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The witness of the unspoken experience: Postmemory in Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*

Abstract. In the graphic memoir *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006) Bernice Eisenstein examines her identity as a second generation survivor, tells stories about her parents, and depicts the community of survivors in Toronto. Eisenstein's memoir is most often described as a graphic novel. However, the book is a specific combination of words and drawings, and can be hard to categorize. In my paper I focus on Eisenstein's complex relationship with her father presented in the novel, and argue that the way she writes about him and draws him is anchored in his unsaid Holocaust experience. I read Eisenstein's portrayal of her father in reference to the concept of postmemory, and suggest that Eisenstein was heavily affected by her father's experience of being a Holocaust survivor. Her deep connection to the past is demonstrated in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* through drawings, selected memories, and references to numerous works of culture. I discuss how Eisenstein draws her father and how she commemorates him in images – not as a victim, but as extremely strong personas: movie star, gangster or sheriff. I analyze the role of shtetl culture in the memoir as another way of linking present with past. I suggest that the books and movies about the Holocaust which Eisenstein references in the memoir create a basis for changing the confusing, or even unexpressed traumas, into an understandable story.

Keywords: postmemory, graphic novel, illustrated novel, memoir, trauma.

Introduction

In the graphic memoir *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* Bernice Eisenstein examines her identity as a second generation survivor. The choice of the medium of comics to explore Holocaust-related issues is not new: the most prominent example is, of course, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991). Yet Eisenstein manages to tell her family's story without providing a detailed account of her parents' experience of living in Auschwitz. Instead, she focuses on the difficulties of growing up, her complicated relationship with her father, and depicts the community of survivors in Toronto. In her intertextual and complex narrative, Eisenstein often references various works of art, literature, and popular culture. The difficult to categorize medium of the illustrated memoir or graphic nov-

el, as well as the dreamy, ghost-like illustrations, help to create a very original vision. Eisenstein's work not only focuses on the trauma of the Holocaust, but on the ways of sharing and transferring the memory of these events.

The book, divided into eleven thematic chapters, is a non-linear narrative about different aspects of being a Holocaust survivor, as well as a reflection on how memory works. Memories are focused on certain images, and necessitate work to shape them into a narrative. Scott McCloud describes a similar phenomenon – closure – in comics, defining it as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63), and adds that specifically in this medium “the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” (65). In *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* the form of the memoir – that is the unique juxtaposition of verbal and graphic – is as important as its content. Eisenstein states herself: “[t]here is no center to be found in memory, but each place holds its heartbeat” (83). The non-linear order is well justified, since Eisenstein's main focus is how her parents' experiences have impacted on her life, and therefore: how the past influences the present. Miriam Harris suggests that rejection of linearity serves as a way of giving the past a specific dimension: “to transform this haunting world of the past into a more tangible state, and thereby to banish what is mythlike and ghostly, Eisenstein collapses the linearity of time” (131). Rejecting chronology gives Eisenstein freedom to focus on those aspects of the story which for her are the most significant. In *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* she describes her relationship with her parents, who were born in Poland, met in Auschwitz, and then emigrated to Canada. In the memoir she analyzes more closely her relations with her father (who was unable to speak about his experience), than with her mother.¹⁰ Eisenstein declares: “all my life, I have looked for more in order to fill in the parts of my father that have gone missing” (16). *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* belongs not only to the sub-genre of graphic narratives about the Holocaust, but can also be examined in comparison to other graphic memoirs about the father-daughter relationship, for example Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Throughout the novel Eisenstein explores her relationship with her father Ben, trying to understand him better, as she has attempted to do her entire life.

In this article I read Eisenstein's portrayal of her father Ben through the concept of postmemory. Eisenstein's deep connection to the past is present in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* through drawings, selected memories, and several references to works of culture. I discuss how Eisenstein draws her father and how she commemorates him in images – not as a victim, but as extremely strong personas: movie star, gangster or sheriff. The books and movies about the Holocaust which Eisenstein mentions in the memoir create a basis for changing unexpressed traumas into an understandable story. I analyze how the concept of postmemory is seen by Marianne Hirsch and Ernst van Alphen. Van Alphen emphasizes disconnection rather than symbolic transmission of

¹⁰ Eisenstein portrays her mother as more eager to open up about her life in Auschwitz. She even took part in the Archives of the Holocaust Project, where she answered several questions about her past.

the memories, and in my article I argue that the father-daughter relationship portrayed in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* is anchored in van Alphen's understanding of postmemory.

