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Casting a shadow backwards and forwards : the para-Holocaust fiction of Charles Reznikoff, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bernard Malamud

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In my paper, I attempt to contextualize a possible interpretation of Charles Reznikoff's novel *The Lionhearted* (1944) by lining it up with instances of what, for want of a better term, can be called para-Holocaust fiction. The assumption of such a critical perspective follows in the footsteps of Alvin H. Rosenfeld, who in his *A Double Dying. Reflections of Holocaust Literature* (1980) proposes to consider Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Slave* (1962) and Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* (1966) in the same frame of reference as Holocaust fiction *per se*, and who thinks of certain elements of these narratives as literary pre-figurations of the genocide. The violence inflicted on Polish Jews in the aftermath of the Khmelnytsky Uprising in the mid-17th century, and the story of Menachem Mendel Beilis, a Russian Jew accused of ritual murder in 1913 are all literary reconsiderations of authentic, well-documented histories of anti-Semitism. Still, as Rosenfeld argues, their meanings far surpass their historical considerations. But, while Rosenfeld points to Singer's and Malamud's alleged inability to face the subject matter of the Holocaust directly, not even attempting to speculate on possible explanations for this alleged artistic impuissance, he disregards Reznikoff's prose completely, and that is why in my paper I reconsider and briefly analyze *The Lionhearted*, a tale referring to the persecution of the Jews of York in England in the 12th century, to establish whether it is justified to regard it as a double discourse, and, arguably, a preliminary for "direct" writing about the Holocaust. More specifically, I take up Rosenfeld's proposal to see whether in his popular novel Reznikoff really thinks of distant historical events as *analogues* of the on-going extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis.

For Rosenfeld, authors of Holocaust fictional narratives invariably face the conceptual dilemma that is situated beside the division into the traditional and the experimental mode of writing (1980: 62–68). An invented story aspiring to the presentation of facts surpassing fiction is, to a lesser or greater degree, doomed to appear unsatisfactory. The post-Auschwitz awareness of what happened in the 1940s – often acting as a controlling and censoring agency – forms a boundary that seriously cramps endeavors to be "original" and "creative." In his historical review of "popular" Holocaust prose, Rosenfeld identifies two categories of fiction, or, better, two ways of finding a solution to this ethical and aesthetic obstacle. John Hersey's *The Wall* and Leon Uris's *Mila 18*, for example, present themselves to the readers as literary transcripts of facts by means of imagined – i.e. fake – archives. Here, invented documents play the role of credibility boosters in the plot about the Warsaw Ghetto. The second category comprises fictions that deliberately withdraw from dealing with the Holocaust head-on, preferring instead to focus on events from a more distant past as anticipatory to the destruction of European Jewry. The carnage of Jews during the Khmelnytsky Uprising in 17th-century Poland – probably the greatest and most brutal anti-Semitic outburst before the Nazi era – or pogroms in Tsarist Russia may, so the argument goes, serve the purpose well. Rosenfeld strongly asserts, that "all novels about Jewish suffering written in the post-Holocaust period must implicate the Holocaust, whether it is expressly named or not" as it "casts its shadow backwards as well as forwards" (1980: 68). However, such a phenomenology of reading of, for example, Singer's *The Slave* and Malamud's *The Fixer*, done without delving into the circumstances of their inception, provokes at least one serious objection: namely, it is not sufficiently clear whether Rosenfeld discusses the various strategies that writers have adopted over the years to address the Holocaust (i.e. by demonstrating examples of the so-called direct and oblique ways), or whether he is trying to convince us that the Holocaust

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has permanently and inescapably conditioned the ways we read any literature dedicated to Jewish suffering throughout history.

The period that is bracketed by the dates of the publication of the three novels, 1944 and 1966, respectively, was – roughly – the time when the Holocaust was propelled into American consciousness and American culture from “silence to salience” (Mintz, 2001: 2–3). While the reasons for the genocide remaining largely unrecognized and/or being deliberately downplayed as poorly corroborated during the early- and mid-1940s were largely political, after the war the silence shrouding it can be accounted for in various ways¹. To begin with, as Alan Mintz convincingly argues, the unprecedented scale of the catastrophe was overshadowed by the celebration of America and its allies of their victory over the Nazis, and, very soon, by the new sinister challenge that the Soviet Union and its aggressive Communism posed for the West after the war (2001: 5). Secondly, the post war years brought a diametrical volte-face in the perception of Jewish communities within American society. In the 1930s Jews were commonly blamed for having perpetrated the Depression or actively supporting political extremism. The alleged influence they had in the American establishment was judged as dangerously excessive (Quinley, Glock, 1979: 7). Even their material and cultural achievements did not ensure liberation from the notorious discrimination, and often open hostility, that had accompanied them for the nearly three centuries of their presence in the new Promised Land. Private business corporations, law firms and colleges would give preferential treatment to gentiles and refuse to consider Jewish applicants, irrespective of their professional credentials (Shogan, 2010: 6). After 1945 that prejudicial atmosphere seemed to have attenuated significantly, and American Jews were eagerly taking advantage of new possibilities to reenter American society on new terms by taking up courses at prominent universities, or gaining access to the ranks of corporate management or the US army, etc. All this was accompanied by the gradual, and unavoidable, adaptive acculturation or assimilation of some of them into the mainstream of American life – processes that were at odds with the painful remembrance of what happened to European Jewry not so long before:

An acute awareness of the Holocaust was not part of the American Jewish experience during the first two decades after the event because it impeded this process of Americanization in two ways. Like all immigrant groups entering the mainstream, Jews sought to avoid distinctiveness in the public sphere, however much they held onto their own ways privately. Overt identification with the Holocaust and memorialization of its victims would have drawn unwonted notice at a time when Americans were united in their pride over the complete vanquishing of Nazism.

(Mintz, 2001: 6, emphasis mine J.P)

Mintz’s assertion that Jews adopted the strategy of evading “distinctiveness” and “unwonted notice” provides a convincing explanation for the “Holocaust

¹ The problem of the (factual or alleged) “invisibility” of the Holocaust in postwar American Jewish culture is thoroughly discussed and problematized in Hasia R. Diner’s *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962*. New York: New York UP, 2009.

silence” that, from today’s perspective, was conspicuous in America at the time. Once the desired goal had been achieved, i.e. when a substantial number of American Jews could at last think of themselves as Americans, the traumatic past of their ancestors could be encountered and reconsidered publicly. The shift in the status of Jews in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s coincided with at least two important events that pushed the Holocaust to the top of cultural, social and political agenda, transforming the concern of an ethnic-religious minority into an issue of national magnitude: the publication of the English translation of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* in 1952, and the capture and trial of Eichmann in 1960–1961². As we shall see, the notion of Holocaust literature was by no means obvious and easily definable to American readers and critics.

A short review of the critical reception of Singer’s *The Slave* and Malamud’s *The Fixer* demonstrates how debatable or even risky the attempts to universalize the experience of the Holocaust or to approach this event by means of metaphor(s) can be. The first novel, published in 1962, is a quasi-picaresque tale of a Jewish man captured and sold to Polish peasants as a slave. Set in the seventeenth century against the background of the infamous Khmelnytsky massacre, it presents the protagonist’s struggle to maintain his identity in an alien and hostile environment. The historical, aptly reconstructed context to Jacob’s endeavors is, however, sometimes treated as a mere vehicle to “smuggle in” completely different issues. Irving Malin, in his analysis of the language and the imagery employed by Singer, points to the eternal (not historical) dimension of the time envisioned in the narrative – for him everything happens “before or after [the] Holocaust” (1972: 59). Although there is certainly nothing wrong in reading historical novels as expressions of universal truths about the so-called human condition, the temptation to re-categorize literary texts by critics can go too far. This is, perhaps, the case of Lawrence S. Friedman, who proposes a peculiar interpretation of the scene in which the eponymous slave returns to his native village, Josefov. The place is unrecognizable because all the landmarks of Jewish life there – the synagogue, the study house, the ritual bath, etc. – have been completely obliterated. Desperate, Jacob feels that there is “a limit to what the human mind could accept,” the tragedy is “beyond the power of any man to contemplate,” and from now on Poland is perceived as “one vast cemetery” (Singer, 1968: 106–9). Here the scraps of interior monologue convey the state of mind of a traumatized individual, but Friedman, without any reservations, likens Jacob to a Holocaust survivor, and then takes it for granted that the phrases used by Singer in the fragment under consideration are “generally reserved for the Holocaust” (1988: 53). Without a shadow of a doubt, distinct echoes of the destruction of European Jewry can be heard in the oeuvre of the author of *The Slave*: in numerous short stories (e.g. “Blood,” or “The Gentleman from Cracow”) or in the novel *Enemies*, which treats directly of Nazi victims and survivors, and therefore the claim that “[un]like his American Jewish counterparts” Singer was virtually “condemned ... to confront the Holocaust endlessly” (Friedman, 1988: 148) seems a reductive and simplifying critical gesture.

