

STORIES OF SUITCASES: YOUNG GIRLS FROM AUSCHWITZ TO CANADA

Anna Pia De Luca*

Though the main function of children's literature is to entertain, disguising issues of morality, comportment and fair-play, Canadian literature, especially in relation to a rising political awareness of cultural diversity, has added a new genre: children's ethnic literature in which emphasis is placed on the importance of multicultural and transcultural education. Respecting the point of view of children, contemporary writers of various nationalities are giving voice to ethnic histories of silences and shadows resulting from difficult cultural, racial and linguistic integration into the new world. In their cultural encounters, the young marginalized protagonists of ethnic literature struggle to define their identity in a peer group or social milieu that is often insensitive and oblivious to the difficulties of immigration and integration into a new society. Many of the literary works that have appeared over the years covertly underline the necessity for children to eradicate stereotypical prejudices and intolerance towards those considered 'different' or 'other' – attitudes that have been handed down, not only by parents but also by mainstream society at large. Thus young readers, after having read and learned about the traditions and heritage of different cultural realities, are encouraged to be observant, receptive and more open-minded.

A fascinating extension to this new transcultural dimension in children's literature are the stories of children who have been forced into hiding from a misunderstood and humiliating past, such as that of Jews who managed to escape the terrors of the Holocaust. Two recently published books, *The Old Brown Suitcase* by Lillian Boraks-Nemetz, who survived the Holocaust in Warsaw, and *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine, a book which documents and reconstructs the early life of Hana Brady before her arrival and death at Auschwitz, have poignantly stirred readers throughout the world for the simplicity yet intensity

* Università degli Studi di Udine.

with which they describe this devastating moment in Jewish history. Through a secret resistance, frequently assuming a false identity, the children who survived were often able to deceive the Nazis, but the stories of their misery and degradation have remained untold for too many years. Today, some of these survivors, now in their seventies, live a closed life as they continue to suffer the symptoms of their psychologically suppressed trauma, but others have found the strength to give voice to their silenced past and overcome the humiliation and pain which they previously experienced. In particular it is the will to find an effective and credible means to tell grandchildren, through story books, not only of how the horrors of the past had made them doleful, uncommunicative and sometimes 'strange' but above all to teach them to become aware of the signs of prejudice and racism, which were the cause of so much suffering during their own childhood.

The difficult representation of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and its effects on young readers, has been the topic of much critical attention by scholars who have asked how it is possible to represent in a convincing and truthful way, the so-called 'unspeakable' horrors suffered by Jews in Nazi Europe. In other words, how can art be reconciled with ferocious cruelty? How can innocent and naïve children cope with the horrific treacheries of mass murder if such descriptions would only defeat the purpose of teaching them about the Holocaust? Can Holocaust literature have a happy ending? Theodor Adorno in his critical work "Committed" feels that aestheticizing the genocide makes «an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror is removed» (Adorno 313) thus reality is disfigured and incomplete. In the same manner Lydia Kokkola, in her critical book on Holocaust literature for children advocates the need to present historically accurate narratives which have a 'mimetic fidelity' to historic facts. In particular she dedicates a chapter to pedagogical issues in the classroom, underlining that books of fiction must be truthful and real and if possible accompanied by authoritative books of history. The fear, of course is that otherwise, accounts of the Holocaust could be either distorted or even denied. Kokkola's theories have recently been challenged by critics such as Adam Muller who questions the history versus narrative dichotomy by believing that imaginative invention can certainly offer important truths about our emotions and moral responsibilities. Since children love stories but do not understand the distinction between fact and fiction, a too vivid presentation of pain and suffering could be traumatic, therefore it is important to minimize the portrayal of violence and give voice to more familiar elements with which the young readers can associate. On the other hand fictions about the Holocaust, even if inaccurately presented, can still offer the proper message since they are able to bridge the historical and

cultural gap that separates the young reader from the events depicted. With regards to Kokkola's insistence on historical facts, an article by Kalle Pihlainen, a literary philosopher, argues that after Hayden White's postmodern stance that identifies «the historical text as a literary artifact» (H. White 33), the very act of writing history itself can be problematic and no longer objective in that the narrated historical construct always contains the personal ideology of the historian. Because of this he believes that writers of history can communicate a social message to the reader: «Historical writing, like literature is a matter of communication, not fact-finding. It is about a process of understanding others, not about 'truth'» (Pihlainen 26). Therefore rather than measuring whether a text is realistic or distorted, White's contribution to history, where the reader is actively participant, has consequently left space for more imaginative interpretations and evaluations of the many fragmented stories found in children's literature.

