

Article

Holocaust Impiety in 21st Century Graphic Novels: Younger Generations ‘No Longer Obligated to Perpetuate Sorrow’

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Abstract: At a time where so few survivors remain alive and the extermination of European Jews is leaving the field of direct human experience, the evolving collective memory of the event is reflected in popular culture. There has recently been a rise in the number of graphic novels written on the subject of the Shoah, particularly in France, Germany, and North America. These works, written by second or even third-generation survivors nearly 80 years after the genocide, approach the event from perspectives that not only further Art Spiegelman’s path in that they challenge the so-called limits of Holocaust representations, but also open up new discussions on transgenerational trauma. Focusing on two graphic novels, Michel Kichka’s *Deuxième génération: Ce que je n’ai pas dit à mon père* (2012) and Jérémie Dres’ *Nous n’irons pas à Auschwitz* (2011), my aim here is to examine the new aspects of trauma that these texts present, more specifically the reluctance to deal with one’s past, the struggle to bear the weight of the ‘sacred’ memory of Auschwitz, and in some cases the lack of interest of the youth in the Shoah. Both these autobiographical texts narrate the story of men who end up making the conscious decision never to go to Auschwitz after finding out about their ancestors’ history, asserting their desire to not solely be defined by their family tragedy. These issues, which fit in with what Matthew Boswell and Joost Krijnen define as ‘Holocaust impiety’, mark a break with graphic novels from the 1970s and 1980s which, as Gillian Rose writes, ‘mystified’ the event as ‘something we dare not understand’.

Keywords: Holocaust literature; third generation; graphic novels; trauma; post-memory

1. Introduction

In their book *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation* (Aarons and Berger 2017), literary scholars Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger make an invaluable contribution to the recent reflection on the new complexities of Shoah memory. Specifically, they discuss the extent of the relationship between the central Jewish biblical assertions of redemption—‘we are punished for our sins’ (*mipenei hataeinu*) and ‘suffering is a reproof of love’ (*yessurin shel ahavah*)—and the representation of the event in third-generation authors’ literary productions (p. 107). To these paradigms of the Jewish religion and culture I would like to add that of ‘remember’ (*zachor*). This commandment appears no less than 200 times in the Hebrew Bible and symbolizes the importance of the passing of memory in Judaism. The Holocaust¹ has been represented in every possible form over the last 70 years, and its memory is indeed remembered very strongly in the Jewish community as children grow up celebrating

¹ I will use the words ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Shoah’ interchangeably in this paper. Aware of the debate around the different terms that exist to describe the event, I choose to use both.

Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day, first established by the state of Israel) and fast on the Tenth of Tevet to pay homage to the dead. However, there is a growing desire from younger generations to detach themselves from an overwhelmingly painful memory of the past. Identified by several critics, amongst whom Alan L. Berger and Asher Z. Milbauer in 'The Burden of Inheritance' (Berger and Milbauer 2013), the need to sever stifling links to the event and to regain agency in the construction of their own family history is particularly noticeable in third-generation authors' works.

The reluctance to fully immerse themselves in their ancestors' experiences and the anxiety arising from the 'duty' to pass on memory is present in contemporary American, German, or French novels (see Krijnen (2016)'s *Holocaust Impiety in Jewish American Literature: Memory, Identity, (post)Postmodernism*), but also in graphic literature, a genre considerably less focused on in Holocaust criticism. The two recently published graphic novels I focus on in this article are examples of texts written by authors who grew up on 'the periphery' of the event (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 4) and that show a clear reticence, for different reasons, to hear about their family's past. Drawing on the duality that seems to be at the heart of Holocaust literary studies—Holocaust piety (as coined per Gillian Rose 1996) and Holocaust impiety (as defined by Matthew Boswell 2012)—I analyze here two autobiographical works originally published in French: *Deuxième génération—Ce que je n'ai pas dit à mon père* (Second Generation—The Things I Didn't Tell My Father) (2012/2016)² by Belgian-Israeli author Michel Kichka and *Nous n'irons pas voir Auschwitz* (We Won't See Auschwitz) (2011/2012)³ by French author Jérémie Dres.⁴ Both the authors, respectively the son and grandson of Holocaust survivors, narrate their difficult relationship with their family traumas, struggling to find the desire to listen to perpetual sorrow and refusing to go to Auschwitz. These texts, challenging on the one hand the stigma attached to 'popular' literature deemed unfit to deal with such a subject,⁵ present readers with a completely different dynamic to that found in the most famous Holocaust graphic novel, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986/1991), in which the son dedicates years of his life to listening to his father and passing on his memories.

2. Holocaust Graphic Novels Post-*Maus*

Evidently, one cannot discuss the subject of Holocaust graphic novels without referring to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, one of the best examples of an illustrated account of the genocide and certainly the most well-known, though not the only one. *Maus* both shocked and impressed as it, as Thomas Doherty (1996, p. 70) writes, 'redrew the contractual terms for depictions of the Holocaust in popular art', offering 'a media-wise vision whose rough images put traumatic history into sharp focus'. The two-volume comic is based on the conversations between Spiegelman and his father, who tells him about his experience as a Polish Jew and a Holocaust survivor. In his work, Spiegelman chose to represent the Polish characters as pigs, Nazis as cats, and Jews as mice ('*Maus*'/'*Mäuse*' in German). In 1992, *Maus* received the Pulitzer Prize (the Special Award in Letters), a tour de force in that it managed to overcome the harsh criticism generally addressed to any text dealing with the Holocaust, its potentially breaking of moral barriers by using animal characters mostly perceived as a way of respectfully paying homage to the victims of the dehumanizing *Endlösung* (Final Solution). Many studies have been conducted on the revolutionary aspect of the text as well as on Spiegelman's

² This work was first published in French in 2012 and in English in 2016.