In 1966, over twenty years after the Holocaust, the following anti-Semitic speech that Bernard Malamud has a Russian boatman deliver in the presence of Yakov Bok, the protagonist of *The Fixer*, hints at something more than the mere history of pogroms in Tsarist Russia:

2 For further details see: Mintz, 2001: 9–12.

... God save us all from the bloody Jews ... those long-nosed, pock-marked, cheating, bloodsucking parasites. They'd rob us of daylight if they could. They foul up earth and air with their body stink and garlic breath, and Russia will be done to death by the diseases they spread unless we make an end to it. (1987: 28, emphasis mine J.P.)

... Day after day they crap up the Motherland ... and the only way to save ourselves is to wipe them out. I don't mean kill a Zhid now and then with a blow of the fist or kick in the head, but wipe them all out, which we've sometimes tried but never done as it should be done. I say we ought to call our menfolk together, armed with guns, knives, pitchforks, clubs—anything that will kill a Jew—and when the church bells begin to ring we move on the Zhidy quarter, which you can tell by the stink, routing them out wherever they're hiding—in attics, cellars, or ratholes—bashing in their brains, stabbing their herring-filled guts, shooting off their snotty noses, no exception made for young or old, because if you spare any they breed like rats and then the job's to do all over again. (1987: 28–29, emphasis mine J.P.)

And then when we've slaughtered the whole cursed tribe of them—and the same is done in every province throughout Russia, wherever we can smoke them out—though we've got most of them nice and bunched up in the Pale—we'll pile up the corpses and soak them with benzene and light fires that people will enjoy all over the world. Then when that's done we hose the stinking ashes away and divide the roubles and jewels and silver and furs and all the other loot they stole ... (1987: 29, emphasis mine J.P.)

The boatman's speech is informed by Nazi-like rhetoric, and the phrases he intersperses it with point to a global picture of the 1940s mass-murder: from vicious propaganda labelling Jews as rats or parasites, to the carefully planned annihilation (burning corpses of the killed) and the utilization of Jewish property. Such a speech could easily have won publishing space in *Der Stürmer*, or have been taken as a background voice of Fritz Hippler's film *Der Ewige Jude*.

In his analysis of *The Fixer*, Robert Alter builds his argument on the assumption that Malamud's prose presents Jewishness as an ethical paradigm, and that the characters that he creates are "more metaphoric than literal" (1969: 121). Inviting a comparison of the novel with Kafka's *The Trial*, Alter argues that the authentic Beilis case, on which the story of the unfortunate fixer draws, was one of the first distinct examples of a historical fact that approximated the arbitrary arraignment of the fictional Joseph K. However, the universal dimension of the text, i.e. its presentation of imprisonment as the "central metaphor for Jewishness" (1969: 120), does not exclude the possibility of reading it as a double, or even triple historical referent:

One often feels in *The Fixer* that for Malamud 1911 is 1943 in small compass and sharp focus, and 1966 writ large.³ The Beilis case gives him, to begin with, a way of approaching the European Holocaust on a scale that is imaginable, susceptible to fictional representation. (1969: 125)

This, in turn, implies that the controversy surrounding the accusation of a Russian Jew of ritual murder in Kiev, and the anti-Semitic policies prevailing in the Russian Empire at the time, contained within themselves a portent of doom that hit European Jewry some thirty years later. Even if the diagnosis of the origins of the “cultural sickness” that was to assume the scale of the “Nazi madness” (Alter, 1969: 125) can easily be accepted, it is interesting to note that Alter, for reasons not clearly stated, thinks of such a representation of the Holocaust as “imaginable.” One may ask whether this means that any direct treatment of the event would be *unimaginable* and *not* susceptible to fictional representation, or whether this does not downplay the novel’s proximity to the *proper* historical context it grows out of. After all, in 1966, when *The Fixer* was published, a significant body of various historical documentation concerning the Shoah had already been widely available.

Exploring the aforementioned dilemma, Michael Brown follows an analogical way of interpreting Malamud’s prose. Referring to the traditional Jewish distrust towards artistic forms of representation (but irrespective of the parallel and equally strong attachment to the written word), the author of “Metaphor for Holocaust and Holocaust as Metaphor: *The Assistant* and *The Fixer* of Bernard Malamud Reexamined” points to the well-known aura of sacredness surrounding Holocaust victims and survivors, which – logically – elevates the genocide to the status of an event that defies full understanding. Arguably, however, the professed singularity of such a shattering experience may, in turn, lead to its slide into “limited [cultural] significance” (1980: 481). Therefore, as Brown asserts, the mediation of artistic representation appears a convenient tool in the process of universalizing the Holocaust so as to make it more accessible. Inevitably, here one may have the impression that the equality sign is placed between the Tsarist prisons and the Nazi camps, or between the establishment of the Pale of Settlement in Imperial Russia and the Nazi policy of ghettoizing Jews in the conquered states. The connection between Beilis/Bok suffering and the mass murder of European Jewry is even extrapolated as symbolic of the plight of African Americans in the United States (1980: 485). All these historical occurrences are perceived as symbols of “the dangers posed by the modern world to any person who would be different” (1980: 487).

