The Impact of the Holocaust in America

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Although a good deal has been written about Holocaust education at the college and university level, little attention has been paid to what is being taught in Jewish institutions for younger students, that is, in day schools, supplementary schools, synagogues, and the like. Even less is known about what Jewish children, who have no formal Jewish education after Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, know about the Holocaust. Our interest in this project was sparked by a desire to know what “Millennials”—children coming of age in the last decade or so—know or think they know about the Holocaust. It is our assumption that what they learn when they arrive on our college campuses is not so much a result of a Jewish education as it is a product of popular culture, be it films like X-Men or material read in high school, such as the diary of Anne Frank. There is, however, a third medium that may also be highly influential and yet has hardly been studied by scholars, namely, books about the Holocaust written especially for children below the seventh grade. What follows is our first step to survey this literature and to draw some preliminary conclusions about its history, development, and message.

We want to stress at the outset that in no way are we claiming that this study is comprehensive. The amount of material out there that could arguably be included in “Children’s Holocaust Literature” is immense. What we have aimed to do here is to look at a varied enough sample so that we may be able to draw some reasonably accurate, if tentative, conclusions. The conclusions
themselves lead to a further consideration of some interesting broader ques-
tions about how the Holocaust might well be seen and understood by children
today, and thus about the nature of Holocaust-awareness in the next generation
of American Jewish leadership.

Before turning to our discussion, we wish to focus on several important
issues. There is, first and foremost, an inherent tension in the genre of chil-
dren’s Holocaust literature. On the one hand, the Holocaust is such a significant
part of the contemporary Jewish narrative that it cannot, and should not, be
ignored. The younger generation needs to be made aware in a responsible way
of this formative event that has had such an impact on contemporary Jewish
culture. On the other hand, the very nature of the Holocaust is such that it
may not be suitable as a topic for all children, especially those below fourth
grade. Jewish educators and librarians thus find themselves in an awkward
situation. In essence, they have to decide whether or not to make aspects of the
Holocaust available to children below fourth grade, and if so, how to present
a proper sense of the Shoah to young children without exposing them to the
horrific aspects of these atrocities.

This is an issue for parents as well, which in turn creates some market de-
mand for writing Holocaust books for ever younger audiences. The Holocaust
is usually not taught until fifth grade, whether in secular or synagogue schools.
As a result, many educators and librarians do not discuss the subject before
fifth grade, leaving parents with the task of determining whether to shelter
their children from this information or to inform them about it in some man-
ier, a job for which they may or may not feel prepared. For a variety of rea-
sons, many parents do feel a need to expose young children to the Holocaust
in some way at some time. They feel this need so as to socialize their children
into the Jewish community and give them some background for the classes
they will have during the middle school years and for the many books about
the Holocaust that were written for preteens. So one major question is, what
should be presented (and what should not be presented) in children’s books on
the Holocaust for this younger age group?

A second concern has to do with what one hopes to accomplish through
a children’s book on the Holocaust. At all grade levels, there is the issue of how
accurate and detailed an author wants or needs to be when dealing with the
Holocaust. It is important, of course, for children’s textbooks and novels to be
accurate, but how graphic should one be especially in relation to atrocities?
And if one makes the story age-appropriate for young readers, then is one re-
ally being faithful to the event and to its victims? We have found books that fall
virtually everywhere on the possible spectrum, indicating that this question is far from having a universally accepted solution. An example of this tension is found in the work of the author Carol Matas, who broke the normative boundaries in her well-known children’s Holocaust book *Daniel’s Story*. According to Adrienne Kertzer:

Matas insisted on retaining the following passage even after readers of the manuscript suggested that it was too much for children: “After living for a while in the Lodz Ghetto, Daniel was sent to Auschwitz. There, he said that ‘he almost committed suicide after seeing burning bodies in a pit’”. This passage goes against the traditional image of children’s books as a place for “simple heroism, resistance, and spiritual uplift.” But Matas felt that the need to inform children about atrocities (the “unbelievable”) took precedence over the need to console and inspire children. (255)

Matas made a choice for accuracy over delicacy or what might generally be regarded as age-appropriateness. Our goal here is not so much to judge the decision Matas made as to point out that this is an issue many of the authors discussed below have had to weigh and consider.

The main question we propose to explore here, then, is how authors and illustrators of Jewish children’s books have navigated through hazardous, dangerous literary shoals as they strive to find a safe passage of appropriateness that does justice to the Holocaust without doing damage to impressionable, young psyches. As we shall see, there are a number of strategies that have developed over the last several decades for how to portray and present the Holocaust. Ultimately we hope to learn through this inquiry just what moral and religious lessons are being taught in this particular area of children’s literature. To that end, we will be keeping an eye on the connection between the solutions that authors and illustrators have come to, on the one hand, and what these authors and illustrators are actually conveying to the next generation of Jews, on the other. In short, we intend to explore the connection between the “form” of children’s Holocaust books (what is being told, how it is being told, and the role illustrations play) and the content and interpretation of the events. As we proceed, we shall try to maintain a double focus on literary strategy and on the heuristic effects of those strategies.

