

Title of the Submission: Remembering the Murder of the Mother: The Orphan's Outcry in the Holocaust Memoir

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ABSTRACT

In Elie Wiesel's *Night*, when Moshe the Beadle returns from a mass grave to warn the people of Sighet of the approaching storm, he cries out to them, "I have come to tell you the story of my own death." Such, indeed, is the position of any Holocaust survivor: like Moshe the Beadle, he rises from a continent that was transformed into a mass grave to relate the tale of his own death. As it unfolds in the Holocaust memoir, the process of telling the tale is part of the process of recovering the soul, where recovery entails a return to origins. And a fundamental figure at the origin of any human being is the mother. The purpose of this paper is to examine the testimony on the murdered mothers that we have from numerous Holocaust memoirs in order to attain a better understanding of (1) the essence of the mother, (2) the murder of the mother, and (3) what the two have to do with the essence of the Holocaust.

Exploring the symbolic and metaphysical dimensions of the assault on the Jews in the Holocaust, the paper will first explain the significance of the mother in Jewish teachings. Here it will be shown that the assault on the mother as the origin of life is part of a larger, calculated assault on the soul, and not just on the body, of Israel. Next the paper will examine the implications of removing the mother and her maternal love from the world. Here we shall see that the violation of this most intimate bond between two human beings—the bond between mother and child—is a definitive aspect of creating the "anti-world" of the "concentrationary universe," which is a realm void of human relation. Finally, the paper will explain how the murder of the mother is connected to a general assault on the home as a sanctuary and dwelling place for the family. To be sure, a defining feature of the Holocaust is seen in this devastation of the home: living in a camp, in a ghetto, or in hiding, every Jew in Nazi Europe was homeless.

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As Elie Wiesel tells the tale in *Night*, the Nazis rounded up the foreign Jews of Sighet before they took the local Jews. Moshe the Beadle was among these first Jews to be transported to a killing field, where he and hundreds of others were shot and buried in a mass grave. Moshe, however, crawled out from that abyss and returned to warn the people of Sighet. "I wanted to come back," he says, "to tell you the story of my death."¹ And so it is the case for every Jew who emerged from a Europe transformed into a mass grave. Recording their memories, the survivors relate the stories not of their lives but of their deaths. More often than not, the survivor is an orphan who returns to an orphaned world to transmit a message. Why an "orphaned world?" Because these are not orphans whose mothers have passed away—they are orphans whose mothers were murdered in a realm where it was *illegal* to be a Jewish mother. In the Holocaust Kingdom not a single Jewish mother died. No, they were all murdered.

If, as it is often said, the Nazis destroyed souls before they destroyed bodies, a key component of such an assault lies in an assault on the mother. For our first sense of who we are—our first inkling of substance and meaning—comes from the relation to the mother. It is she who first intones our name with love and conveys to us the sense that we are a *something*. When the mother is lost, the word that bespeaks the dearness of the human

being is lost; hence the self or the soul of the human image is lost. For the mother is our first and most immediate tie to the Creator, to that absolutely Other who is revealed in the absolute non-indifference of love. Inasmuch as the Holocaust entails a radical assault upon the soul, it entails a radical assault upon the mother and, through the mother, upon the One in whose image the soul is created.

In the pages that follow we shall discover the ways in which the Nazis' calculated murder of Jewish mothers was tied to a murder of the Supernal Mother. Similarly, we shall see how a people and a world are ontologically orphaned, with their essence redefined as the essence of the orphan. Sara Zyskind's begins her memoir, for example, with the memory of her mother's last Mother's Day before the destruction of all days.² Before long she loses her mother to the slow death of ghetto life, and the memory of an outcry rises to the surface of her page: "I don't want to be an orphan, Mother!"³ Her plea, of course, meets only with silence. Similarly, while standing at the window of a Nazi prison cell Paul Trepman looks out into a courtyard, where Jews stand naked, waiting to be murdered, and from the silent suffering of that crowd a terrible vision comes to him. "My mother," he writes, "had probably perished in the same way in the Warsaw ghetto, along with my sister, and the rest of my family. Now, for the first time, I felt truly orphaned."⁴ Now, for the first time, he belongs to no one's memory.

The cry of "I don't want to be an orphan" is a cry of "I don't want to be forgotten." The orphan's memory is the memory of the loss of the one by whom the human being is always remembered. The emptiness experienced by the orphan is the void of being forgotten—by force, by murder, not by an act of G-d, who remembers us even when He takes our mothers from us. Losing those hands and that face, the child loses her own hands and face, her own deeds and words,

to become “the shadow of another shadow,” as Ana Vinocur expresses it. “I felt an infinite emptiness in my mind and heart,” she recalls. “They’ve taken my mother away. I’m nothing but the shadow of another shadow.”⁵ When the mother is turned to ash, creation is returned to the *tohu vevohu*, the chaos and the void, antecedent to every origin. Significantly, the first word in Vinocur’s *Book without a Title* is *mother*. From this word arise all other words in the memoir; from this memory arises a large portion of the Jewish essence of the Holocaust memoir.

