

*“As they were ghosts in history, you’re  
a ghost in your own safe little  
suburban bedroom with  
cowboy lampshades.”*

*—Melvin Jules Bukiet*

# TRANS-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA: *The Zone of Indistinction After Mauschwitz*

REBECCA KRAUS

GIORGIO AGAMBEN TALKS ABOUT THE CONCENTRATION CAMP AS A ZONE OF INDISTINCTION WHERE THE EXCEPTION WAS THE RULE, THE ILLICIT LICIT, AND THE EXTREME NORMALIZED. THIS PAPER SEEKS TO EXTEND AGAMBEN'S THEORY TO UNDERSTAND THE TRAUMA OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP. IF THE REAL HORROR OF THE CAMP WAS INDEED THIS ZONE OF INDISTINCTION, THEN CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE TRAUMA AS THE CONTINUED EXPERIENCE OF THE TRACES OF THIS ZONE OF INDISTINCTION? WHILE THE SURVIVORS WERE IN THE CAMPS, IT WAS A BARBARIC WORLD BUILT ON NORMALITY; IN THEIR LATER LIVES, IT WAS A NORMAL WORLD LACED WITH TRACES OF BARBARISM. ABRAHAM AND TOROK'S THEORY OF THE PHANTOM IS APPLIED TO DISCUSS HOW THIS TRAUMA OF INDISTINCTION IS TRANSFERRED TO THE CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS. FINALLY, ART SPIEGELMAN'S MAUS AND MELVIN JULES BUKIET'S AFTER ARE EXAMINED THROUGH THE LENS OF THESE COMBINED THEORIES TO DISCUSS THE FORM OF SECOND GENERATION HOLOCAUST LITERATURE IN RELATION TO THE TRANS-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA EXPERIENCED BY ITS AUTHORS.

## INTRODUCTION

*Everything they undertake, everything they build has a secret tie to the unnamable experience of their parents. The 'children of Job' will never detach themselves from the tragedy that gave birth to them.*<sup>i</sup>

—Elie Wiesel

“It was nothing like that.” Each word punctures the airwaves of NPR’s *Morning Edition*,<sup>ii</sup> saturated with restrained rage. The topic of discussion is Roberto Benigni’s film, *Life is Beautiful*, and Melvin Jules Bukiet, along with Art Spiegelman—both children of survivors and well-known authors of Holocaust literature—are nothing short of appalled by it. Bukiet expresses: “There was no fear. There was no terror. There was no despair. The clothes were not dirty, on the simplest and most physical level. There was no pandemonium as they exit the trains.” Both Bukiet and Spiegelman make a point of separating their own artistic attempts to represent the Holocaust from Benigni’s. Bukiet, author of the comic novel, *After*, comments: “Humor is *a priori*, no worse or more doomed a mode for portraying the Holocaust than saccharine tragedy is a formula for succeeding at portraying it. I would say that humor is maybe riskier and, therefore, can, *if it’s evil enough a humor*, probably convey that truth better.”<sup>iii</sup> Rather, Bukiet feels that the humor he uses in *After* is appropriate to the subject matter. Likewise, Spiegelman also defends his portrayal of the Holocaust in his comic book *Maus*: “I think I took it personally that I’d heard that Benigni was inspired by *Maus*. It seemed that there’s a kind of zeitgeist shift, let’s say, that *Life is Beautiful* is the clearest demonstration of, into using the Holocaust with impunity as a metaphor...And I see *Maus* as really something else, as using metaphors really to try to approach the actualities.”<sup>iv</sup>

In addition to the general questions raised in this program about Holocaust representation, the responses of these two authors evoke questions specific to the second generation: Why are these children of survivors so extremely bothered by the portrayal of the Holocaust in *Life is Beautiful*? What

unites their work as being an acceptable form of representation?

The same NPR program features Prof. Omer Bartov, a historian at Brown University<sup>v</sup> whose specialty is the German army on the Eastern front; he provides the other side of the argument: “[Benigni] tries to save some flicker of humanity . . . that is obviously so completely lacking in [the Holocaust] that if you look at it directly, you’re not only faced with the impossibility of representing it, but also with the impossibility of contemplating life after it. And yet life has continued. You have to somehow come to terms with the fact that there was life in the Holocaust and there was hope in it.”<sup>vi</sup> This does more than explain the value of Benigni’s film; it provides a key to understanding why Spiegelman and Bukiet are so adamantly against it. These children of survivors are first-hand witnesses to the fact that life has continued, but at the same time, intimately familiar with the tension of the necessity and impossibility<sup>vii</sup> both of representing the Holocaust and of contemplating life after it. Bartov is right; we do have to “come to terms with the fact that there was life in the Holocaust and there was hope in it,” but this was a life that was oftentimes indistinguishable from death, it was a hope that was often blurred with despair. The only way to truly come to terms with this is to acknowledge this tension.