³ This work was first published in French in 2011 and in English in 2012.

⁴ Both authors, while from different countries, share a similar background in terms of literary influence, as they grew up reading 'Franco-Belgian comics', comics created either in Belgium or in France and destined to a readership in both countries. Belgium and France have a long-standing tradition in the creation of comics, be it comic books or graphic novels.

⁵ I use the term 'popular literature' here as understood by Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2009, p. 1) when he describes 'popular culture': 'to work on "popular culture" means, to put it simply, to take interest in a body of work that is neither acknowledged nor sanctioned by traditional academic culture, that is to say non-literary literature, non-classical music, or [. . .] comics' (my translation of: '*travailler sur la "popular culture" revient à dire, en gros, que l'on s'intéresse à un objet qui est composé de l'ensemble des domaines non reconnus, non consacrés par la culture universitaire classique, c'est-à-dire la littérature non littéraire, la musique non classique, ou [. . .] la bande dessinée*').

subsequent work *Metamaus* (2011), which includes further background material and filmed footage of Vladek Spiegelman (see for example *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*, edited by Deborah R. Geis 2003).

As Tal Bruttman (2009, p. 174) writes, *Maus* is the symbol of a paradox in the field of Holocaust comic books: 'in the abundant production of comics, one counts very few works dealing with the Holocaust' yet the genre 'boasts one of the most powerful and universally identifiable works treating the Holocaust'. One could argue that the number of comic books focusing on the Shoah is far lower⁶ than novels and personal accounts published on the topic because of the heavy cap of what Gillian Rose termed as 'Holocaust piety' on any representation of the event. Rose (1996, p. 43) defines 'Holocaust piety' as the insistence on 'silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge' and as 'in short, the witness of ineffability'. Holocaust piety is best epitomized in the claims of, for example, Theodor Adorno, Claude Lanzmann, or Berel Lang (2000, p. ix), who argues in *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* that 'certain limits based on a combination of historical constraints impinge on representations or images of the Holocaust, as a matter of both fact and right'. To Rose (1996, p. 43), Holocaust piety might translate into a will to perhaps anxiously protect us from understanding, dangerously 'mystifying something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are—human, all too human', therefore forbidding Holocaust representations from being either too detailed, too graphic, too fictional, too poetic, or not detailed enough, not graphic enough, not eloquent enough, too real, and so on. Jeffrey Shandler (1999, p. xvii) also highlights the risk of Holocaust literary criticism turning into 'exercises of moral connoisseurship, distinguishing "responsible" or "proper" representations of the Holocaust from works deemed "trivialising" or "distorted"'.

The appearance of the longer, more ambitious 'graphic novel' in the 1960s did not end the 'stigmatization of comic books as a juvenile medium' and 'as less than literature and less than visual art', 'capable of engaging only individuals with immature and unsophisticated tastes' (Lopes 2006, p. 404). As Sean Connors (2010, p. 65) explains, a 'misperception has plagued the comic book for the better part of its existence', which 'regards works written in the medium of comics (be it comic books or graphic novels) as a less complex, less sophisticated form of reading material'. Bruttman (2009, p. 173) also writes that 'despite enjoying the highest rates of circulations at lending libraries, the comic book is seen first and foremost as a product of mass consumption destined for a readership, but not for conservation as a cultural object or intellectual work'. Due to the stigma associated with sequential art and the fact that Holocaust piety generally prohibits the representation of the event in 'popular' culture typically thought to be destined to entertain (see the recent controversy of 'Eva.stories (2019)' on Instagram), few graphic novels narrating the event have attracted the attention of critics. None have reached a comparable notoriety to that of *Maus*, with the exception of Will Eisner's works (which only mentions the event in an indirect manner, see *The Contract with God: Life on Dropsie Avenue*, 2006). It is only recently that the increase in interest in the idea of literary Holocaust *impiety* 'within the context of fading social memory' (Boswell 2012, p. 33) and detailed psychological studies on third-generation trauma have sparked several reflections on recently published graphic novels such as Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2003), Joe Kubert's *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (2003), or Rutu Modan's *The Property* (2013) (see Henry Gonshak's 'Beyond *Maus*: Holocaust Graphic Novels', Gonshak (2009) and *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* edited by Baskin and Omer-Sherman 2010).

Both literary and psychological studies seem to converge on the idea that an important shift has been taking place in Holocaust memory. The changes between second and third-generation survivors' Holocaust trauma, or rather passed-on trauma, can be characterized by a growing desire to move on from the event. American author Michael Chabon states that 'it is part of the legacy of [his] generation

⁶ Here, I refer to works focusing on the Holocaust rather than works that mention it. There are many comics that allude to the event, a great number of them recorded in the catalogue of the 2017 exhibition 'Shoah et bande dessinée' held at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris (see *Shoah et bande dessinée*, edited by Didier Pasamonik et Joël Kotek 2017).

following the Holocaust—to have those powerful feelings of wishing it were not so, wishing it could be undone’ to explain why he ‘tried to use [his] imagination to undo at least some effects of the Holocaust, and to imagine a way out of the catastrophe’ (quoted in [Krijnen 2016](#), p. 1). There is a strengthening need to free one’s individuality from an overwhelmingly painful past, and a refusal to bear the burden of previous generations’ survivors’ guilt. Joost [Krijnen \(2016\)](#) very clearly describes this in his analysis of recent American Holocaust fiction by looking at texts that rewrite the event of the Holocaust or imagine a different ending to it. Bjorn [Krondorfer \(1995\)](#) has also contributed to the issue, particularly commenting on the potential benefits of ‘forgetting’ in his research in reconciliation studies. In recent autobiographical graphic novels, these issues are very visible, not necessarily the desire to forget, but the desire to no longer live in and for the past.

