

Post-Holocaust Identity and Unresolved Tension in Modern-day Israel: Savyon Liebrecht's *Apples from the Desert*

Dvir Abramovich
University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This article analyses several Holocaust stories from the first English translation of Israeli writer Savyon Liebrecht's work. A child of survivors, Liebrecht's collection examines the lingering echoes of the Holocaust in Israel, its effect on the children of survivors and the sometimes bizarre behaviour of those parents. Setting her tales within families, Liebrecht's tales also describe the conflict that results from the insensitivity of the second and third generation, which seek to silence those who need to tell of their mind numbing experiences in the camps and the tragic consequences of this lack of understanding. And on one occasion, Liebrecht enters the concentrationary universe to depict the sexual exploitation and killing of Jewish girls by German soldiers.

“The influence of the Holocaust on my work cannot be separated from the influence of the Holocaust on my life,” declaims Savyon Liebrecht, “The very subjects which trouble you and inspire you and haunt you as a person, are those which are- in all sorts of disguises- going to reveal themselves in your work. And since the Holocaust is the event, which more than any other has left its marks on my life, it has become a subject in my life.” (Liebrecht in Yudkin 1993, 125)

Savyon Liebrecht, born in Munich, Germany, is the daughter of Polish Holocaust survivors who escaped the death camps and arrived in Israel when she was a year old. As she told fellow author Sami Michael, silence permeated the home, casting an eerie shadow, “There are people who talk obsessively and there are those who are silent without end, like in my home. You then need to guess. The silence was terrible...as a child I felt I was growing up in an atmosphere of secrets.” (Liebrecht 1987, 8). Further, she described the effect being a child of survivors had on her and on her Israeli contemporaries, “Today I think about the enormous emotional burden that I carried on my shoulder. This was an entire generation that should have been taken in and hospitalized. These are people who underwent such a great trauma that it is impossible to treat them as normal.” (ibid.) In another interview she added, “It could be that one of the reasons for my writing is this conspiracy of silence. How can one break such a great silence, if not with words.” (Amalia-Argaman 1986, 26)

Significantly, a thread that runs through *Apples from the Desert* is the all-pervasive feminine vantage point of either the narrator or the female heroine who serves as the focus of the author's portrait. It is noteworthy, that in almost all of her fictions, perhaps even incongruously, the Holocaust theme informs her corpus, implying that although she does not possess memories of the European genocide, her father's, whose first wife and daughter perished there, dwell within

her and need to bud out. It is sagacious to reflect that Liebrecht is one of the few Israeli women novelists writing on this topic and thus her corpus inevitably involves questions of gender.

The currents of her literary endeavor reflect the nuances of socio-cultural phenomena, zeroing in on unresolved tensions and the lingering dilemmas that occur in the aftermath of the Holocaust. As such, her constant preoccupation is with the peculiar behavior of the survivors and the way this impacts on their families. Liebrecht takes this theme *ne plus ultra* in *Hayuta's Engagement Party* (Liebrecht, 1998), a pathos filled story that records the tragic difficulties of bearing witness and maintaining one's silence. It is the most far reaching example of how polarized are the attitudes of the aging generation, who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis and their families. Liebrecht employs a fixed model to begin with, setting the context within the home and families, and slowly interweaves several theme clusters to show the rifts that exist among the different age groups in relation to remembering the catastrophe. Framing her works within the family unit underscores Liebrecht's textual practice of focusing and shifting the conflict from the external to the internal, adumbrating the drama that unfolds in the traditional arena where the second generation imbibed their deepest cicatrices- the home. (Oren 1998, 14)

Furthermore, each character is a strict representation of various societal postures that have their particular place within the design of Israeli society. Whilst the text embodies a naturalist essence, it also intermingles symbolist writing of the purest kind to striking effect, bequeathing each subject with its own philosophical value. On the one hand, there are the survivors who are restrained from articulating what had happened to them. On the other, we have the second and third generation who repudiate any attempt to impose onto their lives this dreaded memory, adopting a clear and straightforward stance. Never do they realize that their unwavering resistance to empathize with the suffering of their forebears only heightens the pain of those wishing to tell their story. At the core of Liebrecht's corpus is the desire to shock the reader into the awareness of how disinterested and indifferent the present generation of Israelis can be to the murder and pain of millions. Moreover, she expresses how the unspoken code of silence encouraged by the state (aided and abetted by official and educational utilities) has resulted in young Israelis believing they must dis sever and repress any attachment with those perceived as passive victims.