In the light of critical thought regarding Holocaust literature for children then, it is interesting to see how two different authors, Boraks-Nemetz and Levine deal with the horrific tales of survival and genocide of children, taking into consideration the metaphor of the suitcase which is the topic of this conference but also a symbol of the victims of the Holocaust whose suitcases were later heaped in piles and photographed in their memory for museums and reconstructed concentration camps in Europe.

In the first book by Lillian Boraks-Nemetz, the suitcase becomes a metaphor for the continuous journey towards survival of Slava, a young Jewish girl, who during the German invasion was forced, first to live with her family in the Warsaw ghetto, then to leave her parents and flee into hiding in the countryside where her Russian grandmother, who had married a Catholic, was able to protect her from the curious and suspicious eyes of neighbors. It was only after the liberation of Poland and the mysterious death of Slava's baby sister that the family was able to be reunited, assume a new name and identity, and finally immigrate to Canada where a wealthy Montreal Jewish family sponsored them until they were able to fend for themselves. In the book, harrowing scenes of Slava's childhood in Poland are juxtaposed with scenes of her life as a teenager in Canada, underlining the similarities inherent in both worlds of the problematic affirmation of identity and culture. As observed by Victoria Pennell, editor of the *Resource Links Journal* which reviews Canadian materials for children, Slava, in her attempt to establish a proper identity, continuously tries to hide her Jewish background as she struggles with peer group pressures (Pennell 9). In Canada, known as Elizabeth, a name suggested by Mrs. Rosenberg her benefactor, Slava finds herself not only forced to adapt to a new name, a new land, a diverse culture and an incomprehensible language, but also to re-

live, despite the seemingly peaceful ambience, episodes of prejudice and intolerance, which continuously rekindle her feelings of anguish and fear:

Elizabeth? It felt like some other person. Just like “Irena” had felt when I saw it written in my false documents, back in Poland during the war. “El-i-za-beth!” I repeated silently. With the pronunciation of ‘th’, my tongue curled like a worm and my cheeks felt hot. What right did this lady have to dismiss my Polish name? (3).

Even Slava’s father is perplexed by Mr. Rosenberg’s comments on the state of affairs for Jews in Montreal, «Of course there is anti-Semitism. There is always that. But Jewish people are *fairly* safe here on *most* fronts» (4) (italics mine). The ambivalent use here of the words ‘fairly’ and ‘most’ ironically underline that even the wealthy Canadian Jewish families were not immune from racism in post World War II Montreal.

Although the book has been called «a documentary fiction» (196) by Boraks-Nemetz in the final section regarding the genesis and history behind the story, it could also be seen as an example of life writing, for the story of the trauma she recounts transcends boundaries between history and fiction, between documentary and autobiography and includes oral testimony, diaries and letters. Through Slava, the young protagonist who in the novel self-reflexively acknowledges her inclination for story-telling, reading and creative writing, the author moves between fact and fiction as she narrates and re-inscribes her own autobiography of difficult childhood experiences and how these were overcome through creative and imaginative writing. But the story also raises questions regarding the telling of Slava’s traumatic experience, questions often debated in the literature of the Holocaust, such as the relationship between the author and the narrator, their fidelity to history and memory, and the final interpretation they have transmitted to the reader. Boraks-Nemetz has answered these questions in a very sensitive and creative way.

Narrated in the first person, the author of *The Old Brown Suitcase* presents episodes in the life of a child who had always hidden behind doors or in pits burrowed in the ground and had lied and falsified her identity because obsessed by Nazi persecution. This scenario is reenacted throughout the novel and becomes the ‘leitmotif’ of many of the episodes described, both before and after Slava’s arrival in Canada. The story begins in 1947 in Montreal where the Lenski family was resettled after their escape from Poland, but through the use of flashbacks in alternating chapters, the author recreates the city of Warsaw, the protagonist Slava’s life before the war and the horrors of the ghetto. The first memory that surfaces goes back to the time when Slava was only five and her mother first took her on a *dorozhka*, driven by a horse, to a dressmaker

who makes her a ballet dress that resembles «a cloud, a burst of golden petals on a green stem» (16) and that she is to wear for her first public recital. At a symbolic level, the inclusion of the Polish word for ‘carriage’ underlines not only a language barrier but also the need for Slava to mediate between the two cultures and languages that exist in her daily life. Even the image of the child dressed to resemble a flower becomes a haunting omen of its future eradication. The memory continues with a birthday gift from her father who, as a reward for the commitment and skill with which his little girl has approached her ballet classes, gives her a beautiful brown suitcase as he ironically comments, «I bought this suitcase so that you can pack your things in it. [...] Who knows where this suitcase might take you someday» (18). But as the Nazis advance and the horrors of the Holocaust become increasingly more brutal, the Lenski family, after having lived a comfortable and culturally stimulating life, are forced to move into the Warsaw ghetto where they desperately try to adapt to its confined and mortifying spaces and vile odors. Slava’s old brown suitcase, in fact, becomes heavier and heavier with personal mementoes and memories of a past that will forever cast a shadow on her new life in Canada. Emblematic and touching is the desolate description of her forced relocation as she and her family move into the ghetto carrying the only belongings permitted them:

I AM SEVEN

It is a sunny November day, but I am cold.

An endless dark line of us moves slowly through a gate in the tall brick wall. People carry on their backs or push carts all that remains of their life’s belongings. They enter the Ghetto beneath the cold eyes of German soldiers and Polish police. A cruel silence reigns over us, despite the voices, the shuffling of feet, the grinding of wooden carts against the cobblestone street and the clanking of pots and pans. The faces of the people around us are frightened. Some are crying as they walk. I walk with my parents, my hand numb from the weight of the brown suitcase. It contains all I have: one chipped porcelain doll, two books, my ballet costume, and some clothes (42-43).

Past and present consistently overlap as the traumatic experience of the Ghetto is subtly re-enacted in the context of Canadian anti-Semitism in the immediate postwar years, a condition discussed by Ross Lambertson in his study of Canadian human rights activism (197). Once the family has escaped, and contrary to the hopes of encountering social and religious tolerance in the new world, the family finds it very difficult to adapt to Canada’s new way of life and ethics, but especially to its hidden racism and glib prejudices. This change is very arduous for fourteen year-old Slava, who due to educational restrictions for Jewish children in Warsaw, is far behind the other students in Canada, thus

she is mocked and marginalized by her classmates. At each new provocation psychological and physical spaces of her past overlap her present spaces. She calls to mind the bravery of her remarkable escape from the ghetto with a suitcase, walking alone through the gate while the guards, previously bribed by her father, turned the other way. Yet she cannot forget the feeling she had of being shut in a strange and unknown space where masked identity was the only means for survival. The hollow in the garden in Canada, where she hides after having been mocked for being Jewish and rebuked for telling tall tales to her companions about her false identities, based on her readings of the two books stored in her suitcase, *Princess Dzavacha*, a Russian princess in constant flight and *Anne of Green Gables*, who learned to assert her own personality, is symbolically superimposed on the hole dug by Vlad, her grandmother's husband in the town of Zalesie, to hide her from the Nazis. Though cold and uncomfortable, Slava in both hiding places occupies her time by writing short stories about brave protagonists who with determination and strength overcome all types of adversity, stories which are written on scraps of paper and hidden in her suitcase but which anticipate Slava's own personal success and integration. Throughout the initial stages of the novel, Slava is psychologically fragile and always careful not to reveal her true identity or secret past but as the novel progresses she finally learns to overcome her fears through the healing process of creative writing, and like Anne of Green Gables, to overcome adversity with courage and tenacity by understanding and accepting herself as she really is. Help also comes through two close friends, Miriam, a caring Jewish girl who teaches her self-esteem and Josuah, a special boyfriend who encourages her to develop her creative talents and become a writer.

Thus, despite the difficulties and misfortunes suffered in childhood, Slava proves to be a survivor with a realistically multi-faceted personality. Young readers of the novel are able to empathize with her as she adapts to her new life and to the idiosyncrasies of her specific age-group, but in particular they can identify with her struggles for independence and her desire to authenticate her sense of self. Boraks-Nemetz gives the young reader sufficient descriptive detail to understand the horrors of the persecutions suffered by Jews during the Holocaust without being excessively graphic or violent. In addition, although the use of alternating chapters is sometimes difficult to follow, this technique allows the author to address and juxtapose two mutually important issues: the difficulties inherent in assimilation for children of diverse ethnic and religious extractions and the appalling atrocities of the Holocaust as a result of prejudice and intolerance. The formal separation between linear time and space assists the young reader in becoming aware of the significance of earlier events.