“The greatness of Israel,” it is written in the Midrash, “is compared. . . to a woman bearing child” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 8:19). If the Covenant that distinguishes the Jews is definitively linked to the Creation, as Nachmanides argues,⁶ then the murder of the mother is inextricably bound to the extermination of the Covenant. When, upon their arrival at Birkenau, mothers are sent to the left and their children to the right, it is not simply the division of a transport into two groups, one condemned and the other yet to be condemned; what transpires is a rending of the Covenant itself and the tearing of a wound into the heart of Creation.

Isabella Leitner’s memory of the moment when her mother was torn from her upon their arrival in Birkenau, will drive the point home: “Mama! If you don’t turn around I’ll run after you. But they won’t let me. I must stay on the ‘life’ side. Mama!”⁷ No good-bye. No last look. Such exchanges belong only to the world that comes from the hand of the Creator, only to the world where there are mothers, not to the anti-world where Mengele orchestrates the annihilation of the mother with a wave of his baton. The memory of Auschwitz is marked by the memory of this essence of Auschwitz, by this obliteration of the mother who signifies the obliteration of self and world, as Ka-tzetnik demonstrates in the last of his visions in *Shivitti*, a in which vision he finally beholds the image of Auschwitz itself: “It’s my mother. . . going to be gassed. I run after her. . . . ‘Mama! Listen to me! Mama!’ My mother naked. Going to be gassed. I behold my mother’s

skull and in my mother's skull I see me. And I chase after me inside my mother's skull.”⁸ The mother is the strength of Israel, Jewish tradition maintains. In that mass of Jews consigned to the flames it is she who is on her way to the gas chambers, every Jewish mother in every Jew and every Jew in every Jewish mother. For the mother is the embodiment of the origin, of the love, and of the home that constitute Israel.

The Annihilation of the Origin

Certain teachings from the Jewish tradition enable us to see some of the metaphysical implications of the murder of the mothers of Israel. In the *Zohar*, for example, Rabbi Shimon teaches that G-d the Mother, and not just G-d the Father, is the One who brings heaven and earth and humanity into being: “The [Supernal] Mother said: ‘let us make man in our image’” (*Zohar* I, 22b). The tradition also teaches that the Torah not only precedes the Creation, but it is the soul and substance of everything that comes into being (see *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1; *Zohar* I, 5a). And the first letter in the Torah is *beit*, a letter that is associated with the womb from which Creation is born. *Beit* is also designates a “house,” the place that a mother transforms into a *dwelling* place. Because the sanctity of the home is linked to this presence of a wife and mother in the home, “blessing,” says the Talmud, “is only found in a man's house on account of his wife” (*Bava Metzia* 59a). And blessing means Torah: it is thanks to the mothers of Israel that Torah enters the world. This being the case, we see that, if the Torah is the foundation of Creation, the mother, through her tie to the *beit* in which the Torah originates, is the foundation of the Torah itself; she is the origin of the origin.

These interconnections linking Torah, Creation, and women explain why tradition holds that at Sinai “the Torah had to be accepted *first* by the women (the ‘house of Jacob’) before it could be accepted by the men (the ‘house of Israel’).”⁹ If the Torah is the basis of Creation and the

mother lies at the origin of the Torah, then one understands why the Torah enters the world through the mothers of Israel. Emmanuel Lévinas sheds light on these connections when he says, “*Rachamim* (Mercy). . . goes back to the word *Rechem*, which means uterus. *Rachamim* is the revelation of the uterus to the other, whose gestation takes place within it. *Rachamim* is maternity itself. G-d as merciful is G-d defined by maternity.”¹⁰ One will recall that the Divine Presence, or the *Shekhinah*, is a feminine entity; it is, moreover, a maternal entity, as we may gather upon reading in the Talmud that whenever he heard the sound of his mother’s footsteps, Rabbi Joseph would say, “I shall rise before the Shekhinah that is approaching” (*Kiddushin* 31b). Examining the Holocaust memoir’s account of the loss of the mother, we too must rise before the one who approaches in the memory of her loss. So rising, we may meet some small portion of our responsibility for the recovery of the mother’s connection with the origin.

Initially a person comes into the world as a Jew because his mother is a Jew; then he is reborn as a Jew through the memory of his Jewish origin, a memory manifested through a sense of Jewish responsibility. As it manifests itself in the Holocaust memoir, this remembrance entails a movement toward the womb of the origin that arises not afterward but from the depths of the Horror itself, from the first moment of the origin’s obliteration. One example of the memory of that moment is found in Ka-tzetnik’s *Star of Ashes*, where he remembers the children who “push against their mother’s belly as if seeking to get inside once more. Their scream, embryonic, unuttered, howls out of the mother’s eyes.”¹¹ That mother’s eyes bore into our own eyes. And, seeking to merge with the womb of the origin, the mute scream of the children rises up from within the origin, not in a howl of pain or despair but in a cry for help, for *our* help. It is we—those of us who have lived to know our mothers and whose mothers have thus lived—we are the ones summoned to the memory and the life denied to those little ones. Our relation to this origin is an essential avenue of

any relation that we may have to ourselves. For once this relation to the origin is lost, the human image is itself undone, as Nathan Shapell suggests when, upon the death of his mother, he laments, “It was the end. My life had no further meaning. I had no function as a human being any more.”¹² A cry rose up from the ghetto. It was the Jewish children weeping for their mother Rachel. And they would not be comforted. For she was no more.