3. Deuxième Génération: Ce que je n’ai pas dit à mon père (Second Generation: The Things I Didn’t Tell My Father), Michel Kichka, 2012/2016

Originally published in 2012 by award-winning Belgian-Israeli illustrator Michel Kichka, the English version of this text was presented on 11 April 2019, on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), at a student event held by the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme at New York headquarters. In this autobiographical graphic novel, Michel Kichka (born in 1954) tells of his struggles to grow up as the son of a survivor, as his father Henri Kichka was the only one to come back from Auschwitz, where he was sent with both his parents and his siblings in 1942.

The title itself is already the bearer of an interesting idea. *The Things I Didn’t Tell My Father*: here, the son of a survivor is reversing the roles of the traditional transmission of memory. The son is the one who does not say, who refuses to speak, who does not reveal a dark secret. He is no longer the receiver of a message, as Art is in *Maus*, but on the contrary the one who withholds information. This title, as is the cover drawing of Michel literally walking over his father’s enormous prisoner cap, acts as a symbol for the main message of the text, in that it insists on this son’s claim to regain agency in his own progression and his own history, against the figure of a father whose past overshadows all of his family’s lives. This dynamic is one that is built in opposition to the one in *Maus*, where it is the son who is seeking to know, and who probes his father for more details about his past.

One of the main features that has been identified by clinical psychologists in second-generation Holocaust survivor’s trauma is the (over)identification with parental trauma in children of ex-prisoners. As Dani Rowland-Klein explains, ‘survivors’ children have presented with symptoms resembling those of their parents, including depression, anxiety, phobias, guilt and separation problems’ ([Rowland-Klein 2004](#), p. 119). Art Spiegelman’s profile fits in well with this paradigm as he himself ‘duck[ed] in and out of depression’ and was told by his therapist to ‘deal with [his] own reality, not [his] father’s’ (quoted in [Dreifus 2018](#), np.). Dina Wardi also claims that children ‘attempt to fill [an]emotional void between their parents and them and construct the continuation of the family history, creating a hidden connection with the relatives who perished in the Holocaust and providing the parents a way of discharging unresolved unconscious conflicts’ (quoted in [Rowland-Klein 2004](#), p. 120). This is also true of Spiegelman who explains that talking about the war with his father was the only way for him to emotionally connect with him: ‘This is the oddness of it [. . .] Auschwitz became for us a safe place: a place where he could talk and I would listen’ (quoted in [Cooke 2011](#), np.). In *The Things I Didn’t Tell My Father*, which was written 25 years later, Kichka rebels against this model and seems to reject his family’s memory instead of entering a kind of ‘psychogenic osmosis’ ([Brenner 2004](#), p. 181).

The first two parts of the graphic novel highlight Michel’s struggle to come to terms with the gap between public and personal memories of the Holocaust. Michel grows up in the 1960s, surrounded by books on Hitler and the Second World War and attending memorials and homage ceremonies, but is incapable of connecting what he hears and knows about the event to his father’s past, simply because his father refuses to talk about it. As a child, he searches for his father Henri’s face on photographs of camp prisoners and tries to imagine what his dad looked like in a striped uniform, starved and ill.

As his father does not speak, little Michel ‘needed to see him to believe it’. He is ‘afraid [he] wouldn’t recognize him’ and ‘afraid [he] would’ (Kichka 2016, pp. 6–7).

The fact he does not know about his father’s personal experience creates such a huge void that Michel is prone to nightmares. What scares him even more than the knowledge that most of his family is dead is that relatives such as his aunts, uncles, and grandparents are not talked about. Michel is obsessed with the war and is paradoxically met with silence from the only person he knows who lived through it. The Holocaust is everywhere, but also nowhere, a paradox most tellingly symbolized by his father’s absence of eyes, hidden behind very thick glasses. Eight-year old Michel can never quite distinguish them properly, and imagines his father might have lost his eyes after crying too much in the past and having ‘used up all the tears in his body in the camps’ (p. 44). This serves as a way for Michel to explain his father’s seemingly cold and unemotional rapport to his past, but is also for the child proof that his father really did survive Auschwitz.⁷

Throughout his childhood, Michel is made to feel by his father that he represents his ‘way of getting back’ at the Nazis (p. 18). Everything he succeeds in, is to Henri Kichka, a way to show his persecutors that they have failed to ruin him. All three of Henri’s children are ‘one over on the Krauts’ (p. 26), all bearing the names of dead family members. Michel grows up with the strange feeling that Hitler somewhere is somehow angered by him getting good grades in school, a thought that does not make sense to him but that he cannot discuss with his father (p. 18). What the young child goes through is characteristic of many second-generation survivors who grow up with the idea that, as Samuel Juni (2016, p. 8) states, ‘incorrect choices can be fatal’. Michel himself does not feel any particular kind of survivor’s guilt, yet this guilt is constantly imposed on him by his own father. To Juni, ‘a child who lives with constant worries of something happening—a child who is taught “One mistake, and you lose”—can hardly be expected to emerge with a sense of self-efficacy’ (ibid.). Indeed, Michel wonders: ‘As “son of”, am I not always fated to please [my father] in order to make up for what he went through? Until what age do we remain their “child”, with all that that implies?’ (p. 49)

