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A Way to Persist: Storytelling and Its Effect on Trauma in Gábor Schein's *The Book of*

Mordechai and Lazarus

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in English

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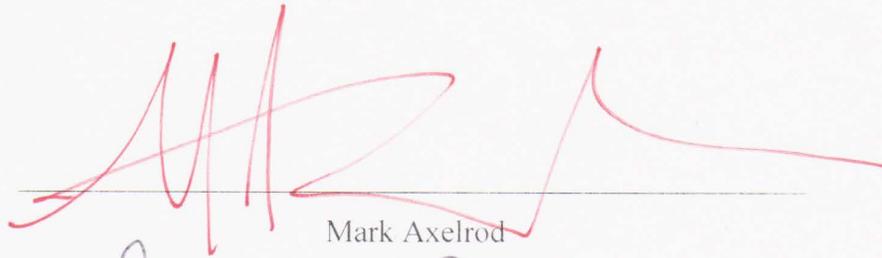
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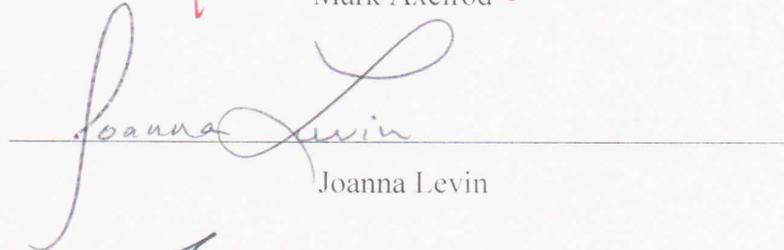
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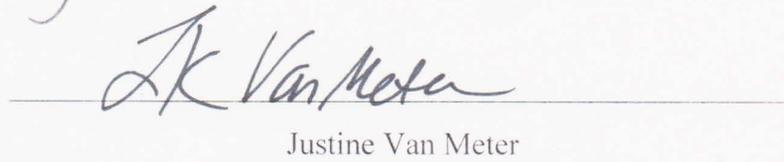
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May 2019

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ABSTRACT

A Way to Persist: Storytelling and Its Effect on Trauma in Gábor Schein's *The Book of Mordechai and Lazarus*

by Duncan Capriotti

For centuries, people have been telling stories of the traumatic events in their lives in order to deal with the lasting effects of those traumas. This thesis will explore the way Gábor Schein applies this belief to his own writing by focusing on his protagonists' connection with the Holocaust. In his novels, *The Book of Mordechai and Lazarus*, Schein uses the protagonists to reveal the process of recovery through storytelling. By applying the theory of narrative therapy to Schein's writings, it becomes apparent how vital the moments of sharing are for those suffering from trauma. Schein's protagonists have suffered several forms of mental and physical displacement, but they find a new home and sense of community with the people that they share their stories. Many studies have been done on the effect that trauma has on memory and how those memories, no matter how terrible they may be, can be shared with happiness. Schein's protagonists engage in social sharing of their stories to build off of each other's memories and regain a semblance of the community they lost.

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“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” — **Elie Wiesel**

“Fiction cannot recite the numbing number, but it can be that witness, that memory. A storyteller can attempt to tell the human tale, can make galaxy out of chaos, can point to the fact that some people survived even as most people died. And can remind us that the swallows still sing around the smokestacks.” — **Jane Yolen**

Introduction

For thousands of years, humans have been telling stories that span across all genres. There are many theories as to why storytelling came into existence, but the common thread that unites all stories is that they connect with someone, whether it be the writer or the audience. These connections draw from shared experiences, a person’s ability to convey their story in a way that allows the audience to relate their own lives to the authors’. For the audience, they can read or hear a story and feel a sense of community formed, like they are not alone going through life. These connections allow the art of writing, storytelling, and reading to become forms of therapy in a way. Only recently researchers have started to focus in on the reasons behind the healing act of storytelling. Two of these researchers, Michael White and David Epston, have formulated the narrative theory, which states that “people create and tell stories to make sense of and construct meanings about their experiences, relationships, and lives...Stories or aspects of stories that are deemed to be problematic are externalized and, thus, separated from the clients’ identity” (Panina-Beard). Although this theory has only been given a name since the 1990s, many survivors of traumatic experiences have been writing or telling stories in order to cope with the effects of their trauma since long before then. Trauma can be defined as “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or

emotional stress or physical injury” (Merriam Webster). Not all causes of trauma are the same, but the effects on the survivors’ mental, emotional, and physical state are often similar. Gábor Schein is a Hungarian writer that struggled with the trauma from growing up the grandson of a Holocaust survivor during the unrest of communist Hungary and the 1989 regime change. He sought to write a book that would allow him to engage the social part of therapy and feel a new sense of perceived community. The therapeutic value of storytelling can be seen by looking at studies done on the restorative aspect of telling stories, other survivors’ experiences with sharing, and Schein’s writing in which he tries to connect all the threads among trauma, storytelling, community, and therapy.

People who have survived unimaginable pain and trauma can find a semblance of the community they felt before the trauma shattered their perception of who and what they were by sharing their stories. One of the most devastating and traumatic experiences in modern history was the Holocaust. Several generations, millions of humans, entire histories were burned up and spread by the wind while the people who called them friends and family were helpless to do anything that could save them. The survivors of this atrocity were left with indescribable trauma. The Jewish community was crushed, and after WWII was over, they were left to try to piece together the shattered remains. Many of the survivors did not know how to deal with the trauma. Some looked back at their shared history as a guide to the future, and others set out to record what had happened, to put down on paper the new history of how their people had survived once more.