“. . . the blurring of the everyday and the barbaric that occurred in the camp, for survivors and their families, did not end with liberation.”

Indeed, second generation testimonies are testimonies not to the fact that life did not occur in the camps or that it did not continue after, but that the blurring of the everyday and the barbaric that occurred in the camp, for survivors and their families, did not end with liberation.

In this paper I will use Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory about trans-generational trauma and Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the concentration camp to try to understand the nature of Holocaust identity in children of survivors and how this influences what they deem an acceptable representation of the Holocaust. Abraham and Torok present the idea that a person can be haunted by a traumatic event that occurred in his or her family and explain that this trauma is unconsciously transferred to the child through the gaps in his or her knowledge. This applies particularly well to children of Holocaust survivors: despite their disparate upbringings, they all say that they always knew that something was different in their family. I will combine this theory with what Agamben deems a "zone of indistinction": a place where the exception is the rule, the licit elicit, and the barbaric normalized. He talks about the concentration camp as a zone of indistinction, and I will argue that this is precisely the phantom that haunts the second generation. In order to reduce this phantom, one must exorcize it in words, but due to the sensitivity of the subject and to the fact that it is the secret of another, this must be done in an acceptable form. For children of Holocaust survivors, the acceptable terms are those that acknowledge this phantom; these works of literature insist on showing their readers the haunting zone of indistinction, where barbarity invades the everyday.

#### ABRAHAM AND TOROK'S PHANTOM

*His testimony was merely secondhand. Yet the staggering reality of cattle cars, the gas chambers, and the crematoria did not feel remote to him, either, even though half a century of years and an ocean of water separated him from the actual crime. But crimes don't just end with immediate injuries. The mind, alas, does not allow for that. And this was a special crime. The dreams of his parents—actually, their nightmares—kept it all alive . . . The*

*Holocaust shaped those who were survivors of survivors. Inexorably, cruelly, and unfairly so. The choices and compromises made, the relationships cultivated and broken, the psychic demons and grotesque muses that mockingly interfered with everyday life.*<sup>viii</sup>

—Thane Rosenbaum

Nadine Fresco comments that "the artistic works of this [second] generation bear presence of an absence."<sup>ix</sup> Rather, the generation is defined by the things missing, such as, grandparents, knowledge of family history, and sense of safety. This, coupled with the reluctance of many survivors to tell their stories, can create a void in familial identity; indeed, the Holocaust takes on a nearly mythical quality, for it is the unspoken presence that underlies every family interaction. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, French psychoanalytic theorists Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok suggest that in some cases people are haunted by a phantom; however, "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others."<sup>x</sup> A family's silences are transferred to the children. Although the psychoanalysts do not mention children of Holocaust survivors as examples, this explanation resonates particularly well with their situation. Helen Epstein, one of the first second-generation authors to write about her experience, describes this phantom as being within an "iron box" which resides inside her:

*For years it lay in an iron box, buried so deep inside me that I was never sure just what it was. I knew I carried slippery, combustible things more secret than sex and more dangerous than any shadow or ghost. Ghosts had shape and name. What lay inside my iron box had none.*<sup>xi</sup>

Epstein's description fits perfectly into Abraham and Torok's model of the phantom as "gaps left within us by the secrets of others."

Psychologist and second-generation survivor Aaron Hass notes that "the second generation exhibited a need to identify with their parents' suffering in order to understand more fully and feel closer to them."<sup>xii</sup> This tendency is

again Abraham and Torok's phantom, which is characterized as "a formation in the dynamic unconscious that is found there not because of the subject's own repression but on account of a direct empathy with the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a parental object."<sup>xiii</sup> Yet this phantom is especially problematic because "the gaps and impediment in our communication with the love object create a two-fold and contrary effect: the prohibition of knowledge coupled with an unconscious investigation."<sup>xiv</sup> A common trend in the second generation is the desire to know more about their parents' past, but a reluctance to ask, to reopen their wounds. One study notes, "Subjects indicated that their present motivation to ask their parents questions involved a desire to understand better their own identity through understanding the forces that had affected their parents, and, indirectly, themselves."<sup>xv</sup> However, "[a]ll subjects expressed some degree of reticence about approaching their parents with questions about the concentration camp experience."<sup>xvi</sup> The children have a need to investigate this haunting phantom, but sense that this secret will only cause their parents more pain, and so they retreat to their imagination in order to identify with their suffering. Yet the "questions designed to satisfy these needs often had to await the mastery of unpleasant feelings associated with their parents' past experience and present behavior."<sup>xvii</sup> Moreover, these "unpleasant feelings" could not be expressed to the parents who "had an exaggerated need to perceive their children as happy and problem-free so that they could serve as the requisite compensatory symbol for all that was lost."<sup>xviii</sup> Therefore, no part of this search for the phantom could be verbalized: it would hurt their parents too much.

