

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's Fictionalized Memory

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This essay examines the role of memory in the novel Anya written by contemporary Jewish American writer Susan Fromberg Schaeffer. Its significance is underscored by the generic form of the novel; Schaeffer has written her book as a fictional memoir. The author of this essay suggests that this Holocaust novel is not only about the clash between perpetrators and victims, but also mainly about the conflict between memory and oblivion. He emphasizes the victory of memory that has become an essential part of the protagonist's identity and praises the complexity of Schaeffer's novel in her representation of the Holocaust.

Memory plays the key role in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's novel *Anya* (1974). For the title character of this novel "memory is a form of reality after all" (9). She may be right; nevertheless this reality can be significantly influenced by our choice of what we keep in our memory, because the process of remembering is always selective in nature (though this selection is often made involuntarily and lies beyond our rational explanation). Susan Fromberg Schaeffer decided to choose the events of the Holocaust as "a form of reality" for her novel, even though she lacks first-hand experience of this apocalyptic chapter of history. As a matter of fact, Schaeffer was born in 1941 in Brooklyn, New York.

Considering Schaeffer's absence of personal experience of the Holocaust, it may seem surprising that she decided to present this topic directly; but, after reading her novel, we can put our doubts about the authenticity of her account of the fatal historical events aside, because the way that the book is written makes us believe that it really is the author's story. Schaeffer manages to identify with the fate of her protagonist Anya so remarkably that the authorial subject entirely merges with the character or is dissolved in it. For this family saga the author decided to use the first-person narrative, in which the survivor Anya narrates all of the novel's incidents.

In Schaeffer's view (Templin 1997: 138-139), "experience does not necessarily have to be firsthand, provided that you can identify sufficiently with the experience so that it becomes alive for you." She also proved the truth of these words in another novel, *Buffalo Afternoon* (1989). Though she never experienced the hell of the war in Vietnam, she wrote about it so convincingly that the novel was highly appreciated by numerous war veterans and, in the *New York Times Review*, praised by the critic Nicholas Proffitt, who had been *Newsweek's* war correspondent and bureau chief in Vietnam.

In various interviews Schaeffer confesses that for a long time she did not know anything about the Holocaust, nor was she interested in the topic. The immediate impulse to write *Anya* was the startling revelation that one of her acquaintances had been in a concentration camp. She made the decision to write a book inspired by the testimonies of survivors whom she interviewed. In fact she preferred interviewing to research. We must admit that writing this novel was a daring task, but as Schaeffer says (Templin 1997: 143), "[t]he Holocaust should not be an untouchable subject. That would be the best way to guarantee that nobody ever remembered it."

Although *Anya* records the destiny of Polish Jews before, during and after the war with panoramic scope, Edward Alexander (1979: 134) is correct when he claims that “[t]he novel is as much about memory as about the Holocaust.” The significance of memory, both individual and historical, determines the generic form of the novel. *Anya* is written in the form of a fictional memoir; this imitation contributes to the authenticity of the novel and makes us believe that what the central character experienced really happened. Anya gives her testimony from her new home in America, nonetheless the American setting merely frames her memories of life in Poland. As a matter of fact, it occupies only limited space within an otherwise voluminous novel, appearing only in the short “Prologue” and “Epilogue.” The largest part of the novel, composed of three sections, covers prewar life in the Polish city of Vilno, the Nazi occupation of Poland, the first manifestations of the repression of the Jewish population, ghettoization, massacres, the deportation of Jews to camps, and finally the postwar situation in the devastated country, which results in the emigration of the most stricken inhabitants.

Unlike other writers of the “survivalist genre” (according to the categorization of Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, 1980), Schaeffer does not employ brief flashbacks, involuntary or intentional reminiscences, and her restoration of the vanished world is presented chronologically without interruption, in accordance with the technique of the classic realist novel. In so doing she has created a quite comprehensive chronicle of the Holocaust, connecting an individual’s lot with the most crucial phases of historical developments in Europe after the rise of fascism.

The prologue sets the mournful tone of the work. It contains a rather inconsistent monologue by the lonely Anya Savikin, many years after the war and in her American exile. Her confession is full of sadness resulting from her awareness of irretrievable loss. The reality is inexorable: out of Anya’s numerous family only her daughter Ninka has survived. The narrator’s dreams are imbued with the past and linked with her loved ones who are now dead. Anya remembers particularly her loving, always supportive mother Rebecca, her learned father Boris, her beloved sister Verushka, her husband Stajoe and the other vanished members of the family while she is lighting the Yom Kippur memorial candles, which, according to Kremer (1999: 121), are a manifestation of “her lament for the loss of European Jewry, and her commitment to Holocaust remembrance.”

