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Third-Generation Holocaust Representation

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Published by Northwestern University Press

Aarons, Victoria & Berger, L..

Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

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CHAPTER 5

Nicole Krauss

Inheriting the Burden of Holocaust Trauma

The deep effects of catastrophe, the kind that are passed on from psyche to psyche and mind to mind, continue to reverberate unto the third generation.

—EVA HOFFMAN, *AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE*

I inherited a suffering to which I had not been subjected.

—ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT, *THE IMAGINARY JEW*

Remembering is a noble and necessary act.

—ELIE WIESEL, “HOPE, DESPAIR AND MEMORY,” NOBEL LECTURE

A grandchild of Holocaust survivors and the author of three novels, *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), and *Great House* (2010), Nicole Krauss admits that while the Holocaust is a manifest presence in her work, she cannot write her ancestors’ stories the way survivors or their children have written about the Shoah. In a recent interview, she takes issue with being labeled a Holocaust writer and maintains that she has “written very little about the Holocaust in terms of actual events.”¹ Chronologically separated and shielded from the horrors of the historical realities of the Holocaust by her grandparents and parents, this third-generation artist points out that in treating her Holocaust inheritance she is mostly interested in “the response to catastrophic loss” and in a

survivor's ability to deal with the trauma of dispossession and "starting a second life" (Gritz).

These pivotal concerns, while already present in her first novel, *Man Walks into a Room*, assume existential urgency in her two recent novels, *The History of Love* and *Great House*, extending their field of inquiry to include treatment of the Shoah's impact on the second generation and the quest of the third-generation artist to find means to reimagine the traumatic history of Jews marked by exile and genocide. This chapter focuses on the tropes and symbols Krauss employs within a post-memorial context in order to come to terms with the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Her literary oeuvre utilizes the tropes of nostalgia and displacement in charting a course for responding to catastrophic events that occurred long before the author's birth. We maintain that Krauss's work amply substantiates Cathy Caruth's observation that "History is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation."²

Unlike the works of first-generation writers, Krauss's novels avoid the realities of concentration camps with crematoria chimneys belching out human ashes; or ghettos encircled by barbed wire and high walls to reinstate and reinforce the millennia-old practice of separating Jews from the rest of humanity; or forests where young girls are forced to come of age surrounded by beastly villagers rather than by the welcoming embrace of a mother, a grandmother, or sister. Likewise, the chaotic and often surreal milieu of a displaced persons camp teeming with orphaned, widowed, emotionally and physically maimed survivors searching for loved ones and for a country to call their own—another preoccupation of first-generation authors—remains off-limits to Krauss's novels. Neither do the mundane and epic tensions in survivor Jewish households, with their so-called replacement children in Jerusalem, New York, Kiev, or Buenos Aires, fall under Krauss's scrutiny, as they do in the writings of second-generation authors, the "survivors of survivors," as described by Thane Rosenbaum, himself a son of survivors.³

Krauss's protagonists refer to what are considered archetypal events and persons in the history of the Holocaust: Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass), which foreshadowed the soon-to-unfold genocide; the Nazi gold train, a convoy loaded with stolen Jewish art and treasures,

symbolizing the dispossession of the Jewish people; Emanuel Ringelblum and his Oneg Shabbat team's heroic effort to create an archive of witness testimonies in the Warsaw Ghetto, an act that transformed a historian's duty to write a factual account of observable reality into a sacred mission to bear witness.

Krauss is right to insist that she could not write the story of survivors or their direct offspring for whom the Holocaust as a lived experience holds an immediacy she cannot recreate. Nonetheless, Krauss realizes that the impact of the Holocaust continues to resound, even though its historicity is under continuing assault,⁴ and that she must therefore find ways to comprehend and articulate the plight of contemporary Jews who have inherited the traumatic legacy of the Shoah, in all of its many varied, but sharply felt manifestations. In this desire she follows the pattern of third-generation writers.

The Holocaust was always “humming away at the edges”⁵ of Krauss's own existence, notwithstanding a life of comfort and privilege she enjoyed growing up in Long Island in the finely designed Bauhaus home of the family of a successful orthopedic surgeon. A sensitive and curious teenager, she read widely and thoughtfully. When, at age thirteen, she studied Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, her teacher told her that the book was about nostalgia, a concept that provoked her and stimulated her imagination. As Milan Kundera points out in his novel *Ignorance*, the word “nostalgia” is derived from the Greek words “nostos” and “algos,” a “suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return”⁶ to one's homeland, to a world of familiarity and roots. Kundera goes on to point out that, embedded in this concept, is an acute sense of loss and an unbearable “pain of absence” (Kundera, 6).

Investigating nostalgia in Márquez's novel led Krauss to an epiphany: subconsciously this feeling of loss and an ever-present sense of a painful absence had been resonating deeply within her since adolescence. Moreover, as she discovered later, “It [had] something—or everything to do with—the fact that my grandparents came from these places that we could never go back to, because they'd been lost. And people were lost.⁷ My great-grandparents and lots of great-uncles and aunts died in the Holocaust. Maybe it is something inherited in the blood, a sense of a loss of a thing and a longing for it.”⁸