In the Jewish tradition, as in most traditions, the mother is associated with the earth. Planet Auschwitz, however, rests not on the earth but on several feet of Jewish remains, on the mothers’ ashes that now veil the Mother Earth. The loss of the human image of the self that Shapell experienced upon the loss of his mother is expressed in other memoirs as an eclipse of the earth. It is the earth—and, symbolically, the mother—of which Agnes Sassoon speaks when she says, “My memories are of darkness and doom; heaviness, depression, desolation. . . . I cannot remember spring or summertime, or seeing flowers and greenery.”¹³ In short, she cannot remember the life that rises up from the womb of the earth, since her every link to that origin has been severed by a darkness that the light cannot comprehend. In those days of destruction, in that destruction of days, the earth moved not with the stirring of life but with the throes of death. Donna Rubinstein, for instance, recalls the mass graves at Krasnostav: “They covered up the graves but the soil heaved.”¹⁴ And, as though in a state of delirium, Judith Dribben writes, “They bury them half-alive. . . or half-dead. . . and the soil was moving. . . the soil was moving. . . they bury them half-alive. . . and the soil was moving. . . .”¹⁵ The earth that heaves is not an earth that we can walk. With the annihilation of the *adam*, the *adamah* churns; the origin itself tosses and tumbles under the weight of the children forced back into her womb. The ground itself crumbles in a mute, embryonic howl that reverberates throughout the pages of the Holocaust memoir.

And yet within the memory of the loss of the earth as mother there springs a trace of the recovery of that earth. At times this recovery lies in the remembrance of a garden in a ghetto where there should be no garden, a sowing of the soil with life rather than death. Ana Vinocur was among those who planted such a garden and who remembers, “That dialogue in which the earth’s answer was expressed so eloquently and in such a comforting way, brought to my mind that expression which is now so meaningful: Mother Earth.”¹⁶ The act of sowing and thus affirming life at its origin enables the human being to hear the eloquence of the origin and to thus determine a direction toward the origin. One sees this symbol, for example, in the Jewish tradition of planting a tree in the Promised Land and thus signifying the remembrance of a life, as well as in the observance of *Tu B’shvat*, the 15th of Shevat, which is the New Year for trees. Vinocur’s characterization of her relation to the earth as a dialogue is also significant: the divine aspect of the mother imparts to the dialogue with the mother an aspect of prayer. While the father seldom appears in the Holocaust memoir as an interlocutor in prayer, the mother frequently assumes that role. Eugene Heimler, for instance, writes, “If I was in trouble, all I had to do was to close my eyes, imagine my mother’s face hovering before me—and pray to her.”¹⁷ Here the maternal aspect of the divine presents itself as an intermediary or a pathway to the divine. G-d may have turned away, but the prayer still find its way to the mother’s ear.

We see this even more clearly in Saul Friedländer’s *When Memory Comes*. Hidden in a Catholic school during the Shoah, he was isolated from his mother and father. There, in the image of the Holy Virgin, he “rediscovered something of the presence of a mother.”¹⁸ If it should be objected that the Virgin is a Christian figure, we may reply that it is a Jew who utters the prayer and it is as a Jew that Friedländer invokes the memory. His rediscovery of the presence of a mother, moreover, lies not in the plastic image of the Virgin Mary but in the linkage to the divine opened up

by a prayer to the maternal. If, as Lévinas indicates above, *rachamim* or mercy is tied to a maternal aspect of the Divine, then prayers of supplication include that aspect of G-d.¹⁹

For Sara Zyskind, this linkage is revealed in the form of intervention on the occasion of her father's illness in the Łódź Ghetto. When he was finally allowed to enter the hospital, she writes, "I ran to the cemetery to tell Mother about what happened. There was no doubt in my mind that the miracle had taken place thanks to Mother's intervention with the Divine Powers."²⁰ Here the dialogue with a mound of earth becomes a pathway to the Heaven of heavens; the one who signifies the human tie to the divine origin—precisely *because* she signifies that bond—has the power to intervene with the Divine Powers. Donna Rubinstein also expresses this conviction when, upon her liberation and return to her hometown of Krasnostav, she cries, "O, my dear mama, did you intervene for me? Is it you who helped me survive the war? Please, mother dear, guide me in my future the way you have until now."²¹ Even as she lies on the other shore the mother who is the origin of life is also the origin of the future. To be sure, according to the Jewish mystical tradition, the *Sifrah* of *Binah* (Understanding), which is identified with the Supernal Mother, signifies the future.²² The annihilation of the origin, then, entails not only the destruction of the past but, in that very destruction, it includes the obliteration of the future. The recovery of tradition, therefore, is a recovery of the future, without which there can be no life. Just as there can be no life without the mother.

The mother's intervention with the Creator is a manifestation of the compassion that lies at the root of Creation. But this intervention did not always occur; or, if it did occur, it did not always succeed. In many cases all that was experienced was the terrible absence of the mother and an infinite isolation from her compassion. While imprisoned with a group of orphaned women in Stutthof, for example, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk recalls, "We felt that we . . . could not even succeed in

raising a trace of compassion. That was how it remained until Liza started singing a song about a Jewish mother, and we, who had lost our mothers so cruelly, could not keep ourselves from crying.”²³ Upon the annihilation of the origin that the mother represents, the void overtakes the origin and swallows up every word. The emptiness in which the words of these women fade is the emptiness that emerges with the loss of the mother and of the love that makes the mother who she is. The song about a Jewish mother is, after all, a song about love in its most sacred form. The recovery of tradition includes a recovery of the maternal love that is the basis of all creation. The memory of this love belongs to the essence of the Holocaust memoir.