Before proceeding, we want to point out that we will be limiting ourselves to Holocaust picture books, fiction, and some biographies for children. We have purposefully decided against looking at textbooks or history books. The reason is, first of all, that we are including a good deal of material aimed
at an audience that is too young to understand what history really is. In addition, we are interested in books that relate information about the Holocaust in a more informal, personal manner. That is, readers of fiction are invited, as it were, to relate to the subject matter on a personal level rather than in an abstract, detached and academic manner. A novel or picture book puts a face on the Holocaust and allows, and maybe even forces, a child to identify with someone who had some connection with the Holocaust. In that way this fictional literature leads him or her to experience vicariously, aspects of that person's story. These books, then, are not so much intended to provide factual information about the Holocaust as to give a sense of what the Holocaust was and what it means.

We begin our study by turning to the basic issue, alluded to above, concerning whether or not young children should be exposed to the Holocaust, or, more specifically, to the more brutal aspects of the Holocaust, at all. Many librarians and other educational professionals contend that children should not read books about the Holocaust before fourth grade. They feel that below fourth grade, children have no historical perspective and should not be traumatized by reading or hearing about some of the darkest periods of modern history. Young children should be sheltered from this kind of knowledge, first because of their age and also because of their poor ability to distinguish real from make-believe. The tension between reality and appropriateness is nicely articulated by Lydia Kokkola in *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. She notes:

> In a sense, one can argue that any writing about the Holocaust for children breaks a strict taboo: that children are not to be frightened. Holocaust literature introduces the child to a world in which parents are not in control, that survival does not depend upon one's wits but upon pure luck, where evil is truly present, and worst of all, a horror story that is true. . . . Holocaust literature for children can therefore be distinguished by its combination of challenging subject matter, ethical responsibility, and its position outside the normal boundaries of children's literature. (11)

The other school of thought argues that in the post-Holocaust world, children need to be exposed to, rather than sheltered from, what happened. There are many reasons that one could put forward in favor of early exposure: in particular, that children will become aware of the Holocaust anyway through Jewish communal events. Hence, they should have some foundation for understanding it, since it is, after all, an important component of contemporary
Jewish identity. Moreover, children need to be made aware that anti-Semitism in the past and in the present continues to threaten the very survival of the Jewish people. Consequently, guided by this and other rationales, books that relate in varying degrees to the Holocaust are being written and published with the target audience being children as young as the first grade.

Needless to say, there is a broad consensus that such books for young children should not be as comprehensive or graphic as books for teenagers. Some of these books for very young children are parables about the Holocaust and so can be read differently by children and adults. But, as we will elaborate more fully below, some recent picture books for very young children are now becoming much more explicit, portraying Nazi soldiers, concentration camps, hidden children, and other traumatizing events in graphic ways that would have once been deemed unthinkable. Holocaust picture books of this sort, targeting young children, especially for children below third grade, have been published in greater number since the beginning of the 1990s.

With these thoughts in mind, we turn to the various periods of such literature and the conclusions we have drawn based on our survey of a number of representative literary works. Holocaust books for children began to appear as early as the 1950s. The plots of these first books tended to focus on evasion and escape. One of the earliest children’s books about the Holocaust was written for grades three through six. Twenty and Ten by Claire Huchet Bishop (published in 1952) is a short book that closely resembles the mystery/adventure books commonly written for children of that age group at that time. The story is about twenty French children and their teacher, Sister Gabriel, who are sent to a refuge in the mountains during the German occupation of France. Later, Sister Gabriel agrees to take in ten Jewish children and warns her students about the importance of never telling anyone about the Jewish children. When she becomes fearful that they might be discovered, she asks the French children to look for a hiding place for these refugees. The children discover a hidden cave that proves to be the perfect solution when the German soldiers come, and thus the Jewish children successfully evade their enemy.

What is notable here is that the children are depicted as the real heroes of the story, finding a way to help each other in the face of nasty adults. There is no reference to torture or violence. The action takes place in the mountains of France, hardly a “typical” Holocaust setting. In fact, on one level this work can be seen as a typical child-oriented book of the period, with the Holocaust backdrop being only incidental. And yet there is a historical cast to the story that conventional adventure stories for children do not have—the German
invasion of France. We mention this book because it was one of the earliest, and in fact one of the very few children’s books of the 1950s, that even alludes to the Shoah.