Filling the absence and countering the loss became major artistic

preoccupations governing her entire oeuvre. At the onset of her literary career Krauss composed a record of her four grandparents' lives. Her maternal grandparents were born in Germany and Ukraine and later found refuge in London, while her paternal grandparents, who met in Israel and then moved to New York, were born in Hungary and Slonim, in what is now Belarus. Their histories of displacement, as well as the memory of many of her relatives who perished in the Holocaust, helped her create credible characters, who, as she puts it, "survived the Holocaust or have been affected by it" (Gritz). Leopold Gursky, a native of Slonim, a Holocaust survivor, and the protagonist of *The History of Love*, is in love with his childhood sweetheart, Alma Mereminski, whose surname is identical to that of Krauss's paternal grandmother, Sasha Mereminski. Sasha Mereminski also inspired the creation of one of the most movingly tragic characters in *Great House*, Lotte Berg, who like Krauss's grandmother was forced to leave Germany after Kristallnacht for a transit camp in Poland. One year later she evaded death in Auschwitz by becoming a chaperone on one of the last Kindertransports to London.⁹ The parents of both Sasha Mereminski and those of her fictional counterpart were murdered in the Shoah. Their tragic fate casts a long shadow over Krauss's literary landscape, which spans from Israel to America, from Germany to England, from Belarus to Argentina, from Russia to Chile. In the process, Krauss's novels engender the unbearable "pain of absence," the sense of nostalgia, indeed, that make her readers fully aware of the horrors of the Holocaust without coming into direct contact with the kingdom of night. As a third-generation writer, Krauss cannot help but follow the necessity of bearing witness to her Holocaust inheritance; she does it, however, by celebrating and asserting life, just like her grandparents did who are "people who love life" and who taught her to "always emphasize life over the loss of it" (Marsh). "Every conversation I remember having with them as a child," she tells Alden Mudge in an interview, "was about life—not about tragedy, not about history, not about what had happened to their families—but simply about living."¹⁰ Krauss's point of view bears comparison with that of Margot Singer, discussed in chapter 6.

The History of Love is dedicated both to her four grandparents who "taught me," she writes, "the opposite of disappearance" and to the celebrated novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, her husband at the time. Foer's family has also been touched by the Shoah. Consequently, Krauss "intu-

ited a lot of the same things in the silences of [their] childhoods” (Wood). Her grandparents’ legacy is also reflected in the dedication of her latest novel, *Great House*, “For Sasha and Cy,” her two sons named after their great-grandparents. The three tributes constitute a text of far reaching consequences that help answer the question Krauss poses after defining the subject matter of *Great House* as “the burden of inheritance.” The question, as she puts it, “that was of great concern to her . . . What do we pass down to our children, knowingly or unknowingly?”¹¹

This question is central to the explicitly Jewish imperative of passing the tradition from generation to generation (*l’dor ve-dor*) and goes to the heart of Krauss’s fiction. It identifies two imperatives: first, to pass on or pass down an inheritance, in this case an intergenerational trauma that transcends generational and chronological boundaries and requires attesting to the inheritance of the Holocaust’s postmemory and second, to ensure the existence of yet another post-memorial generation—children who live “after such knowledge” and transmit—even as they shape—testimony, as in the admonition “Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation” (Book of Joel 1:3). This issue of postmemory and propagating children appears as early as Krauss’s first novel, *Man Walks into a Room*. The protagonist, Samson Green, an English professor at Columbia University, who lost his memory as a result of a brain tumor, bemoans his inability to recall events that happened during the last twenty years of his life, including the death of his mother. In desperation, he muses: “What is life, Samson wondered now, without a witness?”¹² Moreover, he “wondered now whether he and Anna [his wife of many years] had spoken about children, whether a child of their own with Anna’s eyes and his countenance had been waiting up the road in the future that was now lost to them. The thought of it made his heart quake with sorrow and love” (*Man Walks*, 208). The issues of writing and parenthood are intertwined, as are those of bearing post-memorial witness and intergenerational transmission of trauma. Both are cornerstone concerns in *The History of Love* and *Great House*, and serve to link the writings of the third generation.

The burden of emotional inheritance Krauss so acutely experiences is expressed in a variety of different ways. Her writing repeatedly returns to the post-Holocaust lives of survivors, their children, and grandchildren. She is obsessed by the consequences of this most recent manifestation of

the archetypal brutalization and destruction that has recurred repeatedly throughout Jewish history. Moreover, in July 2010, she and Johnathan Safran Foer toured Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum and archive located on Jerusalem's Mount of Remembrance, where they reviewed documents relating to members of her family. For Krauss, this experience was both compelling and traumatic, in the sense of the term that Cathy Caruth describes in her trauma theory: "to be traumatized is to be precisely possessed by an image or an event."¹³

As this volume reveals, other third-generation writers feel compelled to confront the Holocaust and its continuing impact on survivors and their progeny. Erika Dreifus, for instance, describes her own characters as having been "chased from their original 'living space' . . . [They] still search for psychic and physical territory, still don't feel safe."¹⁴ Dreifus, a Harvard educated historian, writer, and professor, insists that, as a grandchild of refugee survivors, she finds a need to work through the burdens of her own inheritance and takes to task those who question the credibility and authenticity of Holocaust writings of third-generation artists. To substantiate her argument, she enlists the help of Thane Rosenbaum who, anticipating the emergence of third-generation writers, observes: "The enormity of Auschwitz was so great . . . it can't be canceled out in one generation" (Shai Oster, "Holocaust Humor," *Moment*, September/October 1999). Dreifus invokes a pointed statement made by Ariel Levin, a third-generation teenager in Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham* who attests that her role in life is to "redeem and liberate the ghosts of her grandparents' generation—effectively giving them space to live again . . . while freeing her father from the prison of the present" (Dreifus, 526). As Dan Bar-On attests, "The third generation (is important) in evaluating intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust."¹⁵

Rosenbaum's insistence on the intergenerational nature of traumatic inheritance and Dreifus's acceptance of her responsibility as a third-generation witness to attest not only to the past but also to the effects of the Holocaust on post-Holocaust generations sharpen the focus of Krauss's central question: "What do we pass down to our children, knowingly or unknowingly?" *The History of Love* and *Great House* are responses to this query; they contain, in fact, two major images that thread through her respective novels and help bind their highly complicated and tightly structured narrative designs into a coherent rhetorical whole: a book-within-

a-book in *The History of Love* and a multi-drawer writing desk in *Great House*. These images are intimately associated with writing—in Krauss’s words “they stand for Literature” (Gritz, *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2010) and are passed on or passed down from one character to another. These objects become “like a needle and thread” that help stitch “some of the stories of the [characters’] lives together” (Bar-On, 113).

