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The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of the Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature

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In the non-anthropocentric humanities, objects are considered to “co-fashion human identities.”¹ This view is of particular relevance and produces special meanings in the study of things connected to the Holocaust as these things not only talk but also give testimony and transmit memory, because they boast life stories of their own which are interwoven with the dramatic life stories of people. Things accompanied people in hiding, on their way to ghettos, in transports to concentration camps and, sometimes, in their last moments, when facing death.² Stolen, changing hands and finally preserved at museums, things are not simply discrete objects that represent their respective owners but, especially when amassed in heaps of, for example, suitcases or shoes, they also metonymically represent the Holocaust as organized,

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1 Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna a studia nad rzeczami,” *Kultura Współczesna* 3 (2008): 14.

2 George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 48; 67.

industrial-scale genocide. Objects associated with childhood, in particular toys, take a unique place among such things, because they commemorate one and a half million Jewish children who were killed in the Holocaust and the traumatic and lost childhood of the handful who survived. In the context of memory studies, Marianne Hirsch depicts “testimonial objects”³ as vehicles for the memory of the Holocaust, and Bożena Shallcross highlights the intimate interrelatedness of people and things:

Many Holocaust narratives reveal an intensified state of subject-object unity that defies a Cartesian understanding of the divide between subject and object. Related to each other in a distinctly unifying manner, these fleeting moments inform the sense of episodic object-subject proximity as triggered by the threat of death or dispossession.⁴

In this article, I examine this characteristic amalgamation of subject and object in children’s books in which the child protagonist is accompanied by a toy. Thereby, my aim is to explore these relationships, the representation of the agency of people and toys and the epistemic and commemorative value of these narratives.

Play and the Holocaust are radically discordant and clashing concepts, as elucidated by George Eisen: “children’s play and the Holocaust confront the untrained observer with a perplexing contradiction. [...] Mass murder signifies the ultimate evil while play, at least in popular imagination, speaks of a measure of innocence and happiness.”⁵ In his study of children’s play during the Holocaust, Eisen relates what often come across as shocking instances of play, such as children tickling dead bodies when messing around in the ghetto.⁶ Eisen pictures various kinds of play invented by children in ghettos, camps, hiding places and the like settings, where traditionally conceived toys were few and far between. This deprivation prompted children to use a range of objects as toys. When discussing play in Uri Orlev’s work, Krzysztof Rybak dubs such toys “things to play with” and describes them as “phantom-like objects whose semantic field does not overlap with the denotation of the word

3 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 177–199.

4 Bożena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11.

5 Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 79.

'toy'.⁷ Pauline Dewan foregrounds the essential role of play as children's primary language for externalizing emotions and the subconscious,⁸ and Daniel Feldman investigates wartime play to conclude that play "communicates latent childhood feelings of anxiety, defiance, or complex engagement with difficult circumstances forged by war."⁹ In discussing the emotional and psychological relationship of the child and the toy during the Holocaust, Eisen explicates:

The tense moments in the ghettos, camps, and hiding were the true test of how much the uprooted children needed their toys for emotional security. As a direct result of the painful loss of family members and friends, human beings who were disappearing rapidly from their lives, children's psychic lives turned more inward or toward their favored toys. A psychological transference process took place when the children could provide and perceive they were receiving love from an inanimate object instead of a loved one. They could share their fear, sorrow, anguish, love, a whole range of human emotions, for the worn-out dolls and broken toys were good listeners.¹⁰

Given this, toys, which tended to be the only objects that reminded children of family and home, were emotionally becoming children's whole world. The fundamental function that toys performed in the lives of these children, forced, as they were, to leave their homes, part with their loved ones, go into hiding, flee and try to survive in ghettos and concentration camps, has also been highlighted in exhibitions, such as Yad Vashem's *No Child's Play: Children in the Holocaust: Creativity and Play* (which proved so popular that it was on from 1996 to 2015) and the *Stars Without a Heaven: Children in the Holocaust* Ready2print exhibition.¹¹ All these toys have their own history, which is

7 Krzysztof Rybak, "Rzeczy do zabawy. Zabawki w cieniu Zagłady w twórczości Uriego Orleva," in *O czym mówią rzeczy? Świat przedmiotów w literaturze dziecięcej i młodzieżowej*, ed. Marta Niewieczerał and Anna Mik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP), 99.

8 Pauline Dewan, "More Than Child's Play: The Scaffolding Role of Toys, Games, and Play in Children's Literature," *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 25 (2019): 5, accessed May 31, 2023, doi: 10.1080/13614541.2020.1774266.

9 Daniel Feldman, "Children's Play in the Shadow of War," *American Journal of Play* 11 (2019): 303, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.museumofplay.org/app/uploads/2022/01/11-3-Article-1.pdf>.

10 Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, 74.