This generally indirect approach of the very earliest children’s literature on the Holocaust persisted into the 1960s. One popular author who wrote from a child’s perspective, in this case from the point of view of a German child, was Hans Peter Richter. As a good example, we can take *I Was There* (1962), a roughly autobiographical book written in the first person and originally published in Germany. This book, written for teens, tells about three friends who join the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth Movement). The narrator and one of the other boys are enthusiastic about serving the *Führer*, but the third boy joins only due to pressure put upon him and his family. He and his family are part of a minority of German citizens who felt very uncomfortable with the political events of the time and tried, as long as possible, not to go along with the crowd. In the course of the story, the book not only informs the reader about the activities of the *Hitlerjugend* but also shows how those who disagreed with the prevailing political sentiment were shamed and humiliated. The book opens with the following powerful statement, written as the author looks back many years later on his experiences:

> I am reporting how I lived through that time and what I saw—no more.  
> I was there. I was not merely an eyewitness. I believed—and I will never believe again. (Richter vii)

This book and others by Hans Peter Richter were translated into English and became part of the stock of children’s Holocaust books available to American children in the early to mid 1960s.

Overall, however, we found that Holocaust-related children’s books were few and far between in the 1950s and 1960s. This is hardly surprising for a number of reasons. For one, the Holocaust was really not discussed all that much during this time. Jews were uncomfortable talking about the Holocaust in general, all the more so to their children. In addition, the Shoah had not really become a significant part of the Jewish or secular educational agenda. What was transmitted about the Holocaust took place within Jewish families and maybe in unstructured ways in synagogues and religious schools. So a market for children’s Holocaust books was largely undeveloped.

This began to change by the 1970s. At this time, the Holocaust became a more open topic of discussion in both the Jewish and the non-Jewish worlds. Many have attributed this to the trauma of the 1967 Six-Day War, but there
is also a change in generation, with the Holocaust then twenty-five years in the past. Whatever the reason, the number of Holocaust books for children increased significantly, and the messages they conveyed about the Holocaust became more varied and nuanced. The subject was still handled with a certain emotional distancing, however. For example, this decade saw the publication of books such as Sonia Levitin's *Journey to America* (1970) and Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971). Both of these books describe the hardships of being a refugee—poverty, family separation, loneliness, and difficulty in learning a new language, for example. Like earlier books, the focus is on the ability of children and family to evade and/or escape. In these instances, however, the physical and emotional suffering that occurred comes more to the surface. But even as these and similar books are more explicit about the physical and psychological difficulties of survival, they usually end on a positive note—survival and triumph over adversity.

Another popular book of this time, but one that takes a very different angle, is *Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene and Robert Hunt (1973). The story focuses on a teenager in Arkansas who experiences the Holocaust only indirectly. The heroine of the story comes into contact with the events in Europe when she meets a German soldier who is interned in a POW camp set up near her town. As she becomes friendly with the soldier, the girl from Arkansas realizes that the German soldier has a lot of the same feelings, thoughts, likes, and dislikes as the Americans that she knows. As in the stories of Hans Peter Richter, the suffering of the Holocaust is personalized and not limited only to Jews. The Holocaust here bears a more universal message.

The aim of the literature from this period, then, seems not to be so much to teach about the Holocaust from a political angle but more to show how the Holocaust and the war affected the lives of ordinary people, whether Jewish or not. These books do this by depicting events related to the Holocaust and the war in terms that teens are more likely to understand, namely, experiences of kids like themselves. In most cases the leading characters are not Jewish or at least not Jewish in any particularly overt way. The novels also emphasize putting a human face on the Holocaust. The reader of *Summer of My German Soldier* realizes that, despite the brutality of the Nazis, not all Germans should be viewed as monsters. At the same time, the book enables its young Jewish readers to understand and relate to some of the stories they might hear in synagogue or from relatives and yet not feel personally threatened. Overall, the market for Holocaust related books for children was growing, but allusions
to the Holocaust still remained somewhat indirect. The anti-Jewish threat is certainly manifest, but in most instances it is kept in the background and its depiction is muted.