Their passage from one character to another implies both loss and inheritance. Exploring their journey allows Krauss to closely probe how the survivors’ and their offspring “respond to catastrophic losses and suggest ways to transcend these losses while beginning a second life, albeit in the shadows of the Holocaust” (Gritz, *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2010). Given the close association the book-within-a-book and the desk have with the creative process, it is no coincidence that most of her major characters are, in fact, writers or are closely associated with the written word, and all are driven “to describe the world, because,” as Leo Gursky, the eighty-year-old survivor and author of the book-within-a-book asserts, “to live in an undescribed world is too lonely.”¹⁶

Krauss’s literary method seeks to reconstruct and reassemble fragmented lives, giving her characters a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. To describe the fragmented, chaotic, and anomic world of a century of genocide, dispossession, uprooting, and exile is not an easy task for a writer.¹⁷ Neither is it easy to give shape to lives of characters whose personal histories are marked by an understanding that to be born Jewish is to live in a state of uncertainty and doubt. But rendering these sensibilities and states of being is Krauss’s primary artistic goal and is a shared third-generation characteristic.

Krauss conveys the fragmented nature of her characters’ lives in *The History of Love* in part by having multiple narrators tell the story: Leopold Gursky, a Holocaust survivor and writer; Zvi Litvinoff, Gursky’s childhood friend and an aspiring author; Alma Singer, a young girl in search of her past; and Emanuel Chaim, Alma’s brother and wannabe *lamed vovnik*, one of the thirty-six hidden righteous whose presence helps to ensure the continued existence of the world. Their narratives are complemented and cross-referenced by diaries, journal entries, and letters that offer both deeper insight into the characters’ experiences and sensibilities and simultaneously make their lives seem more problematic, contradictory, and fragmented. Imprints of visual images of a heart, a book, a com-

pass, and an ark precede each narrative, signifying the innermost desires of each narrator: Leopold Gursky yearns to mend his broken heart; Zvi Litvinoff aspires to write a book of testimonies; Alma Singer needs a compass to keep her search on track, and Emanuel Chaim covets spiritual renewal.

The story centers on traumatic personal and literary loss and rediscovery. Leopold Gursky is the author of three books, including the-novel-within-the-novel, *The History of Love*, a namesake of Krauss's book, which he dedicated to his childhood sweetheart, Alma Mereminski. Unlike him, she escaped the ravages of the Holocaust because her father had the foresight to send her to America two years before the Nazis invaded Slonim. Brokenhearted, Leopold Gursky periodically sent her installments of his manuscript, hoping that this rhetorical thread might reconnect them in the future and in the interim help mend his heart. His friend, Zvi Litvinoff, also in love with Alma Mereminski and also an aspiring writer and poet, is a Holocaust refugee whose arduous wanderings finally land him in Chile along with Leopold Gursky's manuscript, which its author had passed on to him for safekeeping. Zvi Litvinoff's marries a Yiddish-speaking Chilean woman, Roza, who nurtures him back to life after he has suffered the loss of nearly his entire family. Convinced that Gursky is dead, Litvinoff publishes a Spanish translation of the book under his own name. At the time of his death, he is plagued by guilt and self-recrimination for his literary theft.

Alma Singer, the teenage protagonist, is named after Leopold Gursky's prewar sweetheart, Alma Mereminski, by her deceased father David Singer, who had stumbled on a rare copy of Zvi Litvinoff's plagiarized novel in a Buenos Aires secondhand bookstore. Alma Singer is consumed by her desire to find a husband for her widowed mother, Charlotte, a translator. Jacob Marcus, who asked Charlotte to translate Leopold Gursky's *The History of Love* into English, sends her a copy. Unbeknownst to her mother, Alma Singer reads some of the translated chapters and contacts Jacob Marcus as a possible suitor for her mother. The girl subsequently discovers that Jacob Marcus is, in fact, Isaac Moritz, a New York writer. Moreover, he is the son of Leopold Gursky and Alma Mereminski, conceived before Alma Mereminski left Slonim. Jacob Marcus, ignorant of his real origins, was raised by Alma Mereminski and the man she married in America. The young girl further learns that her namesake

had secretly maintained her contacts with Leopold Gursky and had read chapters of his manuscript to her son.

Krauss realizes her artistic goal of providing her characters a renewed sense of meaning and purpose through Alma Singer's search for Jacob and her namesake. Alma Singer's identity-forming and life-altering journey leads her to an encounter with a Holocaust survivor whose main fears in life are that he will "die on a day when [he] went unseen" (*Love*, 4) and that his memoir, *Words for Everything*, will go unread. "The truth was," he cries out, "I wanted someone to read it" (17). The convergence of the two journeys undertaken by a survivor in search of a reader and a teenage girl in search of her namesake has allayed Gursky's dread of invisibility and also made Alma Singer aware of her people's past, of her roots, of the importance of family, of the need to memorialize the victims of the Shoah. Moreover, it shed light on both her mother's belief of the oneness of the Jewish people as reflected in her pie chart, which shows the interconnectedness of the Jewish people and the intergenerational responsibility for balancing inherited burdens of the past with the realities of the present and anticipation of the future.