One of the hardest parts about dealing with traumatic experiences is that they isolate the individual from the greater community leading them to feel like they have no

outlet for their pain. These displaced individuals want to feel normal again. They want to feel like a part of a community. Many have been able to find this sense of community by interacting with the page and letting their emotions out through their writing. For those with trauma in their past, ranging from something expected like the death of a father to something so substantial that it changed the history of the world like WWII and the Holocaust, storytelling and reading the stories of the past can become something akin to therapy.

The Book of Mordechai and *Lazarus* are the first two novels by Gábor Schein and have been collected into one book. Schein grew up during the communist rule in post-World War II Hungary. Within three generations, his family dealt with the horrors of the Holocaust, the oppression of a communist regime, and the chaos during the downfall and subsequent changing of that regime in 1989. Schein pulls from his own family history to create an intricate story of Peter (P.), his father M., and his grandparents as they go through their lives dealing with the effects of the transition from the Holocaust to their lives after. In these novels, Schein emphasizes the usefulness of memory as a form of truth, deception, and a way to remember the dead. He also uses it to demonstrate the healing power storytelling has on trauma survivors and the interconnectivity of families or communities that grow from the tales they tell each other.

The Book of Mordechai

The Book of Mordechai follows the young protagonist P. as his grandmother teaches him to read and write one summer in the 1980s. The tool with which she teaches him is the tale of Mordechai and Esther translated by the local Rabbi, Leopold Blumenfeld. Schein often integrates the fluidity of memory in the main narrative as well

as the side plots. At several different places, it is mentioned that the memories, written records, or tales told between friends were probably variations of what was once the truth. This process is endemic, stemming from storytelling itself. In a study on reconstructive memory, Shigehiro Oishi, a professor of Psychology at Columbia University, found that:

As stories are passed from one person to another, they change in content and tone. Bartlett (1932) identified this phenomenon empirically, using a serial reproduction method. To retell a story, one first needs to remember what the story was. Thus, the transmission of a story involves memory processes, and in particular what Bartlett called “reconstructive memory”. (Oishi 2153)

Schein focuses on the social aspect of this reconstructed collective memory, by adding it throughout each of the stories and using it to force the reader to confront not only the initial destructive act but the aftermath of those acts on the memory.

Throughout the story, the reader learns about P.’s family’s connection with the Holocaust, how they were a single step away from being sent to Auschwitz, and managed to survive off a loaf of bread as the train car waited for four days before being sent to a forced labor camp. Schein then time jumps to after the Holocaust. In one of these moments he says:

Once a week a few old friends came over to visit his grandparents. After the war, in ’51, in ’52, they all moved to Budapest from the same village; there couldn’t have been any of them left. They came in the afternoon, the doctor’s daughter, the shopkeeper, one of the old suitors, and recounted until late in the evening the names and stories which on each occasion emerged slightly differently; new

additions occurred in them, new pieces of information were authored together.
(Schein 30-31)

With each visitor, the memories of the events were continually changing. Schein writes on this process to demonstrate how the evolution of stories can be communal. He also makes sure to mention that the war was over and that all the friends originated from the same place. By having them congregate, Schein allows them to preserve their traditions and their history through their community. In a people who have survived genocide and been displaced, the reader is shown how they are still a community and not just neighbors. In a look at Holocaust literature, Brett Ashley Kaplan found that “The pleasure - in remembering is divorced from the content of the memory and stems from the structure of the release of time” (Kaplan 328). According to Kaplan, joy, happiness, and a sense of family are products of the process of sharing and remembering and are separate from the horror of the actual memories. The act of these old friends meeting together with P.s grandparents and merging their stories to create a line of memory that they pull pleasure from terror allows them to accept their past, and become more than the label of victim.

Schein goes into further detail about the collective memory gathered by P.s grandparents:

On the basis of these stories, one could have put together the story of a little city that had never existed, a map on which each street was called something slightly different each day. Talk was full of the dead. And as they spoke, while evening overtook them on the brown, floral-patterned armchairs, it was visible in their

faces that this was the only thing in which they took absolute pleasure: they hardly even noticed the passing of time. (Schein 31)

After showing how the histories are created, he shows how they affect those who are sharing, how those people can take pleasure in sharing memories, whether true or fabricated, of a past that may have been harsh, but also connected them in a sense of survivorship. In an article about the lasting psychological effects the Holocaust has on the survivors and their children and grandchildren, Natan P. F. Kellermann found that, “While it is impossible to give any general recommendation about talking or keeping quiet, from the perspective of healing trauma, it is generally agreed that letting out what was hitherto kept in is better than attempting to repress and forget painful memories (Herman,1992)... Thus, the commemoration of the Holocaust and the acknowledgment of its legacy are surely an essential part of collective working through” (Kellermann 204). For P.s grandparents’ old friends, they had to gather and retell their stories in order to reconcile their past lives with their current life. They share their memories as a form of communal therapy. These creations are their home so that even if they are forced out of their physical homes, they will always have the records of their people, of the struggles that came before. In the reverse of this community sharing, Schein cautions against silence, “They all spoke quietly and moved without making a sound, hurriedly packing up the last of their things, as though they no longer had a place in their own apartment” (Schein 41). By specifying that they were speaking softly and moving quietly, Schein is alluding to the effect that sharing memories with enthusiasm and volume allows them to break free from the horror of the past while silence reinforces their physical displacement

by making them feel alone. The community created by the sharing of stories is vital to making them feel at home, like they are not threatened anymore.