Another significant change occurred in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. During this decade, we witness the rapid development of new children’s Holocaust fiction, some of it within the genre of “coming of age” literature. Many of these stories have to do much more explicitly with the physical and emotional challenges faced by youngsters, as they and their families struggle to survive the war. One example is Carol Matas’s *Lisa’s War* (1987), which depicts the experiences of a young girl who joins the resistance. More explicit in its depiction of the Holocaust’s reality is Uri Orlev’s *Island On Bird Street* (1984). Here we read the story of a young boy who struggles through the harsh winter of 1941–42 in the Warsaw ghetto. We also find, for the first time, children’s books that deal explicitly with life in the concentration camps. A good example is Clara Asscher-Pinkhof’s collection, *Star Children* (1986). Asscher-Pinkhof presents the reader with stories that describe the lives of Dutch children throughout the Holocaust, from arrest to life in camps like Westerbork to their transport and experiences in Bergen-Belsen. Another sensitive theme is explored by Ida Vos, who wrote in *Anna Is Still Here* (1986) about the trauma of a young child who is separated from her family for a number of years and then, after the war, struggles to return to a normal life. Also, significantly, books from this era tend to bring to the forefront the victimization of Jews as Jews at the hands of Nazis. Clearly by the 1980s, many of the earlier literary taboos on treating the Holocaust have been broken.

Curiously, just as these books were becoming both more explicit and also more focused on the Holocaust as a Jewish event, they were also tending to deal more subtly with its complexities. As one example, we can point to Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* (1978). Here is an account of the friendship between a Jewish girl and a Catholic girl in Vienna and how both are adversely affected by the Holocaust. A second example is Lois Lowry’s narrative of the Danish rescue of Jews in *Number the Stars* (1989). Overall, books of this period are much more graphic and realistic reflections of the Holocaust than had previously been the case. They are also much more focused on Jewish suffering, and yet more open to introducing complexities and ambiguities.

An interesting comment on the sensitivity of the times can be found in comparing editions of *The Number on My Grandfather’s Arm* by David Adler (1987). The story is about a child who notices numbers tattooed on her grandfather’s arm one night when her parents are away and he is washing dinner
dishes. She asks him about the tattoo, and her grandfather tells her about the persecution and humiliations that the Jews of Poland suffered and some of the horrors of the concentration camps. Though the story is fairly realistic, it is of course told by a survivor and so has, as it were, a happy ending. The story is accompanied by black-and-white photographs, which add a somber aura to the story. Yet this is also a somewhat more muted effect than might have been the case, for example, if color pictures had been employed. One of the photographs, however, shows a German soldier pointing a rifle at a mother clutching her baby. Should this have been included? Apparently the editors had a change of heart, since it was removed in the subsequent edition.

It is notable that during this period we begin to see a bifurcation of Holocaust children's literature. On the one hand, the accounts become somewhat more graphic and realistic, and on the other, many stories focus on rescue and friendship. Children in the 1980s were learning more realistically about the horrors of the Holocaust, but also about instances of resistance, friendship, and rescue. A working synthesis had evolved that allowed the Holocaust to be more or less accurately conveyed to young readers, yet without it being overly traumatic.

Children's Holocaust books really began to come of age in the 1990s. There were a number of factors that can account for this. No doubt, one was the fact that the Jewish audience had evolved by this time. Fewer and fewer Jewish children, even in Jewish day schools, were hearing of the Holocaust directly from survivors, and with the increasing numbers of children coming from families of mixed religious backgrounds, many students of Jewish heritage did not have any immediate family connection to the Holocaust. Moreover, the Holocaust by the 1990s had risen in visibility and prominence in American culture so that it had become a subject of concern to the general public. Thus, children's books began to address this much more general American audience.

A second factor was the maturation of academic studies of the Holocaust. Scholars began to focus on many more of the subtleties, complexities, and intricacies of the Shoah. This, of course, had an impact on writers and illustrators of children's Holocaust books, who were themselves exposed to a much more polychromatic view of their subject matter. They now had a greater array of themes with which to work.

Third, there were fewer and fewer Holocaust witnesses (whether survivors, refugees or liberators), and this created a sense of urgency for recording their stories and making sure, through novels and history books, that the events of the Holocaust were remembered and passed on to a new generation. Many books from the 1990s deal with more or less true personal accounts.
Finally, the Holocaust, or at least Holocaust readings (like the diary of Anne Frank), were becoming part of secular school curricula. This was itself a function of a greater openness among the general public to consider all aspects of the Holocaust—a tendency fueled to some significant degree by the impact of the TV mini-series “The Holocaust” that first aired in 1978. Not surprisingly, the introduction of the subject into general public education greatly accelerated the growing awareness of and interest in the Holocaust, not only for the Jewish but also for the non-Jewish community.