Paradoxically the children are made to bear the burden of a past that they are simultaneously shut out from, as they literally do not understand the Yiddish language spoken by their parents. Unlike the present time where numerous cultural entities are trying to revive Yiddish culture and literature (the 2018 International Commemorative Conference of Yiddish Culture and Language took place in Czernowitz to mark the 110th anniversary of the very first conference), many survivors of the Shoah in the 1960s and 1970s did not want to speak Yiddish to their children because it was ‘the language of the ‘flames’, the language of ‘death’, the language of the ‘ghetto’ (my translation, Kahn 2013, np.). Hence why Michel feels frustrated and marginalized from his family’s secrets: ‘I gradually got in the habit of not listening to them, even when they were speaking French. What did they have to hide from us? Why were we left out of family discussions? The things they said in that language were probably things that would have helped us understand who we were’ (Kichka 2016, p. 29).

From the point of view of the family children, the Shoah is an unknown yet tyrannical memory that governs their life in the household. Rules are set according to their father’s mood, itself inevitably linked to Hitler: ‘We never raised our voices, because Dad wanted us to fit the image of the perfect family he wanted to recreate. The slightest conflict gave him “stomach pains”, because “Hitler had given him an ulcer”. The rule at home was the following: Dad was always right, and whenever he was wrong or we didn’t agree, we kept it to ourselves.’ (p. 30).

⁷ In Joe Sacco’s non-fiction comic *Palestine*, focusing on his experiences as a journalist in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in December 1991 and January 1992, the author chooses to represent his own character with dark glasses hiding his eyes. Wendy Kozol argues that this eye-less depiction functions as an ‘avatar [...] call[ing] attention to the privileged perspective of the outsider’ (Kozol 2012, p. 167). In *Second Generation*, a similar idea could be applied, with Henri’s glasses acting as a screen between the man who experienced Auschwitz and the one who has not.

Unlike *Maus* in which Art's father Vladek's voice dominates the story, *The Things I Didn't Tell My Father* is focused on the son's trauma, as opposed to his father's memories themselves. In his graphic novel, Kichka tells his own story rather than his dad's, refusing to conform to, or moving away from, the paradigms of second-generation survivors who become the containers for their parents 'projections' (Rowland-Klein 2004, p. 133). This is probably linked to the fact Spiegelman and Kichka wrote at different times in terms of collective memory. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Spiegelman published *Maus*, the world was witnessing the awakening of the Jewish memory of the Second World War, a specific memory of the Holocaust within the collective narrative of the conflict. Until then, Élie Wiesel or Primo Levi's testimonies had not been read by a large audience and had not sparked much interest. Films like *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann mark the beginning of 'the era of the witness' (Wieviorka [1998] 2006) and along with it the development of a memory of the Romani or the Righteous Among the Nations. In the 1990s and even more prominently in the 2000s, this 'ère du témoin' contributed to the development of a plurality of memories which led to what several historians and sociologists identify as a 'saturated memory'. Henry Rousso and Eric Conan (see *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, 1998) remind their readers of the importance to not only remember but also *accept* their past, and Régine Robin (see *La mémoire saturée*, 2003) reflects on the (over)abundance of commemorations and ceremonies which could eventually lead to the disappearance of memory in oblivion.⁸ Kichka's *Second Generation* could be the reflection of an era in which the Holocaust and its visual and literary representations have become perhaps overrepresented, if not banalized, in popular culture, affecting the very transmission of its memory.

What brings a drastic change to Michel's life and what unlocks his father's untold and unspoken memories is his younger brother Charly's unexpected suicide. During an evening of the *shivva*, the traditional Jewish mourning ritual during which family and friends gather together, Henri Kichka speaks about his past for the first time. Suddenly, the passing of his son, who looked just like him, activates in him a desire to speak, an unstoppable flow of words. He speaks at length about the camps, going into precise details about anecdotes of him hiding under a pile of corpses to escapes the shots of a zealous Nazi soldier. One drawing shows Michel's father speaking to the people around him and the word 'talks' written all over the space between him and his audience (Kichka 2016, p. 54). His words fill the room, not leaving space for any other topic or any other person's feelings, as if suffocating the atmosphere (ibid.). Henri Kichka develops what medical doctors call 'delayed-onset PTSD' (see Barak 2000), which occurs when symptoms arise over six months after a traumatic event. Often seen in aging individuals, trauma might be reactivated by another event, the death of a loved one for example. The trauma, in this case experiencing the Shoah, that survivors spent a lifetime trying to suppress suddenly becomes unmanageable and more difficult to silence. In *The Things I Didn't Tell My Father*, Michel writes: 'He was the one who found Charly, lying dead on his bed. I think it suddenly brought back all those images at once, the images of the dead he had managed to suppress as best he could. The two traumas must have come crashing together' (Kichka 2016, p. 56).