Toward the middle of the book, Schein mentions another gathering of Holocaust survivors. “When the old friends met, again and again they told each other how someone had been freed, how someone unwittingly avoided the worst. The stories were always the same, and from the sentences, even from the words, it was possible to know where they were, where they had left something out, where someone had cut in, where the other had continued, and during all this the war was not called a war but a storm. Full of good cheer, they crossed over into the rich, unspeakable lives of the dead” (Schein 43-44). By mentioning crossing over into the lives of the dead, the sense of familial bonds forged in tragedy and kept sharp by stories is reintroduced. It emphasizes Schein’s insistence that there is an intersection between memory and community. The old friends repeat the same stories over and over to the point that the stories no longer haunt them. In Kellermann’s article, he states:

Talking about their Holocaust experiences in therapy may, in a paradoxical fashion, provide some emotional relief. For example, a woman had insomnia and nightmares for many years. She would dream that she was back in the camps and that she was going to die. Once she gave testimony and began writing her memoirs, the nightmares subsided and she slept better. Retelling her story again and again seemed to have helped her. The mere verbalization of memories and the very act of translating feelings into words may thus help to reorganize experiences and make them easier to digest. (Kellermann 204-205)

The move from internal feelings to external expression not only allows the teller to cope with their trauma, but it also makes those who hear or read it feel as if they are not isolated. Similar to Kellermann's article, the old friends' repetition lets them digest the truth of what happened to them while also feeling emotional relief in their group setting. The friends gather and weave a story from the clear-cut memories that the horror and stress of the Holocaust ingrained into them. They share stories of those who survived as a transition into remembering those who died.

The friends use the stories to keep the memories of those whom they lost during the Holocaust alive. Without those memories, there would be nothing to remind them of that time, and the greatest tragedy and act of perseverance of their lives would be lost to the seclusion of their individual minds. The thought of sharing the memories of the Holocaust and using them as bonding may seem strange at first glance, but studies have shown differently. In Brett Ashley Kaplan's research, she found that the actual survivors had to share their memories with beauty, "This also is the paradox of Holocaust representation in order to begin to capture the horror, the representation must be beautiful, must be metaphorical, and must then to some degree be pleasurable" (Kaplan 328). By looking at the memories of the Holocaust using metaphors and sharing those stories with a close group of friends who shared in the suffering, the old friends in Schein's book are able to take the steps toward the future, and the recovery of the part of themselves that they lost in the concentration camps.

One of the main arcs of the story is the record of Mordechai and Esther. This record of the survival of the Jewish population in the face of a decree of extermination is used to teach P. his history and how to cope with possible trauma. At the start of the

story, P.'s grandmother is teaching him how to read and write by having him first read and then transcribe Blumenfeld's translation of the story of Mordechai and Esther. This process takes place over several months, and the whole time his grandmother is sitting across from him making sure he is doing it correctly. In the first third of Mordechai's story, the reader learns that "In all likelihood, the king never had a wife named Vashti or Esther, who sat on the throne. As for the many books to be written, however, as the sage says, there is no end" (Schein 40). What is Schein trying to say by telling the reader that the story he is reading, and the story that P. is recording, is a fabrication of a religious body? By looking at the rest of Esther and Mordechai's story, the answers start to become apparent. It does not matter whether the story is entirely factual or not, what matters is the meaning it has for the Jewish people.

In Esther's story, the King keeps a detailed book of records. "What could the Book of Records have been? Was it a real book... Was it enough that someone began to write and read the book, and believe that there was time, believe there was memory?" (Schein 42-43). This book is a written record of what happened and is mentioned several times in the story. Schein is trying to make the reader understand the importance of memories for their society. These records are so important that one night, when the king could not sleep, "he ordered the BOOKS OF RECORDS to be brought... And when the servant... read from the book, one entry, in particular, caught the king's ear" (Schein 86-87). The entry that caught the King's ear was about how Mordechai had thwarted a plot against the king. As a result of the king keeping a record of that day, not only was Mordechai saved, but it also allowed Esther to ask for the survival of the entire Jewish population. Schein focuses on the story of Esther to point to the significance of the

written and oral histories of the Jewish people. Each and every story holds meaning for the communal history as well as the individual familial memories.

When a community is faced with the possibility of extinction as well as the murder of millions of their kin, it can cause the entire community to not only suffer from immense trauma but also lose their identity. Sociologist Kai Erikson “defines collective trauma as a blow to one’s collective identity and social life: ‘It is a form of shock ... a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared’” (qtd. in Emanuel 24). For a people to survive an event that breaks their community and eradicates their sense of identity they need to find something that can help them heal, something to which they can relate. One of the ways in which they can stay a strong group is by using the stories of the past to encourage them that they can not only survive but grow and thrive.