These shifts in audience, by their very nature, had a strong influence on shaping not only the strategies of the authors and illustrators, but also the content of Holocaust stories. The resulting growth in demand was answered by both an increasing number of authors and publishers entering the field and also a much broader range of topics and themes. In the 1990s, for example, the award-winning Star of Fear, Star of Hope by Jo Hoestlandt was published (a 1993 book written in French with an English edition published in the United States in 1995). The story is narrated by Helen, an elderly French woman (who is not Jewish), looking back on an event that occurred in her childhood. Despite the 1942 German invasion of northern France, she and her Jewish friend Lydia continued to play and go to school together. On her ninth birthday, Helen invited Lydia to sleep over at her house. But late in the evening, the “Midnight Ghost” knocked on the door (a code name for someone who came to warn Lydia to go home because of an impending roundup of Jews). When Lydia handed Helen a gift and told her she had to leave, Helen became angry at Lydia for ruining her birthday celebration and said, “You’re not my friend anymore.” Helen never saw Lydia again and always regretted her parting words to her friend. She continued to live with the hope that Lydia somehow survived and that perhaps some day Lydia would read this book and contact her.

Children who read this book become aware of how an incident that would have been long forgotten had it happened in ordinary times can be so painful and haunting when it happens during a time of war and persecution. They are also given a deeper sense of how the inevitable loss of the innocence and security of youth can be thrown into especially dramatic relief in the shadow of the Holocaust. The shaded illustrations by Johanna Kang, all in black, white and tones of brown, add to the somber atmosphere of this story.

Also, in the late 1990s we see more books related to the Holocaust for children below fourth or fifth grade. As noted above, this development is controversial among librarians and Jewish educators. Some of these books have been sensitive to the concerns expressed. Several, for example, deal with the
Holocaust through allusions or parables that can be understood at different levels by children and adults. In the picture book *Elisabeth* by Claire A. Nivola (1997), an elderly woman reminisces about a beautiful doll that she had as a child. It was slightly damaged by her dog and then was lost “when the soldiers came.” Many years later, she was delighted to find the doll in an antique shop in America. She recognized it because of the teeth marks that her dog had made. The technique of using vague references like “the soldiers came” is not only a way of referring to the Holocaust without directly saying so, but also ties in these experiences with other times in Jewish history, in general, when “soldiers” (that is, Romans or Crusaders or Cossacks) came.

A classic example of the “parable” style of children’s books is *Terrible Things* by Eve Bunting (1989). In this book, small animals live together in a forest, all peacefully co-existing with each other. The birds and squirrels live in the trees, the rabbits and porcupines on the ground and so forth. Then one day the “Terrible Things” come. All of the animals are frightened until the “Terrible Things” say that they only want to take away animals that fly. The other animals, assuming that they are now out of danger, remain silent as the birds disappear. After the birds are gone, everyone breathes a sigh of relief. But the “Terrible Things” return and next take away all the animals with bushy tails. Again, no one speaks up for the squirrels and skunks. The “Terrible Things” return several more times, each time removing one more kind of animal until the only animals left are the rabbits. When the “Terrible Things” come once more, there is nobody left to speak up for the rabbits. This allegory, built on Pastor Martin Niemoeller’s famous statement, “First they came, . . .” can be understood by young children as a not overly threatening story that still teaches the importance of supporting others in need; older readers will, of course, realize the underlying meaning of the story.

However, sometimes efforts to make vague references to the Holocaust may be open to the criticism that they leave children in need of further explanation from parents or teachers. The picture book *Don’t Forget* by Patricia Lakin (1994), targeting grades one through three, arguably falls into this category. The book tries to deal with the Holocaust obliquely. Set in a post-World War II American city, the story follows Sarah, an eight year old girl, who wants to bake a birthday cake for her mother and keep it a secret. With a list of ingredients in hand, she visits several different stores and finally goes to the Singers’ mom-and-pop grocery store. Sarah makes a point of not looking at the numbers tattooed on the Singers’ arms, but “like a magnet” her eyes are eventually drawn to them. Sarah tells Mrs. Singer, “I tried not to stare. I know how you
got them. And that they are your secret.” Mrs. Singer replies that the numbers should never be a secret. “If no one knows about bad things, they can happen all over again.” But the story behind the tattooed numbers is never told and, in effect, the secret that must not be forgotten is, for all intents and purposes, left unspoken in the rest of the book. The remainder of the book is devoted to telling how Mrs. Singer helps Sarah bake her cake. Although Lakin tries to couch awareness of the Holocaust within an otherwise upbeat story, she does not try to deal with the full implication of the numbers tattooed on Mr. and Mrs. Singer’s arms, and so leaves this aspect of her story open-ended. This is likely intentional in light of the targeted age of her reading audience. Perhaps too, it is her aim to leave her young readers seeking more of an answer outside the pages of her book—from parents and teachers, who can best judge on an individual basis what a child can and should be told.