11 "Stars Without a Heaven: Children in the Holocaust," Ready2print exhibition of Yad Vashem. The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.yadvashem.org/ready2print/children-in-the-holocaust.html>.

interlaced with the history of human beings, and some narratives of this kind have inspired children's books.

In this article, I discuss three of such picture books about the Holocaust produced by Israeli, Flemish and Polish authors. My sample includes *Bear and Fred*¹² (2016) by Iris Argaman and Avi Ofer, *Een pop voor Hannah*¹³ [A doll for Hannah] (2018) by Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, and *Mama zawsze wraca*¹⁴ [Mum always comes back] (2020) by Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska. These books are very special not only because they are based on true events, but also because their young protagonists represent Holocaust survivors, and the toys featured in them represent their authentic playthings from that time, which today are put on display at the museums of Yad Vashem in Israel and Kazerne Dossin in Belgium. The discourse of children's literature and the discourse of the Holocaust's material culture intersect at this point and invite an examination of this interwovenness, as encouraged for example by Robin Bernstein: "Either to split or to lump children's literature and material culture, however, is to erase representational play as many children's lived connection between them."¹⁵ In my argument, I will identify interconnections between the biographies of the protagonists and the biographies of play-things, whereby I will also establish how toys and their people are represented in the three picture books in order to determine what each of these books for a contemporary young readership tells them about the Holocaust. My theoretical framework draws on memory studies¹⁶ and thing theory, in particular its second phase, in which the being of objects is valued equally to the being of subjects, and researchers argue for the agency of non-human materials, insisting that not only humans, but also objects, interact.¹⁷

12 Iris Argaman, *Avi Ofer, Bear and Fred. A World War II Story*, trans. Annette Appel (New York: Amazon Crossing Kids, 2020).

13 Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah* (Wielsbeke: De Eenhoorn, 2018).

14 Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, 2020).

15 Robin Bernstein, "Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or, The Possibility of Children's Literature," *PMLA* 126 (2011): 162 (emphasis original).

16 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*; Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001): 5–37.

17 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): "A Questionnaire on Materialisms," ed. David Joselit et al., *October* 155 (2016): 3–110, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43830081>.

The Biographies of Toys and Humans

As artefacts to be seen at museums and as protagonists of picture books, the survivors' toys can be examined through a biographical lens, where "things possess a material identity and sometimes have multiple identities that change over time and across contexts; they live their own lives, which begin at point a and terminate at point b; something happens to them in this lifetime."¹⁸ The very title of Tomi Ungerer's *Otto: The Biography of a Teddy Bear* (1999)¹⁹, a classic of children's literature on the Holocaust, provokes such a biographical approach, revealing that "it was the author's intention to construct a historical-cultural life history of things."²⁰ Katarzyna Slany, who has scrutinized *Otto* from the biographical perspective, concludes that Ungerer "overcomes the culturally sanctioned conceptualization of things as objects by having *Otto*'s life history develop in parallel to people's life histories."²¹ I believe, however, that framing the fates of objects and people as concomitant is less about parallelisms and more about intertwining and reciprocities. The interactions that bear special relevance are those where a shift of perspective to a less anthropocentrically biased one can foster the perception of a thing as the Other that is, as Domańska insists,²² an equal, albeit perhaps less strong and less active participant both in the dialogue of cultures and in the reality construction process. The emphasis on the "process" ties in with Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which foregrounds the importance of relations among actors.²³ Bringing together ANT and literary research, Rita Felski argues that the uniqueness of a work stems from its links to the social context.²⁴ Of course, links to the social context need not necessarily concern concrete facts that have actually taken place or real people who have lived but, presumably, the existence in the real world of actors – in this case, the Holocaust survivors and their toys – will buttress the protagonists in literary texts and substantially enhance the uniqueness of the books I discuss. This may also be a meaningful factor in the reception of these books by today's readers, adults and children alike, who currently appear to value the correspondence of

18 Domańska, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna," 14.

19 Tomi Ungerer, *The Biography of a Teddy Bear* (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1999).

20 Katarzyna Slany, "Zabawka jako medium pamięci o Holocauście na przykładzie picture booka *Otto*. Autobiografia pluszowego misia Tomiego Ungerera," *Ruch literacki* 49 (2018): 453.

21 Slany, "Zabawka jako medium pamięci," 455.

22 Domańska, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna," 14.

23 Krzysztof Abriszewski, "Teoria Aktora-Sieci Bruno Latoura," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2007): 121.