The Loss of Maternal Love

In the sixteenth century Rabbi Yitzchak Luria raised a question: “If *Binah* or Understanding, which is associated with the Mother, is a mental process, why is it said to be in the heart, and not in the head?” To which Aryeh Kaplan answers, “The heart is actually the Personification of Imma-Mother, which is Binah-Understanding, where She reveals herself.”²⁴ In the injunction to love G-d, the first thing with which we are called upon to love is the heart, *b’kol levavkha* (Deuteronomy 6:5). One also recalls that the *lamed* and the *beit* of the Hebrew word for “heart,” *lev*, are the last and the first letters of the Torah. The heart, therefore, contains all of the Torah: it is on the heart, indeed, that the Teaching is to be inscribed (Deuteronomy 6:6). The mother whom the *beit* situates at the origin of the Torah thus includes the sum of the Torah in her personification as the heart, or the *lev*. Personified as the heart, then, the mother signifies not only the origin of life but also the center of life. The heart bears this significance because it is the seat of Torah, which is the love and the teaching of G-d. And the lovingkindness shown by one human

being toward another is the highest expression of that love and teaching centered in the heart and personified by the mother.

Hence, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh reminds us, “lovingkindness is the means through which G-d’s presence is ultimately revealed,”²⁵ and it is originally revealed through the mother. In the *Tanya*, moreover, the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, maintains that lovingkindness in the form of charity is feminine and, by implication, maternal, for “it receives a radiation from the light of the *En Sof* [the Infinite One] that [like a womb] encompasses all worlds.”²⁶ From a Jewish perspective, therefore, maternal love is not just a feeling or a state of mind but is the manifestation and revelation of the Most High in our very midst. When that love is targeted for extermination, the light of all there is to hold dear, the light that was in the beginning, is assailed. In the annihilation of maternal love we find once again that the ontological assault manifested in the assault on the mother moves to a metaphysical level. Like the light created upon the first utterance of G-d, the mother’s love is the mainstay of life, even and especially during the reign of death.

We see this in Leon Wells’ memoir when he says, “I began to observe to my disgust that I, too, was coming very near to developing the indifference and apathy of so many others. I was saved from succumbing to these feelings only by the thought of those at home, and the determination that my mother should see me alive.”²⁷ And: “Nothing could disturb me. I had seen my mother again. It had been the happiest day in my life for a long, long time.”²⁸ Representing love in its holiest aspect, the mother embodies the opposite not only of human indifference but of ontological indifference, the opposite of what Lévinas calls the “there is” or “the phenomenon of impersonal being.”²⁹ Maternal love, in short, represents a loving non-indifference that comes from beyond the human being to awaken a non-indifference within the human being. If, as Olga Lengyel declares, “inhumanity was the natural order of things at Birkenau,”³⁰ it is because Birkenau is the

phenomenological manifestation of an ontological indifference. For in Birkenau motherly love was carefully eliminated from the order of being; in Birkenau motherly love was a capital crime.

Maternal love is not part of the fabric of being—it is a breach of being. Through that love the mother opens up a small portal through which the Divine reveals itself from beyond the mute neutrality of all there is. “Mothers never thought of themselves,” writes Vinocur. “They were sublime, special beings, divine!”³¹ Only where we have a connection to these “special beings” do we have a connection to life. Why? Because as they love, so do they command us to love, as it is written in the Torah: “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). This does not mean, “I know how much you love yourself, and that is how much I want you to love your neighbor. Not, the *kamokha*, or “as yourself,” means “that is what you are. In other words: “You shall love your neighbor, for that loving *is* your self,” the soul and substance of who you are. That love for the other is the meaning of our life. And that commandment is what the mother conveys. The memory of the mother’s love is a memory of this commandment to love, regardless of reward, regardless even of the presence of the loved one who might return the look of love. Indeed, the act of remembrance characteristic of the Holocaust memoir is an act of love.

If one of the aims in writing the memoir is to recover some link with life, it should come as no surprise to find that the orphan’s tie to the mother is an essential aspect of his or her memory. In a statement reminiscent of Leon Wells’ remarks cited above, Kitty Hart writes, “One thing I needed very much: regular visits to my mother.”³² Why? Because every other image and entity she encountered in the concentrationary universe declared to her that she was a non-entity, not a child or a person at all but a mere shadow about to be swallowed up by the Night. Through her mother’s eyes, however, she could retrieve some trace of herself as someone who is loved and who is

therefore alive. When she fell ill with typhus, in fact, Kitty once again received life from her mother. “Mother talked to me,” she tells us, “though all she got in return was rambling nonsense. I did not even recognize her. But she persevered, slowly and steadily drawing me back to life.”³³ In these lines we see that maternal love is as unconditional as it is deep, absolutely unconditional, and therefore a reflection of the Absolute.