At the other end of the spectrum we sometimes encounter a book that might go a little too far in its efforts to bring the Holocaust to the attention of young children. In fact, the 1990s see many books aimed at children as young as first grade and which do not hesitate to make reference to Nazi soldiers, round-ups, and other potentially traumatic tragedies. These books bring starkly into question just how graphic one should be. One book that, in the view of many, goes too far in its depiction of the Holocaust is Let the Celebrations Begin by Margaret Wild, with illustrations by Julie Vivas (1991). It tells the story of women in a concentration camp who make toys for the camp’s children. This book has a rather vivid description of the camp and the lives of the children and contains illustrations depicting starving and skeletal women with shaven heads.

Other books of this period, however, seem to find a more acceptable balance—for example, The Butterfly by Patricia Polacco (2000). Polacco writes about a French family that has hidden a Jewish family in a room in their basement. At night when the household is asleep, the young daughter of the Jewish family (Sevrine) secretly climbs upstairs to the bedroom of the French family’s daughter (Monique) and plays with some of Monique’s toys. One night Monique, who is unaware of the hidden family, wakes up and thinks at first that she has seen a ghost. After waking up a few more times, Monique learns who Sevrine is and is shocked to realize that people have been living in the basement. The two girls become friends and have many nighttime meetings. But one night, they come too close to the window and a neighbor sees them both. The girls tell Monique’s mother, and the Jewish family is forced to leave, with help from Monique’s family to go to another refuge. This story, in fact, is
based on an event that happened to Polacco’s aunt Monique, whose mother was part of the French resistance. A note at the end explains that Sevrine was the only family member to survive the escape and she and Monique remain friends to this day. Although this book deals quite openly with the rounding up of Jews, there is something of a happy ending (in that Sevrine survives), and the illustrations are much softer and less frightening than what we find, for example, in *Let the Celebration Begin*.

Another example of a book that finds a good middle ground is *The Lily Cupboard* by Shulamith Levey Oppenheim (1992). Its story takes place on a farm where a young Jewish girl has been sent by her parents to be hidden during the Holocaust. The narrative describes the child’s disorientation at being separated from her home and parents. While the story itself is psychologically difficult, the illustrations are somewhat muted and make the story less traumatic than it might otherwise have been.

A different kind of approach that deserves mention is found in *Brundibar*, authored by Tony Kushner and illustrated by Maurice Sendak (2003). The book is a retelling of the opera of the same name, which was written in 1938 and then performed in the Theresienstadt Ghetto in 1943, where the actors and writers (except for the librettist) found themselves reunited. The story itself does not mention the Holocaust, and there are only slight hints of it in Sendak’s illustrations. The occasional person wears a yellow star, for example, and the organ grinder wears what looks like a Nazi party (i.e., “brownshirt”) uniform. Like *The Terrible Things* and other books that take a “parable” type approach, *Brundibar* offers only allusions to the Holocaust, in the text as well as in the illustrations. In fact, the original story itself has nothing overtly to do with the Holocaust at all; yet its production and history has everything to do with it.

Another approach was pioneered in *The Grey Striped Shirt* by Jacqueline Jules (1993). One day while Frannie is visiting her grandparents, she discovers an old striped shirt in a basement closet. When she asks her grandparents what it is and why it is there, they seem reluctant to talk about it. But gradually, over the course of a year, they tell Frannie bits and pieces of their story about life in Germany before the war, their expulsion to a ghetto, and finally their experiences in a concentration camp. The Holocaust accounts are interspersed with modern-day activities such as gardening and trips to the synagogue. The book transmits a good deal of information about the Holocaust, but it parcels it out gradually and intermittently, which serves to break the inherent tension of the story. Furthermore, the book enables Jewish children to understand better something about the survivor community.
We now turn for a moment to books designed for middle school children. For this age group as well, the 1990s and the current decade have brought about considerably more diversity than previous periods. This possibly is a response to the introduction of Holocaust readings, particularly the diary of Anne Frank, into school curricula. As students learned about the Holocaust in secular and religious schools, many developed a growing curiosity about these events and wanted to read books with more detail, and with personal recollections that did not soften some of the hardships that were endured. As a result, a flurry of more direct and specific Holocaust books for this age group appeared, an excellent example of which is Isaac Millman’s autobiographical story, *Hidden Child* (2003). The narrative relates how, when Isaac’s father and later his mother were arrested, his mother managed to bribe a prison guard to take Isaac to their landlady’s house and ask her to shelter him. When she refused, the insensitive guard simply left Isaac sitting on the curb in front of the house. Deep in despair, Isaac fortunately was rescued by a Jewish neighbor who kept him until she, herself, was arrested. Throughout the war, Isaac was shuffled to a number of other homes and institutions and finally ended up in an orphanage, never to see his parents again. After the war, Isaac was adopted by a family in the United States, who cared for him until adulthood. He eventually married the daughter of the woman who saved him during the war when he was left on the street. But he continued to mourn the memory of his parents, with whom he was never reunited, while many others at the orphanage were able to find their parents again.