Children of Holocaust survivors all say that they always knew, either that their parents were survivors, or at least that there was some sort of secret, something different. This is corroborated by Robert M. Prince's psychological study of the second generation, as well as Hass' similar finding, that despite "the fact that most children of survivors were not well acquainted with their parents' lives during the Holocaust, all had a sense of being aware, from

a very early age, that they were, indeed, children of survivors"<sup>xix</sup> Beneath this instinct is Abraham and Torok's observation that the "phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never become conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined – from the parent's unconscious into the child's."<sup>xx</sup> Epstein reinforces their theory with her experience: "All the children of survivors I spoke with said they had absorbed their parents' attitudes towards Germany and the Holocaust experience through a kind of wordless osmosis. They had not been explicitly instructed to feel one way or another. Rather, they had picked up on cues, attitudes, desires that had never been expressed in words."<sup>xxi</sup>

Abraham and Torok go on to explain that "the shameful [and painful] and therefore concealed secret always does return to haunt. To exorcise it one must express it in words. But how are we to accomplish this when the phantoms inhabiting our minds do so without our knowledge, embodying the unspeakable secret of...an other?"<sup>xxii</sup> Again, they are echoed by Epstein: "Whatever lived inside me was so potent that words crumbled before they could describe."<sup>xxiii</sup> The phantom is difficult to describe in words, not only because it is so "potent," but also because it is made up of gaps. As Abraham and Torok explain, "[r]educing the 'phantom' entails reducing the sin attached to someone else's secret and stating it in acceptable terms so as to defy, circumvent, or domesticate the phantom's (and our) resistances, its (and our) refusals, gaining acceptance for a higher degree of 'truth.'"<sup>xxiv</sup> Epstein expresses this challenge in her own terms of the "iron box":

*The box became a vault, collecting in darkness, always collecting, pictures, words, my parents' glances, becoming loaded with weight. It sank deeper as I grew older, so packed with undigested things that finally it became impossible to ignore. I knew the iron box would some day have to be dredged up into the light, opened, its contents sorted out, but I had built such fortifications that it had become inaccessible. I needed tricks to get near it, strategies to cut through the belt of numbness that formed each*

*time I made a move towards it.*<sup>xxv</sup>

For Epstein, the process of expression involves finding others who also have an iron box, a phantom, and through her connection with them, she is able to break through the “fortifications” of silence that she had built around her story. She explains, “I set out to find a group of people who, like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Though this process differs from person to person, in each case, the phantom must be exorcised in two ways: by filling in the gaps through imagination and expressing the experience of carrying this burden. More importantly, this must be done in some sort of acceptable form: a form that does not claim authenticity for an event that has not been experienced but still bears witness to the lasting effects of the Holocaust on its survivors and their families.

#### THE PHANTOM AS A ZONE OF INDISTINCTION

*“Twenty-eight years ago today, the Nazis gassed my mother and four sisters,” Papa said. He set down the coffee cup. I thought how in a movie Papa’s hands would have trembled, but in real life they were steady.*<sup>xxvii</sup>

—Barbara Finkelstein

*A child is a hollow vessel with a thundering echo. What is a child to make of tales of hunger, humiliation, and murder? Where did the tales stop and reality begin? We no longer knew.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

—Carl Friedman

Giorgio Agamben defines the concentration camp as a “zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense.”<sup>xxix</sup> This zone of indistinction is “precisely the place in which the state of exception coincides perfectly with the rule and the extreme situation becomes the very paradigm of life.”<sup>xxx</sup> The insight of Agamben’s point is his location of the unbearable aspect not in the presence of horrific events and lack of normality, but in their indistinction.

He gives the example of a soccer match between the S.S. and the Special Forces (those prisoners assigned to work at the gas chambers) which, in the words of Primo Levi, appeared “as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Agamben explains that this “match might strike someone as a brief pause of humanity in the middle of an infinite horror. I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The horrific aspect of Auschwitz was not so much the fact that it was a site of horror, but rather that the horror was normalized.