“Mother talked to me”: the mother speaks, which is to say, the mother loves, without the reinforcement of response or recognition. She loves, then, without ground or limitation, infinitely and eternally, as G-d loves. And so she summons from the child a love that also transcends the boundaries of time and death, as one may see from a memory recorded by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk: “A young girl whose mother was assigned to the gas did not want to be separated from her. She wanted to die with her mother. They tore her from her mother by force.”³⁴ Here the assault on maternal love takes the form of an assault on the love for the mother, even unto death. Not only are the mother and child consigned to death, but the love between them is also condemned through the elimination of the embrace that arises *between* them. The space *between* the two, where this love abides, is obliterated by forcing each to die separately, in isolation from one another: no more visits, no more looks, no more being together. Not even in the gas chamber.

And yet the memory of the mother re-establishes a certain between space, where the visitation of maternal love comes from beyond the grave, from the other side of the sky that became her grave. For Isabella Leitner, this visitation assumes the form of an epiphany of the face. “My mother’s face,” she writes in the present tense, “her eyes, cannot be described. . . . She knows that for her there is nothing beyond this. And she keeps smiling at me, and I can’t stand it. I am silently pleading with her: ‘Stop smiling.’ I gaze at her tenderly and smile back.”³⁵ One reels at this silent exchange. “The face speaks,” as Lévinas says. “It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and

begins all discourse.”³⁶ But the mother’s face does more than speak. The mother’s face *loves*, silently and absolutely, transcending all the limits of discourse. “Her face has an otherworldly look,” Leitner continues her memory of her mother. “She wants us to live, desperately. All these years I’ve carried with me her face of resignation and hope and love.”³⁷ The commandment to love that signifies the divine here becomes a commandment to live. Like the Good that chooses us before we make any other choices, maternal love beckons the memory and recovery of life even as that life is about to be consumed. If memory is able to traverse time, it is because maternal love is able to transcend time. More than the remnant of a life, the survivor is the bearer of a life. For she bears the loving gaze of the mother who bore her.

Because maternal love is of such a transcendent nature, the image—no, the *presence*—of the mother manifests itself despite death. Eugene Heimler, for example, lost his mother just prior to his deportation. Yet, while riding the train to Auschwitz with his wife Eva, he notes, “Everybody to whom I belonged was either unconscious or dead. Eva, too, was lying in a coma by my feet. And then I saw my mother’s face approaching from the distance.”³⁸ Once more the epiphany of the face announces the maternal love that overcomes all loneliness and isolation. Once more the memory of maternal love invokes a moment in life over which death has no power. Saul Friedländer also recalls an instant of horror and panic during the time when, as a child, he was hiding from the Nazis. It too happened on a train; although the train was not bound for the death camps, the incident took place after his mother and father had been deported. “I screamed in terror,” he writes. “But suddenly, by a miracle, my mother, who had set out in search of me, appeared. I ran to her, threw myself in her arms sobbing, . . . I opened my eyes: it was Madame Chancel stroking my forehead to calm me.”³⁹ Here too we find the language of apparition and the image of a loving caress

reaching across the chasm of death, as though his mother moved the hands of his protector Madame Chancel.

Of course, Friedländer's mother is dead, as in Heimler's. What, then, does memory recover? Among other things, it recovers a word and, with the word, a world in which the human being may belong. Permeated with the sense of an abiding maternal love, the memory draws the word out of exile and, if only for a moment, rejoins the word with its meaning. Which word? Thomas Geve tells us in his memoir, where he recalls receiving a certain message from the women's camp in Birkenau: "News of my luck spread quickly and soon I was surrounded by dozens of roommates who, claiming to be my best friends, wanted to hear details—but above all to see the word 'mother.' There was a double reason for rejoicing: someone had found a mother, the being dearest to all of us."⁴⁰ Here the word *mother* is itself a message, a conveyor of meaning and of love, that appears in the midst of an anti-world dominated by everything that is opposed to love and the meaning it fosters. Just as young Geve's fellow inmates gather around this word, so do we gather around this memory rendered through the word. Just as they see in this message not only *his* mother but *the* mother, so do we seek in the memoir a trace of maternal love as such. For if this love succumbs to the annihilation aimed at it, then this word loses its meaning and we lose our lives. But if the word is there, if a life is risked to transmit this word, if memory can smuggle it into the present through the veils of the past—then the center of life might be recovered. As soon as this word overflowing with meaning makes its appearance in the prison block, the block is itself transformed, if only for an instant. Suddenly these orphans lost in an orphaned world have a mother. Suddenly the block assumes the air of a home. But only for an instant.

The Harrowing of the Home

If, according to Jewish tradition, the letter *beit* situates the mother at the origin of all life, the meaning of the letter *beit* (“house”) places the mother at the center of the home. “The feminine aspect of the soul,” Rabbi Ginsburgh points out, “and, in general, the woman in Judaism is symbolized by the house.”⁴¹ The reverse is also the case: the home, which houses life within its walls, is symbolized by the woman, who also houses life within her womb. Other associations and explanations also come to mind; one recalls, for example, Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, where he writes, “The decree consequent upon the incident of the spies had not been enacted upon the *women*, because they held the Promised Land dear. The men had said, (Numbers XIV.4) ‘Let us appoint a chief and return to Egypt,’ whilst the women said, (XXVII.4) ‘Give us a possession in the Land.’”⁴² It is the women, in other words, who seek out the home and who thus signify the home. The House of Jacob, whose reception of the Torah made it possible for the Children of Israel to receive the Torah, embraces the promise of a place to dwell. The sum of the Torah lies in the commandment to love, and the commandment to love opens up a dwelling place, a place where children and families may come into the world. As we have seen, the mother is the incarnation of that love; hence the mother is the personification of the home. And the Nazi Reich is precisely the opposite of the home.