Alma Singer's encounter with the survivor leads her to discover a life-sustaining legacy that impels her to pass on *The History of Love* to future generations. Moreover, Krauss suggests another aspect of this legacy through Alma Singer's eleven-year-old brother. Mourning the loss of his father and desiring to become a *lamed vovnik*, Emanuel Chaim represents messianic yearning, in spite of the Holocaust. And even if such yearning often produces frustration and doubt, it nonetheless contains within it even stronger elements of faith and hope. Furthermore, Emanuel Chaim, desires to be repatriated to Israel where their mother and father met in Yavneh. He plays a pivotal, quasi-mystical, role that enriches Leopold Gursky and Alma Singer by allowing them both to bear witness—he as a survivor, and she as a third-generation member—and transmit the legacy of the Holocaust to future generations.

In Krauss's worldview the burdens of inheritance and intergenerational transmission of traumas can be turned into joys of a rich and a reciprocally nourishing relationship between parents and children, one deeply anchored within a family unit and based on a tradition developed out of stories of loss, survival, and redemption. In *The History of Love* she employs memorialization and storytelling or writing to facilitate her

characters' redemptive transformations. While in America, Leopold Gursky writes a memoir, *Words for Everything*, and sends it to his son. Charlotte Singer, a member of the second generation, translates—literally and figuratively—Leopold Gursky's novel of loss and exile. Alma Singer, of the third generation, reads the translation and becomes aware of her roots. This rite of passage will help redeem and liberate her grandparents' generation from oblivion while freeing her mother from the burdens of her own losses. Given Alma Singer's successful search for the woman whose name she inherited, it is not far-fetched to assume that she will be able to restore the wholeness of her own family, perhaps helping her mother find a husband, perhaps in Yavneh, again. She will thereby live up to the meaning of the name "Alma"—one who nourishes the soul.

Great House

Great House, Nicole Krauss's exquisitely wrought novel, defies easy categorization. The author herself terms it a "very difficult book to describe" (YouTube, "Conversation: Nicole Krauss' *Great House*," 11/8/2010). The work, nonetheless, is vital in helping readers understand the emergence of a third generation of writers, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, who, while living in the present, shoulder the elusive burden of their Holocaust inheritance. The fate of an enormous multi-drawer writing desk, once, allegedly, used by the assassinated Chilean poet Lorca links the novel's protagonists. The desk, variously described as "overshadow[ing] everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster"¹⁸ or as "an enormous, foreboding thing that bore down on the occupants of the room it inherited, pretending to be inanimate but, like a Venus flytrap, ready to pounce on them and digest them via one of its many little terrible drawers" (*Great House*, 248), assumes the role of a silent yet palpable protagonist and acts as a symbol of the inescapable burden of a writer.

Acknowledging the continuing trauma of Holocaust survivors, *Great House* concerns itself primarily with how this trauma imprints itself in the lives of two second-generation witnesses, children of one of the four major protagonists who also serve as narrators in the novel. Their Holocaust inheritance manifests itself in a variety of ways: a fear of intimacy, being raised in silence concerning the Shoah, and feelings of unease

with the social world. The novel employs the trope of traumatic post-memory in dealing with the second generation. As Hirsch attests, post-memory “describes as well the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first—their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge.”¹⁹ This reminds us of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* volumes in which Art reflects his own burden of being raised in a survivor household.

Like *The History of Love*, *Great House* is a richly textured multi-themed novel. The volume, however, differs in two important ways from its immediate predecessor. First, Krauss seeks to imagine what a second-generation Holocaust witness feels and experiences. Second, *Great House*’s themes—memory of trauma and its ineluctable relationship to identity, the near-impossible task of nourishing the souls of Holocaust survivors, and its bleak emotional tone—set this work apart. Moreover, it reflects the fragmented nature of postmodern writing itself. Specifically, Krauss speaks of the psychic burden of inheritance in the lives of individuals both in and out of the State of Israel whose existence is inextricably bound to the Shoah. As part of an emerging body of third-generation writings, *Great House* offers a distinctive angle of vision for reading the literary map guiding readers wishing to negotiate the terrain of this generation’s traumatic Holocaust burden.

Great House is composed of two books, each having four chapters, which tell the intersecting story of four people, three of whose lives have been touched by the mysterious and enormous writing desk which is passed on as either an inheritance or a gift. The narratives in each section of the novel are simultaneously a story of the early and later lives of the protagonists. Moreover, these narratives are reminiscent of the Vidui, a confession or reckoning of the soul (*Hesbon Hanefesh*), which is a prominent feature of the ritual of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, during which one seeks reconciliation between oneself and the deity and between oneself and others against whom one may have sinned.

Although God plays no overt role in *Great House*, the deity’s place and function in Jewish history, especially following great upheavals in which the continued existence of Judaism is in grave peril, is a constant in the Jewish experience, defined as a cycle of catastrophes and redemptions. Krauss invites the reader to contemplate this issue following the Holocaust. This point is given credence by a chapter titled “All Rise” which

purports to be testimony given before a judge. In the case of *Great House*, the “judge” may be God whose post-Holocaust existence is, for many, in extreme jeopardy. While it is true that skepticism about God, the deity’s acting in history, and the entire notion of the sacred came under intense scrutiny in modernity, especially beginning with the work of Spinoza, the Holocaust intensified this scrutiny in an unparalleled manner. The late historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes, “Jews are not prepared to confront [history] directly, but seem to await a new, metahistorical myth, for which the novel provides at least a temporary modern surrogate.”²⁰