I want to extend Agamben’s idea that the normalization of the extreme was the truly horrific aspect of the camp to understand the trauma that is experienced by survivors. Cathy Caruth raises the question: “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?”<sup>xxxiii</sup> I would argue that another way to understand the trauma is not as an encounter with death or the ongoing experience of survival, but an encounter with what Primo Levi describes as a death “one hesitates to call . . . death,”<sup>xxxiv</sup> as well as an ongoing experience of the traces of this zone of indistinction. A person on his or her way to Auschwitz rode in a normal train, but it was a train to horror, and most likely, to death. Survivors often continue to feel horror and panic on a normal train. In the first case, the barbaric was normal; in the second, the normal carries a trace of the barbaric. Caruth locates the trauma in the experience of survival: “What one day returns in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival.”<sup>xxxv</sup> In the case of Holocaust survivors, the flashback is not merely this, but also the incomprehensibility of the zone of indistinction. Flashbacks are triggered by everyday things—trains, dogs, food, striped clothing—and it is precisely because the barbaric was normalized in the camp that these traces of the concentration camp still invade everyday life. While the survivors were in the camps, it was a barbaric world that had been normalized; in their later lives, their “normal” world is laced with traces of barbarism.



GATE AT AUSCHWITZ: "WORK MAKES YOU FREE"

I am interested in trying to combine Agamben's notion of the zone of indistinction with Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom. If the trauma of the camp is indeed the continued experience of the zone of indistinction, then can we align the phantom with the zone of indistinction? I would argue that the way in which the phantom is transferred, which Abraham and Torok say is "yet to be determined"<sup>xxxvi</sup> is by witnessing these barbaric traces. Even children whose parents never talked about their experiences perceived this phantom in other ways. Their parents screamed from nightmares in the middle of the night, they had strange issues with food.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Every normal question that a child might ask his parents could be a landmine: Where did you meet? What was your childhood like? Not to mention the obviously treacherous ones: What is that number on your arm? Where are my grandparents? The specter of the extreme barbarity of the concentration camp makes the children recognize the gaps between what they know and their parents' experiences. In some cases these gaps consist of factual information, but even in cases where parents often told stories of the Holocaust, there is always a gap between the recounting and the actual experience. Because the children of survivors cannot remember this, they imagine it: they try to fill these gaps with imagination, and it is this phantom which haunts. Marianne Hirsch coined the term "post-memory," which she defines as "a

powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Thus, if the survivors' trauma of the experience of the zone of indistinction triggers memory which can manifest itself as the barbaric mixed in with the normal, the second generation is haunted by this zone of indistinction, but, instead of memory, it triggers post-memory, or imagination. The child tries to fill in the details with an imagination, which in the case of the Holocaust is necessarily barbaric, and this barbaric imagination invades their normality in the same way that flashbacks and other forms of memory do for the survivor. In the camps, the barbaric, deadly showers were presented as normal; hence, many children of survivors, such as Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, "fantasize Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water."<sup>xxxix</sup> Likewise, in the introduction to *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings By Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*,<sup>xl</sup> Bukiet notes, "As they were ghosts in history, you're a ghost in your own safe little suburban bedroom with cowboy lampshades."<sup>xli</sup> Once again the use of the word "ghost" calls to mind Abraham and Torok's conception of the phantom. Other little boys do not look at their lampshades and think of human skin. In this bedroom, the barbaric imagination replaces Zyklon B as the suffocating agent of any sense of safety.

How do the acceptable terms of expression appear in the literature of the second generation? One method is the form that conveys this continued zone of indistinction, what the survivors experience in memory, and their children experience in post-memory, or what I call 'barbaric imagination.' This zone of indistinction, where horror and normality are inextricably bound, is what is missing from *Life is Beautiful*, in which humanity exists explicitly and inhumanity is only an allusion.

## MAUS AND AFTER

*Were the novelists and poets and dramatists and cartoonists of the Second Generation born writers or were we compelled to write by our proximity to extremity? I don't know. I only know that these are the stories I heard at the dinner table. Thus, rendering life with people who are capable of saying, "I'd rather be hung tomorrow than shot today. Pass the salt," becomes one's most enduring subject.<sup>xlii</sup>*

—Melvin Jules Bukiet

Both *Maus* and *After* describe moments in the lives of survivors after liberation, in which the zone of indistinction still exists: the normal is infused with the barbaric and everyday lives are invaded by the extremity of the concentration camp. Even though they are written in different ways — *After* is a fictional narrative of survivors' lives directly after liberation and *Maus* is a two-volume graphic novel about Spiegelman's experience recording his father's story of life during the Holocaust — the issues confronted by children of survivors appear in both of them. Both works offer insight into the zone of indistinction that still traumatizes the survivors and haunts the second generation by showing the normal mixed with the barbaric.

In the very first scene of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*, young Art falls down on his rollerskates and is left behind by his friends. When he cries to his father, Vladek, he replies: "Friends? Your Friends? . . . If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . then you could see what it is, friends!"<sup>xliii</sup> It is a completely normal situation, a child having a conflict with his friends and getting upset, but the scene is disturbed by the father's recollection of the barbarity of the camps. Vladek is still so consumed by the zone of indistinction in which the extreme and the everyday were fused that a normal word like "friend" cannot be separated from the barbarity.