Her monologue twenty-five years after the appalling events is marked by the feeling of guilt that is so typical of Holocaust survivors. In spite of her second marriage she feels abandoned, ignored, and misunderstood. Nobody listens to her and her loneliness stems from her dreary present time. Of course, it is especially the past that has marked her psyche. She even envies the dead. Only in the context of the author’s blurring of the borderline between the dead and the living can we understand the introductory motto of the prologue, taken from Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*: “A man’s dying is more the survivors’ affair than his own” (1974: 1).

The first section of the novel, entitled “In History,” portrays the life of the Jewish upper middle classes in Vilno, represented by the Savikin family. The narrator describes her happy childhood and adolescence in the harmonious atmosphere of the family, dominated by a spirit of mutual understanding and love. The reader has no reason to think he is reading a holocaust novel as he is taken to the idyllic world of a well-off family that enjoys a special, privileged position in society. The narrator stresses the cultural milieu: Anya has a governess who teaches her French, which for the Russians is the traditional language of aristocratic circles (the Savikins were of Russian origin), her sister Verushka has a gift for music and

plays the piano, and her father, a rabbi's son, is an enthusiastic lover of books and a prototype of the "saintly scholar." The cultural ambience is supported by the mother's, father's and their servants' passion for telling folktales.

In her description of family life, the author underlines the feeling of safety, solidarity and the entirely friendly atmosphere of the city of Vilno. Some passages of the novel, especially those describing summertime, which the Savikin family spends regularly at their *dacha* in the countryside, are almost bucolic in nature. In her depiction of the happy moments of family life, Schaeffer tends to lyricize her text by using highly figurative language (we should not forget that Susan Fromberg Schaeffer is also the author of several volumes of poetry). But it is especially the sense of togetherness and mutual support that pervades these memories of the protagonist's happy youth:

It was so close, so close, and so happy, because during the summers all the families were like one family [...] [E]very mother was everyone else's mother. So the music went on, losing itself in the tops of the pines, while the little children played hide-and-seek, and the winner, who reached his tree and pounded on its bark three times, screamed with excitement. (1974: 39)

By recording everyday family customs and rituals Schaeffer intends to pay tribute to life in prewar Vilno. She strives to give us an accurate reconstruction of this life so that it might become a part of our collective memory. Thus, in accordance with the tradition of Yiddish literature, she addresses us, the readers, directly, as if she wanted to challenge us to enter Anya's beautiful world.

Dorothy Seidman Bilik (1981: 102) claims that "Anya is victim and witness but, above all, recorder of the past." According to her, "Anya wants to convey concrete authentic experience and at the same time transmit *her* memory of her life" (103). If in the first section the narrator concentrates, in her "form of reality," on the predominantly happy moments of her childhood, this is because she wants to accentuate which precious values of the Jewish community were irrevocably lost due to the interruption of continuity in the community's development.

"That was what I was doing, remembering" (1974: 34), says Anya when recalling the atmosphere of the last summer spent at the *dacha* with the whole family together, and that is what Schaeffer is doing throughout the entire novel. Extensive descriptive passages relating to prewar life in the Vilno Jewish community have, however, another function too. They stand out in sharp contrast to the situation in which the persecuted Jews found themselves during the war. The comfort of a spacious, eight-room apartment will be soon replaced by an overcrowded room in the ghetto, supplies of preserved food will be replaced by starvation, the warmth of the Russian stove by the cold of the camp barracks, Anya's elegant dress (made by Vilno's best dressmaker Madame Kirilova) by a prisoner's uniform. And instead of vacationing in the pastoral surroundings of the countryside or in the summer spa of Druzgeniekie (where Anya met her future husband Stajoe), the protagonist will be confined in a labor camp and reduced to seeking out claustrophobic hiding places. Yet material losses cannot be compared with spiritual ones, which affect individual lives even more painfully. This explains why the narrator returns to her beatific past spent in the narrow circle of the family so often:

I remember that, the maids sitting on top of everything like figures on a crazy wedding cake, and getting there, and the complete happiness and the dizzying air, and then