24 Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 103 (2015): 740.

narrated events to facts as the most important criterion in the selection and appreciation of literary works.²⁵

Therefore, let us have a look at the biographies of people and toys in the three picture books. Alfred Lessing, on whom the eponymous Fred in *Bear and Fred* is modelled, was born in the Hague (the Netherlands) to an assimilated Jewish family who moved to Delft soon afterwards. When the persecution of the Jews escalated in the Netherlands in 1942, the exacerbated purges prompted the family to split and hide separately. Going to his first hiding place, Fred was only able to take a rucksack and his beloved teddy bear, which from then on accompanied the boy throughout his wartime journey. Fred went through at least six hideouts, fell ill and was treated in a hospital for a few weeks. All the logistics was orchestrated by his mother. When she was arrested, the father and sons spent one more year in hiding together until the war was over. Fred's mother survived Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Sobibór and Bergen-Belsen, and joined her family in the Netherlands after a long treatment in Algeria. In 1947, the family emigrated to the US, where Fred started a new life, obtained a PhD in philosophy and became a marital therapist.²⁶ After the war, his teddy bear was also always with him as a witness of his lost childhood:

I kept my little bear until I went to college, then my mother kept it on the bookshelf and when I came back from college she gave it back to me. When you talk about the Holocaust, you should have a bear. When I talk about this, it's so hard because you grow up and you become an adult and you learn so much more and I want my bear with me to remind me that I was just a little kid. [...] My little bear was really the only thing I had. [...] I would talk to him and I would hold him very close and I would suck my thumb and rub his paw against my nose, it was all shiny after the war, and there isn't much fuzz left on him, but he stood for my mother, my family, it was very very precious during those years.²⁷

In Lessing's view, the teddy bear is thus a thing whose history has grown into his life to the point of becoming, as it were, its part, while at the same time remaining a thing that has its own biography. This is conveyed through the manner in which Lessing addresses his teddy bear: "I didn't want to part from

25 Justyna Tabaszewska, "Na granicy faktu. Kategoria faction w badaniach nad współczesnymi biografiami," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2019): 61–62.

26 Zekelman Holocaust Center, Lessing, Alfred (Fred). Oral History Department of Library Archive, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.holocaustcenter.org/visit/library-archive/oral-history-department/lessing-alfred-fred/>.

27 Lessing in Zekelman Holocaust Center.

him, but Bear and I decided he should go. When he reached Israel, a new chapter began in his life."²⁸ Fred Lessing's personality and the personality that he created for the toy have interpenetrated so thoroughly that the difference between the identities of the boy and the teddy bear has undergone a linguistic erasure. Concomitantly with perceiving the toy as a thing that has a subjectivity and a life of its own ("he's had a life beyond me"), Fred felt a very strong connection to the teddy bear: "He's always felt like a piece of me."²⁹

In *Bear and Fred*, the boy and Bear are inseparable as well, and the narrative revolves around a series of salient episodes in the life of Fred Lessing and his teddy bear, such as an encounter with a dog that damaged the head of the toy, the leaving of home when the boy rushed back at the last moment to collect his favorite toy, his mother's endeavors to find new hiding places for Fred, a textually and visually rendered episode of Bear wiping the boy's tears off with his paw and a moment in the epilogue when Fred asks Bear whether he wants to go to the museum at Yad Vashem. Symptomatically, the narrative is conducted from the viewpoint of the toy, and Bear calls Fred's mother "Mama," which additionally underscores the relationship of the child and the toy. The illustrations are mainly arranged in grey and yellow hues: yellow marks the star of David sewn onto the clothes of other Jewish children, and the teddy-bear is, tellingly, yellow as well. This chromatic correspondence creates a link to Fred's Jewish identity, which is not externalized in the star of David on his attire since his mother believes that it is safer to conceal it. This notion sparks her quarrel with Fred's grandpa, their disagreement imaged in a double spread that pictures them sitting with their backs turned against each other: as Grandpa is sewing a yellow star of David to Fred's coat, Mama uses the other end of the same tangled thread to fasten a head onto the yellow teddy bear, and the fact that the head is made of a pocket of this very coat establishes an unmistakable visual connection between the child and the toy. The thread is thus another element in the book that brings out the interwovenness of the identities and lives of the toy and the human being with whom it interacts. The last page of the book contains Bear's letter to young readers, in which the narrator explicitly articulates the merger of Bear's and Fred's biographies into one narrative:

We grew up, but even when we are apart, we talk often, mostly about our feelings.
We have a very strong and special connection. One knows exactly what the other

28 Lessing in Dafna Arad, "The Holocaust Told From the Perspective of a Teddy Bear," The International March of the Living, September 18, 2016, accessed May 7, 2023 <https://www.motl.org/the-holocaust-told-from-the-perspective-of-a-teddy-bear/> (emphasis mine).

29 Lessing in Zekelman Holocaust Center.

thinks and feels, as if we were one person. You know what? Maybe we are one person. Maybe we always were.³⁰

Een pop voor Hannah [A doll for Hannah] is based on the life story of Charlotte Hamburger, the grandmother of Peggy Poppe, who penned the book. Arrested in April 1942, Hamburger made a rag doll for her four-year-old daughter Albertine (Tiny) when at prison, briefly before being transported to Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen and thence to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where she was killed.³¹ The doll she had made was smuggled out of the prison and found its way into Tiny's hands. Peggy Poppe, her daughter and the author of the book, also played with the doll as a child.³² In this way, the fates of the doll tie in with the fates of three women, with Tiny's mother being at the same time the symbolic 'mother' of the doll. At the moment, the doll is on display at the museum of Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen.