In another scene in *Maus I*, Vladek rides an exercise bike while he talks about how he gave his first son, Richieu, to another family for protection, even though one friend ques-

tioned his decision. He does not even stop pedaling as he says: "But his [the friend's] son remained alive; ours did not."<sup>xliv</sup> How conflated must the exception and the rule be, that the death of a child is a normal subject? Later in the story, Vladek describes the gas chambers, the ovens, and the mass graves. In the most graphic scene in all of *Maus* he describes: "And those what finished [sic] in the gas chambers before they got pushed in these graves, it was the lucky ones. The others had to jump in the graves while they were still alive. Prisoners what worked [sic] there poured gasoline over the live ones and the dead ones. And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better."<sup>xlv</sup> Art exclaims, "Jesus," and his wife, Françoise hangs her head, but Vladek calmly continues, "Ach! It's 2:30. Look how the time is flying. And it's still so much to do today."<sup>xlvi</sup> As unsettling as the graphic sequence that appears on the page before is, I would argue that what is even more disturbing is the ability of the survivor to tell this story of unimaginable horror and then immediately lapse back into normal life. The phantom is not created from the presence of these awful stories, but from their integration into everyday life.

In his newest novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&\*!*,<sup>xlvii</sup> Spiegelman shows how these scenes of the concentration camp pervaded normal conversation, even from the time he was very young. He depicts a car ride with his parents on their way back from a party:

*Art's mother: "What a fancy affair! Everybody was invited—even Janek!"*

*Vladek: "Yes, but nobody would sit near him."*

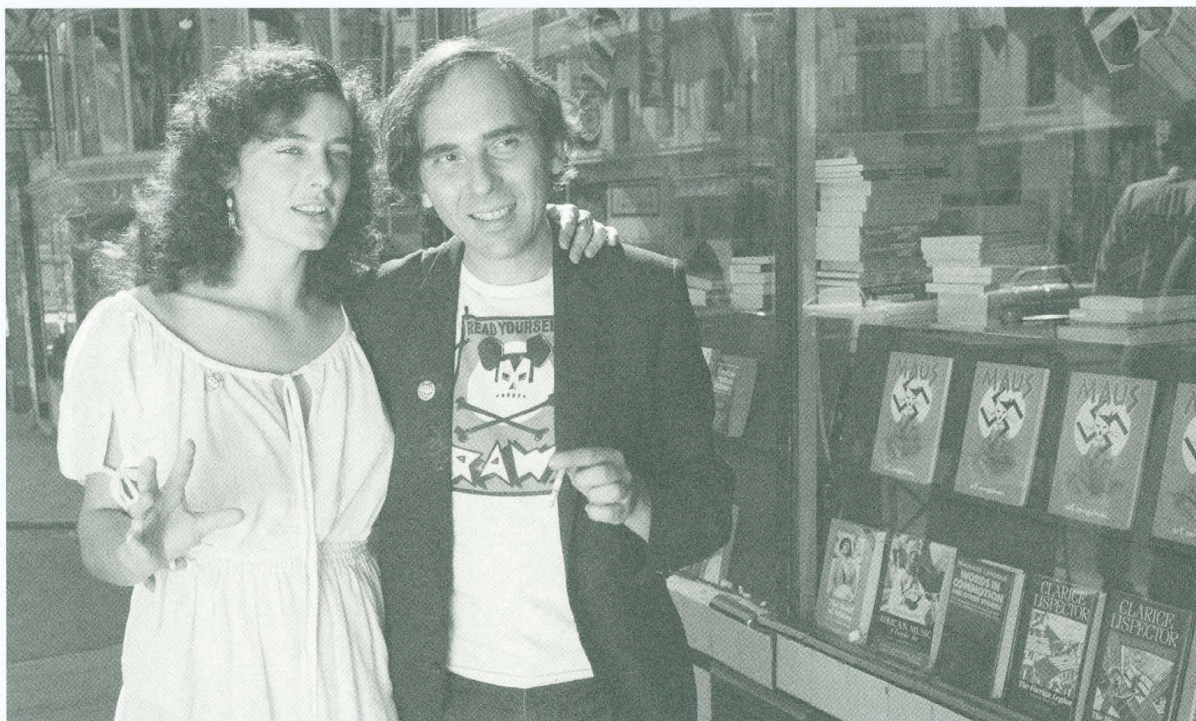
*Art: "Why don't people sit with him?"*

*Vladek: "In Auschwitz he was a Sonderkommando, he threw Jews into the ovens."*

*Art: "Why?"*

*Vladek: "If not, the Germans throw him in the ovens."*





ART SPIEGELMAN AND HIS WIFE, FRANÇOISE, OUTSIDE A BOOKSTORE CONTAINING HIS BOOK *MAUS*

Art: "So...it wasn't his fault, right?"