Drawing the father: A hero

Marianne Hirsch states that postmemory:

describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (106-107)

Therefore, the Holocaust influences those who were not part of these traumatic events, but were close to the survivors. Growing up surrounded with recollections of the Holocaust survivors (not always expressed out loud) affects the second generation so much that the memories of something they have not experienced feel like their own. The need to understand, to pass on the stories, to never forget about the past, influences the second generation to various extents, including shaping one's identity. Hirsch continues discussing how important family ties and parent-child relationships are in the case of postmemory:

second generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain ... of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. They are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair. (112)

Children growing up close to those who survived the Holocaust are looking for ways to express what they have experienced. Numerous works of culture prove that for many second generation survivors this issue plays a significant role throughout their whole lives. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* is precisely an attempt to portray what it means to be influenced by one's parents' trauma. Eisenstein ponders on her experience of growing up with parents who are Holocaust survivors – sometimes it is what makes her special, “Hey man, I'm different, my parents were in Auschwitz” (21). Another time it is the baggage, “[b]ackpacking in Europe, the heaviest part of my baggage was my parents' history” (Eisenstein, 22), or a “drug” (20). In *After Such Knowledge* Eva Hoffman examines “the baggage” of the second generation, and states that “for the second generation, the anxieties, the symptoms, no matter how genuine in themselves, no longer correspond to actual experience or external realities. . . . [T]his is exactly the crux of the second generation's difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows” (66). These shadows of parents' experiences play a central role in many second generation survivors' lives. The drawing on the cover of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* is a powerful visual representation of the baggage: Eisenstein – portrayed as a child – casts a shadow that resembles her parents.

From the beginning Eisenstein portrays her father Ben as athletic, elegant and dapper. In almost all of his pictures Ben is youthful and handsome, and I argue that this is how Eisenstein wishes the reader to remember him; she commemorates him as vigorous and tough. To describe her father, Eisenstein quotes Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Panther," and states that Ben always reminded her of an animal in a cage: "a panther, sleek and mysterious with the elegant sheen on its fur" (29). In this description Ben resembles an animal that is strong, majestic, yet limited by something beyond its control. There is anti-Semitic history behind Jewish animal metaphors. Jonathan Freedman notes that in "the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jew's monstrosity is performed by the transformation of the hand – the emblem of warmth, love and pleasure – into bat wings, vampire talons, spider legs or octopus tentacles" (94). Yet another association can be drawn to Spiegelman's portrayal of Jews as mice in *Maus*. Michael E. Staub observes that "the choice to turn people into animals, as the Hitler quote that opens the first volume [of *Maus*] ('The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human') makes clear, can be read as straightforward metaphor for the dehumanization of victims that allows genocide to occur" (37). Portraying Jews as animals was often used in anti-Semitic or Nazi propaganda. In *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* Eisenstein manages to subvert this image and create a contrastive metaphor: she imagines Ben as a powerful animal – a panther – to demonstrate his strength and dominance. The animal is no longer a metaphor of a monster or a rodent, but a source of power.

On the following pages Eisenstein draws her father as extremely elegant, looking somewhere far away – it is probably one of the most thorough drawings in the memoir. This portrait follows a detailed description of Ben: Eisenstein writes with true admiration and fondness that "his thick black hair was always swept back dramatically" (30), and "there was always a ferocity in his gaze, luminous throughout and invisible darkness" (31). She describes him with awe and fascination. In one of the first drawings of Eisenstein's parents the reader sees them fully dressed up: Regina is wearing a black dress with a small hand-bag, and Ben is in a suit with a hat. On the previous page, Eisenstein states about her father: "I searched to find his face among those documented photographs of survivors of Auschwitz ... if I could see him staring out through the barbed wire" (16). The contrast between the referenced image of concentration camps and the somehow glamorous illustration on the following page is striking. These are the parents Eisenstein knows and remembers, not people from the photographs she is looking for. Although a large part of her memoir is devoted to examining her father's past and its influence, it is not apparent in the visual dimension of the narrative. Eisenstein's vague speculations about Ben's life as a Holocaust survivor end within the dimension of the text; she does not draw her father as how he might have looked in Auschwitz. In the memoir, he is a star: the Jewish version of Heathcliff or Robert De Niro's character in *Casino*.