⁸ Régine Robin writes: 'This surfeit of memory that engulfs us today could well be nothing but a figure of forgetting. Because the "new age" of the past is that of saturation. [...] Saturation [...], through a fluctuation in the perception of the Shoah, between a core memory that refuses to come to terms with the event, a kitsch memory of the past, based on Hollywood representations, an artificial memory that thinks it can insure, through mass culture [...] the transmission of the event to future generations after the disappearance of the last witnesses, and a critical memory attempting to escape fetishism by inscribing in the heart of its memorial forms the marks of this impossibility' (my translation from: 'Cet excès de mémoire qui nous envahit aujourd'hui pourrait bien n'être qu'une figure de l'oubli. Car le nouvel âge du passé est celui de la saturation. [...] Saturation [...], par une oscillation dans l'appréhension de la Shoah, entre une mémoire fondamentale qui refuse de faire le deuil de l'événement, une mémoire kitsch du passé, indexée sur les formes de représentation hollywoodienne, une mémoire prothèse qui croit pouvoir assurer, par les formes de la culture de masse, sans banalisation, la transmission vivante de l'événement aux générations futures après la disparition des derniers témoins, et une mémoire critique qui tente de sortir du fétichisme en inscrivant, au cœur de ses formes mémorielles les marques de cette impossibilité' (Robin 2003, p. 19)).

Although he envisages the idea that his father has found his own way of coping with loss, focusing on the pain of the past rather than on his son's death in an attempt to shield himself from having to face the loss of a child, the feeling that overwhelms Michel is uncontrollable anger (p. 59). While he is moved by his father's story, he is both envious of his father who can focus on something else than Charly's suicide and furious because of the very fact the attention in the room is not entirely centered on his deceased brother. Michel explains: '*Shiva* is for mourning, for expressing your pain, for sharing memories, both good and bad ones, for talking about the deceased, for honoring him one last time, as a family, surrounded by friends. For me, it was totally eclipsed' (p. 56).

It is from then on that his reaction to anything concerning the Holocaust is one of reticence and refusal, as he associates the memory of the Shoah to a selfish intruder in his life:

It dawns on me that he is talking about what he went through during the Shoah for the first time. I thought we had come together to talk about Charly. I needed to mourn him. Dad's talking about himself and I can't bring myself to listen to him, whereas I should be feeling happy that he's finally. Some crappy timing! Instead of joining the circle of friends, I stand to the side. Ever since that night, I've been a little reticent towards anything to do with the Shoah. My father started sharing his story in schools. He would send me articles in the press, photos and documents. I would put them away in a drawer without reading them. [...] Whenever he called me up and asked: 'Did you read my book?' I told him I was swamped. The truth is, I was still mad at him for the ruined *shiva*. (p. 55).

To Michel, the Holocaust goes from being a memory that ruined his childhood to one that prevents him from mourning his brother.

Henri Kichka then starts writing books (which Michel refuses to read) and participates in many memorial days, conferences, and museum openings. A museum in Vielsalm bears his name and he is always meeting officials or organizing trips to Auschwitz. Michel warily watches his father's status going from 'Shoah victim to Shoah hero' (p. 78). Not only does he resent his father from a personal point of view, but he also finds the particular ways in which the Holocaust is commemorated problematic. He is not keen on seeing his father acquiring a certain notoriety because of his testimony, and also mentions he finds the groups of young Israelis carrying their flags around Auschwitz 'inappropriate' and lacking 'humility' (p. 89).

Henri wants his son to visit Auschwitz with him. Michel, feeling pressured and forced to do something he never particularly desired to do, refuses to go. Page 84 of the graphic novel is framed by the huge black entrance gates of the camp, on which the letters read 'COME WITH ME TO AUSCHWITZ'. The letters replacing *Arbeit macht frei* imprison Michel in his father's memory. Everybody around him tells him he should go and that it is his duty as the son of a survivor to visit the place where so many members of his family were killed, but he just cannot find it in him to organize a visit there. A panel shows Michel standing alone on the right, facing a group of angry people shouting at him: 'Go to Auschwitz!' 'How dare you?' 'You're his son!' 'We went!' 'It's your duty!' 'You ungrateful son!' 'What are you waiting for?' (p. 84). Incapable of formulating it openly to his father and to his accusers, Michel tells the reader: 'Auschwitz! The truth is I don't want to go' (p. 85). He even justifies his decision, as if he felt the need to give arguments for a shocking claim: 'I don't need to go there to realize it happened', 'I grew up with its ghosts' 'I grew up with its symbols' 'I grew up in its shadow' 'I grew up in its stench' (ibid.). The reader is not told explicitly whether or not Michel ends up accompanying his father to the camp.⁹ Again, this contrasts with Art Spiegelman who went to Auschwitz twice, in an effort to represent the camps in a documentary manner in *Maus*.

⁹ Here, it is worth noting that Kichka's work was published in 2012, in a period where his native Belgium was going through complex debates surrounding the idea of the '*devoir de mémoire*' (duty to remember). The country only recognised the role of Belgian authorities in anti-Jewish persecutions in 2007, just months after the report 'Docile Belgium' focusing on the responsibilities of Belgian authorities in the Shoah (directed by historian Rudi Van Doorslaer), was presented to the Senate. This contributed to reinforcing a climate of tension in both the political and the academic spheres, as Walter Pauli explains:

This graphic novel reads as a painful confession, as the debunking of a myth according to which second-generation survivors would be particularly keen on passing the memory of the Shoah. The title of this text is significant in that it highlights the shame, or perhaps the taboo, that revolves around this issue, around what Michel implies is a masquerade of a 'model family' (p. 27) orchestrated by the descendants of survivors who, in the aim not to aggravate their parents or hurt their loved ones, *did not tell* what they felt growing up in the shadow of the Shoah. The work can seem controversial in the sense that it is not one that considers the memory of the Holocaust in any kind of sacred or reverent manner. On the contrary, it depicts the story of a rebellion against it and its consequences on survivors' children and grandchildren. Hence why the title also reads almost as an apology, one the one hand inferring to us the 'impious' anger and frustration provoked by the memory of the Holocaust, but also the shame and guilt deriving from this very anger.