Considering *The Fixer* (and also the earlier novel *The Assistant*) in the context of alleged Holocaust references, Lawrence L. Langer points to the fact that the major parameter (or index) of Jewish themes in Malamud’s fiction is an attempt to demonstrate that regardless of the predicament they find themselves in, Jews “retain the gift of suffering, and this keeps their minimal existences from dissolving into despair” (1987: 116); and if any pigeonholing for the novels is required, they should be seen as part of the tradition of literature that is preoccupied with suffering as an agency capable of empowering man’s ethical and spiritual urges (e.g. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn), rather

3 The essay was written in 1966 and three years later became part of the volume *After the Tradition. Essays on Modern Jewish Writing*, from which I quote.

than (para-)Holocaust fiction. Malamud's literary universes, so the argument goes, are simply incommensurate with the "premises on which the Holocaust universes are built" (1987: 117). Accordingly, Langer's critique of Alter's and Brown's interpretive extravaganzas consists in highlighting these moments in the narratives where the discrepancy is most distinct. It is, I think, advisable to briefly recall at least some of them here as they can be easily applicable to any endeavors to situate Singer's and Malamud's (and later Reznikoff's) novels within analogical, indefensible interpretive frameworks.

To begin with, in *The Fixer*, despite the bleak circumstances of his life, the protagonist remains adamantly *human* – full of inner strength and moral discipline, bearing with dignity the hostilities he faces. And these qualities, as Malamud seems to imply, are sometimes transferable to his oppressors (e.g. one of his jailors). Therefore, drawing an easy parallel between the world of anti-Semitic Russia, where personal suffering still retains "an exemplary as well as personal value" (Langer, 1987: 116) and, say, the world of death camps, i.e. the space of an ultimate de-valuing of the human, is a serious critical malpractice. The experience of hunger and starvation, which gets prominence in numerous moments of the story about Bok, can be yet another instance of an irresponsible confusion of terms in the case when they are applied to radically different historical contexts. Suspecting an intention to poison him in jail, the fixer refuses to eat, but the problem is soon solved by the permission to have his meals examined in the kitchen. No analogical options were available or even conceivable in Nazi prisons, camps or ghettos, where starvation was the staple element of the oppressor's policy. "To convert the focus or the scope of suffering in a Tsarist prison ... into [the] metaphor of the Jewish experience of atrocity in the concentration camp is to abuse [this] metaphor ..." (Langer, 1987: 122). Arguably, the Holocaust thus – irresponsibly – metaphorized is as manageable and universalist as it is falsified in its historical veracity.

Asked in 1983 to what extent the Holocaust had an impact on his fiction, and whether he felt an inner urge to address the problem directly in a literary form, Malamud was more than laconic: "I am compelled to think about it as a man rather than a writer. Someone like Elie Wiesel who had a first-hand knowledge of the experience is in a better position to write about it than I. He has become a voice for those people who could not communicate their personal experiences and emotions" (Lasher, 1991: 129). In fact, as a writer in whose works the theme of the miserable Jewish lot features so prominently, Malamud was interested in the catastrophe of European Jewry only peripherally, touching upon the subject matter in three short stories from the volume *The Magic Barrel* ("The Loan," "The Lady of the Lake," and "The Last Mohican"). Not being a witness himself, he was aware of his limitations if he ever tried to translate the atrocious experience into a literary text. However,

Malamud critics like Michael Brown, ... noting accurately Malamud's desire to portray men in circumstances allowing them to achieve their potential humanity to the full, extend Malamud's limited ambitions toward the Holocaust beyond verifiable frontiers, ones certainly unverifiable in Malamud's fiction... (Langer, 1987: 124)

Taking issue with Alter and Brown, Langer, himself a Holocaust analyst, assumes a radical position on two counts: the literary and the historical, and his contention about the doubtful legitimacy of reading *The Fixer* as Holocaust

discourse exemplifies the problem of a much wider scope. There can be distinguished two major heuristic models of evaluating cultural responses to the Holocaust: the exceptionalist and the constructivist⁴. The first one sees in the catastrophe a paradigm-shattering event that irreparably tore history into “before” and “after.” In the times of “after” both the present and the past are (inescapably) viewed “through a profoundly altered lens” (Mintz, 2001: 36), and the Nazi project to annihilate all European Jewry in a factory-like manner defies the notions of uniqueness, comparison or analogy. As a consequence, the only acceptable cultural responses to it are those aesthetically unadorned, historically verified and devoid of “cheap” comfort or uplifting hope. The second model emphasizes the fact that irrespective of the Holocaust’s pivotal character, it is, whether we like it or not, doomed to be considered and understood through already existing (and ever changing) categories. The atrocity can gain currency only at the cost of being appropriated and (ab)used by the given culture, and the forms of its representation are as revealing about the event being represented as they are about the community within which the representation is done.