In "Absent Fathers, Present Mothers" Margarete Myers Feinstein notes that "there is evidence that some survivors believed Jewish masculinity and paternal authority have been called into question by the destruction of Jewish families in the Holocaust" (176). Yet the way Eisenstein draws Ben proves that she is able to see him as one of the archetypes of Western masculinity. In the

narrative she admits that she could not always see him as authority. However, her portraits demonstrate how strong he looked in her eyes. One of the most powerful images in the narrative is the portrayal of Eisenstein's father as a sheriff. Ben was an enthusiast of the Western, a genre which in its most classic form offers a clear distinction between villains and heroes. Eisenstein observes that "only here, lying in bed watching television, could he stand alongside his heroes" (49). It is possible to trace in the narrative signs of Ben's dream to become the hero from American Westerns: before the Holocaust he was fighting in the cavalry, and after the war he was briefly in the Polish paramilitary movement seeking out collaborators and Nazis. In the memoir, Eisenstein writes a short passage of alternative history, depicting her father as a sheriff. She creates a mock-western narrative, in which Ben frees Jews from Auschwitz. She illustrates the story with an image of her father in a cowboy hat, with the Star of David in place of the sheriff's star; in this picture he is stronger and more mighty than ever. Behind him the reader sees the open gate to Auschwitz: Ben is not looking back. I suggest that this powerful image can be read as the way Eisenstein wants to commemorate her father. Harris comments on the described illustration: "[g]iven the Holocaust survivors suffered horrific persecution and their identities were reduced to numbers, Eisenstein's conferring upon her father the powers of resistance is a glorious act of liberation for both him and herself" (141). With this image, Eisenstein is able to show Ben as a hero, not only a hero to his daughter, but to a much broader audience. Only in his last portrait – opening the final chapter, the epilogue of the story – Eisenstein's father does not look like a movie star or an American gangster. Exclusively in this picture, he is dressed in a simple T-shirt, with a hand on his stomach, looking tired and in pain. In the epilogue about his death Eisenstein allows herself to portray her father as weak; she allows the reader to see Ben as fragile and ill.

Transmitting other people's stories: The Holocaust becoming narratable

Eisenstein's illustrations often reflect or echo what she writes about; they serve as comments on the text and add a new dimension to the memoir. Several of Eisenstein's illustrations are direct references to early 20th-century artists: Eisenstein portrays herself in the pose known from Auguste Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker," and she draws her parents, aunt and uncle dancing in a circle, resembling Henri Matisse's painting "Dance." Eisenstein uses iconic art to create yet another dialogue with history. Among the influential artists, the one who stands out is Marc Chagall. Eisenstein references his aesthetics throughout the memoir. She draws her parents in an affectionate hug (resembling famous couples from Chagall's paintings) and portrays her aunt singing on the roof along with a fiddler, a motif also known from Chagall's works. I read her allusions to Chagall as a recognition of the importance of Jewish culture in shaping her identity. This, again, connects past with present, her life with Ben's life before the Holocaust. The basis for this connection is Jewish culture, later put to the test of survival through the Holocaust – this disappearing world is the world of her father. The reader gets to know some aspects of Ben's life, yet just elementary information: when and where he was born, what he was doing when the war broke out. There is almost no account of his life before the Holocaust, no illustrations of Ben as a child or before the war. Eisen-

stein draws how her father could have looked when he got to Canada, but she does not attempt to create an illustration of him as a child, or just before the Holocaust. She cannot imagine her father before the Holocaust. Her references to his life before the war are only in the illustrations influenced by Chagall and shtetl culture. By incorporating those visual tropes into her memoir she is closer to understanding Ben's background.

Eisenstein describes the Holocaust as her drug (20) – she craves knowledge and testimonies. This is an excellent example of Eisenstein's dark humor, which penetrates her memoir. In one of the illustrations Moses holds a giant letter "H," while Eisenstein asks him: "Hey, wait! Which is it? Thou shalt not take its name in vain or not take it into a vain? Help me out" (22). I read her way of describing the Holocaust as the effect of highly personalized and individual means of thinking about her parents' experiences. Harris argues that "humor, such as Eisenstein's use of the pulsating stone H, is an important tool for integrating the past and keeping the terror of the uncanny at bay" (132). Eisenstein's playful comments and drawings help her story be original, and establish distance, in spite of her involvement in the topic.¹¹ Eyal Zandberg examines black comedy sketches from the TV program *Hahamishia Hakamerit (The Chamber Quintet)*, and quotes Des Pres' thought that "by putting things at a distance humor permits us a more active response" (568), pointing out its liberating characteristics. In *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* humor creates distance, serves as comic relief, and helps the reader see the topic as less intimidating. Eisenstein's narrative creates the possibility of reading it as the intimate, highly personal story of a child, without experiencing fully the burden of the topic.