4. *Nous n'irons pas voir Auschwitz* (We Won't See Auschwitz), Jérémie Dres, 2011/2012

We Won't See Auschwitz (English edition published in 2012) is the first graphic novel of French illustrator Jérémie Dres (37). It recounts his and his brother's trip to Poland, looking to piece together their deceased grandmother's history. Their family quest allows readers to meet today's Polish Jewish community, through various figures such as that of young artists in Warsaw, American rabbis, or members of the TSKŻ, the Jewish Social-Cultural Association in Poland. The particularity of this Holocaust survivor's grandson, which is paradoxically the title of his work, is that he insists on *not* going to Auschwitz. According to Dres, the Shoah has become the central if not sole focus of Jewish culture today, and he wants to make sure his discovery of Jewish heritage is minimally connected to the genocide. As in Kichka's work, this graphic novel raises many questions in terms of the passing on of memory and the evolving changes in younger generations of Holocaust survivors who have 'put some distance behind them', 'transgressing a family taboo' as they feel they are 'no longer obliged to perpetuate sorrow' (Potel 2012, pp. 4–5).

We Won't See Auschwitz can be identified as the next step in the evolution of representation of Holocaust memory after the issues touched on in *The Things I Didn't Tell My Father*. While Kichka is in a dynamic of sole rejection of the painful memories, Dres is in a 'quest which breaks free of death to remember life' (ibid.). Dres is very much involved in the search for his family's history, particularly trying to find traces of the house where his grandmother lived in Warsaw's old town and wanting to learn about the Jews that still remain in Poland, yet he wants his journey to be completely disconnected from the Shoah, of which the memory 'overshadows all the rest'. The 'rest' is what he goes to look for in Poland (Dres 2012, p. 18), perhaps embodying what Victoria Aarons calls 'an incongruous forward march into the past' (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 92).

In Poland, Jérémie Dres and his brother reminisce about their father's mother, Téma Barab, who moved to France from Warsaw in 1930. While her childhood was severely affected by anti-Semitic tensions in Poland before she had to hide in a closet in occupied France, Dres chooses not to focus on memories which would only 'perpetuat[e] the nightmare haunting all [Jews]' (p. 180).¹⁰ The graphic

¹⁰ 'According to [Meinen (German historian author of *Die Shoah in Belgien*, which implies that most Belgian Jewish victims were arrested by German authorities as opposed to Belgian ones)], Belgian historians put too much emphasis on their own guilt, while the main culprits are the Germans, and all of them. That conclusion is now and again even picked up politically in the current amnesty debate: do you see that all that wailing over one's own guilt and responsibility is a form of historical masochism? That is of course not the case' (my translation of '*Belgische historici leggen volgens [Meinen] te eenzijdig de nadruk op de eigen schuld, terwijl de voornaamste schuldigen de Duitsers zijn, en zij allen. Die conclusie wordt nu her en der zelfs politiek opgeraapt in het actuele amnestiedebat: zie je wel dat al dat geweeklaag over eigen schuld en verantwoordelijkheid een vorm van historisch masochisme is? Dat is natuurlijk niet zo*', quoted in Brüll and Lanneau 2014, p. 107). This is not to say that Kichka's trauma is solely linked to a specific sociopolitical context, but that the tensions he felt in the early 2000s might have been exacerbated by the larger debate taking place in Belgium (a debate that was mostly kept to the academic spheres, receiving little media attention).

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Dres does not tell the reader about his grandmother having to hide from the Nazis in France. This is only mentioned by his brother, who signed the 'afterword' of the novel.

novel, like Kichka's, then becomes a paradox: it focuses on the search for the past of a woman who had to leave her home because of anti-Jew movements and would have most likely become a victim of the Shoah had she stayed, while at the same time actively trying not to mention Auschwitz (a name that only appears four times in the text).

Claire Gorrara (2018, p. 123), author of the only two studies published to date on the text, explains: 'In Dres's comic book, the choice to delocalize the memory of the Holocaust, to untie it from its mooring in Auschwitz as the Holocaust *lieu de mémoire* par excellence, gives shape to family stories that fall outside the scope of official commemoration and the mantra of a "duty to remember"'. Yet, looking closely at the particular family stories recounted in *We Won't See Auschwitz*, all of them are invariably linked somehow to the Shoah, contributing to the construction of the text as one that falls *within* the scope of official commemoration. The question Dres text asks is whether or not there still is an aspect of Jewish culture and identity unaffected by the Holocaust and the war, or at least if it is possible to salvage 'the broken, hidden part' of a rich and complex Jewish heritage (Dres 2012, p. 180). Yet, the Jewish heritage Dres is after is essentially that of a post-Shoah world. When he arrives in Poland, the author first sets foot in Warsaw's old town, reconstructed after the Nazis destroyed the city, a reconstitution in which there is no trace of the 'once-thriving Jewish community' (p. 10). The only remnants of the Warsaw ghetto are a wall that has 'never been cleaned' and is 'in terrible condition', on which huge posters made from family photos collected from survivors have been put up as part of a project named *I Can Still See Their Faces* (pp. 57–59). The few Jews left in Poland form 'a tiny community' (p. 30) after many left in the 1930s or were killed by the Nazis. The first young Jew Dres meets, Jan Spiewak, one of the founders of the Jewish organization Zoom, just released his first movie: interviews of Holocaust survivors (p. 28). One of the leaders of TSKŻ is keen to promote Polish historian Dariusz Libionka's new book that 'compares the collaboration in Poland and the Vichy regime' (p. 48). All over Poland, 'people from Israel or elsewhere' are 'returning to their former shtetl to find out there's nothing left' (p. 75). Rabbi Schuman of the Beit Warszawa movement received 'a grant to oversee [children] in memorial work on the former shtetls' (p. 86). The Jewish heritage that Dres is willing to find in Poland and promote in his work is ineluctably linked to the Shoah: unlike what the author first thought, the memory of Auschwitz is an inescapable trauma that is still too recent to be entirely eluded from Jewish contemporary cultural production.