Poppa's arrivals when the "dacha husbands," the brothers, and the guests came in by train, all of them loaded down with packages, cakes, candies, pastries, presents of all kinds, and how we all looked forward to those Friday nights, and how we got dressed up for them. (33)

Anya's happiness is consummated by her decision to study medicine—although this profession was denied to Jews and generally to women in Russia of that time—and by her marriage to Stajoe and the birth of her daughter Ninushka. But even in the idyllic atmosphere of the novel's first section, we can observe the early disturbances that foreshadow the advent of dark times. The intrusion of these dissonant tones into the harmonious life of the title character serves as a warning indicating the fragility of her seemingly stable universe. The first disquieting portent of terrifying events is the threat of confiscation of the family's property because of the bankruptcy of the father's stocking factory. However, Schaeffer makes it clear that it is above all anti-Semitism, both in its hidden and overtly open forms, that poses the most serious danger to the Jewish community. In the third chapter anti-Semitism still appears as a distant force in the mother's recollection of her childhood, when she escaped rape during a pogrom by finding shelter in a coffin. This scene, resembling Artur Sammler's refuge in a mausoleum in Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, anticipates the claustrophobic hiding places from the Nazis that she and Anya will later be forced to use. This element of the novel is reminiscent of Melville's redemptive scene of Ishmael's salvation in *Moby Dick*; places and objects associated with death paradoxically save one's life. In this way Schaeffer again blurs the divide between life and death, a concept that later, in the context of the living dead in the death camps where life is so extremely fragile, acquires a special meaning.

Anti-Semitism, however, gradually assumes a more real shape for Anya: in the fifth chapter the narrator records the assault on Jewish girls by Index, a fraternity at the university where the protagonist studies medicine. While the purpose of this attack, which is based on a real historical event, is to disfigure Jewish girls with iron nails, Anya is spared this frightful experience through her father's timely warning. By registering Christian anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland, Schaeffer manages to present the Nazi annihilation of Jews in its wider historical context and to point at the link between the religious nature of anti-Jewish campaigns in the past and the Nazi anti-Semitism, based on blatant racism.

There are also other incidents that deviate from the idyllic ambience of the prewar years: the sad story of the maid Zoshia after giving birth to her illegitimate child, the gruesome death of the psychiatrist Gershonsky, Anya's teacher, and even some episodes in Anya's personal life after her marriage with Stajoe Lavinsky, when she has to overcome cultural differences between her and his Hassidic family, living in Warsaw.

Yet the worsening political situation in Europe interferes with the lives of the novel's characters only in the background. Anya and the other family members hear about it only fragmentarily, either through scattered mentions in conversation or through letters. It is symptomatic that the news about the outbreak of the war reaches Anya and her husband in the remote winter sports center and mountain health resort Zakopanie (Zakopane) during their vacation. In the first part of her novel Schaeffer does not pay much attention to political developments in Europe, focusing on the portrayal of the Jewish family as individualized by the Savikins. Her interest in family life accords with her effort to reflect the Jewish community in prewar Poland, as for her "the word 'Jewish' and the word 'family' were synonymous. To me family life and Jewish life are indistinguishable" (Ribalow 1980: 90).

The tone of the second section, entitled “Biblical Times,” contrasts with that of the first. Its title is explained by the mother in one of her conversations with Anya: “Sometimes . . . , I think we’re living through biblical times, or we’re starting to live through them; visions, dreams. I remember, my grandpoppa used to say, when you are living through biblical times, the living will come to envy the dead” (1974: 149). These words suggest the extent of human suffering. Moreover, according to Edward Alexander (1979: 135), “when you are living in what Anya’s mother taught her to call ‘biblical times,’ the boundaries between what is living and what is dead are obliterated. For Anya, at the end of the war, the dead are more real than the living, and memory serves not to retain that which still exists but to recover that which is no more.”

In “Biblical Times” Schaeffer develops how the outbreak of the war affects the everyday life of common people, including Anya and her family. She reveals the fatal consequences of the disruption of the Jewish world in central and eastern Europe and chronicles the various discriminatory steps taken against its population: the exclusion of Jews from public places, curfews, the confiscation of personal property and robbing of Jewish households, dismissals from employment, anti-Jewish street violence, the ghettoization of Jews and the eventual liquidation of the ghetto. It is a considerable achievement by the author to manage to connect all these discriminatory acts with the fate of one individual family and its struggle for survival. In comparison with some other American writers who represented the wartime ordeal of Jewish people only in fragmentary reminiscences, Schaeffer presents a comprehensive picture of European Jewry both before and during the war.