This book reflects a number of elements that characterize the most recent permutations in children’s Holocaust literature. Most obviously, it relates a wide variety of Holocaust experiences directly, rather than by allusion. It clearly deals with disturbing facts, informing students about how families were separated, the ways in which children were saved, how luck often played an important part in whether or not an individual survived, the hardships that individuals endured, and the bittersweet endings that often occurred. The first-person account, of course, heightens the impact.

An even more striking example of the diversity of recent Holocaust literature for middle school ages is the award-winning *Hana’s Suitcase* by Karen Levine (2003). It tells the true story of a young girl, Hanna Brady, who died at Auschwitz but whose suitcase disturbingly survived. The book, however, consists of two stories told in alternating segments. One is the fate of Hanna and her brother. The other interwoven story follows the teacher of a Japanese class on the Holocaust—how the children wanted to see something tangible from
the Holocaust; how the teacher traveled to Poland and obtained the suitcase; and then how the students in her class wanted to know something about the person whose name was on the suitcase. This amazing story reaches its climax when it depicts how the Japanese teacher made contact with Hana’s brother, who had become a plumbing supplies salesman in Toronto. It is hard to imagine that a book on the Holocaust written in the 1970s or earlier could have centered on Holocaust education in Japan or could have spanned three continents. Yet this book is innovative in another way. It not so much focuses on the Holocaust itself but more on its aftermath and in particular, contextualizes the Holocaust in the contemporary world of young readers.

Maybe the most well-known example of a Holocaust story that deals with events of that time in a fairly realistic fashion is Louise Borden’s *The Journey that Saved Curious George: The True Wartime Escape of Margaret and H. A. Rey* (2005). An illustrated book about the late husband-and-wife authors of the popular “Curious George” preschool books, it describes how the Reys escaped from Paris on their bicycles with the manuscript of the first Curious George story hidden in the basket. Many school children today are likely to remember hearing the Curious George stories when they were three or four years old, and this book helps them see how the Holocaust connects to their own lives and thus makes its history much more real for them.

We should note that some books from this period deal with the Holocaust only incidentally. An unusually engaging story that nicely illustrates this is *Bridge to Freedom* by Isabel Marvin (1997). A young German soldier deserts his unit and hides in a cave in Germany. There he discovers a Jewish girl who fled Berlin and who is also hiding in the cave. The two young people do not really know what to make of each other, but as each one considers what their next course of action should be, they notice a third individual in the cave—an injured dog. After hesitantly deciding to trust each other, the soldier and the Jewish girl decide to risk their lives in order to assist the helpless dog. The soldier makes a splint for the dog’s leg, and the two of them whisk the dog out of the cave and go to the girl’s house. By the end of the story, the soldier has joined the Jewish family as they escape to safety in Belgium.

For older readers—that is, high school and up—the taboo against graphic depictions no longer holds, if it ever did. In high school, students begin reading adult books and books written specifically for teens. A good example of this type of literature is the collection *Salvaged Papers*, edited by Alexandra Zapruder (2002). This anthology presents selections from teenagers’ diaries from different countries that describe, for example, hunger, living in the forest,
betrayal by non-Jews, narrow escapes, etc. Since Salvaged Papers is comprised of diaries, the reader learns about the Holocaust from specific and personal accounts. A diary is neither fiction nor a “wide canvas.” Rather, the reader shares the writers’ day-to-day experiences along with their fear and uncertainty: what they ate (or did not eat), if their food supply was reduced because more people moved into the ghetto, how a mother worked all day and then “did sewing” at night to bring in a little extra income, if the person providing food to a family in hiding met them when he had agreed to, where they slept, how they survived the cold weather and many other anxieties, hardships, humiliations, and close calls endured day-by-day. Though the diaries do not appear in their entirety, the selections fit together to give a reasonably unvarnished sense of the daily life of young people trying to survive the Holocaust.

It is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of children’s books about the Holocaust are written for students in grades four through six. Children above grade seven or eight are beginning to read regular adult literature and so do not comprise a significant market for children’s books of any sort. At the other end of the age spectrum, as has been discussed, there is some understandable reluctance to write Holocaust books for children in grades three and below. In this regard, matters have persisted over the last fifty years.