The story begins fifteen days before Hayuta's engagement party. In the course of the rushed preparations the young woman realizes that her grandfather Mendel may ruin her celebration with his habit of recalling dreadful camp tales at happy family get-togethers. Tellingly, Liebrecht tips her allegorical hat when she has Hayuta's first thoughts on the matter emerge during her final exams in Jewish history. After lunch, she begs her mother to keep Mendel away from the party, fearing that during the engagement he will spoil it for all by embarrassingly recalling atrocities from the Shoah. After forty years, the eighty-two year-old Mendel has begun to speak of his concentration camp experiences. We are told that he has not spoken to his daughter, son or grandchildren about his four years of wartime suffering. Mendel's character demonstrates most acutely the recurring figure of the Holocaust survivor, who, after the war, chose not to dwell on the past. Knowing that words cannot express the unimaginable horror, like many other survivors, he decided it was better to say nothing. Time and again, those who had survived the death camps, wanted to shelter their new families, (which, to a large extent, replaced the relatives extinguished

by the Nazis) from what they had experienced. Saying nothing to their protected children, while deeply singled by the nightmares and the daily fears, was the path they traversed.

But Liebrecht explodes the stillness. Suddenly, something snaps in Grandpa Mendel- whenever family members are seated around the dinner table, a dam of submerged memories compulsively spouts forth, of all the relatives (and by extension European Jewry), which had perished during the Holocaust:

Up until six years ago he was really in good shape. Until then he did not talk about what had happened to him during the war... The tables laden with meat, fish, chopped liver, glazed carrots, black plum pudding, and triggered something in him, like a coded message. A secret door to the memories of the war- what had been shrouded in blissful oblivion for decades-suddenly burst open forcefully. It all started on the eve of Rosh Hashanah.” (Liebrecht 1998, 84-85)

In speaking of *Hayuta's Engagement Party*, this is how Liebrecht explained the habit of survivors to compulsively recount their terrible stories especially when the family met:

It is only during festive family celebrations that the memories float to the surface. It is only then, when families get together, that the Holocaust survivor has the losses visualized and can see how few members of the family are left. Only then can he compare the current family meetings with the ones he remembers from the time before the war, with the large families and all the grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. (Yudkin 1993, 129)

To be sure, the family is shocked and dismayed at the old patriarch's outbursts, especially as they occur during festive occasions. Put simply, most of the members want to avoid the subject, retreating from it as the state did. It is hinted that sympathy can only be found among other survivors, not those born after the war. The family's apathy to Mendel's monologues of horrors is presented so plainly and precisely, yet it resonates with a moving declaratory tone:

The years that followed hardened their hearts gradually... they let him talk, blocking his stories from the path to their hearts. Whenever he rose to his feet and lifted his right arm with the goblet in his hand, they knew that the moment had arrived. The children would go out to play; the hostess would start clearing the table so as not to waste time. The others would start whispering or drifting into thoughts, letting the next few moments pass, like a raging hurricane that would soon blow away, like an airplane that zooms overhead and roars with it. (ibid., 83-84)

At one time, his son Mordechai tried to muffle him, scolding him for his lack of tact, “Dad, this is a holiday. We want to celebrate and not remember such things. On holidays one should be reminded of happy things.” (ibid., 86-87) Significantly, however, the struggle within the family to block that flow of memories is taken up most combatively by the daughter in law, Shifra. While the others are resigned to Mendel's accounts of death and starvation from his war years, related in the midst of holiday celebrations, Shifra revolts against the clan's passive acceptance. She represents the young Israelis' yearning to sum up the past in the form of monuments and

state rituals, which allows them to continue with their own lives. After once leaving the table and walking out, on another occasion Shifra complains to the family, knowing Mendel is listening:

We have suffered enough and we have heard enough. Don't we have Memorial Day and Holocaust Day and commemorative assemblies and what have you? They never let you forget for a minute. So why do I need to be reminded of it every meal? I don't understand how you can go on eating so heartily when he goes on about festering wounds, blood and vomit- but that's your own business. As for me, the moment he opens his mouth, the holiday is over. (ibid., 88)