Zandberg also notes that the "third generation's commemoration looks at the Holocaust from a different point of view, one that encompasses both thoughts about the event and its memory, raising questions about history and its representation" (575). The third generation often employs a very critical perception on the current nature of the Holocaust commemoration and its social construction. Zandberg continues, "they use genres such as satire and humor, genres that have rarely been used before to deal with Holocaust memoir" (575). Those elements are visible in Eisenstein's narrative. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* was published in 2006, and although Eisenstein herself is a second generation survivor, her memoir is historically closer to the narratives of the third generation.

Pointing out similarities between Ben and the actors or characters from movies is just one of the references to works of culture in Eisenstein's novel. Movies and books about the Holocaust were essential for Eisenstein in understanding her parents' trauma. She turned to testimonies, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Book of Alfred Kantor*. Harris notices that "words and images

11 Of course, Eisenstein's is not the first one to connect pop-culture or humour with Holocaust trauma. The Frenchman Horst Rosenthal, who was in the French internment camp Gurs, and later died in Auschwitz, created in 1942 a comic strip titled *Mickey au Camp de Gurs: Publié Sans Autorisation de Walt Disney*. It shows life in the camps from the point of view of Mickey Mouse (who is not an inmate, but an outsider); his work is full of absurd and irony. However, the juxtaposition of Mickey Mouse and the Holocaust creates an even more tragic picture, while Eisenstein's references to movies are a source of power and strength, for her and her father.

have functioned for Eisenstein, then, as potent symbols of presence in the face of the absence, and as keys to enable the unlocking of secrets” (132). These words and images from other narratives are transmitted onto her memoir – Eisenstein writes: “the Holocaust arrived in Hollywood and the new images I saw, stripped of color, penetrated deeper and were filled with something different yet strangely familiar, connecting to my parents’ past” (92). Testimonies of the Holocaust survivors create the basis for transforming traumas, and fragmented narratives into an understandable story, both for survivors of the Holocaust, and for the second-generation. Ernst van Alphen argues that “the coherence [of survivors’ narratives] rather came from the outside, through literature and film, through memories and testimonies of others, which circulated more and more in public culture. So ‘official’ and public accounts of the Holocaust enabled personal memories to become narratable” (485). Therefore, different works of culture helped individual testimonies come to light. I propose that a very similar approach can be observed in the case of the testimonies of the second generation survivors. Public accounts of the Holocaust constitute the fundamentals of what later becomes an attempt to grasp what happened to survivors, what shaped them – and in consequence – so heavily influenced the lives of second generation survivors. This idea is clearly visible in Eisenstein’s memoir. Numerous references to works of culture prove that those testimonies, found outside of the family, are what brought Eisenstein closer to her father. She states: “I wanted to see a replication of Auschwitz and be able to imagine my mother and father standing in the background among the other starving inmates. In that way, I thought I could find them” (Eisenstein, 21). Through movies and other narratives, she seeks to understand what her father went through, to ultimately be closer to him. Her attempts to find Ben’s face among the Holocaust victims is a recurring issue. Eisenstein explains: “if I could see him staring out through barbered wire, I would then know how to remember him, know what he was made to become, and then possibly know what he might have been” (16). While in the book there are no reproductions of photographs, their importance is marked. Hirsch characterizes the role of photography: “Holocaust photographs are the fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory. The work that they have been mobilized to do for the second generation, in particular, ranges from the indexical to the symbolic, and it is precisely their slippage within this range that needs to be scrutinized” (116). Eisenstein’s persistence in searching for Ben’s face among photographs from the Holocaust suggests that for her it could be highly symbolic. She bases her narrative on numerous testimonies, yet in none of them can she find her father.

In *Prosthetic Memory* Alison Landsberg discusses the structure and function of collective and individual memory in the age of mass culture. She claims that prosthetic memories “originate outside a person’s lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory” and “develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experience” (Landsberg, 19). Therefore, through different works of culture, prosthetic memories enable people who have not witnessed certain events, to feel as if they did. This idea is somehow similar to van Alphen’s claim about the role of literature and film in helping personal memories

of the Holocaust become narratable. However, Landsberg argues that prosthetic memories can be gained by anyone, and therefore they are not connected with genealogy, as in the concept of post-memory. The emphasized importance of works of culture about the Holocaust in Eisenstein's life proves that these narratives influence her perception of the Holocaust.