During P.’s copying of the story of Esther, he ponders the truth in the book. “Not only because he was used to there always being truth in the books he read or in those read to him, even though what was written was never true in itself, but also because he vaguely sensed the implausibility of Haman’s hatred” (Schein 64). In this passage, the structure of the sentence alludes to the gray areas of truth. How can there be truth in books when what is written is not true in itself? In the case of Esther’s story, Emanuel writes, “Although likely not a direct recording of historical events, the book of Esther nevertheless offers ‘effective truths’—truths that, albeit coated in fiction, still reflect a Jewish communal consciousness” (Emanuel 27). The story of Esther may not be factual, but it tells about a people’s struggle, about the ability to overcome oppression and keep a hold of their community through dark times. The act of repetitive telling and writing of

Esther's story points to the healing power of sharing traumatic experiences. Emanuel goes on to explain that "By naming, shaping, and giving words to traumatic experience, storytelling becomes an act of processing—an act that seeks to make sense of and survive the many haunting associations and dissociations, which, paradoxically, signify events that exceed categorized signification" (Emanuel 24). In the mind of P., he is being forced to write the retelling of an old story about people too far off to seem real. However, by having his grandmother teach him through this type of repetition, Schein is giving the reader a glimpse into the way an oppressed people, such as the Jews during and after the Holocaust, continue. He is also using Esther's story to hint at different ways in which victims or survivors can deal with their own traumatic experiences.

Nearing the end of the book, reading and writing became an oppressive, almost unbearable suffering to P. As though all that he read, like a terrible vision, had been born of his imagination, and now there he stood among the horrible, faceless figures, shouting to them, but no voice would come out of his throat, starting towards them, but his legs would not move. (Schein 130)

P. deals with this suffering during the time that his grandfather is on his deathbed and his family knows he does not have long to live. The trauma of the impending death of a loved one turns the act of copying into a terrible exercise because P. can see the guidelines of how he should be dealing with his emotions, but does not have the knowledge of how to engage with those guides. He wants to use Esther's example to forge his own path of processing, but all he can do is copy, which does not engage him as writing down the memories of his dying grandfather would.

The memory of P.'s father and grandfather is a topic of repetition in the book. They are presented in several different lights. "After a time, P.'s mother and grandmother could not help but speak about themselves. They told and told their stories. And as the numbers grew, details beginning to repeat themselves, in explanation of and justification for all they could not change, P.'s father and grandfather were drawn into an increasingly wounded silence" (Schein 100). In this instance, P.'s mother and grandmother are relating stories of themselves, but in doing so, they are retelling stories of P.'s grandfather and father. P.'s grandfather and father overhear these stories and are hurt by the way they are represented, but instead of retelling their own versions, they stick to their silence. For Schein, each memory carries with it a singular viewpoint. Because of this partial perspective, no memory is a hundred percent factual, but to P.'s mother and grandmother, they used these memories to sustain themselves and justify the choices they had made, to deal with the many traumas in their lives. The silence is described as wounded because Schein is trying to reiterate that to be silent is to let the trauma take hold and destroy the sense community around oneself. In one of the last examples of P.'s grandfather in memory, Schein writes that P.'s father "had been through the many prolonged months of his own father's death, who in 1955 was so devastated by lung cancer that almost every memory had died with him" (Schein 137). Most of P.'s father's memories of his father were destroyed by the months of debilitating lung cancer. Lastly, Schein uses this detail to show that trauma can destroy decades of happy memories within the span of months. Memory is fallible and susceptible to emotions such as fear, anger, regret, and sadness. Without a guide to help him, P.'s father is rendered mute, and the trauma boils in the silence of his mind.

In the end, Schein uses these instances of memory building to illuminate how generations of the Jewish population have found a way to not only survive but thrive through their many horrors and genocides. After the retelling of one of Blumenfeld's sermons, Schein writes that he "said all of this in a temple orator's raised, sonorous voice, like a story, like a legend, the truth of which he himself did not believe but whose meaning he held in high regard" (Schein 46). This brings up the question, what is more important, the facts of history, or the stories, meanings, and community behind the evolution of history? In *The Book of Mordechai*, Schein makes the inaccuracies behind the stories apparent but also demonstrates how they affect the Jewish population as a whole and how those stories allow them to carry the memories of their dead loved ones and their homes with them wherever they go. As Kellermann notes, "Since much emotionally painful material is out of the reach of words, it may be more easily uncovered and contained within expressive therapies such as art, creative writing, music, and/or movement therapy. Group interaction and communal sharing may provide further resources for coping with the stressors of life" (210). Schein adds in the old friends and the reliance on the evolution of memories to tell the reader how the Jewish population needed to be part of a collective memory in order to deal with the past atrocities committed against them during the Holocaust. In both books, Schein is recreating the memories and feelings around the descendants of Holocaust survivors. In Sarah L. Canham's study on why Holocaust survivors remember what they remember, she found that "Holocaust survivors do not define their lives based on trauma and loss, but on their ability to rise from the ashes and bear witness to the past to help secure the future... They

are not victims of the past, but symbols of endurance and survival” (Canham 1164).
These stories and memories are a way for the survivors to persist.

Lazarus

The second book in the collection by Schein is *Lazarus*. It is written in the first person and follows the narrator, whose name we never explicitly get, as he tells the story of Peter and his father M. At the start of the book, it can be inferred that M. is the narrator’s father and that Peter is a stand-in for the narrator. The story encompasses the lives of Peter, M., M.’s parents, and M.’s grandparents, all the while interwoven with the narrator’s personal messages for his deceased father. Throughout all of these stories, there is a common thread of loss and how people use stories and memories as a coping mechanism to deal with loss.