In this context, Liebrecht has written that she is not surprised that it is the daughter-in-law, in both *Hayuta's Engagement Party* and *Excision* who speak out against the survivors' strange deportment. According to her, only an in-law, rather than a survivor child, could express such hard words. The reason is this. An outsider, who has now become part of the family, is not saddled with the same emotional encumbrance of a child of Holocaust parents. The in-laws' aggression or rebellion is not mediated by the instinct, imbibed at puberty, that one must not inflict pain on their survivor parents. (Liebrecht in Yudkin 1983, 128-129)

Indeed, it is only Mendel's daughter Bella, who shows some compassion towards her father and is responsive to his need to inform his family of those missing from their joyous celebrations. She understands his longing to validate his past, explain to his descendants, wallowing in the festive atmosphere and enjoying the abundance, who have never experienced hunger, how it was in his world. Thus she listens vigilantly, for she knows that the tales are "a window opened for her, a key to the riddle that had haunted her all those years." (Liebrecht 1998, 88) Standing at the kitchen, she wonders how her father had managed to veil the death and fear in his hearts for forty years. And although she admits this is a difficult situation, she is incredulous at her own daughter's aloofness and coolness, most specifically the malicious alienation she exhibits towards her grandfather and his need to remind the others of his grief. When her mother tells her that he has always dreamed about having a big family, that this engagement is very special for him, Hayuta rebuffs her mother's appeal for tolerance. Indeed, Hayuta's estrangement is evident when she suggest sending Mendel on a municipal trip for senior citizens on the day of her engagement, a proposal which, elicits the following observance from her mother:

Bella looked at her daughter and shuddered: here she is already getting rid of him like an unwanted object, with that typical nonchalance that this new generation has. Hayuta had already forgotten how he raised and coddled her, ready to give up his food for her... Monsters, thought Bella in disgust as her daughter went to answer the phone. We are raising monsters. At first they look like babies, then like children, but behind the innocent facade- hearts of stone. (ibid., 87)

Inevitably, Bella caves in to her heartless and selfish daughter's insistence that Mendel be forbidden to speak at the party and be kept in check. Although Bella extracts a promise from the old man that he will say nothing, Hayuta follows her grandfather's every move, hurling perforating looks at him whenever he opens his mouth to talk. Midway, she notices him raising a glass, the customary sign he is about to deliver his long speech about the starvation and hunger in the war. Terrified of a scene that would wreck the smooth party, she yells at him to stop. The

stress of being forbidden to speak at his granddaughter's engagement is too much for Mendel to bear- he suffers a stroke, collapsing on the cake and smearing himself and Hayuta's dress. Inside the house, in the story's concluding scene, Bella holds her father and gently wipes the tormented face, which has never known respite, "and the closed eyes, and the lips that were tightly pursed under a layer of sweet frosting, firmly treasuring the words that would now never bring salvation, nor conciliation, not even a momentarily relief." (ibid., 92) The tale's downbeat ending is a comment about the consequences of subjugating individual memory in favor of public rituals that fete national accomplishments. Mendel's death yields the logical conclusion- the crushing of individual stories and the effluence of grand official ceremonies. The image of the tightly clenched lips under the sweet frosting speaks of the current situation, where under the seemingly sugary reality of the present lies the pent up misery that cannot be discharged. Liebrecht's story captures in miniature, be it in brilliant strokes, the idea that living in the present by imprisoning the past encases within its midst another type of calamity.

All in all, it argues that the demand by the granddaughter of her grandfather to restrain himself and to not repeat the past, and the old man's desire to speak cannot be reconciled. On another reading, one should note the role of the mother Bella. She had not been asked about her years hiding with a Christian family. Although she tries to mediate between her daughter and Mendel, in the end she colludes with her in silencing him (this is in line with her assumption of Israeli identity, which steers clear from touching upon the Holocaust). Not only has the survivor been hushed, but so has the second generation. This leaves the reader with the following question: What shall happen when Bella needs to speak of her wartime experience? Perhaps, as Gershon Shaked argues, these types of texts can be viewed as constituting a moral act, for they:

...reveal the weakness of the "native" Israelis, who cannot cope with the Holocaust and its survivors. They attempt to correct, as it were, in their writings and fictions the distortions and the harm wrought by members of their generation orally and in reality. Their fiction must be seen as a kind of testimony by guilty *sabras*, who as the children of a historical group whose best sons were murdered or destroyed spiritually, are attempting to repent. (in Ramras Rauch 1985, 280)

The uneasy relationship between the post war generation and the survivors is ossified in *Excision* (Liebrecht 1998), another of Liebrecht's aftermath tales. In a similar vein to *Hayuta's Engagement Party*, it showcases the survivors' bizarre behavior and its tragic results. Above all, it contains Liebrecht's intractable trope of heroes who continuously oscillate between the world of the conscious and unconscious and whose madness is logical, even normal, when viewed in light of the extreme and devastating wound inflicted by the Holocaust.