In the book, the mother character is called Esther. She secretly makes a doll called Charlotte for her daughter, who is named Hannah in the text. The doll's name explicitly points to Charlotte Hamburger, who was separated from her daughter upon being imprisoned in 1942. The doll sports woolen plaits which are braided in exactly the same way as the plaits that Esther herself and her daughter are shown to be wearing in the illustrations. For Esther, hugging the doll and talking to it provides a surrogate of intimacy with her own child. While remaining a thing, the doll obtains the status of a subject as well. Like in other children's stories in which dolls appear, the doll in this picture book is cast in the role of a daughter, yet the difference is that she is not a "daughter" to the young protagonist, which is usually the case,³³ but to the adult mother. The effort of making the doll and the desire to pass it over to her daughter, despite the lethal risk this involves, are not only a therapy to the mother but also an attempt to create future prospects for the child, because, as observed by Jocelyn Van Tuyl, "having toys is related to having a future."³⁴

30 Argaman, *Avi Ofer, Bear and Fred*, 39.

31 Kazerne Dossin Memorial Biografieën, Charlotte Hamburger, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://kazernedossin.memorial/biografie/charlotte-hamburger/>.

32 Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah* (Wielsbeke: De Eenhoorn, 2018): 2.

33 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 53; Jocelyn Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature: From Identification to Manipulation," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40 (2015): 35; Margaret R. Higonnet, "War Toys: Breaking and Remaking in Great War Narratives," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 31 (2007): 124.

34 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 27.

When the doll is ready, Esther, so to speak, entrusts her testament to the toy by showering it with advice and reflection, which she cannot communicate directly to her daughter:

She tells the doll everything that she believes is important and would like Hannah to know. She tells her how to comb her hair, how to retain courage, how not to let anyone take her pride away, how to take care of herself and be a good student; she tells her about going on walks together and jumping into puddles after rain, about pancake parties, kissing, hugging and so many other things.³⁵

Charlotte takes this legacy with her when, buried in a laundry basket, she is carried away by the prisoners' relatives. The doll represents Esther on one more occasion in the tale when, after a danger-strewn journey, she is found in a dustbin by the grandma, who recognises the fabric of Esther's petticoat in the doll's dress: "She sits down in a chair and starts weeping. She strokes Charlotte lovingly and fondles her torn dress and her broken arm."³⁶ The damage the doll sustained underway is also symbolic, because the dog that grabbed and mauled Charlotte was a German Shepherd, while "there are such dogs in the prison as well."³⁷ This suggests that the grandmother's tears are triggered both by the emotion aroused by Esther's act of courage and by the fear about what is ahead of her. Like in multiple narratives about the Holocaust,³⁸ the tarnished doll represents the loss of bodily autonomy and agency to which the victims were vulnerable. Young readers may fail to recognize this correlation because, as noted by Jordan,³⁹ they may not have sufficient historical or psychological knowledge. Notably, the literary doll specifies some details of what befell the toy and Charlotte Hamburger, filling in certain blind spots in her story.

Another doll in my paper, Zuzia [Susie] belongs to Zosia⁴⁰ Zajczyk, a girl hidden by her mother in a basement in the Warsaw ghetto who took the name

35 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 12.

36 *Ibid.*, 33.

37 *Ibid.*, 27.

38 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 33.

39 Sarah D. Jordan, "Educating Without Overwhelming: Authorial Strategies in Children's Holocaust Literature," *Children's Literature in Education* 35 (2004): 205.

40 Zosia is an endearment of Zofia, a girl's given name corresponding to English Sophie. In the passage below, the names alternate depending on whether a young girl or an adult woman is meant. (Translator's note).

of Yael Rosner after the war.⁴¹ Zuzia's biography is intertwined with the lives of the two women. Zosia and her mother survived the Holocaust and left Poland for Israel in 1950, where the mother died soon afterwards. The doll accompanied young Zosia on this journey and then adult Zofia throughout her life until the toy was given to Yad Vashem as an exhibit for the *No Child's Play* show. When in hiding, the doll functioned as a "transitional object," to use Donald Winnicott's term,⁴² as she helped Zosia cope with being parted from her mother and better understand the situation.⁴³ *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back], a picture book by Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, also tells a story of motherly love, with the mother bringing her daughter a doll and other playthings in order to give her child a future. The plotline is based on Yael's oral testimony. Her mother, Natalia Zajczyk, was a teacher before the war and as the war broke out, she became involved in smuggling children out of the Warsaw ghetto.⁴⁴ She would bring various things to her three-year-old daughter, who knew no life other than in a ghetto basement, to tell her about the world and furnish her with something to play with in the long hours when her mother was away:

Mum wanted me to be cheerful and to be able to play. I had a doll's head there, and one day mum brought a piece of cloth, blue with a flower print on it, and said: 'Why don't we make arms and a dress for your Zuzia?' She had no legs, but I could put my hand inside and play in this way.⁴⁵

The floral pattern of the doll's dress inspired Chmielewska's design of the illustrations for the book, in which it recurs as a leitmotif. An embroidered flower also hints at the skill that the girl was taught by her mother in the basement and which earned her livelihood as an adult, since Yael had an embroidery studio in Jerusalem. The flower motif derived from the doll's dress

41 "Doll Smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto: 'Mothers Do Not Leave their Daughters.'" Yad Vashem, Featured Artifacts, accessed May 14, 2023 <https://www.yadvashem.org/artifacts/featured/zuzia.html>.

42 Daniel W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

43 Irit Abramski, *Three Dolls* ([Jerusalem: Yad Vashem. International School for Holocaust Studies, 2007]), 30.

44 Renata Kim, "'Nikt cię nie znajdzie' – obiecała Zosi mama, gdy ukryła ją w piwnicy w getcie," *Newsweek Polska*, April 18, 2022, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/historia-z-warszawskiego-getta-juz-wiem-ze-mama-nie-wroci/88bg8n9>.

45 Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 9.

and mutating across Chmielewska's illustrations, with embroidery being one of its iterations, is one of the devices the book mobilizes to indicate how closely the biographies of Natalia, Zosia and Zuzia the doll are knit together. This interlacing is also foregrounded in illustrations, where Zosia is wearing a dress or a babushka with the same design as that on the doll's dress. The interwovenness of the lives of the three characters is additionally highlighted by the grouping of the three protagonists together in illustrations, with the doll looking like a child – one a bit younger and smaller than Zosia. The visual anthropomorphization is reinforced verbally, as the text tells the reader that Zuzia became a "daughter" to Zosia.

The Agency of People and Things

Yael Rosner's oral testimony contains a passage in which the mother asked by her daughter why the doll has only a head answers: "She is just a doll; I can arrange for her to have everything."⁴⁶ To the girl, being a mother meant being a person possessed of agency and capable of doing anything, a person who was up to anything to save her daughter and would never let her down. She became a mother to her doll, which the book phrases in a moving diction that echoes a child's naive perspective:

I was her mother. I felt great because I could be a mother rather than a child. I always thought that being a child wasn't such a great thing. It's cold, and there's nothing to wrap yourself in. And mum always knows where a blanket or a rag is, and where you can get a potato or a carrot. A carrot was something awesome. To be a mother is the best thing. Everybody out there is up to catch the child, to shoot the child, to take them away from their parents. I didn't want to be a child anymore; I just wanted to grow up. And to be adult. When I am mum, I'll have the right looks and all the trouble will be over.⁴⁷

From the girl's point of view, a child is merely an object acted upon by adults and, like a doll, has no agency altogether. Being a mother to Zuzia the doll helped Zosia develop her own agency. At the same time, acting like a mother vis-à-vis Zuzia embodies "representational play"⁴⁸ in that it reveals the stress and distress experienced by Natalia who, in her desperate attempts to save her daughter, had to be as severe to her as Zosia was to Zuzia:

⁴⁶ Abramski, *Three Dolls*, 25.

⁴⁷ Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 9.

⁴⁸ Bernstein, "Children's Books, Dolls," 162.

Then I would cry and say: "What a cry-baby you are; why are you crying, why are you weeping, you mustn't cry so hard, do you want the Germans to hear you? No one must know that there's a girl down here. Be quiet!" [...] That's what I always told her and how I comforted her.⁴⁹

In Chmielewska's illustrations, the doll is endowed with agency as well: together with Zosia, she arranges letters into her name and when playing, she gesticulates, smiles and, as a three-faced doll, lulls Zosia to sleep in the folds of her dress. Van Tuyl explains that "in Holocaust literature, liminal, not-living dolls are juxtaposed with liminal, living children who are in constant danger of death."⁵⁰ In *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back], this opposition is mitigated by investing some agency in the doll. Such a representation of play where a thing – a toy – has subjectivity and agency makes one think of stories in which toys come to life, and the power of the imagination is brought to bear by helping a child be a child under all circumstances, paradoxically including those when, in play, children become adult mothers to their dolls.

The agency of the doll in *Een pop voor Hannah* [A doll for Hannah] is veritably extraordinary. From the beginning of her journey in a laundry basket, the doll takes over the narrative, feels cold, pain, fear and fatigue and can recognize danger. She experiences reality with all the senses. She is not as strong an actor as humans are and must rely on their help in extreme situations, such as an encounter with a dog, but she eventually manages to find her way to Hannah. The girl sees her mother's semblance in the doll and at the same time becomes a mother to the toy, promising to look after it. The doll in its materiality represents thus the absent mother in the book. Van Tuyl states that "in survivor stories, dolls and toys may offer a way to grieve for the past and adapt to new life,"⁵¹ an insight that is certainly borne out by Charlotte the doll, which helps Hannah handle the loss of her mother and find joy in play. Hannah herself is a secondary character in the book, as her role in the plot is rather limited and she possessed very little agency. She is more of an object acted upon by other – adult – protagonists, such as her mother, who endeavors to do something for her daughter, defying the dire circumstances, and the grandparents, who take care of the young girl. The child's passivity is aptly conveyed by an illustration in which Hannah is sitting motionless, having her hair braided.⁵² It is only when playing with the doll that the girl

49 Tuszynska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 26.

50 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 27.