While Kichka's graphic novel is centered on personal memory, as the author tries to sever ties that would link him to collective duties, such as going to Auschwitz or being set on passing on his father's story, Dres' first objective is to narrate the story of a Jewish *community*: 'the journey wouldn't be just a personal one. It'd bear witness to the future of an entire people' (p. 19). However, what Dres is constantly confronted to during his journey are series of individual stories marked by tragedy, forming overall a particularly divided community. Jan Spiewak explains to him that 'even within the [Jewish] community, relations are strained. No leaders, all interest groups, tensions with the community in Kraków' (p. 27). The younger generations argue over what it means to be Jewish, some only welcoming 'Halachic Jews' (p. 27), others claiming they never go to the synagogue as they 'do not believe God exists' (p. 49). Dres himself seems to grow confused as to what his Jewish identity is based on, and worries about rabbis 'noticing [him and his brother] are not practicing Jews at all and force [them] to have a bar-mitzvah' (p. 89). As Alan Berger (2016, p. 83) states, 'post-Holocaust identity is fragmented and seeking cohesion'; the revival of a rich Jewish heritage that Dres is looking for in Poland is still in its very early stages in 2011, and he is faced with more division than he expected, as symbolized by the lack of continuity between the different chapters, each focusing on a different representative of the Jewish community. Dres' disappointment when discovering the apparent absence of Jewish togetherness gradually grows clearer throughout the text. After failing to reconnect with 'the Jewish Atlantis' (Dres 2012, p. 55), the author recounts hearing a voice whilst in a semi-conscious state during an office in a synagogue: 'what you seek no longer exists' (p. 174). Of course, 'the Jewish renaissance is no dream' (p. 159) (the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków is about to hold its 29th

edition and the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP) organized its first congress in 2012), but it is a revival that is developing in the shadow of the Shoah.

Although he has not come to Poland with the idea of focusing on the Shoah, Dres is surprised by the lack of effort (from the Polish government or the Polish people) to maintain alive the memory of the Holocaust victims. Interestingly enough, Dres only risks himself to a couple of comments on the state of Jewish cemeteries and the 'general indifference' of the country (p. 139), but never openly discusses it with Polish people, nor does he share his later thoughts on the issue once back home. The only person who is featured talking about the memory of wartime Poland is an unnamed man, and although two pages are dedicated to his socio-historical explanation of the problematic collective remembrance in his country (pp. 47–48), Dres does not react to it. The illustrator's fear of bringing up his Jewishness when speaking to Poles—'I figure it's not a memory the want stirred up' (p. 24)—highlights the nation's ongoing complicated relationship with the memory of the Second World War.

Indeed, *We Won't See Auschwitz* was written at a time of important tensions in discussions on the subject of Polish responsibility in Nazi crimes. In 2000, Jan Tomasz Gross publishes *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, in which the historian narrates the 1941 pogrom of Jedwabne, the massacre committed against Polish Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors. A few years later, Jan Grabowski writes *I know this Jew! Blackmailing the Jews, Warsaw, 1939–1943*, focusing on the Polish blackmailers who helped identifying Jews in Warsaw, followed by *Hunt for the Jews. Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (2013), which also analyses the involvement of the local Polish population in the search for and the killing of Jews. These publications sparked heated debates in Poland, all the more as they appeared shortly after the creation of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN), created to preserve 'the remembrance of the enormity of the number of victims, the losses and damages suffered by the Polish people during World War II and after it ended; the patriotic tradition of the struggle of the Polish people against the occupiers, the Nazism and communism' (IPN [1998] 2016, intr.). Led by a director elected by the Polish parliament, the historical narrative presented by the IPN is one that is to an extent supervised by the government, who, as ex-director Janusz Kurtyka explains, 'can choose certain themes which it chooses to support and promote' (my translation, quoted in Behr 2019, p. 3). The IPN thus finds itself contributing to the reinforcement of the 'official' memory of the Second World War in Poland, one of a nation 'abandoned by its British and French allies' to face the 'aggression and destruction of the independent Polish republic', crushed 'by the cooperation of two totalitarian regimes, German and Soviet' (IPN 2018, np.). The controversy surrounding both competing narratives of the period reached a crisis in 2018, when the Polish parliament voted a law (later rephrased) calling for up to three years in prison for accusing the Polish state or people of involvement or responsibility in the killing of Jewish civilians (particularly the use of the phrase 'Polish death camps'), when the IPN published a report entitled 'The criminal nature of the German occupation in Poland, 1939–1945', explicitly reflecting a 'rather biased narrative' of 'a nation of heroes and victims' (Behr 2019, p. 1).