Rendered motherless, the orphan is rendered homeless, so that the Kingdom of Night instituted by the Nazis is the Kingdom of Exile. If, as Martin Buber has said, “‘Good’ is the movement in the direction of home,”⁴³ then we see that the Nazi evil manifest in the murder of the mother is a movement away from home and into exile. It was not for nothing that the language of extermination included terms such as “resettlement.” It was not enough to kill the Jews. Waging an ontological war against the Jews, the Nazis had to annihilate their home and their concept of home; they had to drive them from their homes and thus render them homeless prior to killing

them. Living in a camp, in a ghetto, or in hiding, *every Jew in Nazi Europe was homeless*. The fact that all six of the murder camps were located in Poland, therefore, had a particularly devastating irony for the three and a half million Jews who lived there, as Harry Rabinowitz points out: “So closely did the Jews associate themselves with this homeland that its name was etymologically interpreted in Hebrew either as *Polin* (‘Here ye shall dwell’) or *Polaniah* (‘Here dwells the Lord’).”⁴⁴ In the Nazi assault on the mother we see the fundamental human problem of dwelling manifested in its most extreme form: the murder of the maternal love that distinguishes the origin of life is engineered by the devastation of the home. Once the mother is eliminated, the reign of exile and homelessness is inaugurated. And the mother herself, the very one who had symbolized the home, becomes the symbol of exile, an embodiment of “the Shekhinah in exile.”⁴⁵ Yet the orphan’s memory of the loss of the mother is a memory of exile that initiates the movement of return from exile. For, as we have seen, in the Holocaust memoir it is very often her children that weep for Rachel.

The Nazi project aimed at the devastation of the home assumed a variety of forms. There were times, for example, when the house initially lost the sanctity and sanctuary of a home by the mere appearance of the Nazis, who would come and go as they pleased. Such was the case in the Polish town of Bielitz, where prior to being forced out of her house, Gerda Klein recalls the loss of her home: “The sanctity of our home was gone, the chain of tradition broken, the shrine built by love and affection desecrated.”⁴⁶ In just a few words Klein articulates the scope of the loss: an entire history, the time of tradition, was destroyed by the violation of this small space. Epitomized by the mother, the love that distinguishes the family is the love that constitutes the tradition. And the center of the life nurtured by tradition is the home.

What Gerda Klein invokes with words Lily Lerner conveys by means of an image. After being forced out of their home in the Hungarian town of Tolcsva, she and her family were forced to find shelter in Miskolc. “We no longer sat around the kitchen table,” she writes. “The kitchen in Miskolc was too small to have one. In a strange sense, the family had lost a little of its magnetic core when it lost that table.”⁴⁷ The sense of this loss is not so strange when we recall that in the Talmud Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar both teach that “as long as the Temple was in existence, the altar was [the means of] atonement for Israel, but now [since there is no Temple], each man’s table is [the means of] atonement” (see *Menachot* 97a; *Chagigah* 27a). Thus the Code of Jewish Law compiled by Rabbi Joseph Caro in the sixteenth century is known as the *Shulchan Arukh*, or *The Set Table*. The table is where family members and guests join with one another and with Creation in the act of sharing a piece of bread. The life of the family has its origin in the mother, both literally and symbolically; from her womb come the children and from her hands the bread on which the blessing is said at the table. It is she who sets and orders the table, she, then, who creates the place of *dwelling*.

And so one understands why Jean Améry insists that “there is no ‘new home.’ Home is the land of one’s childhood and youth. Whoever has lost it remains lost to himself.”⁴⁸ A man can have no new home any more than he can have a new mother or a new identity. The “new” one is always a counterfeit and invariably leads to the alienation experienced by Saul Friedländer when, as a child, he and his parents tried to find a new home in Paris after they had fled from Prague. There, he remembers, he could find a place neither among the Christian nor among the Jewish children: “I was tied to a tree and beaten. . . by Jewish children because they thought I was different from them. So I belonged nowhere.”⁴⁹ The violence done to the home translates into violence done to the child. Here the Jew becomes the one who, by definition, belongs nowhere, so that the beating

suffered by the one who remembers results not only in bruises to the body but in an absence imposed upon the soul. Thus, when Friedländer recalls his mother's words, "we can no longer exist legally,"⁵⁰ he articulates the memory of being cast outside the parameters of life itself. And that memory is articulated in the words of the *mother*: it is she who expresses the child's loss of being and belonging, since it is she who embodies the home that makes possible all belonging—something that the Nazis made impossible for the Jews *by law*, or by a kind of anti-law. Here we discover a most insidious aspect of the ontological evil that National Socialism represents: once it becomes a crime for a Jew to have a home, it is a crime for a Jew to be. And the arch criminal in this scheme of things is the mother.