In the second book, it can also be inferred that Peter is the same P. from the first book in the collection. Now that P. has grown up, he has learned how to deal with trauma from when his grandmother taught him how to read and write by using the story of his ancestors, Esther and Mordechai. Esther told her story, and in return, Peter finds himself following her lead “by naming, shaping, and giving words” (Emanuel 24) to process his own familial traumas with the silence and death of his father. On the first page of *Lazarus*, Peter speaks about his motivation behind writing the book as he addresses his father. “That is how this book should begin. But it cannot, because you have forbidden me to write it, and in defiance of your prohibition I am writing about you, about those weeks during which, deprived of your voice, you suffered your last agonies” (Schein 147). After suffering through the weeks of his father’s debilitating illness that led to his

death, Peter needed a way to deal with the trauma of seeing his father decay to nothingness. As his father died, he needed a way in which to remember the man he knew before the illness, and even if his father had explicitly told him not to write about him, the writing was not for him, but rather for Peter and future generations of his family as a strategy for healing. As Emanuel noted, “Trauma erodes one’s understanding of the world and one’s place in it, making it that much more difficult for the trauma to be effectively ‘grasped by the conscious mind’” (Emanuel 25). From his time writing down Esther’s story and hearing his grandmother’s stories, Peter understood the importance of storytelling, that if he followed his father’s wishes, his father’s memory would be forever altered or worse even, lost.

The loss of his father is not the only trauma Peter is coping with through his writings. “And now it is my turn to torment you, holding fast in this silence. I shall build a sepulcher above your grave made of words—that material completely alien to you in those last weeks—making it impossible that, apart from this book, which shall henceforth be your body and your home, there would be anything else between us” (Schein 147). Peter is creating a symbol of the trauma that riddled his life from his dysfunctional relationship with his father. While growing up, Peter constantly tried to connect to his father, but his father’s silence was impossible to understand. As Kellermann found on the generational effect of Holocaust trauma, “Such subliminal mediating influence of parental communication style, through either oversilence or overpreoccupation, might explain some of the difficulties many children of Holocaust survivors have when trying to connect their vague sense of fear, sadness, and vulnerability with actual memories of the experience of growing up with Holocaust survivor parents” (Kellermann 213). His

father's death and the insistence on silence was the culmination of an entire relationship that was marked by the space between the silences. For a person to live with repeated trauma and then be rendered silent because the person who caused the trauma falls deathly ill is a situation with which Peter's family was all too familiar. Similar, but on a much smaller scale, to how Holocaust survivors had to figure out how to cope with their changed lives while the world moved on and the symbol of their hatred was gone, Peter had to learn to continue on without the closure of confrontation. Another similarity with some of the Holocaust survivors is that Peter wishes his father had died suddenly:

I perhaps shall be secretly awaiting that moment where, in a real house, you will open the door for me and be unable to comprehend my surprise. As if your body were consumed by a sudden flame. Without even time for us to scream. A great storm of fire, as if dreaming; we watched the flames, we watched your body as it burnt, and when we awoke, you were nowhere to be found. (Schein 148)

The effect of watching a loved one die in a prolonged fashion is unimaginable. It can tear away a person's sense of community or relationship until there is nothing that resembles what once was. Whereas Peter has a direct line of sight for his loved one, the Holocaust survivors were torn apart and could only imagine what their loved ones were going through based on their own experiences. "Trauma theorists often describe traumatic events as those which are unnarratable. To use the words of psychiatrist Judith Herman, traumatic occurrences are such 'violations of the social compact' that they become 'unspeakable'" (Emanuel 25). Peter is trying to process his trauma in the way he has been taught, by writing his story down. However, for some people, there are such traumas that affect the use of language, when something so large happens that it renders language

inadequate. “The brain cannot put words to what has happened, because it cannot make sense of what has happened. Many survivors allude to this sensation in their own storytelling attempts” (Emanuel 25). The brain cannot take the vastness of the trauma and dilute all those emotions into words that do them justice. Peter has seen the process of how storytelling can be therapeutic but his father and his grandfather never fully understood its importance and so they remained silent about their trauma from the Holocaust.

From the onset, the narrator makes it apparent that his father’s silence, which had been his choice before, was forced upon him for the last two months of his life. There is an immediate sense of disconnection between the narrator and his father. “But because I would prefer to dislodge the history of those silences and oblivions—that is all I can do now. I cannot put that narrative back in place—for which we both, you with your silences, I with my compulsive need for speech, were equally late” (Schein 161). The narrator is trying to retell a story that he admits he cannot tell completely. There is also an emphasis on the father’s silence which is in close proximity to the word ‘oblivions.’ By combining these two words, the narrator is giving the reader the sense that silence is a form of erasing memory which the narrator sees as worse than creating something adjacent to the truth. There is a constant tension between the narrator and his father, as well as Peter and M. “I have a need for stories, nonetheless, just as Peter in his childhood made up all sorts of narratives about his father, his mother and himself, which as M.s meticulous detective work always decisively proved, were lies...So that this book will not only be your grave but, at the same time, the place of your birth; a body which I shall give to you in place of another” (Schein 167). M.s insistence on using only facts or

staying silent is caused by his own father's lack of communication. He is then subconsciously forcing his son, P. into that same way of dealing with trauma, but P. has learned differently and clashes with his father because of it. This tension between them leads to a constant form of friction when they are both alive, but when Peter or the narrator's father dies, there is a silence where that friction used to be, a silence which can only be filled by the stories of his father and family. Whereas the generations before chose silence to fill the void left by trauma, Peter uses the tools he has learned while growing up and from Esther and writes down the story of his loss in order to preserve the memory of his father and force himself to confront his pain.