The Lionhearted, Charles Reznikoff’s long forgotten novel of 1944 (not republished since) could also, theoretically, be classified along with *The Slave* and *The Fixer* as obliquely referring to the Holocaust – in this particular case under the mask of a historical narrative about the plight of Jews in the years 1189 and 1190 in England. The dramatic events that Reznikoff evokes in his text appear to be diligently and faithfully drawn from historical data available at the time he was writing the novel – the background to the main storyline does not divert from the one given in Cecil Roth’s seminal study *A History of the Jews in England*, first published in 1941⁵. The American novelist takes the reader to the time after the death of king Henry II, a proponent of the idea to cleanse the Holy Land of infidels. The news of the planned crusade is announced in an atmosphere of religious reawakening, and the conviction that the whole enterprise ought to be sponsored by Jewish money gains wide support. The vow of the late king is sustained by his son and successor, Richard the Lionheart, whose coronation ceremony in September 1189 is disturbed by a scandal that, in consequence, leads to anti-Semitic riots and mass killings. Cherishing the hope of receiving a charter of privileges analogical to the one granted to them by previous monarchs (for example by Henry I), a delegation of notable English Jews with presents and offerings appears in front of Westminster Hall to pay homage. Obeying the strict rule that no female and no Jew is allowed entrance to the ceremony, the guard at the door reacts immediately and with excessive violence. This unfortunate occurrence galvanizes the crowd gathered outside. Some members of the Jewish deputation are killed on the spot, some of them are forced to convert to Christianity and instantaneously baptized in a church nearby. When the tidings of the Westminster pogrom reach London, they are already embellished by the alleged information about Richard the Lionheart’s order to exterminate all the Jews. The most dramatic and best documented episode in the whole story takes place in York. Seeking

4 Mintz, who proposes the terms, is perfectly aware of the intellectual risk connected with the use of such binary differentiation (2001: 38). Nevertheless, taking into consideration the Holocaust criticism that has been written so far, the terms still seem valid and illustrative. See: *Popular Culture and the Shaping of...* pp. 38–84.

5 I use a PDF copy of the 1942 reprint that does not have pagination. A detailed description of the 1189–1190 massacres can be found in the second chapter of the book, “The Beginning of Persecution and the Organization of Jewry, 1189–1216.”

refuge from an infuriated mob, a group of about one hundred and fifty Jews lock themselves in Clifford's Tower. The local English noblemen who happen to be under financial obligation to some of the absconders behind the walls decide to take advantage of the situation and toss their debts by eliminating the creditors. Indeed, the very next day all the Jews are dead – some of them fall under the blows of the townsmen, some choose to take their own lives.

Putting aside the intricacies of the storyline in *The Lionhearted* as not essential for the purposes of the present paper (Reznikoff, in fact, mainly dramatizes the events highlighted by Cecil Roth), there remains the question of the novel's categorization. If we agree that it can be treated as an oblique Holocaust literary discourse, as Rosenfeld would probably have done, we need to remember the fact that contrary to *The Slave* or *The Fixer*, *The Lionhearted* was composed at the time the tragedy of European Jews was an ongoing event. Its critical reception is, today, rather difficult to find, but upon its publication the novel about the Jews in Medieval England received few, largely negative reviews. The most representative came from Milton Hindus, who did not hide his dissatisfaction with the quality of the prose:

Reznikoff's book is the worst tradition of historical fiction in the sense that the characters are pasteboard creations serving merely as vehicles for the author's ideas. I liked Reznikoff's frankly partisan tone, but I failed to see his purpose in spinning a story so thin that he himself gives it up before the end of the book and turns to straight historical narrative. Had he done so from the very beginning, his book would have been much stronger. (1994: 253–4)

We can, however, venture the opinion that the unbearably “pasteboard creations” that Reznikoff offered in the narrative were his deliberate choice, or, better, part of his plan to produce a consciously popular narrative (with bait in the form of a love affair interwoven into the plot) that would attract a comparatively wide readership and try to make the problem of anti-Semitism common currency in America. At the same time, Reznikoff, also a historian, must have felt the insufficiency of available data to confront the problem that, in all probability, he *might* have wanted to confront in his writing, i.e. the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. The only reasonable justification for such a presupposition could come from the fact that he subtly peppers his English story with occasional references to the contemporary situation in Europe:

As David came near, he saw the crowd gaping in the narrow street. Among them were a dozen sailors of the German ship at anchor in the harbor. ... [T]he Germans stared at him. The small grey eyes of one big fellow, head and shoulders above the others, were glaring in the fat round face as if in another moment he would fling himself at David with a howl. David knew well enough what the Germans ... had been doing to the Jews who had been living among them at peace for a thousand years, the long list of Jewries sacked and of the many thousands butchered. (1944: 25, emphasis mine J.P.)

Benedict saw... that to leave the door of the palace was to walk into a furnace in which not even their bones would be found.” (1944: 91, emphasis mine J.P.)

A fire of old bones and sticks; maybe a handful of leaves. But when the bones are the bones of Jews ... out of the fire pops a gold coin like this!” (1944: 155, emphasis mine, J.P.)

The list of significant key words or images is not limited to Germans, furnace, or burning bones, but also includes, for example, the wall and lice, that — meaningfully — the narrative is interspersed with.

To what extent was Reznikoff aware of what was happening in Europe while he was working on his allegedly historical novel? The first American report on the organized extermination of European Jewry appeared in 1942, in the November issue of the *Jewish Frontier*, co-edited by Hayim Greenberg and Reznikoff’s wife, Marie Syrkin. The history behind the publication of this laconic and short text is illustrative of how inconceivable the whole idea of the Final Solution at first seemed, even despite the fact that since 1933 regular coverage of the conditions in which German Jews found themselves under the Nazi regime had been provided by the American Jewish press. As early as in August 1942 key Jewish journalists were invited to a meeting at which they were presented with the content of a cable sent by a representative of the World Jewish Congress to Rabbi Stephen Wise. Initially, the information about Hitler’s definite plan to annihilate European Jews was received with reserve; a few months later, however, Syrkin, having sufficient confirmation for the appalling news, produced the now famous editorial that implied the unprecedented character of the Holocaust:

In the occupied countries of Europe, a policy is now being put into effect whose avowed object is the extermination of a whole people. It is a policy of systematic murder of innocent civilians which in its ferocity, its dimensions and its organization is unique in the history of mankind... (quoted in Kessner, 2005: 56–57)

Interestingly, a bit earlier, in the summer and fall of 1942, information about the Holocaust had been blocked from being spread not only by the US State Department but by Rabbi Wise himself. Before it reached America, the news had been passed on several times⁶. It was Edward Schulte, a businessman from Breslau, who was the first noted element of the “divulge chain.” Schulte was apparently unaware of the fact that in the spring of 1940 Himmler had ordered the setting up of a concentration camp in the vicinity of Oświęcim, which soon, as Auschwitz, became a death factory meant to ultimately respond to the *Judenfrage*. Neither did he know about the existence of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the special SS squads responsible for the systematic killing of the inhabitants of the Jewish *shtetls* after the Third Reich invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Having well-established contacts with the Nazi party, the businessman may, however, have found out about the conclusions drawn at the Wannsee Conference held in Berlin in January 1942, during which the plan for the Final

6 For detailed discussion of the whole affair see: Robert Shogan’s *Prelude...* pp. 166–194.

Solution was put forward and its logistics thoroughly discussed. Schulte revealed what he knew to Isidor Koppelman, a Jewish entrepreneur with a Swiss passport, who immediately turned to Gerhard Riegner, the Swiss representative of the World Jewish Congress. Riegner decided that the information of the planned mass murder (none of the informants knew that the extermination squads had already started their deadly mission) should be delivered as a cable message to the very head of the World Jewish Congress. The US Consulate in Geneva was very skeptical about the content of the cable and, instead sending it to Wise, sent it to the State Department in Washington with an attached covering letter, in which the correctness of Riegner's warning was seriously put into doubt⁷. As a result of all that bureaucratic mistrust, the news was not transmitted to the addressee at all. Anticipating endless postponements, Riegner tried an alternative channel of communication and contacted the British representative of the Jewish World Congress, Sidney Silverman. The British Foreign Office in Geneva, which he visited, turned out to be the right choice – on 28 August 1942 Wise received the message⁸. Still, on the other side of the Atlantic the odd informational meandering continued.