While the genesis of the first novel is the harrowing experiences of a child

survivor, the second novel opens significantly wider globalized dimensions to the topic of fostering transcultural understanding through children's literature. *Hana's Suitcase*, by Karen Levine, chronicles the overwhelming story of Hana Brady, a Jewish child of thirteen who was murdered at Auschwitz during the war. It is an appalling story made enthralling by the manner of its telling. As underlined in the many book reviews and on-line commentaries dedicated to this story, the genesis of the book is the amazing voyage undertaken by Fumiko Ishioka, a teacher of Japanese history and curator of the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Center, to discover who Hana was and the history behind her life and death. The book narrates how, in the winter of 2000, Ishioka had gone to the Holocaust Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland to visit the death camps and ask museum officials for a few artifacts to bring back to Japan, items that might make the story of the Holocaust more tangible for her students. To her surprise, the shipment she later received for her museum was an old suitcase with a name written in large white letters: Hanna Brady, born May 16, 1931, and the German word for orphan, 'Waisenkind'. Inside she found a can that once contained a Zyklon B poisonous gas used during the slaughter of Jews, a white sock and shoe, and a child's pinafore. Her students in Japan, especially the group known as 'Small Wings' who had begun drawing pictures, writing poems and a newsletter on the Holocaust, wanted to know more about the curious suitcase and the fate of this child and so in July 2000 Ishioka returned to the city of Terezin in Czechoslovakia in order to investigate.

The novel takes the form of a detective story in which the main character Fumiko Ishioka, like a historiographer involved in the search for truth, is intent on deciphering and interpreting the complex events of the past. The plot of the story moves in alternating short chapters that shift back and forth chronologically in time and space: Tokyo in 2000 where Ishioka, stimulated by the urgent questions of her students, begins her search; the town of Nove Mesto in Poland between 1938 and 1942 where descriptive accounts of Hana's early childhood permit young readers to sympathize and relate to her games and moods; Theresienstadt, the Jewish children's camp from 1942 to 1944 where Hana, though later deported to Auschwitz, finds moments of joy and learns the importance of good friends and caring teachers; present-day Terezin where Ishioka uncovers drawings sketched by Hana and exceptional documents proving that her brother George had survived; Prague in 2000 where Ishioka meets Kurt Kotouc, George's bunkmate and companion at Theresienstadt, and is told that George, now an elderly man, has become a prosperous plumber in Toronto. In Tokyo, in August of 2000, after the successful unraveling of the mystery behind Hana's identity, Ishioka is able to write to George, send him copies of Hana's drawings and inform him of her discovery. Part of the letter reads as follows:

Please forgive me, if my letter hurts you by reminding you of your difficult experiences, But I would very much appreciate if you would kindly be able to tell us about your and Hana's story. We would like to know about the time you spent with Hana before you were sent to the camp, the things that you talked with her about, your and her dreams. [...] We want to understand what prejudice, intolerance, and hatred did to young Jewish children. [...] We at the Tokyo Holocaust Centre and the children of Small Wings are all so excited to know that Hana had a brother and that he survived (98).

The final chapters of the book find George in Toronto reading the letter with emotional disbelief, while mixed feelings of sadness for not having been able to save her and joyful amazement at discovering that Hana is brought to life again in the imaginations of children in Tokyo. He accepts an invitation to visit Tokyo's Holocaust Centre with his youngest daughter Lara Hana and there he meets the children and shares with them his recollections of his little sister. The power of this novel resides in its extraordinary combination of one man's private memories, the public horrors of unrelenting prejudice, and one Japanese's woman's tenacious determination to have the story told so that children all over the world may benefit and learn.

The chronicle of Hana's life is, of course, a reconstruction but her story is universal in that it underlines how Hana, like all children, loved to play, dance, sing, draw and skate. From a visual and graphic point of view, in fact, the book abounds with childhood photographs kindly provided by George of Hana and her family living a peaceful and happy life in Czechoslovakia before her parents were sent to death camps in 1942. Included are also copies of official documents from Auschwitz and Theresienstadt, attesting to the fact that Hana was just one of the many thousands who were put to death daily by the Nazis between 1942 and 1945. Particularly poignant are Hana's drawings from Theresienstadt that speak of her joy for nature as she sketched field workers gathering hay, just as she had done as a child in Nove Mesto, or people enjoying picnics under an umbrella near a river. But they also evoke the pain and suffering of those waiting for trains holding suitcases as they were being herded off to concentrations camps, naively looking as if they were going on holiday. The simplicity of the drawings allows her images to both evoke her suffering and hint at her immature perception of the world that surrounded her. But these images also permit Hana to speak through them to her readers.