In one of the instances of storytelling in the book, the narrator explains how Peter sees his grandfather. Peter writes, "I myself am not capable of seeing M.'s grandfather as a living human being, but merely as a legend existing before history...I would be asserting that he never lived, that he came into being as a fairy tale devised by someone a long, long time ago, telling the story over and over again, until even the story-teller forgot what tale he was relating" (Schein 165-166). At times, Schein mentions how certain legends of M.'s family are so far from the source material that no one, not even the person telling the story, knows if it is the truth. By bringing attention to the untrustworthiness of stories, Schein reveals a little bit about the possible reasons behind the narrator's storytelling; he believes that to tell a story is to tell what is important. Emanuel insists, "there is more to story than pure imagination. As socio-narratologist Arthur Frank makes clear, human experience is contingent upon the stories that we tell. Stories tell us who we can and cannot be, who does and does not matter, and what should and should not be done" (Emanuel 28). The legend of M.'s grandfather does more than

just create something tangible for M. and Peter to remember him by, it tells them what type of action is worthy of a story and in turn which actions matter and are memorable. Stories of ancestors are beacons for the younger generations to live their lives by and are vital to a community's way of dealing with the loss of members of their group. What is true and what has been interpreted by the author as part of the story? These questions work their way into Schein's writing. He expands the way that stories and memories can change and evolve by saying, "And yet the stifling and mute proximity of these bodies still created stories—silenced stories, which in the succession of generations rendered the muteness evermore impenetrable, until every trace of the original was completely eradicated" (Schein 169). Whereas gathering together and sharing tales of the past can distort and shape the facts, silence also has the same power. Silence is used as a wall through which the stories of the past cannot move, because of this, the stories slowly deteriorate until they are lost.

After showing the connection created between Peter and his grandfather through these tales, Schein turns the attention to Peter's father, M. "The realm of feelings, in particular, had no significance, nor did what one could say about oneself. If anyone in his presence began flirting with such deceptions, his response was unwavering: 'All right, just another tale'" (Schein 183). Peter's father was a man who believed only the "facts" of the memories. If the teller showed any emotion, the story was written off as false. However, at the end of that same page, the reader finds out that M. himself would distort the "facts" in order to further his own story. "The components of any sequence of events could, within days, undergo a radical transformation, losing all original coherence: M.

was able, without any difficulty, to reassemble and embellish his own versions, not infrequently placing words in the mouths of others that they had never said” (Schein 183-184). By contrasting M.’s beliefs with his actions, Schein is showing that nobody is infallible. Even those who trust only the “facts” will change a story to form the narrative that best fits with the way they want the world to remember them. That is not to say that there is no objective truth, only that, when dealing with memory, there are different variations of the truth. In one of the moments when Schein distances himself from Peter and M., he speaks on his connection to them, “I knew Peter, and I knew M., but everything that I remember about them, which isn’t much at all, is in the past now, dead; it perished long ago in that fire that burnt unceasingly in the depths of their days” (Schein 185). Here is another example of the way the truth of the past can be lost in the annals of time. Schein uses this distance between Peter and the narrator as a way to evoke questions in the reader. If the narrator is saying that everything he knows about Peter and M. is lost then what is the story he is telling the reader? Is it a falsehood or fabrication of his imagination or possibly he is using it as a way to reconcile the traumatic experiences in his past? Either way, Schein is bringing attention to questions about the accuracy of familial stories, as well as showing that they can be used for remembering those that have died. The narrator uses this type of memory recollection to read further into the meaning behind Peter and M.’s stories.

In the early 1930’s M.’s father applied to become a naturalized citizen of Hungary rather than Poland. This would not matter until nine years later when Germany invaded Poland and all the Polish citizens in Hungary were forced to return to Poland. M.’s

father's brother and one of his sisters returned to Poland and were forced into concentration camps and subsequently murdered. "So the three of them were there, to be sure, but the son born from the first marriage—whom M. looked up to, as a little boy looks up to his almost grown elder brother—wasn't there, the grandparents weren't there and all those who had been murdered due to a mistake in a story and the silence of M.'s father weren't there" (Schein 196). When M.'s father decided to be silent about when he was applying to be a naturalized citizen all those years back, he condemned a portion of his family to death. At the time that he applied, there was no way for him to know how it would turn out, but in his mind, that decision and his own time in labor camps created trauma that twisted his truth.