On the day before her birthday, while her parents are out, four-year-old Miri returns home with a note pinned to her shirt collar from the nursery school teacher, stating that there is an outbreak of lice at the school. Her survivor grandmother does not realize or remember, that the same note is forwarded every Friday to warn the parents. Reading the note sets off in Henya a strange transformation that takes her back to her camp days, where the epidemic of lice and disease was prevalent and uncontrollable. There, the lice would, "start to leave the dead body; they will look like a black dotted line cutting across forehead, feeling their way towards another body, looking for a new life for themselves."(ibid., 98) Her face frozen in a mask like expression, Henya

extracts the sharp scissors and proceeds to part her granddaughter's long curly locks of golden hair. Gripped in an amok of urgency, she cuts the entire mass of the little girl's hair, which had not been cut since the day she was born, leaving her head shorn with a short stubble, exposing a pale, tender white scalp. Liebrecht deftly shades in the old woman's spontaneous descent into Holocaust memory in the next vignette:

Hanya emitted a feverish breath and her whole body was seized by a tremor. She returned the scissors to their sheath, dropped exhausted into a chair as if after a great exertion, drew the grandchild to her, hugged her with all her might, and covered her nape with kisses, as if they were about to part. Her voice regained its soothing tone, despite the turmoil that had overwhelmed her. "Everything will be all right, now baby. You don't have to worry anymore." (ibid., 94)

Shortly afterwards, Miri's parents return home. The first to see "the excision" is Hanya's son, Zvi. He is infuriated and exasperated at his mother, telling that she has gone out of her mind and reminding her that she herself had mentioned seeing on television the nationwide campaign to rinse all the children's hair with chemicals. Hanya is saddened by her son's questioning of her judgment, failing to see the tears welling up in Zvi's eyes as he strokes the straight spikes on his child's hair.

One of the main points suggested is that the terror of the Holocaust has not evaporated with the years. Rather, it is now visited on the third generation- Hanya has, without thought, turned the little girl into a carbon copy of a death camp prisoner, resembling the grandmother and the other inmates whose human individuality was brutally excised by the Nazis. Looking at her grandchild, Hanya, along with the reader, is shocked at the sight of the animal imagery, "the shorn stumps of hair, the shrunken head, and the tender neck that looked like a plucked chicken." (ibid., 96)

Compositionally, it is the hysterical daughter in law, Ziva, who once more serves as Liebrecht's mouthpiece in limpidly crystallizing the prevailing attitudes of the present generation towards their forbearers. She excoriates her husband for standing by his mother, her vitriol resonating with the bulwark of misunderstanding and lack of empathy:

Why I should I care about this now... So what if that's what they used to do in the camps forty-five years ago. The world has advanced a little since then and we are not in the camps now... Her hands should be broken so she'll never touch a pair of scissors again! Get that woman out of here or I'll kill her with my own hands... I don't want to hear about it anymore! Those stories are *prehistory by now*... She's crazy, you must realize that your mother is crazy. I told you a long time ago. She lost some screws in her head in the Holocaust. Look at the catastrophe she brought on us. A catastrophe! I'll never let hear near my child. And I don't want her to come here again. If you want to see her, you'll have to go to her house. She's crazy and you should put her in a nuthouse. Any doctor will agree to commit her now. (my italics). (ibid., 97)

At heart, the story presents the recto and verso of characters divided between two oppositional and clashing worlds and who are destined to never meet. In decoding the authorial intent of