Viewed from this angle, *Great House* may be understood as a novel in which God’s evident absence—both during the Shoah and in the novel itself—is less a statement of fact than an implicit twofold question: What is God’s role in the Shoah, and in the post-Holocaust world, an enquiry universally pursued with great urgency by artists, philosophers, poets, theologians, and writers. The writing desk links the stories of three of the novel’s four principal protagonists and narrators. Nadia, a divorced, childless, mid-list American novelist, has written at the desk given her twenty-five years earlier by Daniel Varsky, a Chilean poet martyred by General Gustav Pinochet’s dictatorial regime. Lotte Berg, mentioned previously, is a writer who owned the desk for many years and is ultimately, a victim of Alzheimer’s. A refugee, she had come to England on one of the last Kindertransports. Lotte had given away her infant son and concealed this fact from her husband Arthur whom she had married after the event. Arthur, a professor of English, ruminates on the nature of romantic love after the Shoah; these ruminations led him to discover his wife’s traumatic secret. George Weisz is a Hungarian-born survivor whose father—murdered in the Shoah—was the original owner of the desk. Leah and Yoav, Israeli-born brother and sister, are George’s children. Leah retrieves the desk from Nadia. Yoav eventually marries Isabel (Izzy) an American student whom he meets in Oxford.

The fourth protagonist-narrator, Aaron, is an aging Israeli lawyer and widower who has a deeply troubled and ambiguous relationship with Dov, one of his two adult sons and a former judge. Their story, while not related to the burden of traumatic history associated with the desk, conveys another dimension of Holocaust trauma: the complex relationship between the Shoah and the establishment of the modern State of Israel.

Krauss compels her readers to reflect on this relationship in telling Dov's story. We will return to this later.

George Weisz's father, a great scholar of Jewish history, "carried two thousand years with him wherever he went the way other men carry a pocket watch" (*Great House*, 286). Weisz himself retrieves or produces pre-Shoah memorabilia for surviving victims, concretizing survivor memories by retrieving physical objects stolen during the Holocaust. While described as "a person partially erased," Weisz nonetheless typifies the resourcefulness of many survivors and brings a measure of comfort to his peers (284). He is self-described as having "certain talents; I developed an expertise," he states, "Out of the ruins of history I produced a chair, a table, a chest of drawers. I made a name for myself" (285). Although he never owned a store, George Weisz's fame as an antiques expert was legendary; clients "always knew where to find him" (118).

A widower, Weisz wandered from city to city with his children, Leah and Yoav, whose lives are deeply affected by their father's Holocaust trauma. "They were," writes Krauss, "prisoners of their father's, locked within the walls of their own family, and in the end it wasn't possible for them to belong to anyone else" (113). Krauss's description comports with Caruth's assertion that "One's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 8). Leah observes that her father "was burdened with a sense of duty that commanded his whole life, and later ours" (*Great House*, 115). Silence was the familiar form of communication between the father and his children. Here Krauss deftly makes several points: the Shoah's continuing trauma in the lives of its survivors, the intergenerational transmission of that trauma to their daughters and sons, and the impossibility of escaping the consequences of the Shoah despite the survivors' determination to rebuild shattered lives.

Great House is a meditation on post-Holocaust memory, the meaning of Jewish history after Auschwitz, and the impact of the catastrophe on Jewish identity. These issues find resonance in the novel's title which is invested with at least two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to a passage in the biblical book of Kings: "He burned the house of God, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he

burned with fire” (2 Kings 25:9). On the other hand, after this manifestation of divine judgment provoked by the faithless Israelite kings, an exilic remnant returns to begin the task of rebuilding Jerusalem. In classical Jewish thought destruction is never complete and is always followed by a “saving remnant” that enables the search for redemption. It is this paradigm that the Shoah threatens to topple.

Moreover, Krauss references Yohanan ben Zakkai, a second-century C.E. figure who also lived in the aftermath of a great destruction—the Jerusalem Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. Ben Zakkai renews Judaism even as he transforms it from biblical religion to rabbinic Judaism after the Temple’s fall, establishing a rabbinic academy in Yavneh—the place where *The History of Love’s* David and Alma Singer met. George Weisz’s father used to tell his son tales of ben Zakkai that linked subsequent Jewish memory and the rebuilding of the Great House (the Jerusalem Temple) to the meaning of messiah. The elder Weisz speculates, “If every Jewish memory were put together . . . as one, the House would be rebuilt again . . . or rather a memory of the House so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original itself” (*Great House*, 279). This, according to Weisz’s father, might convey what is meant by the term “messiah”: “a perfect assemblage of the finite parts of the Jewish memory. In the next world, we will all dwell together in the memory of our memories” (ibid.). But Weisz’s father cautioned his son that this will not be for us, “Not for you or me. We live, each of us, to preserve our fragment in a state of perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under an open door” (ibid.). Jewish memory is thus seen as eternal and eternally incomplete in the face of historical traumas visited on the Jewish people.

Furthermore, George Weisz muses on the meaning of the action of ben Zakkai’s disciples, a story that his father had related to him when he was growing up. After their master’s death, the disciples sought a response to ben Zakkai’s question: “What is a Jew without Jerusalem?” Finally they were able to comprehend ben Zakkai’s response: “Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself.” The Jewish people themselves, observed the elder Weisz, could then be bent “around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form” (279). In this manner, Weisz offered the key understanding of how Jewish history can integrate even great

destructions into its memory that continues to be shaped by changing historical events.

Weisz's implicit philosophy of Jewish history calls to mind Heinrich Heine's observation that the Bible was the Jews' "portable fatherland" (*The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, 1968). Here exile becomes a state of mind even more than a description of the wanderings of the Jews. For Heine, wherever the Jewish people were physically situated, they bore their homeland with them in the form of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, Heine's observation flies in the face of Ahad Ha'Am's insight that every Jew needs two messiahs—one to take the Jews out of exile and the second to take the exile out of the Jews. Krauss mediates between both views. On the one hand, she writes of Jews exiled to different parts of the world in the aftermath of the Shoah; they are literally exiled. However, on the other hand, she assigns great symbolic and literary weight to Israel, especially to Yavneh which, as we have seen, is the location of a great transition from biblical to rabbinic Judaism, and to Jerusalem, which is where George Weisz maintains a home on Ha'Oren Street, and where he eventually commits suicide. Jerusalem is also where Yoav and Liz will marry and reside.