As Robert Shogan remarks, the cable on the mass murder reached the person whose significance on the American political scene could not be overvalued: “[b]ecause of his role as the nation’s preeminent Jewish leader, he [i.e. Wise] served in effect as the president’s rabbi, continually validating FDR’s bone fides with the Jewish community, whether Roosevelt responded to them or not” (2010: 171). Acting on the advice of Undersecretary of State Summer Welles, Wise decided to keep the information to himself until the State Department was able to confirm its accuracy. He did so despite the fact that at about the same time he was informed about some inconceivable atrocities perpetrated in the Warsaw ghetto⁹. The facts were not revealed to the American press for almost three months. When in late November 1942, having been given official permission from Welles, Wise invited journalists for a conference to announce the information, their response was ambivalent and full of reserve, almost verging on indifference. Most newspapers did not put the story on their front pages. *The New York Times*’ now infamous five-paragraph note, “Wise Gets Confirmations. Checks with State Department on Nazi’s Extermination” was printed on page ten. Tributes to the Holocaust victims were paid in the US as early as in 1942. In the first one, on December 2, approximately five hundred Jewish workers from New York City agreed on a ten-minute cessation of work, lamenting the fate of those who had already perished and highlighting their concern for their European coreligionists, who felt abandoned by the Allies (Young, 1999: 69).

Although there is no definite proof of it in his published correspondence, Reznikoff in the 1940s must have been well aware of what was happening in Europe. And certainly, as a New Yorker, he could not have overlooked the famous pageantries that American Jewish communities organized at the time when the first signals of the mass murders that were taking place in Eastern

7 For the content of both documents see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/newsusdept.html>

8 For the content of the cablegram see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/newscable.html>

9 “The other day ... something came to me that has left me without sleep. One hundred thousand Jews within the Warsaw ghetto have been massacred by the Nazis and their corpses have been used to make soaps and fertilizers. I am almost demented over my people’s grief” (quoted in Shogan, 2010: 191).

Europe became common knowledge. Historical pageantry – a dramatic public ritual staged so as to represent and, even more importantly, to shape the given community’s notion of the past and the present – played a short-lasting yet significant role in twentieth century American culture, its popularity reaching the proportions of a craze, and then being followed by a rather abrupt decline¹⁰. The idea behind such a spectacle “invested with a civic purpose” (Whitfield, 1996: 221) was inextricably connected with the demand for public historical imagery, which, as it was believed, could influence the ways members of communities defined and communicated their sense of identity. As Glassberg argues, by acknowledging minority groups and their individual histories, public historical imagery provided a context for understanding the fact that the social status of the given group was not something to be taken at its face value (1990: 1). Therefore, the rhetorical potential hidden in historical imagery generated and disseminated by means of historical pageantry offered the possibility to turn a preferred perspective on history into a dominant, or remunerative one. Accordingly, American Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s made use of the American tradition of historical pageantry as a means to express their sense of vulnerability and despair, and to effect change in the national and international attitudes towards the persecutions and atrocities taking place in Eastern Europe.

The Eternal Road (1937) and *We Will Never Die* (1943) were two notable spectacles that blended art and propaganda in order to convey the exceptional dimension of Jewish fate. As political gestures, they were motivated by the rise of Nazism and the first tidings of the Holocaust. The second one, written by Ben Hecht and accompanied by Kurt Weill’s music, was conceived as a “Memorial to the Two Million Jewish Dead of Europe” (Whitfield, 1996: 238) and attracted about forty thousand people during two performances at Madison Square Garden on March 9, 1943, as well as countless listeners to the radio broadcast. Despite its ambitious objective, however, the project did not manage to stimulate the desired change in us international policy. The White House, asked to send a supportive statement, was unwilling to react. Initially, acting on the advice of the Office of War Information, Roosevelt’s administration prepared a somewhat bizarre condemnation of the Nazi regime – without mentioning Jews and their extermination at all – but the document was not issued officially. As is clear from today’s perspective, a condemnation of the mass murder would then be tantamount to admitting that nothing was being done by the American authorities to protect European Jewry (Whitfield, 1996: 239).

Taking into account the above-mentioned contexts, *The Lionhearted* should not, I argue, be classified anywhere near Holocaust literature. Instead, it may be seen as a manifestation of Reznikoff’s well-known passion for Jewish history combined with his fascination with the so-called limit experience (i.e. the experience that, by its atrocity and extreme character, situates itself on the threshold of representation – one that can hardly be conveyed in language, e.g. physical and mental suffering, humiliation, trauma, death, mass-murder). Still, his sentimental, oftentimes poorly executed novel foreshadows his huge life-long project of testimonies illustrating the criminal history of the us and the Holocaust, drawn on the basis of authentic court material¹¹. Part

10 For a detailed discussion of the problem see: David Glassberg’s *American Historical Pageantry. The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*, 1990.