The story of Hana Brady and how her suitcase symbolically travelled from Poland to Japan and then to Canada was recreated in a CBC Radio documentary program produced in 2001 by Karen Levine, who was later inspired by that documentary to write the novel in 2002. In an interview with Libby White, she commented on how moving the story was, in particular Ishioko's efforts

«full of pitfalls, setbacks, coincidences and miracles» which finally led her «to Toronto and George Bradly, Hana's surviving brother» (L. White 1). Without the efforts of Ishioka, Japanese children would not have become aware of the tragic horrors of the Holocaust, especially since Japan's complicity with Nazi Germany had always been marginalized in children's history books. Thus the importance of voicing these issues becomes evident if we want our children to learn from the past in order to avoid and eliminate any form of intolerance and prejudice towards those who are diverse because of race, class or ethnicity. After its publication, *Hana's Suitcase* received enthusiastic critical acclaim as one of the most valid books for children on the Holocaust. It has since been published in over 30 countries and translated into 20 languages, collecting many prestigious awards such as the Yad Vashem Holocaust prize for the best work of literature for children in 2006. Like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the novel by Levine, though it speaks about the premature death of a young girl, also underlines how courage and hope can assist us in overcoming fear, suffering and loss.

As a final consideration, when reflecting on the subject of children and the Holocaust, we can understand the moral, but even aesthetic responsibility that an author has in representing the historical sufferings of the un-representable, or as underlined by Elizabeth Baer, «to recognize and convey the evil that is new in the post-Holocaust world». She believes that there is an essential need «to confront the evil, to contextualize it, to warn children, and to provide them with a framework for consciousness, for making moral choices and for taking personal responsibility» (Baer 386). Elain Kalman Naves, journalist and critic, affirms that Jewish children «made the most vulnerable victims » but also the most compelling not just because of their desperately painful stories but above all because they «inspire meditation on the very nature of childhood» (Naves 1). For this reason Holocaust education must be seen in the light of other genocides or forms of discrimination and though we recognize the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, Holocaust literature for children can now go beyond the retelling of past historical atrocities to include important contemporary issues such as diasporic forms of immigration, social, religious and ethnic prejudice, war and ethnic cleansing, intolerance and hatred, multiculturalism and transculturalism. Children must be taught to be aware and vigilant. It will always be difficult to explain the horrors of inhuman actions to children but novels such as those by Nemis-Boraks and Levine constitute a first step towards understanding multiple forms of diversity and identity. Thus the fundamental value that these books offer is the capacity to develop, through the restaging of history in narrative and pictorial form, children's multicultural and transcultural sympathies in this globalized contemporary world. Children can learn from the past to live in the present. As Margaret Atwood aptly states, «The past

no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it» (Atwood 217).

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment". *The Essential Frankfurt Reader*. Ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: Continuum. 2005: 300-318.
- Atwood, Margaret. "In Search of Alias Grace". *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982-2004*. Toronto: Anansi. 2004: 196-217.
- Auschwitz case study. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/highlights/010821_hana.shtml> (retrieved January 27 2012).
- Baer, Elizabeth R. "A New Algorithm in Evil: Children's Literature in a Post-Holocaust World". *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 24 (2000), 3: 378-401.
- Boraks-Nemetz, Lillian. *The Old Brown Suitcase*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press. 2008.
- Coats, Corey. "Review of Hana's Suitcase". *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 34 (2002), 2: 151-52.
- Ellis, Sarah. "Review of The Old Brown Suitcase". *The Horn Magazine*, 71 (1996), 1: 117.
- Kokkola, Lydia. *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. London: Routledge. 2009.
- Lambertson, Ross. *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists, 1930-1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2005.
- Levine, Karen. *Hana's Suitcase*. Toronto: Second Story Press. 2002.
- Muller, Adam. "Writing the Holocaust for Children: On the Representation of Unimaginable Atrocity". *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 2 (2010), 2: 147-164.
- Naves, Elaine Kalman. "Holocaust children's tales are heartbreaking". Review of *Hidden Children: Forgotten Survivors of the Holocaust*. *The Gazette* (18 September 1993): 1 J.
- Pihlainen, Kalle. "History in the World: Hayden White and the Consumer of History". *Rethinking History*, 12 (March 2008), 7: 23-39.
- Pennell, Victoria. "Exploring our Heritage: An Overview of Recent Canadian Historical Fiction for Children and Young Adults". *Canadian History: School Libraries in Canada*, 22 (2003), 3: 5-11.
- Stone, Jay. "Review of Old Brown Suitcase". *The Vancouver Sun* (13 November 2009): 12.
- White, Hayden. "Historical Discourse and Literary Writing". *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*. Ed. Kuisma Korhonen. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 2006: 25-33.
- White, Libby. "Interview with Karen Levine". Proceedings of the 38th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries in Toronto, Ontario, 15-18 June (2003). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hana_Brady> (retrieved January 26 2012).