51 *Ibid.*, 29.

52 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 7.

is able to acquire agency: "Hannah combs Charlotte's hair right. She braids it anew. 'Just like mum and me,' she says delighted."⁵³

In *Bear and Fred*, the teddy bear functions as a "transitional object" that helps Fred find his footing when separated from his mother. This mirrors the function that the toy fulfilled in reality:

My daughter had a blanket she called Mynie, which served the same purpose my teddy bear did for me. An object from one's past is very important for children. This is the first object one chooses to connect with. My teddy bear couldn't talk but it had a truth and meaning that nothing else had.⁵⁴

The close link between the identities of the teddy bear and Fred is vividly conveyed in the book. It is via this link that Fred, as a Jewish child in wartime, stripped of any real agency and in most cases being an object of adults' actions, gains agency through the toy. When Mama tells him that she has no other choice but to leave him, Bear reports: "At that moment, I understood – I had to take care of Fred!"⁵⁵ The toy not only conducts the narrative in the book, but also consoles Fred, making the world a bit less frightening:

Every night Fred would whisper that he misses his father, mother and brothers, that he's sad to be alone, that the world is scary and that he's lucky that I'm his best friend. Fred whispered those things, and while talking to me he stroked his face with my paw. Sometimes Fred shed small and warm tears and I wiped them away.⁵⁶

By taking care of the teddy bear that takes care of Fred, Fred in fact takes care of himself. This dual role performed by Fred is captured in an image on the cover of the Hebrew edition of the book, which pictures three figures: Fred holding Bear and Bear embracing a miniature of Fred. This play with the teddy bear and one's own identity sheds a new light on the agency of Holocaust children: understanding but little of what was going around them, the children had to "grow up" quickly, just like Bear-the-narrator, and being still kids, they had to rely on help from toys in coping with loneliness, bereavement, precariously changing circumstances and various settings in which they

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁴ Lessing in Dafna Arad, "The Holocaust Told From the Perspective of a Teddy Bear," accessed May 7, 2023 <https://www.motl.org/the-holocaust-told-from-the-perspective-of-a-teddy-bear/>.

⁵⁵ Argaman and Ofer, *Bear and Fred*, 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

found themselves while hiding. Toys gave them the “power of being needed.”⁵⁷ Their toys from those times became part of their identities and of that reality, and as the age of the witnesses is drawing to an end, toys spin narratives on their behalf.

Toys and the Transmission of Memory

The possession of “luxury” objects, such as toys, at a time when so many Jewish children had lived and died in atrocious conditions was taboo among the survivors for a long time⁵⁸. This attitude incrementally changed, and the quantity of the toys donated to Yad Vashem illuminated their enormous relevance as objects inextricably bound with childhood, irrespective of the circumstances in which it unfolds: “In the cruel atmosphere of the Shoah, toys and games continued to exist even after other cultural behaviors and consumer objects had already disappeared.”⁵⁹ The toys gifted by the survivors to museums tell there the story of the youngest victims of the Holocaust to the following generations. As observed by Nitsa Dori, “learning about these objects and using them as a visual text, creates a connection to understanding the period – since these objects, the images appearing in them, and their traits, are part of the culture of the Jews of their times.”⁶⁰ Fred Lessing’s teddy bear has been called “The Mona Lisa of Yad Vashem” by Yehudit Inbar, an organizer of the *No Child’s Play* exhibition.⁶¹ The teddy bear is small and dirty, has frayed fur and a patched head, and its eyes are sewn on with a red thread, but it is being exactly the way it is that it symbolizes the toys of all the children of the Holocaust, simultaneously commemorating their lost childhood and their young lost lives:

57 Nitsa Dori, “Children’s Toys and Games during the Shoah, as Reflected in Five Hebrew Books,” *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 8 (2020): 23.

58 Dori, “Children’s Toys and Games during the Shoah,” 20; Dafna Arad, “Toys That Tell the Story of the Holocaust’s Youngest Victims,” *Haaretz*, October 2, 2014, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-10-02/ty-article/premium/toys-tell-story-of-shoahs-kid-victims/000017f-e4do-d568-ad7f-f7fb8add0000>.

59 *Ibid.*, 20.

60 *Ibid.*, 19.