Vladek: "Yah, but it's rumors he put to the ovens his wife and his son, so nobody wants to sit."

Art's mother: "Take a nap again, cookie! It's still a long drive, and we're just having grown-up talk."<sup>xlviii</sup>

The presence of this story in the normal conversation is the trauma of survival—the ongoing presence of the traces of the zone of indistinction where horror was normalized. In most families, "grown-up talk," that mysterious, forbidden thing that children hear bits and pieces of, is about sex and scandals; in Art's family it involved a man who had been able to throw his own wife and child into an oven. Even though this extreme situation no longer literally exists, it still exerts its presence.

In another scene, Art gives his son, Dash, a "family heirloom," a locked box that contains a fire-breathing monster wearing a striped prisoner's hat with Hitler's face on its tongue. Dash responds, "An air loom?," signifying more than just a child's limited vocabulary: it is the contaminated "air" of the concentration camp that still "looms" over its families years later. Art explains, "It's been in the family for years! My dad gave it to me when I was a little boy . . . And now I'm giving it to you!" When Dash opens the box and the monster explodes out of it, Art says, "It makes you feel so worthless you don't believe you even have the right to breathe! . . . And—just think—someday you'll be able to pass it on to your son!"<sup>xlix</sup> Once this box is opened, this monster can return at any time: there is no "normal" situation that is safe from its invasion. By giving the monster to his own son, Art expresses that this zone of indistinction will continue to invade everyday life even in the next generation. This point is also emphasized in *Maus II*, in which the

Table of Contents is subtitled “From Mauschwitz to the Catskills and Beyond.” With the Nazis depicted as cats and the Jews as mice, this clearly implies that, in one way or another, the impact of the Nazis did not end with liberation; indeed, it continues into the second generation, growing up far from Germany, in the *Catskills*.

This mixture of the normal with the barbaric haunts Art into his adulthood. In a conversation with Françoise, he admits, “When I was a kid I used to think about which of my parents I’d let the Nazis take to the ovens if I could only save one of them . . . Usually I saved my mother. Do you think that’s normal?”<sup>li</sup> It is unclear whether he is asking her if it is normal for a child to save his mother or for a child to have these fantasies at all, but either way, his question of “normalcy” evidences his skewed sense of normality. This exchange also displays how Art’s post-memory, or imagination, is triggered by this invasion of the normal by the barbaric. He goes so far as to say, “I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!”<sup>lii</sup> But he was not there, so instead he has to “fantasize Zyklon B coming out of [his] shower instead of water.”<sup>liii</sup> The haunting zone of indistinction leads to barbaric imagination.

*After* contrasts with Spiegelman’s novel and the entire genre of second-generation Holocaust literature because it does not directly involve the children of survivors. However, in light of the issues that these other works present, it is clear that even though the only second generation character in *After* is a baby born near the end of the novel, the issues of the second-generation resonate throughout the book. The survivor characters are traumatized by the zone of indistinction they experienced in the camps in such a way that the extremity of the camps still invades their lives after liberation. Through Bukiet’s writing, the reader experiences the inseparability of the barbaric and the normal, so that he or she gets a sense of what it is like to be a child of a survivor and live in a world haunted by the zone of indistinction.

The vocabulary of *After* is redefined in order to provide the experience of haunted words and world to the reader. In this barbarized language, certain words become charged: they attain a second meaning that can never again be separated from the normal term. In the “Displaced Persons” camps after liberation, the character Schimmel is sent to be “processed,” or have his information recorded by the Allied soldiers, but another, Isaac, interprets that it “sounds like being turned into soap.”<sup>liiii</sup> The effect is that any subsequent time that the reader comes across “processed,” he or she is reminded of its other meaning. In another instance, one of the characters greets, “Good morning! Make that twenty. Need any feathers? The truck will be leaving for its daily pickup as soon as it gets gassed.”<sup>liv</sup> The narrator feels the need to explicate this verb: “Gas was for trucks now.”<sup>lv</sup> For the survivors and their children, words like “processed,” “gassed,” “soap,” and “lampshade” can never again be used without some association to barbaric meaning. The barbaric imagination of the second generation is what allows little Melvin Jules Bukiet to feel as if he is a “ghost” in his bedroom that has “cowboy lampshades.”