11 See: Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony: The United States 1885–1915. Recitative*. Vol I and II (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978) and *Holocaust* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2010).

of the history of the British Jews in the Middle Ages as presented in *The Lionhearted* unveils a story of violence and contempt towards the Other in a foreign environment. Read from today's perspective, it may be interpreted as a modest (it did not resonate within the community of American Jews in New York or elsewhere) sign of solidarity and sympathy with European Jewry, who in 1943/44 were experiencing a tragedy the scale of which was hardly conceivable on the other side of the Atlantic. The idea to tell the story of the predicament of the Diasporic Jews in a distant past in the form of a popular novel with a love story embedded in it could have been fueled by the author's desire to reach the widest possible circle of readers. Its subject matter and commercial intent situate it very close to such Jewish American projects as the pageant *We Will Never Die*.

Admittedly, the contention on the possible but at the same time justifiable ways of interpreting such literary texts as the ones produced by Reznikoff, Singer and Malamud signals a debate of a much wider scope, which, within the field of literary studies, embraces a definition of Holocaust literature that can be agreed on, and, at a more abstract, philosophical level, hints at the problem of historical determinism. Obviously, both the exceptionalist and the constructivist models compete for different conceptions of the literary canon. Accordingly, one can subscribe to the conviction that the Holocaust has had a paradigm-shattering quality, and therefore should stand alone as not related (in terms of distinct analogies) to the substance of Jewish history before and after WW II, or rather recognize the event as *not* a separate entity but one instance of various forms of oppression that afflicted Jews throughout the centuries. The first stance is best exemplified by Lawrence L. Langer's seminal anthology *Art from the Ashes*, where the core meaning of the Holocaust is hidden in everything that is remembered by witnesses and survivors. For Langer, it is as if the unprecedented character of the event emerges from all the works of literature that aim to represent the Holocaust directly, their references to preexistent literary conventions or *topoi* having no or little value. The literature of ghettos and concentration camps is informed by its own poetics, should be studied on its own terms, and the benchmark for critically assessing the refractions of the Holocaust in popular culture must be their faithfulness to established historical facts. No wonder then that Langer so passionately (and harshly) examines the distortions in the American (mis)appropriations of the event in the discourses that allegedly refer to it. The constructivist model, on the other hand, allows for the historicization of the Holocaust, i.e. for the process of contextualization and comparison, seeing it against the backdrop of other instances of mass murder. More inclusive and less ideologically dogmatic as it appears to be, the constructivist perspective sometimes undermines the singularity of the destruction of European Jewry, which may lead to its relativization. It is also responsible for highly controversial attempts at identifying what I call para-Holocaust literature. Although detailed analysis of such quaint interpretations cannot be accommodated within the compass of the present paper, I will limit myself to listing the most telling examples. Probably the first seriously recognized "prophecy of a coming genocide" is found – in retrospective, of course – in the short story "The Death of Eleazer," published by Ben Hecht in the 1939 volume *A Book of Miracles* (MacAdams, 1990: 222). Theodor W. Adorno sees in Kafka, notably in "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony," some ancestral relation to Holocaust literature, and the behavior of the officials from *The Castle* reminds him of fascism (1981:

251–254). For Gillian Banner, the works of the Polish prose writer Bruno Schulz – all of them composed and published before WWII – are “one of the cornerstones of the Holocaust canon” (2000: 3). Locating the author of *Cinnamon Shops* (1934) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937) in a meaningful triad with Primo Levi and Art Spiegelman, she embarks on a truly embarrassing interpretive journey, during which she does her best to present conclusive evidence that Schulz’s writings abound in inklings of the catastrophe (death camps included). By the same token, Daniel R. Schwarz reads some of Schulz’s short stories as allegedly informed by “a strange prolepsis of the Holocaust” (2000: 329). Last but not least, it is important to mention Anne Frank’s *Diary*, a book that is, as Langer remarks, “a victim of one of the worst features of American culture” (Langer, 2006: 21) because for years it has been endowed with the aura of Holocaust testimony, which, in fact, it is not.

Finally, if we accepted the suggestion that *The Fixer*, *The Slave*, and *The Lionhearted* are Holocaust or para-Holocaust novels, this would at most uncover the proverbial American tendency (so omnipresent in American popular culture) not to abide the atrocity without hinting at some forms of amelioration or redemption, and certainly – oversimplification of the problem at hand. The three novels, in fact, are redemptive narratives, and the Holocaust they represent (if they do it at all) is seriously refashioned. After all, as is well known from history, the Holocaust brought a flood of meaningless death and the defeat of any hope.

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