61 Yehudit Inbar, “The Mona Lisa of Yad Vashem: The Teddy Bear that Fred Lessing Took with Him to His Hiding Place in the Netherlands,” (n.d.) Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center: Featured Artifacts, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.yadvashem.org/artifacts/featured/teddy-bear-fred-lessing.html>.

Fred's Bear expresses, in the deepest possible way, the essence of the world of children during the Shoah, who held onto a game or toy so they would not lose their memories. [...] Children's missing and lost objects during the Shoah symbolized everything that had been lost. Holding onto those objects and the meaning they carried for the uprooted children symbolized the memory connected with them. The objects themselves were the memory.⁶²

The survivors' toys are thus vehicles for memory. However, today's young audiences may find the original, decades-old toys on display at museums not really attractive, and the emotional load they carry in reviving the memory of the Holocaust, in particular of its youngest victims, may be difficult for children to relate to. The picture books discussed in this paper represent an attempt to tell these stories anew in a form suited and appealing to a contemporary young readership. The very fact of composing them is in and of itself an act of memory transmission to the following generations. In the Prologue to *Bear and Fred*, Bear relates the moment of being received at Yad Vashem via a special shipment:

A kind woman gathers me up in her arms and hugs me. Teardrops trickle down her face. A large man stands off to the side and says, "I've been hauling that huge carton around in my truck for miles, and for what? Just a small and tattered teddy bear. First everyone was so excited, and now they're all crying. What on earth is going on here?"⁶³

This episode can prepare young readers for a visit to the museum and seeing Fred Lessing's real toy there, an important role judging by the fact that if the delivery man is not impressed by the teddy bear as an object, his emotion is powerfully stirred by the responses of the people familiar with the biographies of Bear and the human being with whom he interacts. This cognitive function is also fulfilled by their story rendered in and through the picture book: shaped by text and image, the narrative introduces readers to the life stories of Fred and Bear, kindles emotions and crafts a link between the present and the past.

In *A Doll for Hannah*, Hannah sews with her grandmother's help a new dress for Charlotte and brushes and braids the doll's hair. Charlotte's old dress is "carefully put away" by the grandma.⁶⁴ On the symbolic level, playing with the

62 Dori, "Children's Toys and Games during the Shoah," 22.

63 Argaman and Ofer, *Bear and Fred*, 2.

64 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 36.

doll channels the transmission of history from generation to generation, with the preservation and storing of things – such as toys: a doll and its old dress made by the girl's mother in prison – being pivotal gestures. The old generation's care and commitment to safeguarding things are a salient guideline for memory transmission. The episode of making a new dress spotlights the need to "revive" memory, tend to it and give it a new form. On the one hand, the doll takes over the duties of Hannah's mother, and on the other, the girl herself assumes the responsibility of looking after the doll. In extratextual reality, Tiny kept her promise as she donated the doll to the museum and started the Fonds Albertine de Houwer [Albertine de Houwer Foundation],⁶⁵ in this way making sure that the memory of Charlotte Hamburger, her mother and a Holocaust victim, is perpetuated. On the level of materiality, the history of the doll on display at the Kazerne Dossin Museum is tightly knit with the histories of three women. It is in that real space that Charlotte Hamburger stayed, and it is to that space that she returns, not only as commemorated in a biography drawn up by the Museum, but also in the tale of *A Doll for Hannah*, which was presented at the Kazerne Dossin on 30 June 2018.⁶⁶ On the level of the text, the fates of the doll are also intertwined with the fates of three generations. Poppe's book makes one realize how the history of this object and the histories of Charlotte Hamburger, her daughter and her granddaughter interpenetrate. For their part, de Bode's illustrations, designed in sepia tints and bringing to mind old photographs, add authenticity to the plotline. Both the doll itself as a museum exhibit and the story of it are part of contemporary Holocaust narratives.

Some of the illustrations in *Mum Always Comes Back* are also stylized as old photographs or postcards, with elements of children's world of play incorporated into them. The line between the real and the imagined worlds is blurred, as rendered in the figures of the characters that, so to speak, partly come out of yellowed pages, in parallel to people who come out of Yael's tale years later. Other illustrations in the book offer an insight into the realities faced by the hiding girl, as they show a range of objects brought by her mother to the basement. The book is enringed by a white stripe with the embroidered pattern of a single flower from the dress of Zuzia the doll, which counterbalances the stigmatizing symbolism of the star of David on the armbands worn by the Jews. This device effectively provokes reconsidering the culturally entrenched Holocaust commemoration models and

65 Kazerne Dossin Memorial Biografieën, Charlotte Hamburger.

66 Kazerne Dossin Jaarverslag 2018, 2018 in vogelvlucht, accessed May 7, 2023, <http://annual-report.kazernedossin.memorial/archives/2018/index.html>.