Yet within this broader structure there have been changes. As a whole, books for middle school readers have become much more varied in approach. They now offer a wide range of topics and formats that meet the diverse interests of American pre-teens, Jewish and non-Jewish. In some ways, many of these books do not place their main focus on the Holocaust at all, but rather use the Holocaust as the backdrop for the presentation of universal themes of love, loss, friendship, etc. Many others, however, make it quite clear that the Holocaust is their central theme. Although books for this age-group still tend to be somewhat circumspect in describing the horrors of the Holocaust, a considerable number are much more explicit in both text and illustrations when it comes to depicting such experiences: the violence, cruelty, suffering and death that was so much a part of everyday life in the concentration camps. We have suggested above that this may be due to a couple of related factors. One is the much more explicit nature of books designed for younger children below middle school, in general. Another may be a recognition by authors and publishers of the increased violence to which American middle school children are being exposed in movies, television, and video games. It is probably a rare twelve-year-old who has not mowed down at least a couple score of fictional enemies, or in any case seen someone do so on the screen. What used to seem traumatic
in the 1950s looks almost tame today. Without making a value judgment about this phenomenon, it raises the rather interesting question of whether or not it still makes sense in the twenty-first century to “water down” the Holocaust for the middle school age-group. Perhaps it is time for us to grant that, just as many books for younger children have become more vivid, so too can books for middle school students take a harder, more realistic look at life and death really during the Holocaust.

Another change is the increasing number of books on this subject for pre-middle school readers, especially for pupils in the second and even first grades, an audience that was not even on the horizon for Holocaust literature until a few years ago. Publishers, teachers, and librarians are still not in agreement about how much, if any, exposure to the Holocaust is appropriate for children this young. One could argue that many contemporary picture books and fairy tales feature stories and illustrations that would once have been considered too frightening for this age-group. Think, for example, of the very popular Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak where monsters are introduced in a manner that would not have been countenanced at an earlier time. We should further recall that children nowadays often hear fairy tales that have unhappy endings, such as the works collected by Hans Christian Anderson (although it has to be acknowledged that his stories were originally intended for adults). One solution, as we have seen, is to have a story and illustrations that only subtly allude to the Holocaust. The book then gently introduces the Shoah, but leaves it to the parent or teacher to decide how much to actually say. Given the trends noted above, however, it is not out of the question and perhaps even likely that, just as the Holocaust has been written about more openly for middle school audiences, so too will it become increasingly a more explicit subject for lower grades. Today, there seems to be a supposition that, rather than be sheltered, young children, especially Jewish children, are better served, better educated, if they receive some more concrete exposure to the Holocaust.

In the end, then, it appears that “Millennials” have the opportunity to learn both everything about the Holocaust; still, inevitably, they actually learn nothing; that is, they are not really able to gain an overarching, universal perspective on this transcendentally horrific event. They can learn everything insofar as children’s Holocaust literature has become widespread and seems to touch on every imaginable scenario and take every possible point of view. Children can read about Jews as victims, partisan resistance, the pressure on German youth, and the memories of survivors. They can further encounter the
Holocaust as the backdrop to stories about perennial themes such as growing up, loss of friends, and first love.

Yet, in the final analysis, Millennials learn nothing in the sense that there cannot really be conveyed to them a common theme, lesson, or approach to an event that by its very nature defies such simplistic characterization. Each book has its own tale to tell and its own lessons to be drawn, implicitly or explicitly. Like so much in the lives of the Millennials, the world is a marketplace in which every imaginable interest can be addressed. So no part of the Holocaust seems to be inherently privileged in the literature; no single message is being sent, and the older generations are bequeathing no universal lesson or story about the Holocaust. In fact, as we have seen, it is possible to read about the Holocaust without any explicit reference to Jews or Judaism at all; it can be depicted as another tale of human cruelty and human good, of persistence and survival against a grim background of death and destruction. If this literature is a fair reflection of Jewish popular culture in general, then the Holocaust, like every other aspect of Jewish life in the twenty-first century, has no universally agreed upon essence. This literature is also perfectly consistent with everything else we know about the context in which Millennials learn. They have lots of information, an overflow of facts, but there seems to be no clear master narrative.

There is, however, one point that this vast array of literature consistently reflects—that the stories of the Holocaust in all their shapes and forms should not be forgotten. The time is approaching when there will be no living survivors or refugees to tell first-hand about the Nazi terror. There is a broad consensus that the Holocaust should not be simply a footnote in Jewish and world history. The literature written for children of all ages, like the books and articles written for adults, is aimed at assuring that the Shoah will be remembered.

Maybe the best way to conclude our survey is to cite the closing passage of Jacqueline Jules’s *The Grey Striped Suit*.

I still visit my grandparents whenever I can. We still walk to synagogue on Shabbat and work in the garden on Sundays. Every once in a while I go down to the cedar closet to look at the grey striped shirt. Grandpa Herman says it will belong to me someday. He wants me to show it to MY grandchildren. “You must tell them our story,” he said. I promised I would. (63)
Works Cited