In addition to the biblical resonance of the novel's title, "the great house" can, observes Liz, who frequently visited Freud's recreated study in London, refer to the mind as a metaphorical house (*Great House*, 111). Here it is significant to contrast the positions of Freud and Wiesel concerning the role of memory. For Freud, memory was a crippling burden which one must learn to work through in order to free oneself psychologically. For Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, memory has vital ontological significance. "If we stop remembering," he attests, "we stop being."²¹ *Great House* seeks to ineluctably link memory and being. *Great House* has a more somber tone than the *History of Love*, which can be attributed at least in part to the fact that Krauss's third novel deals primarily—although not exclusively—with the survivor and second generations. Two of the most important characters in *The History of Love*, Alma Singer and her brother Bird, represent the hope embodied in the third generation and its further historical remove from the Shoah.

Krauss observes in an interview that her characters are filled with doubt, both self-doubt and moral doubt. The protagonists in *Great House*, each in her or his own way, respond to their traumatic legacy of loss, to

contemporary genocide, and to the torture of political prisoners. As we have noted, the massive writing desk had at one time belonged to the martyred Daniel Varsky. The poet's fate brings to mind not only the murder of countless young Jewish writers and intellectuals in the Holocaust whose untimely and horrific deaths deprived the world of undreamed of possibilities, but also underscores the fact that genocide and its perpetrators are very much a part of the contemporary landscape.

Krauss thereby invites her readers to contemplate the meaning of the Holocaust-inspired phrase "Never Again." The "Never Again" reference brings to mind the observation of Rachel Kadish's protagonist in *From a Sealed Room*: "In the Hebrew afterschool program that my mother insisted I attend twice a week, we spent that spring learning about the Holocaust. The teacher sang songs of mourning, recited stories meant to keep the lost ones alive. And she taught us that remembering was what would keep this thing from happening again. *Never Again* and *Never Forget*; we could keep disaster from reoccurring if only we were watchful."²² For certain third-generation writers "Never Again," at best, means "Never Again, at least on our watch." Moreover, Krauss's novel reports both the capricious nature of death and the intentional act of murder. Death is of course a fact of life. It can occur accidentally as is the case when *Great House* reports that a female victim of a fire in a national park lodge was the sole casualty among the guests. Murder, however, differs from death. *Great House* tells of a mother who, after giving her children sleeping pills, incinerates them and herself in a car. The book also refers to Palestinian suicide bombings of Israelis in Jerusalem, and to Israeli soldiers who fell in battle. In Krauss's third novel, images of death and what Robert J. Lifton terms "the death imprint" stalk the lives of Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

Great House also recounts episodes from the seemingly endless Arab-Israeli conflict that indicate the omnipresence of evil and suffering, as well as the third generation's search to reconcile the evidently irreconcilable Jewish and Palestinian narratives of exile and return. Weisz, who proves himself a successful entrepreneur, in time buys a house formerly owned by an Arab in Ein Karem, a fashionable section of Jerusalem. The current owner, from whom Weisz buys the house, reports that the Arab had fled with his wife and children. The Arab's daughter left behind her doll.

The man tells Weisz that at first he kept the doll, but “one day the [doll’s] glass eyes began to look at me in a strange way” (*Great House*, 285).

Returning to the story of Aaron and Dov, the reader learns that while serving in the tank corps in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Dov is forced to confront an impossible moral dilemma: Should he stay with his badly wounded commander and face the reality that they both would die? Or should he seek help, which meant abandoning his comrade knowing that he might die? Dov leaves. The soldier’s body was never found. Honoring the commander’s request, Dov delivers his watch to the soldier’s now sonless father. The father, a survivor of Birkenau, writes Dov a devastating letter accusing him of stealing his son’s watch and letting him die. Moreover, he asks “*How do you live with yourself?*” (185). The survivor’s letter “summoned the courage of Jewish inmates at the hands of the SS,” and called Dov a coward. The letter ends starkly: *It should have been you* (ibid.).

Aaron remarks that the letter “destroyed” his son (188). In the months following receipt of the letter, the father describes his son in terms reminiscent of the figure of the *Muselmanner*—death camp slang for those who, in the words of Primo Levi, “are non-men . . . the divine spark dead within them . . . One hesitates to call them living.”²³ Aaron attests that Dov is catatonic. He refuses to eat and withdraws from life. At this point the reader recalls that Eve, Dov’s doting mother, who desperately wished to leave Israel when Dov was a youngster because of the country’s constant struggle to survive amidst a sea of hostility, had told Aaron—who himself had fought in two of Israel’s wars—that she would willingly sacrifice a thousand people in order for her son to live. Aaron himself had thought the same thing during the time of Dov’s psychic pain.

Dov’s suffering is real and unmistakably links the Shoah and Israeli identity. Even as a young child he is withdrawn and behaves antithetically to his brother Uri’s gregariousness and zest for living. An aspiring writer, “already,” remembers Aaron, “at 12 or 13 you [Dov] keep growing inward” (*Great House*, 67). The youth constantly casts judgment on his surroundings and on the people with whom he comes in contact. He is secretly engaged in writing a book, the chapters of which he sends home in self-addressed packages during his military service. His book tells a bizarre story in which several people, lying in different rooms are

joined by electrodes to a great white shark, transferring their nightmares to the giant fish. The sea creature “everyday grew sicker and sicker from absorbing the pain of so many” (66). Consequently, Dov, like the novel’s other writers, Lotte Berg and Nadia, composes strange and uncanny tales which seek to confront and alleviate evil and suffering. Responding to his war trauma, Dov literally flees the burden of his Holocaust legacy by leaving the Jewish state. He goes to London and embarks on a successful legal career, eventually becoming a judge. Twenty years later, upon the death of his mother, however, he resigns his position and returns to Israel. The fact that he ceases to become a judge, a position based on reason and justice, indicates his reluctant acceptance of the fact that the world is not guided solely by reason and that might frequently trumps right. He cannot escape his legacy.