embracing a new, more individualized and more tender approach. The new band protects Zosia's little big world enclosed in the book, encircling it with hope. Even if Tuszyńska's text unveils this world in a stylized account of an adult witness, the narrator has not lost yet the naive view of a sensitive child whose perception of the world beyond the basement entirely relied on her mother's stories and play with the objects she provided. This child-like viewpoint is also conveyed by some illustrations, notably by the double spread paired with the episode of hiding in the countryside, which shows a huge brown-and-gold dog with floppy ears and a friendly look in its eyes. A smiling, happy girl, wearing a headscarf with a flower print that mirrors Zuzia's dress, is leaning on the dog. The image conveys the duality intrinsic to the account offered by Zofia Zajczyk, who remembers what was good in the cruel reality she had inhabited as a child and fully realized what it had meant only as an adult. The text contains a multiplicity of historically realistic details: the imperative of hiding, forged gentile documents, the lack of food, etc. While these details have educational value in that they communicate the realities of the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War, they are often very drastic, as in the torture scene where the mother loses her eye and the cruelty of a villager who makes Zosia hide in a doghouse. Clearly, this is not an example of literature that uses "spare the child" strategies.⁶⁷ Quite the opposite, it employs confrontative solutions, which enhance the cognitive value of the narrative, especially when combined with the realization that Natalia, Zosia and her doll Zuzia had their counterparts in historical reality.

Conclusion

The toys of Holocaust survivors are material objects that appear in children's literature in the second decade of the twenty-first century and deserve to be addressed against a broader backdrop of the end of the era of the witness. Faced with this horizon, the toys carry on the narrative on behalf of the survivors with whose lives their own biographies interlaced. The fact that the representations acquire a new significance with the impending end of the era of the witness has already been foregrounded by the researchers of Holocaust photography. Narratives framed from the perspective of things reveal the agency of the objects. If, as averred by Domańska, "the more we humanize the thing, the greater chance we stand of developing

67 Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

non-anthropocentric approaches in the future,”⁶⁸ the picture books discussed in this paper, in which the identities of toys are so thoroughly interlocked with the identities of humans, should be regarded as attempts to head in that direction. In the books by Israeli and Flemish authors, the agency of toys transpires in the fact that the narratives are spun by the toys, with the identities of the survivors and the toys brought together both on the verbal level of the text and in the illustrations. By taking care of the doll, Hannah takes care of the memory of her mother; Fred looks after Bear, and Bear looks after the boy. In the picture book by the Polish authors, the entwining of Zosia’s and Zuzia’s identities is most emphatically pictured in the book’s images. The books that relate the biographies of authentic toys and the people associated with them are expressions of the care for the memory of the Holocaust. The toys and their representations in children’s literature acquire agency in child-initiated play, and – in a reciprocal relation – the children (re)gain agency through their toys. This mode of presenting children’s play which manifests an intergenerational investment in the perpetuation of memory invites us to revise our ideas of how the memory of the Holocaust can continue to be transmitted in contemporary culture, as the end of the era of the witness is looming. The books appear to call for renewing the manners and channels of memory transmission to adjust them to contemporary audiences. The representation of play in the three picture books shows that, even in wartime, children were children and needed to play. This aspect of childhood that coincided with the Second World War and the Holocaust is brought into relief by the toys with which children – both those who died in the war and the Holocaust survivors nearing the end of their lives today – played at the time. In literature, their toys are given a new appearance and a form that the following generation of children may find attractive and appealing. Comparing the book illustrations and the real toys makes it clear that the revamping of toys is indispensable in order to arouse interest in children whose knowledge of the Holocaust is insufficient to appreciate the emotional and commemorative value of the real toys without the aid of a fitting narrative furnished with illustrations. At the same time, the picture books effectively prepare young readers for an encounter with a more complex history of the Holocaust. The relevance of the three books discussed in this paper seems to stem chiefly from bringing together the Holocaust survivors’ toys carefully preserved at museums and representational play in children’s literature. This combination brings to the fore the ways in which contemporary culture can commemorate the

68 Domańska, “Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna,” 15.

lost childhood of the children who survived the Holocaust and also those who perished then.

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Abstract

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The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature

In this article, I discuss three picture books about the Holocaust produced by Israeli, Flemish and Polish authors: *Bear and Fred* (2016), *Een pop voor Hannah* [A doll for Hannah] (2018), and *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back] (2020). Their young protagonists represent Holocaust survivors, and the toys featured in these visual narratives represent their authentic playthings from that time, which today are put on display at the museums of Yad Vashem in Israel and Kazerne Dossin in Belgium. I examine the characteristic amalgamation of subject and object: the child protagonist and a toy. My aim is to explore these relationships, the representation of the agency of people and toys and the epistemic and commemorative value of these narratives. My theoretical framework draws on memory studies and thing theory, in which the being of objects is valued equally to the being of subjects and in which researchers argue for the agency of nonhuman materials, insisting that not only humans, but also objects, interact.

Keywords

Holocaust survivors, toys, doll play, teddy bear, testimonial objects, children's literature, picture books, nonhuman biography, agency