Many trauma sufferers not only deal with the reoccurring pain of the event but also the survivor's guilt. They feel that they have done something wrong by surviving a devastating experience when others did not. That guilt coupled with the initial trauma can make people turn to many methods of recovery. For M's father, after being in the forced labor camps, he returned home and "tried to pick up and continue his life where he had left off, as if there were something left to continue, as if there had only been a pause in things, as if a chord had been struck and the sound died away—he strove to keep going as if all the people missing around him had simply never been" (Schein 199). One of the misconceptions about trauma is that repression of those memories is a way to fix it. Repressing a memory is when a person forces that memory of trauma into their unconscious mind. Not only does this technique often result in a temporary fix, but for the sort of trauma M.'s father went through, where the people around him including his family never returned from the Holocaust, it has no sustainability because his way of life

has completely changed. M.'s father is overcome by his inner turmoil and immense trauma and forced into silence. He found that the horrors of the Holocaust had distorted language to the point that he felt incapable of expressing his trauma. Wiesel found a similar problem as he was trying to write about his own experience during the Holocaust. He writes in the preface of *Night*:

While I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else...I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It was still not right. (Wiesel ix)

One of the ways M.'s father gains control over the language that had betrayed him was by writing a manual for printing apprentices. "M.'s father also had secretly inscribed within it, in the year 1953—that year so full of hope and yet devoid of promise—all that he knew of memory and oblivion" (Schein 201). This manual dealt with the reproduction of images through a printing process. The narrator looks at this manual as something deeper. He connects it not only to M.'s life but also the life of Peter, who was not born at the time the manual was created. "But will the image obtained in this way really be identical with the original? In the course of the enlargement, the reproduction, the bleaching, does a transformation not take place, one that compels us to speak of two distinct images?" (Schein 202). The copying of images is very similar to the way memory

works. In the narrator's view, the copy is not the original because it is altered in a way that makes it not identical. Memory and storytelling work in the same way, enlarging and transforming the original happenings into an amalgamation of many memories and stories. This process also occurs when the old friends in *The Book of Mordechai* share their stories and create a sort of collective memory.

Peter's grandfather lost several members of his family to the Holocaust. When he came home, he continued his work at the printing factory. During that time and up until his death, he wrote his manual. Since the narrator makes such an emphasis on the manual, the reader can start to look further into its meaning. Some readers might see it as a return to the usual, to his normal life before the Holocaust to avoid the memory of the past while others might see it as a way of confronting the memories and using them to write and console himself. In one of the moments that the narrator is looking further into the meaning of the words of the manual, he writes, "don't follow me, don't remember me; for to remember is to amend, and then you shall no longer be my progeny but, rather, the sons of death? Is the hidden commandment not directed at us: 'Thou shalt not amend or retouch the image?'" (Schein 205). Does the unique history or process of making an original matter? What can be considered a copy? What can be considered the truth? Moreover, does it even matter, or does the story hold its own value? These questions weave their way through the narrative, continually making themselves known whenever the narrator starts to talk about his father and the memories he has of him. They become most frequent when the printing manual is brought up. Because of their frequency, it can be inferred that the narrator is using this story to fill the silence his father left when he

died as well as cope with writing down his memories of his father, memories that he no longer knows the reality.

Another portion that comes with reading further into Peter's grandfather's book is:

For memory itself is a toxin, afflicting the organism slowly at first, then assaulting the optic nerves and rendering its victim blind, incapable of realizing that it is no longer the world around oneself that one sees but rather a world that has passed, or perhaps never even was; the memory-pictures are displaced and transformed, with grievous consequences, as one no longer knows where one is, the self is lost, falling ceaselessly into oblivion. (Schein 219)

By explaining memory as a "toxin," the narrator is showing the slow deterioration that takes place between the time the real situation happened and its retelling. With each new retelling, there is a slight adjustment to the memory, details the person believes they remember but in reality are adding or subtracting. By only recreating these memories in one's mind, they become distorted and isolate the individual, but by sharing them with a community or writing them down, it allows them to counteract that isolation.

Once the narrator starts to understand that memory is as fluid as fiction, he begins to question whether it is good or bad. "And still, I hope that by the time I reach the end, I will nonetheless be able to convey something of the truth, to bring some peace of mind to both of us, to ease the burden of life for me, and the burden of death for you" (Schein 260). In the end, the narrator is using his writing and storytelling to cope with the loss of his father. By writing down the story of his life, the good and the bad, the narrator is creating an image of a man he only knew and which the reader will never know the full

truth about. However, to the narrator the whole truth does not matter, all that matters is filling the void that used to be filled by his father and that the two months of silence destroyed. “To tell stories, still more stories. A collection of indebtedness, of disgrace. To watch the fire as it consumes your body. And slowly in the blaze, writing is itself devoured...and the fire incinerates the table, inscribing the stories into oblivion, from which nothing readable remains” (Schein 231). It becomes apparent to the narrator during the process of his writing that his attempt to inscribe the memories of his father are insufficient because what he writes are not the facts but just stories that will never completely fill his void. But the act of writing in and of itself is a process of collective memory and preservation of history. In John G. Seamon’s study on the retention of memories during times of survival or heightened situations, he writes “While a constructive memory system can produce occasional errors, it also provides cognitive flexibility by allowing episodic representations of past events to be recombined in novel ways to imagine and plan future action” (Seamon 1045). He also goes on to explain that remembering the past, however flawed that memory is, can lead to planning for the future. In Canham’s study, one of the participants, Itzhak, said, “The memories of what I went through do not belong only to me; they also belong to young people in this country and all Jewish people... It is my duty, and the duty of all those who went through the Holocaust, to make sure what happened to us will be remembered for generations” (qtd. Canham 1162). The survivors of the Holocaust shared their stories not only to cope with their trauma but also because they felt a sense of duty to make sure what happened to them was never forgotten. If the narrator of *Lazarus* never writes the story down, it would truly burn up and be erased by time, but by his transcription, against his father’s wishes,

he is choosing to let those memories survive inside and outside of him. His father is trying to make him be silent to deal with his trauma, but he chooses to face the pain left from his father's distance in life and death in the only way he knows how to process trauma, writing.