The narrator tells of the dark events in her life with growing intensity, showing the hopeless situation in which the Polish Jews found themselves. Her mother’s prophecy that “we will have no time for grief, one will come so fast after another” (165) would be soon fulfilled. Despite the family’s *esprit de corps*, they are unable to avert tragedy. One catastrophe follows another, consequently limiting their chances to survive.

The disintegration of Anya’s safe world is often expressed in metaphorical language, highlighting the specter of omnipresent death. The arrival of German soldiers in Vilno in their trucks is compared to “an endless black border on a mourning card” (159), and the Savikins’ stay in the ghetto is seen as a depressing confinement in the room where “one naked light bulb was hanging over the round table like a dead embryo” (178). If they walk along a ghetto street, they can hear “voices [that] poured out of windows like garbage” (177), which suggests that they have been written off, have become beings whose lives will be wasted.

The novel’s naturalistic depiction of the living conditions in the ghetto is very impressive and undoubtedly enriches American Holocaust literature. The narrator convincingly charts all of the sufferings described in non-fiction literature: starvation, cold, infectious diseases caused by the appalling sanitary conditions, and the overpopulation resulting in harsh competition among people and frequent quarrels. On the other hand, Schaeffer also mirrors the selfless help and solidarity that materializes both within the Savikin family and also in the relationship between Anya and her best friend from childhood, Rachel. Schaeffer underscores especially the mutual support between the mother and Anya, without which their chances of survival would have been greatly diminished. Jacqueline A. Mintz (1978: 353) suggests that “[a]midst the chaos and horror of the ghetto years Anya’s mother creates order and meaning out of everyday life rituals.” Also Kremer (1999: 130) pays attention to the relationship between Anya and her mother and notes that the:

[r]ole reversal between parents and mature children, commonplace in ghetto and concentration camp and a recurrent theme in women's Holocaust writing, is another means Schaeffer uses to suggest the debilitating effects of the ghetto. Anya's and Mrs. Savikin's capacities to slip into each other's roles shows a fluidity of boundaries between the women.

Schaeffer effectively represents the ghetto as a totally different universe which transforms its residents. It is a world of chaos where even well-established rules lose their validity. Although Anya's home is located only ten blocks from the ghetto, it seems to be an extremely distant and unattainable place. Even the space just outside the ghetto seems to be remote, as its boundary has become an insurmountable barrier dividing two opposite worlds. No wonder that the narrator has an impression that "[i]t was almost as if the streets were separated by huge deep cliffs filled with violent water" (1974: 187).

The destruction of the protagonist's world and the fulfillment of the prophecy of the shortage of time for mourning for the dead is completed by the murder of Anya's sister Vera, her brother-in-law Jakob, her brothers Mischa and Emmanuel, her sister-in-law Genya and her niece Lyuba, her husband Stajoe, and, eventually, her mother, who is sent to be exterminated. Anya is only left with the truncated body of her family, her daughter, but even here she cannot be sure whether Ninka is alive, since she has lost track of her.

The third section, which bears the emblematic title "The Lion's Jaws" and which is introduced by the fable about a mouse, a cat and a lion, occupies the largest portion of the novel. Here Schaeffer broadens the Holocaust topos, allowing the section to chronicle the narrator's transport to a camp, her ordeal in the labor camp at Kaiserwald near Riga, the turmoil of the last days of the war as projected into her private life, and the postwar period in which Anya decides to emigrate and leaves her motherland. In the tradition of Holocaust literature the author emphasizes the unbearable conditions of the train transport in cattle cars, the strenuous work in the camp, all the hardships of its prisoners and both their ability and failure to withstand the appalling conditions to which they are subjected. In her vivid account of life in Kaiserwald, Schaeffer incessantly points at the omnipresent fear of death selections that fills the air of the camp. The narrator expresses her feelings of the eventual downfall metaphorically: "my eyes were closed. When they were closed, their lids were shades pulled down on this world" (216).