Liebrecht, one can identify what Levi terms a contextual strategy of inscribing a motif by its reverse. (Levi 1990, 29) In the main, each scene is framed in a Chinese box structure- one draw opens another, a thread woven into an expansive quilt of meanings carries its own special set of imports. For instance, Miri's mane of hair is described as a lying in a puddle of golden hair, the puddle signaling Tzvi's dire situation. Indeed, he is unable to extricate himself from the mire in which he finds himself. On the one hand, he wants to rear a hale and hearty adolescent in Israel of the 80s, in which being afflicted with lice is an ordinary, trivial every day matter. On the other, he feels bound to demonstrate his empathy and graciousness towards his mother, for whom lice represent the monstrosity of the Shoah. Also, the story's title does not refer simply to the hair slashed, but to excision of Henya's life. Although she had survived and established a family in Israel, as a matter of fact her roots and being were left in Auschwitz. Certainly, as we see, it requires only a minute amount of stimulant to propel her from the current reality, where lice are a commonplace thing, back to the nightmares of the camp. The past atrocities of forty-five years ago continue to subsist in Henya's consciousness as if they were part of the present. As in *Hayuta's Engagement Party*, it is the survivor-child who is stranded and is forced to mediate- positioned in the middle, they are impotent to bridge the unbridgeable chasm.

In the story's final scene, Henya has a flashback of Auschwitz, remembering the young boy who was hanged by his feet and the women in the barracks moaning and groaning from the cold. She knows that her neighbor on the other side has died in her sleep. Standing at the door of the study and scratching her itchy skull, it feels like a coarse wooden floor, just as in the days of the camps. It is in this passage that Liebrecht pulls the reader into Henya's interior world, as she disengages from the 'here' and 'now' and from Ziva, who wants her daughter to "hear stories about Cinderella, not about Auschwitz." (Liebrecht 1998, 98)

The lasting nature of Holocaust trauma transmission, its absorption and effect on survivor children is dramatized in *What Am I Speaking Chinese? She Said to Him*. (Liebrecht 1998) The main plot concerns a married woman whose personal identity and ability to function are hampered by the fragmented memories of her mother's repressed sexuality. The hero is aware of her mother's painful Shoah experience a generation earlier, but is not cognizant of how it truncated her ability for sexual relief. At home, she remembers her mother as a harsh and bitter woman who constantly spurned her father's affectionate advances, even though he had spoken of a woman who was passionate and beautiful, even when they were displaced refugees. What she acutely recalls is her mother's distaste and sheer antagonism for sleeping with her father, "Now, standing in front of the empty cabinets, she felt sorry for her father, the gratuitous bitterness she has injected into her life, or the poison she had accumulated in her heart over all these years, letting it fester and bubble like molten lava, locking her heart even against rare moments of sweetness." (ibid., 163)

We are told that after her wardrobe had been removed to make space for a lamp, she began hearing her parents, through the wafer thin wall, quarrel about sex. Re-positioning the wardrobe that acted as a buffer, allowed the frightened teenager to witness her parent's bedroom drama. Whilst her father wanted his desire fulfilled, yearning for tactile intimacy, the mother rebuffed this basic need because of the stains on the ceiling that she wanted removed. Both denied each other's needs- the father claimed there were no stains, but something in the plaster; the mother rejected outright her husband's need for sex. And therein lies the rub. The lack of

communication between the two, as the title indicates, compounded the mother's Shoah experience, which amputated her ability to feel and enjoy love. The mother-daughter conflict stems from the daughter's resentment of her mother's recoil from showing or accepting any display of warmth or emotion. A specific incident resonates with the woman. One afternoon, while the two were preparing a salad, a morsel of laughter emanated from the ground floor balcony where a young couple lived. Her mother stopped, as if a declaration of war had been issued, and burst out of the kitchen, shouting at her neighbors who were hanging the laundry and telling them to be ashamed of themselves. A moment later, when the laughing persisted, she steps out again, flailing a knife. Her eyes bulging, she screams "pigs" at the young man and woman, while her young daughter watches in horror.

Years later, when the daughter's husband comes behind her on the balcony and lifts her skirt, she understands why the dress had flown up the young woman's dress and what infuriated her mother. It seems her mother's rancor erupted at any sign of pleasure or bliss, especially when her husband tried to woo her, "He approached her mother, hugging her from behind; but her mother recoiled from him crossly, wiped her nape where he had dripped on her, smoothed the blouse he had wrinkled, and snapped, "Why are you shouting in my ears?" (ibid.,163)