Third-generation authors writing about the Shoah’s legacy, as noted earlier, refrain from describing Shoah related events. To do otherwise would be inauthentic. They live “after such knowledge.” This is the generation that, as Daniel Mendelsohn observes, has “keepsakes” but “no memories to go with them.”²⁴ Krauss shares Mendelsohn’s point of view. Consequently, she utilizes various words that in the aftermath of the Holocaust have assumed very different associations. Words such as “fire,” “burning,” and “broken glass” invoke images that go beyond the original meaning they carry in standard usage. In Krauss’s works they indicate the psychic imprint of the Shoah on its descendants. Further, the third generation—lacking direct experience of the Holocaust—needs to do research on the catastrophe. Allusions to historical events are then artfully incorporated into the fabric of their novels. In *Great House*, Liz recalls writing a college paper on Emmanuel Ringelblum, the famous archivist of the Warsaw ghetto. The horror of Kristallnacht is invoked when vandals throw a rock through the window of Arthur and Lotte’s home, leaving the living room full of shattered glass. In the context of Weisz’s vocation of retrieving items belonging to victims of the Shoah, Krauss implies the Nazi gold train loaded with items Nazis looted from their murdered Jewish owners.

Hirsch, as we have seen, has written extensively about postmemory in the second and—by implication—the third generation. The psychic imprint of the Shoah on survivor families—especially as it manifests itself in flawed parenting skills—is also revealed in Krauss’s *Great House*.

This is not really surprising since at the time of their lives when survivors would otherwise be observing how to act as parents, they were instead suffering from torture, starvation, and other extreme privations.²⁵ George Weisz was “paranoid that something might happen to his children” (*Great House*, 120). In addition, Krauss writes of the great tension existing whenever Mr. Weisz visited his children. Informed by a telephone call when their father would be arriving that night, “Immediately a tense mood swept through the house, and Yoav and Leah became restless and agitated, coming and going in and out of rooms and up the stairs” (159). Weisz had taught his children to trust no one but each other.

His loss of trust in the world reflects Jean Améry’s observation that this loss of trust is a hallmark of the psychic life of many survivors. Moreover, in seeking to exercise control over his children Weisz reveals the lack of respect for boundaries that exists in many survivor households. In an ironic twist, however, family enmeshment—as exhibited by the Weiszs’—reveals a closeness that eludes many non-witnessing families. *Great House*’s portrayal of the nature of intergenerational transmission of trauma that often characterize relationships between Holocaust survivors and their offspring are firmly anchored in many accounts produced by children of survivors who, contra the norm among children of non-witnesses, report feeling a sense of great loyalty to their family of origin and who in large numbers are members of the healing and helping professions.²⁶

Krauss’s novel searches for a usable past. In the process she utilizes traditional images even while subverting them.²⁷ Passover is for example, the celebration of freedom from slavery and the promise of redemption. Each participant in the Pesach Seder is enjoined to feel as if he or she personally experienced escape from Egyptian bondage. There are several instances in the novel where Aaron ritually intones the phrase “pass over it.” He cannot believe that he has reached the age of seventy as he wonders, “How many ways are there to fear for your child’s life” (*Great House*, 188–89). “To me,” he muses, “my mother was first and foremost a smell. Indescribable” (193). The instances of “passing over it” indicate the silence, which characterizes many in the survivor community, as well as their descendants when reflecting on the myriad moral, psychological, and theological questions engendered by the Shoah. It is fitting that Aaron’s final reflection, “There is a pressure mounting in my chest. I

can't pass over it" (195), indicates that with his life ebbing there is a realization that the inheritance of Holocaust trauma will now become the burden of the second generation.

At the same time, Aaron's inability any longer to "pass over"—an apparent reference to Pesach, one of the central motifs of which is to "pass on" the story of Jewish deliverance from bondage and journey to redemption—suggests that he as a non-witness can no longer retain his faith or his commitment to transmitting the legacy of the Holocaust to future generations. Earlier, when Dov was a young boy and having a tantrum because his bathwater was the wrong temperature, Aaron, who had come to Israel as a five-year-old refugee, grabbed the youth, shook him and screamed: "When I was your age . . . there was nothing to eat, no money for toys, the house was always cold, but we went outside and played and made games out of nothing and lived because we had our lives, while the others were being murdered in the pogroms we could go out and feel the sun and run around and kick a ball" (73). This type of admonishment that invalidates or diminishes a child's concern by comparing it to the experience of a far more serious trauma is frequently reported in literature dealing with children of Holocaust survivors. We think here of the opening scene in volume one of Spiegelman's *Maus* where Vladek responds to young Artie's weeping because his friends had skated away without him. Vladek admonishes Artie, saying that the test of true friendship is depriving people from food for one week in a sealed room. Then you can tell who is a friend. The possibility of such an alternate reading produces an ambiguity in our ability to comprehend Aaron's life that further underscores the fragmented and contradictory nature of reality for survivors, their children, and all those whose lives have been touched by the dark legacy of the Holocaust, thereby instantiating Hirsch's familial and affiliative forms of postmemory.²⁸