Similarly to her portrayal of the ghetto life, she explores life in the camp revealing both the jealous rivalry among prisoners that emerges in the pilfering of food rations and the self-sacrificing willingness to help that is shown particularly by the relationship between Anya and her protector Erdmann, a German soldier who proves to be a disguised Jew and who organizes Anya's escape from the camp. Without his protection, the heroine would probably have not survived. Bilik (1981: 107) notices the symbolic name of Anya's savior, seeing him as a natural man ("earth-man") standing in opposition to the unnatural men around him. In any case, thanks to Erdmann the main character enjoys unprecedented privileges in the camp, which she takes advantage of, not only for her own benefit but also in order to give unselfish help to others, such as her friend Rachel and the fatally ill Sonya.

Throughout the third section the narrator does not cease to emphasize that the principal driving force for her survival is the existence of her daughter Ninka. In fact Anya clings to her late mother's belief that she will survive because she has someone to live for. Schaeffer's dramatic description of Anya's two reunions with her daughter reveals the mother's passionate devotion for her child, intensified by their long period of separation:

I wanted to touch her every minute, to be sure she was real, not a snow child, not a child with skin made of snow which covered only decay and rot and skeleton, and could melt into the earth, leaving only patches, leaving the mud with its snow-speckled hide, not alive at all. I watched her and touched her and played with her, but she was still not mine to keep. (1974: 293-294)

The first reunion takes place in the house of the Lithuanian family the Rutkauskuses, who kept Ninka in their custody, and the narrator's account shows not only her love for the child, who has become the only meaning of life for her, but also her frustration, as the last sentence of the above excerpt indicates. This frustration stems from the estrangement caused by their long-term separation and from the impossibility of her acting as a legal mother. In their first encounter Ninka does not recognize her mother and regards her as a beggar. The second reunion, in an orphanage at the end of the war, is particularly bitter, when Anya too fails to identify her daughter in the desperately miserable, starved, lice-infested creature she has become. She is in a situation when the reestablishment of her ties with her daughter becomes her overriding priority: "Now all I had to do was believe it, to believe she was my child, to have her believe I was her mother" (339). Kremer (1992: 152) points out that Schaeffer's exploration of "the psychological stress on Holocaust-wrought mother/daughter relationships [is] a subject generally left unexamined or given short shrift in Holocaust fiction."

No matter how difficult the restoration of the emotional bonds between the mother and her child is, it is not the only psychological trauma the central character has to face. In the aftermath of the war Anya can move freely in her native city of Vilno and enjoy her recently attained freedom, yet she comes to the painful conclusion that her home is irretrievably lost. She feels deeply uprooted and is fully aware of the transformation of both the place and her own mind. In one part of the novel, relating to the time when the heroine has just reached her town after her escape from the labor camp, Schaeffer conveys Anya's displacement in the following way: "It was warm; it was Vilno. But I wouldn't stick here. The little roots starting out from my toenails were withering and dying, turning black; I could see it happening through my shoes" (1974: 285). She is imbued with doubts, asking herself: "Would I ever be attached to people in the old way again" (301). A return to the "good old days" is impossible. And how could it be possible, after such a harrowing experience.

Anya is aware of the crucial effect of the wartime events (her imprisonment in the ghetto and the camp) on the disruption of her awareness of life's continuity. For her,

[I]f life is a train constantly crossing the border from the past to the present; it moved slowly, an inch at a time, finally a car at a time. The war had transported the whole train into the future which looked the same as the past, where all the rooms were the same, and none of the people were the same and none of the people spoke the same language. (301)

The depressing economic situation of postwar Vilno also contributes little to the narrator's sense of home. Schaeffer recounts the difficulties of earning a livelihood in the poverty-stricken city where living turns into a real struggle for survival. The only difference between the past and the present is that now the reasons behind this struggle are mainly economic. Anya, together with her new and very helpful protector, the fourteen-year old orphan Vladek, finds work in a hospital; but, since their income is not sufficient she has to work two jobs, selling in the market in the daytime and caring for patients in the hospital at night. To improve their living conditions, she retrieves the hidden family valuables from the Savikins' prewar

house and from the former servant Anzia who, in her loyalty, looked after some of the family jewelry during the war. The scene in which Anya breaks into her own apartment, which is now inhabited by different people, can be interpreted symbolically as suggesting that there is no longer any home for her in her birthplace and that the course of events is irrevocable.