The wealthy, middle-aged woman wishes to free herself from the stifling past and shed the smothering psychological legacy of her mother. Only then can she validate her own individuality and independence. In order to do so, she seduces the real estate agent who has taken her to her parent's rundown, dilapidated apartment, copulating with him in the same bedroom where her mother, twenty years ago, complained of ugly stains on the bedroom ceiling. In doing so, the woman not only rebels against her mother's sexual obduracy for which she bears a grudge, but also makes amends for the estrangement she and her father had to endure. The sexual encounter with a complete stranger, in precisely the same spot where her mother used to repulse her husband's advances, symbolizes a differentiation between the two women. Proving to herself that she can enjoy sex, unlike her mother, marks her own unique individuality and enables her to be relieved of the onerous inheritance bequeathed to her. At the same time, it is an attempt to erase the stains of the past, engraved in her mother's psyche and carved onto her. On another level, it represents the incredible impenetrability and difficulty faced by the second generation of understanding the survivors' scars and how it affected their personality and sensuality. Afterwards, she tells her dead mother,

Here I am, Mommy, with a strange man I met by chance, a man without distinction or merit, and he is pinning my head to the same exact spot where your head used to lie, my eyes facing the stains that give off a terrible, musty smell, and I wonder why you had never accepted the consolation of the body, why you had never taught me this great conciliatory gift, this immeasurable pleasure and I had to learn all this by myself, as if I were a pioneer. I always remember your rasping voice: 'Chinese, I must be speaking to you in Chinese.' What were you crying about all those nights, a bitter and sullen woman, so harsh and cruel to your loved ones, so totally devoid of charity toward yourself and others? (ibid, 167)

In *Mother's Photo Album* (Liebrecht 1998) the author limns similar terrain in her exploration of memory and the passing of trauma through family ancestry. This time she centers on a young

man's troubled life. It takes for its subject the tale of a young boy, Joshua Hoshen, who is cut off from his parents after the father returns to his first wife who survived the war, and his mother is consequently hospitalized for life after suffering from prolonged psychotic depression. As the story unfolds, we learn that the former wife located the husband years after he had thought she was dead and demanded that he return to her. When he did, leaving his wife with the infant son, the mother went insane. Growing up in a Kibbutz, the protagonist clings to an old photo album of his parents as the only means to recreate a seemingly safe childhood. As a result, he decides to become a doctor, hoping he can unravel the mental illness that has afflicted his mother and snapped the emotional ties, which grieved the family following the war. Above all, his deprivation of love by his mentally ill mother impels him to take care of her. This helps us understand why he repeatedly applies to medical school, never discouraged when he learns he is the oldest applicant. (ibid., 173)

The symbolism of the photo album grows ever more apparent as the story is studied. Clearly, the foregrounding of the album in the plot signifies one of the predominant themes that fuel this canon: the survivors' desire to make sure their children know practically nothing about the past while maintaining a veil of normality. This is a familiar staple, which looms large in several of the second generation's novels and short stories, underwriting the characterizations that suffuse their work. In an early scene, the adult son reflects that no photos in his cherished album have remained of the bad times: "It was as if they were anxious to preserve the good times, to fix them on glossy bits of paper, like a will executed in pictures... he notices to his amazement, that in all the pictures the three of them always looked neatly dressed... the three of them smiling broadly, as if trying to convince the photographer of their happiness." (ibid., 171)

Later, in the hospital, he browses his mother's medical records. The messily scribbled name reminds him that his parents were always concerned with preserving in the pictures, "the good days before they were devoured by the bad days, dutifully inviting the photographer even when the times were hard, like criminals plotting in advance evil schemes." (ibid., 172) Without doubt, Joshua's curiosity to know erects parallels with other children of survivors appearing elsewhere in the story. At night, to take but one example, when his parents thought he was asleep, he would covertly listen to them argue in Polish, a language that animated his imagination and prowled in the dark, not understanding the words, yet intuiting the menace that was lurking beyond the wall of calm. Not surprisingly, a mental breakdown occurs, a development, which is in harmony with the paradigm framed by the author for Joshua's mother, an ideogram of similar survivors overcome by existential despair. In response to the father's leaving to be reunited with his former wife, the mother explodes. Piling up all of his father's belongings in the middle of the room she sets fire to the pack of tools, books and clothes, she grabs Joshua, forcing him to watch the fire devour the mound and the ceiling. The arson attempt culminates in the mother being taken to hospital where she is kept for years. The final scene takes place in the ward, where the son, after retrieving his mother's medical records, places a photo from the album in the file's inner flap. It shows her dressed in an elegant suit with padded shoulders, a string of pearls, framed by the husband and the son holding her hand. This act relentlessly stresses and magnifies the hero's need for catharsis: "A moment before closing the files and replacing it, he looked at the photo and felt relief, as if a tumor had been removed from his body that for years had metastasized through all his organs. This, he knew, is how she wanted to be remembered..." (ibid., 180) As we are reminded, the stories underline how the children of survivors yearn desperately for some kind of

closure, a symbolic relief from the exposure to their parents' grief. Of particular silence is Joshua's reaching the point of knowing how to yoke his adolescent memories with the pitiful image of his mother lying in the hospital bed. His ability to finally harmonize those two clashing portraits denote the aperiens reconciliation he has been craving.