Another way that *After* creates new connotations from normal vocabulary is through the use of words like “fortunately” and “of course” in sentences that, for the average person, are anything but fortunate or obvious. For example, the narrator explains:

*For those who had been transferred there from extermination camps in Poland, the Liebknechtwerke was like liberation; they didn’t see what there was to complain about. Of course death, random and vicious, was a constant companion, but . . . [t]he gas chamber was used as a punishment rather than the sole purpose of the place.*<sup>lvi</sup>

This use of the common phrase subtly demonstrates the zone of indistinction in which the exception was the rule and the extreme had become normal. Similarly, when the characters are looking for a place to live after liberation, the narrator comments: “Fortunately, there were empty apartments all over Europe. More people were killed than apart-

ments were destroyed.”<sup>lvii</sup> Although it is fortunate for the characters that there are empty apartments all around Europe, the reason for this is so far from fortunate that it makes the use of the word seem absurd.

*After* also reflects how the Holocaust has changed the categorization of time from past, present, and future to Before, During, and After. The word “before” is never used—only “Before” with a capital “B” to indicate the time prior to the war. At one point the survivors are at a show in which one of the performers says, “Perhaps you saw my act Before.”<sup>lviii</sup> Although she means the generalized “before,” to the survivors, the word means only before the concentration camps. Later on, one of the characters on stage says, “So what say every twenty years we have a little excitement and then After, we have a lot of fun.” The narrator concludes, “They had seen the show Before.”<sup>lix</sup>

This conception of time is even more complicated in the second generation: In the Introduction to *Nothing Makes You Free*, Bukiet comments: “In a way, life has become even stranger—though infinitely less perilous—for the children than their parents. If a chasm opened in the lives of the First Generation, they could nonetheless sigh on the far side and recall the life Before, but for the Second Generation there is no Before. In the beginning was Auschwitz.”<sup>lx</sup> More generally, the haunting zone of indistinction can be even more problematic for the second generation, since they never experienced life without its presence. This sense of the non-existence of Before is conveyed in *After*: “After was the same as During, and Before didn’t exist, not even in the mind. Before was as far gone as baby teeth.”<sup>lxi</sup> Even though the narrator is describing a survivor, the quote reveals the pervasiveness of Bukiet’s second-generation experience.

Additionally, both Isaac, the main character of the novel, and the narrator make barbaric jokes and metaphors. For example, in saying that “Before was as far gone as baby teeth,” baby teeth has double meaning: the normal connotation of the baby teeth that all the adult characters had lost

long ago, as well as a grotesque reference to the teeth extracted from the dead in the concentration camps and the fact that no babies survived. Like *Maus*, it shows the insertion of the barbaric into the normalcy of everyday lives of the survivors. At another point Isaac remarks, “if we weren’t so dirty, we wouldn’t have needed showers.”<sup>lxii</sup> This play on words is a joke, but one that Bukiet deems “evil” enough: it shocks the reader, but at the same time commands attention. It bears witness to the kind of person who can say these things at the dinner table.

## CONCLUSION

*In imagining, a particular tone bleeds through in all but the mildest of Second Generation writers. Though often literarily exuberant and sometimes ‘experimental,’ they are viciously unredemptive, scoured for weakness as they look atrocity staring in the face with barely contained rage. Despite today’s insipid fetish for ‘healing,’ frequently engaged in by the social workers of the Second Generation, the writers heal nothing and comfort no one with their work. Healing is another word for forgetting. Healing is what movies like LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL and SCHINDLER’S LIST seek—the former with gratuitous vulgarity, the latter with insidious skill—as they concoct a spurious ray of light to falsely illumine the night. Instead of closure, the writers prefer the open wound. And should that wound threaten to close, they rip out the stitches.*<sup>xiii</sup>

—Melvin Jules Bukiet

One of the most quoted phrases about the Holocaust is Theodor Adorno’s assertion that “*Nach Auschwitz noch ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch*” (as literally as possible: “After Auschwitz, to still write a poem is barbaric”).<sup>lxiv</sup> Michael Rothberg points out that this is frequently mistranslated as “No poetry after Auschwitz” or “After Auschwitz it is no longer possible to write poems.”<sup>lxv</sup> These renderings are especially problematic because they undermine the entire purpose of Adorno’s point: it is possible to write poetry after Auschwitz, just as it was possible for the S.S. to read poetry at night and to work in concentration camps during the day,<sup>lxvi</sup> and this is what is barbaric. So

what is the answer—not to write poetry? Adorno himself answers: “In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.”<sup>lxvii</sup> This is echoed in *Maus* when Art explains, “Samuel Beckett once said: ‘Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.’ . . . On the other hand, he said it.”<sup>lxviii</sup> If writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, then is the only acceptable form barbaric poetry? This is the answer given by the children of survivors, particularly Art Spiegelman in his comic book, *Maus*, and Melvin Jules Bukiet in his comic novel, *After*. Both of these use a “comic” and therefore shocking and controversial approach to the Holocaust, which, in their ability to combine the everyday with the extreme, is appropriately barbaric.