The failure of Anya's last attempt at reconnection with the past proves to be the most decisive impetus to leave the old country. Her journey by air to Warsaw turns into a nightmarish mission: instead of her husband's relatives, whom she is searching for, she finds a totally devastated, lifeless city. Wandering through the ruins in the quarters that once swelled with life, she realizes there is no future for her and her daughter in Poland. Her awareness of the destruction of irreplaceable values causes her to link her future destiny with either Palestine or America.

The description of Anya's exodus to the American continent is very dramatic, as the heroine's hardships prove almost equal to those she experienced in wartime. The fugitives' agonizing journey through ravaged cities like Lodz, Szczecin, and Berlin is one of the most memorable parts of the novel, as Schaeffer has managed to capture the chaotic atmosphere of the first years after the war with all the complications awaiting the wandering peoples—shortage of food, limited accommodation, rampant corruption, bureaucracy, etc.

Anya's journey across the ocean is accompanied by her extreme seasickness, which Bilik (1981: 109) sees as “an earthy symbol of her attempt to purge herself of her unspeakable memories” and “a metaphor of rebirth” in the tradition of older immigration literature. And, indeed, the narrator seems to recoup new energy. She is infused with optimism and, united with Ninka, she feels “as if we were on the longest holiday of our lives” (1974: 456). However the epilogue, entitled “And Then There Were None,” set in 1973, when Anya is fifty-two, has an entirely different tone. Her monologue is marked by overwhelming skepticism, which contrasts starkly with her enthusiasm in the initial phase of her arrival within the American diaspora.

It is obvious that the war has affected Anya for the rest of her life. Her embittered discourse reveals total frustration. Despite her second marriage with the Buchenwald and Auschwitz survivor Max, whom she met on her journey to America, she feels lonely and abandoned by her daughter, who now has her own family. Her relationship with Ninka even has pathological features arising from her extreme over-protectiveness of, if not obsession with, her daughter that results from her Holocaust experience.

Many years after the war, she is still unable to understand the meaning of all the years of genocide she had to go through. She cannot capture the meaning of the entire suffering experienced in wartime Poland; it simply eludes her. For Anya the Holocaust is “as inexplicable as an earthquake” (472) and she comes to the resigned conclusion that she “was chosen to live, or doomed to live, depending on my mood for the day” (472).

Schaeffer's novel has a sad ending. The lonesome Anya knows that she will never be the same person again. She is tormented by her searing feelings of guilt at the fact that she had not been able to save the others. The circle is closed: as in the beginning of the novel, she is captured by her memories and dreams. In contrast with the title of the epilogue, she dreams about the house where all the members of the family are present: “People! There were so many! And I can still see myself sitting on the edge of Momma's bed; it is four o'clock in the morning and I am talking to her” (487-488).

The emotional Anya is not a philosopher, and thus she decides, in her reclusion, to record her experiences on paper, and, as Alexander claims (1979: 137), “[i]n the last page of the book, she re-creates and recovers her destroyed family in a dream, in a new house, which

will not vanish, and which in fact comprises the novel that stands before us, a triumph over time.”

Time: that is what really matters. In one passage, when Anya is depressed by the rapidly worsening living conditions of the Jews, her mother advises her: “[Y]ou can never keep track of all the bombs and guns and trains in this world, never. Don’t take that on yourself. You won’t be strong enough if you keep thinking that way” (150). The mother’s advice, surely well meant, could stand as a motto for the whole novel, since the most pronounced conflict within the work is not so much the clash between perpetrators and victims as that between memory and oblivion. The purpose of this motherly advice is to encourage Anya, to save her from collapse; but, as the novel shows, the desire to forget proves to be illusory. During her brief visit to Kaiserwald, which meanwhile had become a camp for the German prisoners at the end of the war, Anya realizes that she will be “forever attached to this camp by an invisible umbilical cord, infinitely elastic and infinitely strong, one that could never be cut” and that she will “forever be one of its inmates” (362).

“In the Epilogue,” the narrator confesses her wish to go to a hypnotist in order to erase all her memories of the past before her arrival in America. To this end she visits a doctor and asks him to suppress her memory. The doctor, who turns out to be a Holocaust survivor too, refuses her request with the following words: “The Jews get fewer, at least so I think, and what will you have left? At least now you have your memories” (485). Memories are the only heritage. When Anya complains that her memories are terrible and she has only a few good memories from all the years of her past, the doctor replies: “Make more of them” (485).