If the concentrationary universe has been deemed an anti-world, it is because, among other reasons, it is antithetical to the home. Like the child whose "being" consists of not belonging, the home appears in this anti-world as the absence of the one thing needful, the absence of an entire world. Charlotte Delbo makes this point when she relates the story of how she and some of her fellow prisoners found shelter in the remains of a house while out on a work detail one rainy Auschwitz day. As the women dried themselves in the half-demolished structure, they imagined how they might have made it into a home, complete with furniture, wallpaper, curtains, plants, and a radio.⁵¹ Although this talk brings them a moment of relief, it also accentuates the realization of where they are not. All the fixtures and furnishings that constitute a life in the world are absent from their anti-world; indeed, the whole of that anti-world seemed to be gathered into those ruins that had once been a home. In the case of Filip Müller the devastation of the home is signified not by the ruins of a house but by the ruins of memory itself. "The memory of my parents," he writes, "my family and my early youth in my home town had faded."⁵² If, as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi have said,⁵³ the Shoah was essentially a war against memory, it was a war against the memory of

home and all the home symbolizes. The human being has no being without the home; and he has no home without the mother.

This linkage between home and mother is quite explicit in Kitty Hart's *Return to Auschwitz*. After she and her mother were completely shaved upon their arrival at the camp, she relates, "When I turned to look for my mother I couldn't make her out at first. . . . Had we come here straight from home? Home: the word had ceased to mean anything."⁵⁴ In Thomas Geve's memoir we find a similar failure of recognition; upon seeing his mother for the first time in Auschwitz-Birkenau, he asserts, "I hardly recognized mother. Still in her early thirties, she looked as harsh as her companions."⁵⁵ In both instances the failure of the recognition of the mother is directly tied to the loss of the meaning of the word *home*; it is in her face, overflowing with maternal love, that the meaning of *home* is inscribed. Again, the mother is the sign of the home; when the sign is defaced to the point of non-recognition, the thing it signifies, the home, is erased from being. And yet in the act of remembrance the sign is recovered; to be sure, the Holocaust memoir is characterized precisely by this recovery of a sign, or of the trace of a sign. Here remembrance entails a re-cognition that constitutes the face of the one defaced and the word drained of its meaning. While his family may have faded from Müller's memory, the memory of the fading regains a trace of the family. While Hart and Geve may have failed to recognize their mothers, a remnant of recognition—and with it a trace of the mother—is regained in the memory of its loss. For the memory of the loss as a loss entails an affirmation of the dearness of what was lost.

The reconstitution of recognition effected by memory points toward a reunion with the family that was often impossible during the time remembered. The harrowing of the home includes the breakup of the family, so that the longing for a trace of home frequently expresses itself as a longing for the family. When Moshe Sandberg and his comrades, for example, were transported

from a Hungarian labor crew to Dachau, the first thing they asked the inmates of Dachau was how they might be rejoined with members of their families who had been sent there. They met only with cynical laughter, however, since those in Dachau knew, says Sandberg, “that we would also go the way of our families with whom sooner or later we would be reunited, yes, reunited in another world, in the world of the dead.”⁵⁶ In the assault on the home the family becomes the alien humanity relegated to a realm that is eternally *after, later, not yet*. Thus the memory of the family—and, by implication, the memory of the mother—becomes a memory of the future; in the act of remembrance what *was not then* becomes what is *yet to be*. Why? Because once memory affirms the dearness of what was lost, the thing lost becomes the thing *sought*. We find an illustration of this point in Zivia Lubetkin’s memoir, where she remembers a memory that came to her during the darkest hours of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: “My imagination drew my thoughts away to our ancestral Homeland, to my many friends there.”⁵⁷ The ancestral homeland is the home where she has yet to arrive, *ancestral* not because she has already come from there but because it is the origin that summons her toward a future, where a new life forever awaits.

Not long after the Nazis established a ghetto in Bielitz, Gerda Klein’s parents arranged for her to go into hiding in another Polish town, in Sosnowitz. Recalling the moment of their parting, she writes, “The picture of Papa’s and Mama’s mute farewells—those two faces suffering without uttering a cry—was imprinted on my heart forever.”⁵⁸ The imprint of the memory of the mother—and, in this case, of the father as well—is the imprint of a face. In the movement of remembrance a face speaks. And when the memory is the memory of the murdered mother, it is the face of the mother that speaks, the face of the origin, of love, and of home. The mother, who abides at the origin of life, is herself the origin of this memory: in a very important sense, the mother writes the

memory of the orphan's loss. In that writing, then, a trace of the mother, who is antecedent to the utterance, is present in the utterance. From Gerda Klein's remark, we see that the imprint on the heart, on the center and core of her being, finds its way into the imprint on the page. There the mute farewells become a silent summons. From the depths of the orphan's page the voice of the mother summons all who come before this page to a recovery of the origin, the love, and the home that were lost.

Therefore the little girl who cries out in Livia Jackson's memoir cries out to *me*. I am the one called to listen, the one whom she addresses when she screams, "Oh, Mommy! Oh, G-d, they are killing my mother!"⁵⁹ Can the heart endure *this* memory? Can it endure the words and the memory of Isabella Leitner, when she says, "The air was filled with the stench of death. Unnatural death. The smoke was thick. The sun couldn't crack through. The scent was the smell of burning flesh. The burning flesh was your mother?"⁶⁰ Note the shift from the third person to the second person: "your mother," she addresses me. *My* mother!? Suddenly I am the one who must do the work of re-cognition that characterizes memory and recovery. Suddenly I am the one who is orphaned. Because the mother is definitively linked to the origin, the love, and the home that belong to a tradition, the memory of her loss is a memory that becomes part of a tradition and therefore part of a common memory. Thus I too am the one who, in an act of response and remembrance, must affirm the dearness of what was lost. Else I too am lost.