Lily Ratok believes that Liebrecht's output should be categorized distinctly and discretely within woman's literature, pointing out that in the majority of stories the feminine point of view is foremost. For Ratok, the fact that Liebrecht is a woman means that she is "acutely sensitive to situations of distress, weakness and vulnerability." (Ratok 1998).

It is in *Morning in the Park with Nannies* (Liebrecht 1998) that the motif of the Holocaust as a uniquely female experience is exceedingly reinforced. Here, Liebrecht stretches her literary boundaries by actually describing the Holocaust experience of young Jewish women coerced into prostitution. It goes without saying that imagining sexual encounters, albeit forced ones, between Nazis and their victims opens up several ethical and aesthetic questions, especially when they feature sadomasochistic elements. One may argue that to portray such relationships as paradigmatic within the framework of literature in the wake of destruction, is to pervert historical truth. Likewise, there exists the risk of trivialism and objectionable eroticism, of seducing the reader to voyeuristically participate in the sexual victimization presented, rather than focus on the horror perpetrated.

By the same token, it could be said that through the imagined persona of the nanny in *Morning in the Park with Nannies*, Liebrecht renarrates the Holocaust experience, presenting it through the prism of a woman survivor as an attempt to engage in female deconstruction of the patriarchal discourse of Holocaust stories. The tale is intent on reminding us that peace of mind for those carrying the terrible past is always beyond grasp- even a simple outing in the park rekindles memories of how Jewish girls were preyed upon by German soldiers.

Told in flashback, the narrator, who lived in the cellar of the palace sewing clothes, recalls the abhorrent master-slave relationships, the rape and the torture to which the young Jewish girls were subjected. At first, the girls would cry softly at night, trembling from the impending nightmare. A few days later, "...the eyes were already dead, drained of tears, the lovely bodies wilting, and then the eyes would take on a puzzled expression, refusing to understand the surrounding reality... the girls aged overnight: their complexions became ashen, their eyelids swelled, their hair lost its sheen, their bodies lost their vitality." (ibid., 182 and 184) We read that one of the girls could not endure further and committed suicide by diving off the roof. Another two girls, one transported from a camp where she had been married, the other, her friend who sang bridal songs at her wedding, slashed their wrists and were found lying hand in hand in the garden. As a counterpoint, Liebrecht undercuts her passages of sheer Dantean hell with the quotidian interaction between the various nannies and the toddlers with whom they are entrusted, as if to emphasize the two realities, each as stridently polar as the other.

Among other things Liebrecht's story, viewed in light of the scenes it describes, is one more realization of the perverse sadistic nature expressed by Nazism. The extreme sexual abuse of the girls, their treatment as mere objects, further demonstrates the familiar trope of the Holocaust as

the most horrifying, obscene and unique of modern situations. The dark, violent barbarism of the German officers and their perverted enjoyment of it knew no bounds:

Do you remember the three girls who were taken out for one night for an orgy? The Germans were drunker than ever. At dawn two of them crawled back, their bodies bruised all over. The third girl had been rolled up in a carpet, her long hair hanging out of one end, dragged into the garden and set on fire. The drunken Germans stood and watched the hair, flaring up readily, and the smell of burnt flesh filled the room until the wind blew... The Germans had strangled her friend while violating her body. (ibid., 186)

Liebrecht seeks to paint the degradation of the Jewish victims with a succession of vignettes that, in time, skirt along the edge of sensationalism. A striking example of this is embodied in the following episode:

Do you remember that time, at a party, when our eyes met over the back of a girl crouching on all fours, her forehead touching the pulled off boots and licking the bare feet of the officer who stood like an artist's model, a hand on his hips, his trousers down and his underpants sagging around the pillars of his legs? His companion laughed. One of them said "Not many of them can brag that they've caught a German officer with his pants down." (ibid.)