At the end of the narrative, the protagonist’s act of “opening the rooms to the house in the past which were kept locked so long” (469) testifies to the victory of memory. This victory is confirmed by the writing of the novel itself. Recorded memory enables the vanished past to retain its immortality. In conversation with Max aboard the ship sailing to America, Anya exclaims: “Forget, . . . the word doesn’t exist” (451). But if she fails to recall some detail from her past, for example a game played with yellow flowers in her childhood, in the context of the mass extermination of her nation she knows that this experience is dead, forever lost, for “there will be no one to remind me” (327). In view of the enormous loss of the Jewish people, the significance of memory is even greater. Kremer (2003: 1097) aptly suggests that:

[t]he novel’s themes of memory and silence, memory and voice, are brought to fruition in Anya’s comprehension of the futility of oblivion and of the concomitant moral imperative to sustain Holocaust memory and commemorate the martyred millions. That the commemoration will not be restricted to the private realm but chronicled for future generations is signified in the protagonist’s closing affirmation that she is transcribing her testimony.

The role of memory is strengthened by the author’s thematic use of family memorabilia with symbolic meaning. They serve as a symbolic gateway to the past, a hereditary message transmitted from the vanished generation to the generation of descendants. These “visible symbols of the past, bringing it in a tangible way into the present” (Pearlman, 1989: 140), include more or less valuable objects that have the ability to evoke memories of the loved ones whose lives they are linked with. Probably the most distinctive such symbol used in the novel is a silver basket, the family talisman, decorated with the biblical motif of Noah’s ark with the animals. The function of this symbol in the section “In History” is different; it foreshadows the future turmoil of the war years and the destruction of Jews, because the

biblical story of Noah refers to the apocalyptic Flood. As the novel progresses, the meaning of the symbol becomes altered. When Anya visits the former servant Anzia to get the family jewelry back after the liberation of Vilno, she asks her to keep the basket, originally Anya's father's wedding present for her mother, as a reminder of the Savikin family. The generous Anzia gives it up because she knows what value this talisman has for Anya. She yields it to her as a future wedding present for Ninka. In the context of this act, the talisman becomes a symbol of the family's continuity, which is so precious for the protagonist. However, it is Anzia herself who represents one of the few remaining emotional ties with the past. Encountering her, Anya confesses: "Tears were streaming down my face. I wanted to thank her for having stayed alive. She was a cord, a thread, a telephone wire going back into the old rooms where the voices still spoke; her memory went back further than mine" (1974: 388).

Another link with the family's past is Ninka's doll, Vera Mouse, a name given in the ghetto after Ninka's aunt Vera. During the time of her separation from her mother, Vera Mouse becomes Ninka's only tie with the otherwise forgotten family past. Later, Ninka subconsciously values it more highly than other, more beautiful dolls. Moreover, for Anya Vera Mouse also becomes a means for the identification of her daughter during their second reunion.

Schaeffer stresses the value of the past by her use of folklore material, mostly of Slavic origin. She uses various folk tales, fables, fairy tales, poems, songs or sayings that either introduce each section or are inserted directly into the text. In Berger's (1985: 112) view they "establish a mythic framework for succeeding events," and he claims that dreams and fairy tales "blur the lines between reality and fantasy, thereby emphasizing that the unimaginable but real Holocaust universe far exceeds the limits of the imaginable world" (ibid.). More importantly, the inserted folk tales underscore the importance of human memory since they help to restore the shattered past. They have a similar function to that of family talismans because they have become a part of a valuable heritage. It is significant, in this context, that Anya's parents, particularly her mother, and their servant Anzia were very talented narrators of folk tales.

Anya's post-Holocaust world is a world of loss. Though a fluent speaker of several languages in the motherland, she is unable to learn English in America. A former fervent student of medicine, she is not able to work even as a nurse in a hospital after the war. Her professional career washes her up in an antique store, just like the survivor whom Schaeffer interviewed and who inspired her to write this novel. But out of all of the many losses, the loss of family is the most tragic one. While the protagonist's postwar universe is cracked and in many ways empty, her memories are peopled with her loved ones. When Anya, almost at the end of the novel, says "I have not forgotten anything" (1974: 470), we trust her because we know that her memories are what she treasures most. After all, they are "a form of reality" for her, the fundament justifying her existence.

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