Notes

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, tr. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 5.

² Sara Zyskind, *Stolen Years*, tr. Margarit Inbar (Minneapolis: Lerner, 1981), p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

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- ⁴ Paul Trepman, *Among Men and Beasts*, tr. Shoshana Perla and Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Bergen Belsen Memorial Press, 1978), p. 130.
- ⁵ Ana Vinocur, *A Book without a Title*, tr. Valentine Isaac and Ricardo Iglesia (New York, Vantage, 1976), pp. 107-07.
- ⁶ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Vol. 1, tr. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo, 1971), p. 112.
- ⁷ Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella*, ed. Irving Leitner (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1978), pp. 19-20.
- ⁸ Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Shivitti: A Vision*, tr. Elijah De-Nur and Lisa Herman (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 100-01.
- ⁹ This teaching is based on Exodus 19:3, which states that the “House of Jacob” (women) and the “Children of Israel” (men) were gather at Mount Sinai. See Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images*, tr. Yehuda Hanegbi and Yehudit Keshet (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, tr. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 183.
- ¹¹ Ka-tzetnik, *Star of Ashes*, tr. Nina De-Nur (Tel-Aviv: Hamenora, 1971), p. 52.
- ¹² Nathan Shapell, *Witness to the Truth* (New York: David McKay, 1974), p. 93.
- ¹³ Agnes Sassoon, *Agnes: How My Spirit Survived* (Edgware, Eng.: Lawrence Cohen, 1983), p. 34.
- ¹⁴ Donna Rubinstein, *I AM the Only Survivor of Krasnostav* (New York: Shengold, 1982), p. 39.
- ¹⁵ Judith Dribben, *And Some Shall Live* (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1969), p. 85.
- ¹⁶ Vinocur, p. 45.
- ¹⁷ Eugene Heimler, *Night of the Mist*, tr. André Ungar (New York: Vanguard, 1959), p. 102.
- ¹⁸ Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, tr. Helen R. Lane (New York: Avon, 1980), p. 122.
- ¹⁹ One recalls in this connection the Chasidic tradition that maintains that when we pray the Shekhinah speaks through our lips. See, for example, the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the Koretzer Rebbe in Louis I. Newman, *Hasidic Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1963), pp. 335-36.
- ²⁰ Zyskind, p. 61.
- ²¹ Rubinstein, p. 90.
- ²² See *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, tr. with commentary by Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1990), p. 240.

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- ²³ Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, tr. Roslyn Hirsch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 6-7.
- ²⁴ See Aryeh Kaplan's commentary in *The Bahir*, tr. with commentary by Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1979), pp. 127-28.
- ²⁵ Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *The Alef-Beit: Jewish Thought Revealed through the Hebrew Letters* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1991), p. 88.
- ²⁶ Schneur Zalman, *Likutei Amarim Tanya*, tr. Nissan Mindel (New York: Kehot, 1981), p. 593.
- ²⁷ Leon Wells, *The Death Brigade* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1978), pp. 74-75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ²⁹ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 48.
- ³⁰ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* (London: Granada, 1972), p. 94.
- ³¹ Vinocur, p. 88.
- ³² Kitty Hart, *Return to Auschwitz* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), p. 104.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ³⁴ Nomberg-Przytyk, p. 35.
- ³⁵ Leitner, p. 6.
- ³⁶ Lévinas, *Ethics*, pp. 87-88.
- ³⁷ Leitner, p. 16.
- ³⁸ Heimler, p. 31.
- ³⁹ Friedländer, pp. 101-02.
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Geve, *Youth in Chains* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1981), pp. 82-83.
- ⁴¹ Ginsburgh, p. 45.
- ⁴² Rashi, *Commentary on the Torah*, Vol. 4, tr. M. Rosenbaum and A. A. Silbermann (Jerusalem: The Silbermann Family, 1972), p. 131.
- ⁴³ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, tr. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 78.
- ⁴⁴ Hary Rabinowitz, *Hasidism: The Movement and Its Masters* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988), p. 1.
- ⁴⁵ See Steinsaltz, p. 51.
- ⁴⁶ Gerda Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 31.

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- ⁴⁷ Lily Gluck Lerner, *The Silence* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1980), p. 55.
- ⁴⁸ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, tr. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 48.
- ⁴⁹ Friedländer, p. 45.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁵¹ Charlotte Delbo, *None of Us Will Return*, tr. John Githens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 87-88.
- ⁵² Filip Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando*, tr. Susanne Flatauer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 17.
- ⁵³ See Wiesel, *Evil and Exile*, tr. Jon Rothschild (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 155, and Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 31.
- ⁵⁴ Hart, p. 62.
- ⁵⁵ Geve, p. 83.
- ⁵⁶ Moshe Sandberg, *My Longest Year*, tr. S. C. Hyman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1968), p. 59.
- ⁵⁷ Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, tr. I. Tubbin (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1981), p. 151.
- ⁵⁸ Klein, pp. 95-96.
- ⁵⁹ Livia E. Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* (New York: Times Books, 1980), p. 70.
- ⁶⁰ Leitner, p. 94.