While Krauss's earlier novel is imbued by a sense of guarded optimism, *Great House* presents a view of post-Holocaust Jewish life that is bereft of the metaphysical comfort provided by the spiritual remedies of classical Judaism. Nevertheless, *Great House* does contain elements of hope. Arthur's description of the reason Lotte kept writing addresses both the hope and the necessity of bearing witness through the act of writing. "No matter how bleak or tragic her stories were," Arthur observes, "their effort, their creation, could only ever be a form of hope, a denial of death

or a howl of life in the face of it" (*Great House*, 256). Krauss's appeal to her readers is that writing itself is a form of protest against despair. Furthermore, Liz and Yoav will have a son, thereby attesting to their faith in a Jewish post-Holocaust future. Moreover, they will live in Jerusalem *the* city of messianic longing par excellence in the Jewish tradition. This association is buttressed by the fact that the yet to be born son will be named David. Tradition asserts that the Messiah will come from the house of David. In addition, Krauss, like Wiesel, frequently employs the phrase "and yet," further alerting the reader that despite the hideous wounding of the Shoah, Jewish history is not over. Like Jacob of old, the third generation bears the mark of wrestling if not with God, then with the burden of traumatic memory.

The presence of children also connotes an element of hope after Auschwitz, although the tragic fate of a million and a half Jewish children in the Shoah casts a dark shadow over the future. In the Jewish tradition children bear great theological valence. The Talmud attests that all of creation is sustained by the breath of little school children (*Shabbat* 119b). Similarly, "Who is it that upholds the world and causes the patriarchs to appear? It is the voice of tender children studying the Torah; and for their sake the world is saved" (*Zohar* I, 1b). Children ask the four questions during the Passover ritual. There is the simple son, the wicked one, the one unable to ask, and the wise one. A post-Holocaust version introduces a fifth son, one who cannot ask because he has been murdered in the Shoah. Krauss's second- and third-generation protagonists may themselves be understood as children who wonder about the content of their identity and the meaning of their history.

Moreover, her literary children represent various fates experienced by Jewish children during the kingdom of night. Many were immolated and a relative few were given by their parents to a tiny minority of caring Christians in order to hide and save the young ones. In addition, Krauss provides cases where children seek to rescue their parents as in the case of *The History of Love's* Alma Singer. There is also, however, *Great House's* Dina, the daughter of an Israeli waiter—a survivor—who wants nothing to do with her father. Arthur, seeking to connect with the son whom Lotte had given up for adoption at birth, brings the *Book of Glass*—Lotte's first published book whose title conjures Kristallnacht—to present to the son. Alas, Arthur was too late. The child had grown but died in

an accident. Moreover, both *The History of Love* and *Great House* refer to adoptive parents. *The History of Love*'s American-born man who marries Alma Mereminski becomes the father of Alma and Gursky's son. *Great House*'s Mr. and Mrs. Fiske adopt Lotte's infant son. Hiding parents during the Holocaust, although few in number, did save the lives of the Jewish children in their care. Krauss's literary oeuvre emphasizes the fact that having children means having a future. Having a future means inheriting and embracing the traumatic burden of the Shoah.

There is, however, no gainsaying that *Great House*'s portrayal of the burden of inheritance Holocaust survivors and their children experience is psychically wounding. George Weisz acknowledges that he cannot bring back the dead. "But," he attests, "I can bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept" (*Great House*, 275). Weisz's existence reveals a divided self: "memory is more real than the life he lives, which becomes more and more vague to him" (276). The flip side of his dedication to his survivor mission is that life in the present has no meaning. It took Weisz forty years, a biblical generation, to reassemble in his Jerusalem study the contents of his father's Budapest study. Leah, in a letter to Izzy, writes: "as if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret" (116). The one missing piece is his father's desk.

Krauss, however, is too subtle and insightful a novelist to entirely close the door on hope. In one of the closing scenes of the novel, Krauss portrays George Weisz meditating before his father's enormous desk, which now rests in a New York storage warehouse where Leah had it transported from Nadia's apartment. Weisz, doubtless inspired by the desk's presence, speaks as a seer. He predicts three things: Leah will never have children of her own; Yoav will become a father; and, one day after the birth of his child, his mother will discover an envelope with the child's name. Inside the envelope that Leah will have unobtrusively left in Yoav and Izzy's Jerusalem house will be a key to the New York City storage room housing the desk. In this way, the desk and its inherent burden will be transmitted to George Weisz's grandson, the third generation.

Krauss's work also reflects the ethos of the postmodern world, one in which reality is incompletely knowable, paradoxical, relativistic, and governed by rules of probability rather than logic or causation. Consequently, she conveys both the disjointedness of her characters' existence

and the possibility of cohesion even within this disjointedness, thus paralleling chaos theory in which the predictability of future behavior is not an inevitable outcome even in systems that are apparently deterministic. Her occasional use of first initials rather than spelling out of certain names has a Kafkaesque quality, reminding the reader of the fragmented and anonymous nature of the post-Holocaust world. Moreover, the picaresque quality of the novel underscores postmodernism's fragmentation and feelings of exile.

Great House like *The History of Love* is a novel of hope and not solely of despair. Their author has at once achieved an exquisite literary accomplishment and a way of working through her Holocaust inheritance. Krauss's literary encounter with trauma is a refutation of the argument that enough has been said and written about the Holocaust. Against those who urge forgetting, her novels posit the importance remembering has for the post-memorial generation. Krauss's insightful novels reveal to her readers how writing becomes a way of coping with the past while investing the future with a measure of hope. *Great House* and *The History of Love* are markers of postmemory transmission and transformation. In addition, they signify the complexities of a postmodern Jewish identity and the ineluctable role played by books and writing in articulating the contours of this identity. Krauss provides her readers with a map of the future outlines of Holocaust literary representation.