Dres and Kichka, who also briefly mentions his uneasiness regarding tourists carrying Israeli flags in Auschwitz, seem to have cornered themselves into a position where they feel they cannot legitimately express their views on Shoah memory. Both titling their works according to what they have not done and will not do, both refusing to be defined solely by a traumatic memory, they seem to also silence themselves by refusing to fully engage with issues linked to collective remembrance. This displays an even further paradox in these complex graphic novels, in which both narrators claim their need and right to build their identity outside the paradigms of Holocaust memory, yet also worry about the way this very memory is kept alive. There is tension in both books as Dres and Kichka struggle to find their place in the debate around memory transmission as descendants of Holocaust survivors. Most tellingly, both authors, in their desire not to go or talk about Auschwitz, feature respectively a prisoner's cap and the name of the camp as well as Jewish tombs on their works' covers. Reinforcing this inherent contradiction, Dres' text is prefaced by Jean-Yves Potel, a French historian

and writer who published in 2009 the study *La fin de l'innocence: la Pologne face à son passé juif*, which reexamines the memory of the genocide in Poland as well as the witnesses' responsibility.

Dres' journey does not lead him to reach any 'satisfying conclusion' (Dres 2012, p. 190) to his original enterprise that set out to discover the post-war Jewish renaissance in Poland. Although at first pleased by the few cultural initiatives he learns of, Dres is confronted to the 'fading' traces (p. 138) of a destroyed community thanks to a very 'selective remembering' of the war (p. 9): 'The pleasant impressions of tolerance and revival I've had up till now fade abruptly away, making way for absence and indignation' (p. 139). The many testimonies he collected about the Jewish community in Poland today contradict each other and all show very varying degrees of 'optimism' regarding the revival of Polish Jewry (p. 190). Dres' novel is one that asks essential questions about the third generation willing to 'go forward without being weighed down by the past' (quoted in Fanen 2012, np.), however it mainly highlights, perhaps unintentionally, the limitations of this 'quest' in a Poland that has yet to come to terms with its painful past.

5. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the close reading of these two graphic novels. First, they reflect a change in personal Holocaust memory in (younger) second-generation and third-generation survivors. While most second-generation authors who wrote in the 1980s and 1990s mainly focus on telling their parents or uncles and aunts' struggles in the ghettos and camps (such as Art Spiegelman or Helen Epstein in America and Elizabeth Gill, Philippe Grimbert or Jean-Claude Grumberg in France), (part of) the younger generation writing after 2010 seems to have entered a different dynamic, showing a will to *avoid* the subject of the camps and highlighting a desire to be freed from a painful past. Whilst it would be unwise to generalize contemporary works of Holocaust descendants, there are other examples than just the ones focused on here, such as David Rieff's recent *In Praise of Forgetting* or the organization 'Never Again Ever!' founded by British activist Dan Glass, whose group wants 'a move away from the "melancholic memorialization" of the Holocaust, and is calling for mental health provision to treat inherited trauma' (West 2015, np.).

Second, they also underline an inherent paradox to contemporary Holocaust memory and younger generations' Jewish identity. While some Holocaust descendants nowadays may refuse to go to Auschwitz, they nevertheless produce work that precisely center on this refusal, making 'not talking about the camps' the very issue of their writing, perhaps epitomizing one of Thane Rosenbaum's (2012, p. 125) ideas in *The Stranger within Sarah Stein* that 'the past does not walk away without a fight'. As psychologist Flora Hogman explains, 'the unwillingness to take on the pain of the ancestors and the victimology of Judaism clashes with a fear of betraying one's heritage' (quoted in Burton 2011, p. 26), and both Kichka and Dres' works reveal the confusion and anxiety that seem to be an integral part of their inherited trauma. While both these graphic novels may appear to be impious, they should not be understood as an offense to Holocaust memory or as a dangerous path to denial, but rather as useful starting points for reflection on the future transmission of trauma.

Indeed, these graphic novels ask urgent questions and force us to reflect on the transmission of memory to generations now twice or even thrice removed from the event. While there are numerous third-generation organizations that work hard to educate children, salvage survivors' testimonies, and organize visits to concentration and death camps, Kichka and Dres seem to call for a different remembrance of the Shoah (*zachor*), one that would be based on hope and optimism, using trauma as a drive to promote and strengthen Jewish identity and culture rather than as a condemnation to suffer forever in the mourning of the deceased (*yessurin shel ahavah*). Michel Kichka writes in the epilogue that he feels reborn and that he has never felt better than after finishing *Second Generation*, as if 'freed' from a taboo, dark secret. Represented floating over his drawings on the last page, Kichka was able to shed his sadness and resentment through his confession and can now apprehend the memory of the Holocaust in a much more appeased manner, and even joke about it (Kichka 2016, p. 95). Jérémie Dres' trip to Poland might not have fulfilled his expectations, but his work does feature a number of Jewish

organizations which promote Jewish heritage and culture, all embodying a strong desire to ‘move on’ from traumatic memories, even though the socio-political context of Poland can slow down some of these initiatives.

Last but not least, as the rest of the papers constituting this issue aim to highlight, these works contribute to strengthening the idea that popular literature, more specifically here graphic novels, can generate valuable insight on the subject of the Holocaust, despite the general disdain in literary criticism for what is often derogatorily deemed as pop culture. *Maus* unexpectedly entered the Holocaust canon in the 1990s and was undoubtedly a pioneer work in the graphic description of the Shoah, but many more author-illustrators’ drawings make significant contributions to the transmission of memories of the event.

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