#### ENDNOTES

- i. Foreword to Berger, (viii)
- ii. “Survival in Nazi Germany.” *Morning Edition*, March 17, 1999. David D’Arcy. Available at <www.npr.org.>
- iii. “Survival”; emphasis added
- iv. “Survival”
- v. At the time of the interview he was at Rutgers University.
- vi. “Survival”; emphasis added.
- vii. Cathy Caruth uses the phrase “necessity and impossibility” to describe the problem of bearing witness to trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.
- viii. Rosenbaum (2)
- ix. As cited in Berger (2)
- x. Abraham and Torok (171)
- xi. Epstein (1)
- xii. Hass (79)
- xiii. Abraham and Torok (181)
- xiv. Abraham and Torok (188)
- xv. Prince (45)
- xvi. Prince (46)
- xvii. Hass (79)
- xviii. Hass (62)
- xix. Hass (70)
- xx. Abraham and Torok (173)
- xxi. Epstein (117)
- xxii. Abraham and Torok(188)
- xxiii. Epstein (1).
- xxiv. Abraham and Torok (189); emphasis added
- xxv. Epstein (5)
- xxvi. Epstein (5); emphasis added
- xxvii. Finkelstein (134)
- xxviii. Friedman (134)
- xxix. Agamben 1995 (170)
- xxx. Agamben 1999 (49)
- xxxi. Agamben 1999 (25)
- xxxii. Agamben 1999 (26)
- xxxiii. Caruth (7)
- xxxiv. Agamben 1999 (44)
- xxxv. Caruth (64)
- xxxvi. Abraham and Torok (173)
- xxxvii. For an excellent summary of the issues that confront survivors and their children see: *Generations of the Holocaust*.
- xxxviii. Hirsch (22)
- xxxix. Spiegelman 1991 (16)
- xl. This is a collection of second-generation literature edited by Bukiet; the title is an obvious reference to the Gate of Auschwitz which read: “Work Makes You Free.”
- xli. Bukiet 2002 (18)
- xl.ii. Bukiet 2002 (20)
- xl.iii. Spiegelman 1986 (6)
- xl. iv. Spiegelman 1986 (81)
- xl. v. Spiegelman 1991 (72)
- xl. vi. Spiegelman 1991 (73)
- xl. vii. Published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.
- xl. viii. Spiegelman 2006 (34)
- xl. ix. Spiegelman 2006 (40)
- l. Spiegelman 1991 (14)
- li. Spiegelman 1991 (16)
- lii. Spiegelman, 1991 (16)
- lii. Bukiet 1996 (21)
- liv. Bukiet 1996 (217)
- lv. Bukiet 1996 (217)
- lvi. Bukiet 1996 (98); emphasis added
- lvii. Bukiet 1996 (93); emphasis added
- lviii. Bukiet 1996 (86)
- lix. Bukiet 1996 (93)
- lx. Bukiet 2002 (13)
- lxi. Bukiet 1996 (358)
- lxii. Bukiet 2002 (163)
- lxiii. Bukiet 2002 (21-22)
- lxiv. Rothberg (25)
- lxv. Translation by Nathaniel Campbell
- lxvi. Steiner as quoted in Rothberg (31): “We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.”
- lxvii. As cited in Rothberg (47)
- lxviii. Spiegelman 1991 (45)

#### REFERENCES

Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. 1994. *The Shell and the Kernel*. Ed and Trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.
- Berger Alan L. 1997. *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bergmann, Martin S. and Milton E. Jucovy, eds. 1982. *Generations of the Holocaust*. New York : Basic Books.
- Bukiet, Melvin Jules. 1996. *After*. New York : St. Martin's Press.
- Bukiet, Melvin Jules, ed. 2002. *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Epstein, Helen. 1979. *Children of the Holocaust*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Finkelstein, Barbara. 1987. *Summer Long-a-coming*. New York: Harpercollins.
- Friedman, Carl. 1994. *Nightfather: A Novel*. Trans. Arnold and Erica Pomerans. New York: Persea Books, Inc.
- Hass, Aaron. 1991. *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Prince, Robert M. *The Legacy of the Holocaust: Psychohistorical Themes in the Second Génération*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985.
- Rosenbaum, Thane. 1999. *Second Hand Smoke: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon.
- Spiegelman, Art. 1991. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon.
- Spiegelman, Art. 2006. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&\*!*. *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 82(4), Fall.