In the opening paragraph the narrator recognizes one of the girls with whom she was imprisoned in the house of horrors near Meidanek. The unnamed protagonist remembers the aloof, phlegmatic Jewish girl, the mistress of one of the commandants as the only one who kept her head up, maintained her calm, her supple body and waist-length hair never changing. In the course of the story, Liebrecht threads the issue of complicity leaving the judgment unclear for the readers. We discover that, unlike the other exploited girls, the kept woman of the Gestapo soldier slept protected in his room, was served food and was sheltered from the all pervasive cruelty meted to all else. The hero gives voice to the spectator's wonderment of that sickening dyad, "You examined yourself in the mirror and waited for his arrival. Once when you were in his room, the two of you came out on the little balcony. He hung out his jacket around your shoulders and you talked the whole nightlong. *I saw you from my window, talking earnestly. What did you tell him, sitting so erect wrapped in a German officer's jacket. What did he tell you?*" (ibid., 187) (my italics).

Such and other assumptions about the immorality of such Faustian deals are discarded when the woman's benefactor is found dead in his bed. Like the others, the woman is subjected to retribution by the remaining monsters, "When the body had been removed, covered in a velvet blanket, the others had pounced on you in your upper room. All that day and night the Germans kept going to your room one by one, to do what they had been prevented from doing while your protector was alive. In the morning I saw you staggering on the doorstep." (ibid., 189) It is equally clear that on another reading, the text does gravitate to that other central theme hovering above- the facility of the women-victims to survive the gory dehumanization of the Nazis in spite of the beatings and rape.

Liebrecht's stories tap the abrasive and anguished vein of relationships between Holocaust parents and their conflicted children and grandchildren. Often is the case that Liebrecht limns the aftershocks that reverberate through the lives of the survivors' off springs as the memories of the Holocaust come to the fore. The basic method of Liebrecht's writing is to present the reader with two antithetical world views, two opposed aspects of the same inseparable reality. She peoples her diegesis with characters who are emotionally crippled from direct or indirect effects of the Holocaust and who are trying to repress or preserve memory. Typically, the horrific past that engages the characters is fully realized and dramatized in scenes where it is either revealed piecemeal, or less commonly, flares up in an uncontrolled outburst. Her principals, in their various permutations, live lives that, as Leon Yudkin puts it, "have been determined by events that have taken place earlier, relationships from distant years, and even by factors from generations gone by... Trauma has been inflicted on the present generation and thus has made a permanent imprint on the psyche. Yet, somehow the generation following in its wake is also deeply influenced." (Yudkin 1996, 175-6). Indeed, Avraham Ballat concurs, pointing out that the one great theme that informs Liebrecht's work is conflict and its attendant reactions, especially as it flows from the chasm of apprehension and misunderstanding between the different generations. (Ballat 1985, 11)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Liebrecht, Savyon. *Apples from the Desert*. New York: Feminist Press, 1998.

Secondary Sources:

Balat, Avraham. "Ha'adam Ve'hanefesh Bilvad," [Man and the Soul Only] May 15, 1985.

Bracha, Amalia Argman. "Pritza," [Breakthrough] *Yediot Ahronot* December 12, 1986.

Liebrecht, Savyon. "The Influence of the Holocaust on My Work," in Leon Yudkin. ed. *Israelis Consider the Outsider*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1993.

Nili Levi. "Shlulit Haseyhar Hazahov," [The puddle of the golden hair] *Maariv*, March, 16, 1990, 29.

Oren, Yosef. *Kolot Hadashim Basiporet Haiivrit*. New Voices in Hebrew Literature. Rishon Letzion: Yahad, 1998.

Ramras-Rauch, Gila and Joseph Michman-Melkman. eds. *Facing the Holocaust: Selected Israeli Fiction*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Savyon Liebrecht. "Perach Sifrut." [Literary Flower] Interview By Sami Michael *Be'erez Israel* (July 31, 1987). [no page number]

Shaked, Gershon. "Afterword" in Gila Ramras-Rauch and Joseph Michman-Melkman, eds. *Facing the Holocaust: Selected Israeli Fiction*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Yudkin, Leon. *A Home Within: Varieties of Jewish Expressions in Modern Fiction*. Middlesex: Symposium Press, 1996.

---. ed. *Israelis Consider the Outsider*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1993.