukrainian property but could be on display in Yad Vashem as a temporary loan. For a slideshow on Schulz's mural, see: [http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/02/28/arts/20090228\\_WALL\\_SS\\_index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/02/28/arts/20090228_WALL_SS_index.html)

<sup>20</sup> Is it really a coincidence, one wonders, that the latest Penguin edition of *The Street of Crocodiles*, published in 2008, features a foreword by Jonathan Safran Foer?

<sup>21</sup> Krauss even creates an intertextual reference to Grossman's *See Under: Love*, as one of the characters in Leopold's book is called Wasserman, which is in Grossman's novel the name of

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a character who serves as an emotional double to Bruno Schulz – in Grossman’s book, Bruno Schulz transmogrifies into a fish, literally becoming a Water-man. Wasserman’s first name in Leopold’s book, Shlomo, might be a reference to Shloma, the protagonist in Schulz’s story “The Age of Genius.”