Eisenstein's reaction to one of the narratives – *The Book of Alfred Kantor* – causes an important confrontation between her and her father. *The Book of Alfred Kantor*, published in 1971, is a collection of sketches and watercolors drawn by Kantor to show the terror of living and dying in a concentration camp. Eisenstein was deeply moved by Kantor's testimony and wanted to share his book with Ben, but looking at those pictures was too difficult for him. Eisenstein examines the meaning of this situation – she states that it helped her see how similar she and Ben were. They both were “without the means to say what was in [their] hearts” (Eisenstein, 97). For Eisenstein it was the struggle to understand her own feelings; for her father it was his silence about his Holocaust experience. This realization may have been crucial for their relationship and its portrayal in the memoir. Throughout the narrative, Eisenstein simultaneously tries to find a way to understand herself and her feelings, and to find a language in which she can speak about it. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* proves that she has found the language in which she is able to speak about herself and her family – it is her unique mixture of words and images. Her memoir is an attempt to comprehend what has happened to her parents, and how it influenced her. Ernst van Alphen redefines Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and argues that difficulties with comprehensibility are what constitutes postmemory and relations between survivors and second generation: “the dynamics between children and survivor parents is rather defined by dis-connection, hence dis-continuity: disconnection is not an emotional, personal sense, but in terms of intelligibility” (488). In his definition – in contrast to Hirsch's – the emphasis is put on the incapacity to connect with parents and create an understandable narrative of their experience. Eisenstein's efforts to see her parents' faces among the photos of survivors, to discuss with her father his trauma, to watch movies about the Holocaust, then to examine how it affected her identity, are all attempts to create a comprehensive narrative. Her incomprehension of her father's past is what brings her closer and closer to him.

Concluding remarks

In the memoir Eisenstein examines how her parents' trauma has been passed on to her, and how her identity was shaped by her parents' experience of the Holocaust. Efraim Sicher argues that “second-generation writing ... is breaking away from all master narratives to focus on personal memory. ... There can indeed be no future without the past, but, when remembrance relies on imagination to give it meaning, one must be aware of the risks that are involved” (84). Eisenstein looks for clues about her father's past without much speculating and imagining what he came through. She looks for photos, but does not draw him as a Holocaust survivor. She is, however, deeply influenced by his past. Yet it is important to ask: which memories, if he did not speak about

them? From where comes the postmemory of Ben's trauma, transmitted to his daughter? Looking for ways of understanding what happened to him, Eisenstein turns to testimonies in literature and cinema. Hirsch notes that "family life, even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary, shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection by a shared archive of stories" (114). The collective memory and existing testimonies give Eisenstein a basis for her search for understanding. In numerous second generation survivors' narratives there is a need to carry on their parents' legacy. In *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* stories of her father's time in the concentration camp are almost non-existent. In contrast to Spiegelman's *Maus*, there is no detailed narrative of Ben's life in Auschwitz, because Eisenstein's father did not speak about the Holocaust. That is why I argue that their relationship is anchored in the postmemory characterized by van Alphen. He emphasizes that what is crucial in postmemory is based on the second generation's disconnection with their parents' past: "the more children feel disconnected from the past of their survivor parents – the less they are able to understand it – the deeper they feel personally connected to them or the more they need that connection" (van Alphen, 488). Eisenstein's difficult relationship with her father is fueled by the lack of a coherent narrative of his trauma. She focuses on Ben much more than on her mother, who eventually spoke about the Holocaust. Eisenstein in different ways attempts to get closer to her father and his trauma, for example when she shows him *The Book of Alfred Kantor*. Several of her decisions are driven by the need to complete the image of Ben.

Eisenstein creates a clash between text and image in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. On the textual level, her memoir is focused on her father's difficult experience of the Holocaust. However, on the visual level, she is trying to commemorate him as strong and powerful, always drawing him as young and healthy. She incorporates humor to the narrative, but when describing her father, she is almost always serious. On the final pages of her memoir Eisenstein writes:

I had always felt that if I could find my parents' deepest hurt I could locate my own grief, for them. But how could I have ever imagined that everything the Holocaust had voided in their lives could be replaced, as if my need to understand could somehow make up for such sorrow. I will never be able to know the truth of what my parents had experienced. It is beyond my reach, and perhaps even theirs, to know the full extent of their loss. (178)

Ben's untold stories create the basis for the development of Eisenstein's identity. She commits large part of her life to grasp his pain, with the hope that it would be helpful both for her, and him. Hirsch stresses that the children of the Holocaust survivors grow up wanting to help – Eisenstein revises this naïve wish. Her unfeasible quest for a coherent narrative and ultimate truth about her father's experience of the Holocaust is supposed to improve their relationship. She has to accept that it is a futile wish, but in the meantime Eisenstein gains something different – she is able to redefine her needs and explore her relationship with Ben from a new perspective.

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