As Schein delves further into the connection between himself and his grandfather's manual he says, "Does not the author intend to convey us a message about the transience of all things, the impossibility of preservation, the prohibition of memory?" (Schein 204). This passage comes when Schein is writing about the transference of subtle details, such as the highlights created around a cloud by the sun. He implies that by using this example, Peter's grandfather is delicately nodding to the inability to preserve or transfer something like memories. Which is not to say that the process is not worthwhile. Peter's grandfather did write an entire manual on it, and the narrator wrote a book about memories of his life. There have been many papers written and studies done on the process of memory retention. In Alexander Danvers' paper on the effects of awe and emotions on memory, he writes:

A rich research tradition demonstrates that emotions influence perception, interpretation, and memory of information from one's surroundings, sometimes in subtle ways. Although much of this research has emphasized implications of emotional stress or distress for cognitive processing, many studies have focused on characterizing differences between positive- and negative-valence affect.

(Danvers 938)

The study goes on to explain that awe generated greater individual memories in people. The awe decreased the reliance on scripted memories. An occurrence such as the death of a father is stressful and at times can leave the person traumatized. In the case of Peter dealing with the slow death of his father and then writing a book about it, it becomes apparent that he is using his memories and storytelling to deal with his emotions. The descriptions put forth in the book all point to the retention of details. At times he mentions how he was stuck in between the stories his mother and father would tell about each other. These stories centered around specific notable memories of his past, but none as clear as the death of his father. “There were stories which he had heard in too many variations, that contained too many wrenching details, and he could never piece together what had actually happened” (Schein 259). They were never as concrete as the stories of moments where he was struck with shock. They varied in their telling but still retained the details, such as the “bruise under his mother’s eye ... [or the] hundred-forint note, kept in a metal box underneath the oven” (Schein 259), that would lend them the fortitude of truth. And so instead of choosing to believe them and take part in their collective memories, he became separated from them. He wanted to take a stand but how would he know the truth? Did it matter? Schein does not think so, writing, “Is not everything that we think about ourselves and each other a deception...don’t believe that one day follows the next, that your tale began with mine, that Peter and M. can be seen as two figures of a single story, for everything, including this, is an illusion, the illusion of time quickly passing” (Schein 215). Late in his life, Peter’s father started to paint. He would paint on very small canvases that caused the images to become distorted when looked at closely.

A dot would be a person, a bird, a life, an entire story held within a single dot. Schein reads further into these paintings and connects it to the rest of the stories, saying that everything the reader thinks about Schein, Peter, and M. and even themselves, are deceptions fabricated by the tick of a clock.

By using the paintings of his father as an example of the illusion of life and memory, he is relating it to the preservation of memories and how even through sharing them in stories, they are distorted to the point of no recognition. Does that mean that the replication of memories, like images, changes the memory to something separate than what it once was? Schein believes that with every recitation of memory the story takes on a new light in which it becomes something more, “We never can, it seems, extricate ourselves fully from the realm of legend” (Schein 215). This quote is later but it bears a resemblance to the quote in *The Book of Mordechai*, in which Peter describes the stories of his father’s youth as legends. It seems that Schein uses these two instances to show how humans are restricted to the realm of their experiences. Looking through a window, such as Peter’s father did when painting, or hearing stories of someone’s past turns the truth into legend. These legends are implanted into the minds of those who hear the stories, and they themselves become something different than they started. This transference of memory through storytelling is useful in several different ways, but the one Schein seems most focused on is the power it has to help trauma survivors heal. Schein attempts to create a bridge between the loss of his father, the stories of his and his relatives’ lives, and the dealing with trauma by remembering the past, regardless of its inconsistencies.

Conclusion

At the end of the collection, Schein writes, “What you are now is something that never existed, it doesn’t exist even now and only shall exist while this book is being written, this book from which we are both slowly disappearing” (Schein 276). By using the narrator of *Lazarus*, an author who is writing a book about his father, Schein finds a way to connect both books. He also gives the reader insight into the process of recording the story of a dead loved one. Which is vital to the underlying theme that memories and stories, although possibly fabrications of the imagination, are fundamental in the therapeutic process when dealing with trauma. They are an amalgamation of truth, bias, and interpretation. “To speak of memory, and to see memory as a legible text only makes concrete sense, if there can be concrete memories and a concrete hearing of these memories. Memory cannot be a matter of injunction or decree: to identify a general surplus or lack of memory is simply authoritarian” (Fetz and Magsham 76). In the end, all of Schein’s contemplation on memories and what the difference between the truth and the stories based on flawed memories is rendered moot. The truth never mattered to the old friends sharing their stories, all that mattered was that they were not in the concentration camps anymore and could continue with their lives, attempting to feel normal and rooted in their communities. These memories are a way for the people who have suffered through traumatic experiences to confront the past and feel like a part of a community that they see as their home.

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