

HOLOCAUST THEME REFLECTED IN JOHN HERSEY'S "THE WALL". TRANSFORMATION OF SELF AS THE RESULT OF EXTREME OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

"The Wall" was published in 1950 and became bestseller novel in the USA. It was the first popular novel where Holocaust disaster introduced to American reader. In the novel writer used his experience of journalism and the whole novel was told by real testimonies of holocaust disaster.

Key words: jewish Wall, survivors, characters, Ghetto life, real and symbolic wall, conflicts.

The novel is written a list of the events in Warsaw according to Levinson's interpretation from November 1939 to May 1943. Levinson interacts with a lot of the survivors to write down their opinions regarding the highly emotional experience. Continually motivated by his job to maintain his daily duties, Levinson typically visits with his friends to finish things off, to take them away from their environment. Then, male survivors inform Levinson of their reaction to him being compelled to work as a member of the Jewish labor force. Nazis built the very wall that fueled the ghetto's growth. Mordecai Apt said surprisingly that: "it is harder to take the wall down than to put it up. When you are building a wall, the mortar is soft. When you come to demolish it, the mortar has become dry and rigid and adhesive. You have to work with cold steel."¹ The core of the argument is covered by Mordecai's statement. His name "Mordecai" is allusion to biblical figure: "Mordecai was a Jew living in the Persian capital of Shushan during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). He is probably most well known for being the uncle of Queen Esther and the important role he played in the government of King Ahasuerus"².

The wall Mordecai assisted in building was commanded by the Germans. There existed the wall of cultural and social prejudice. The walls are the subject of J. Hersey's novel individuals build a barrier between themselves and their own experiences, primarily, but also among themselves and other people within themselves. Most of the time there were walls that prevented people from understanding themselves and loving each other. The Wall that ultimately surrounded the ghetto was exactly the Jewish Wall in the sense that it was full of symbolism. Just as a physical wall is made up of layers of mortar, the jailer as a symbol in the novel has

¹ John Hersey, *The Wall* (1950; r p t. New York: Bantam, 1967), p. 625.

² <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/who-was-mordecai>

multiple meanings. This novel will not be fully appreciated until wall explores its meaning.

There were many characters in the Wall who had very different and contradictory feelings about Jewish culture and religion. Rachel Apt, the heroine of the novel, admitted at the end that her experience in the ghetto had taught her little about God, but a great deal about love. The Apt family was more friendly with the Protestant life than with Jewish life. The elder Mazurs and their son, Schlorae, were deeply religious and orthodox people. But to their other children, Rutka and Stefaan, being religious was the norm in their way of life. Dolek Berson is a male character in The Wall who is interested in traditional heroic proportions: "He says that when his mother discovered he had some talent, she pushed him and pushed him; she always used to say she wanted people to know what a Jewish boy could do."¹ The world of Warsaw Jewry was a place where many people had to struggle against different parts of their own selves in order to survive. One of the most exciting things in the novel is how Hersey shows how these characters, like Levinson, Berson, and others, overcome their differences in order to achieve a level of strength and freedom which allows them to make choices and act on their own behalf. The kind of insecurity that induced Mrs. Berson to have her son perform for other people instead of letting him stay alone, that caused him to play through the character of a poor self, increased under the pressure of the Nazis. Many of the victims' initial response was to share in their own distress, to divide themselves through an attempt at survival that actually created division. But Hersey makes it clear that the cracks of division with within many of his characters emerged before the appearance of the Nazis. It was with the increased pressure from the Nazis that the cracks widened for many and some exploded beyond repair. An early sense of separation and confusion of identity was evident in the behavior of Dolek Berson at the very beginning of the book. When asked by Levinson to attend an unplanned and unexpected meeting of the Judenrat called by the Germans, Berson, who was not a member of the Judenrat, tried to avoid attending. "This has nothing to do with me," he tells Levinson. "You people carry out your own affairs. I have no concern with you"². Berson, who is consistently truthful throughout the book, lied about his reason for responding based on a deep emotion. He tells Levinson that his wife is sick, when in reality she is expecting him home for a party celebrating their wedding anniversary. However, his fear of commitment troubles him more than his concern for her feelings. "He desired to distance himself from the anxiety on the side of the road, particularly in regards to official and formal matters"³. Levinson's commitment to realism and sincerity prohibits this escape. "This pertains to you as well," he informs Berson. "And with all your relatives: it involves all your familial connections."

Berson's conduct was typical in the sense that he did not commit to anything beyond a few immediate personal relationships, which was harmful. Berson was a romantic and intellectual person who had few connections and did not feel like he

¹John Hersey, *The Wall* 1950; . New York: Bantam,1967) p35

² John Hersey, *The Wall* .1950; r p t. New York: Bantam,1967) p17

³ Ibid 17

belonged anywhere. Levinson writes, "I would describe Berson as a drifter: he allows life to carry him along in its current." Berson himself admitted that when they took him to the Community Building off the street, he followed the crowd with a sensation of being dragged and buffeted by the wake of a vessel."¹

The means for one of Berson's initial insights into the peril of self-division and its perplexing connotations and consequences is a relatively minor individual named Fischel Schpunt. A repulsive figure from the ghetto, Schpunt is a diminutive and insignificant clerk of approximately fifty years of age, notorious throughout the Jewish community for his dreadful appearance and his embarrassing cowardice. Levinson describes him as "tragically unattractive, and appears to live tragically; he bows and scrapes and seems to be on the brink of tears"². However, Berson, upon encountering Schpunt for the first time at the Judenrat meeting with the Nazis, immediately senses that within the unsightly individual lies another creature, a product of the external self, containing "accumulated resentments and animosity"³. In Schpunt, another aspect of oneself becomes apparent to Berson and other Jewish individuals who witness it. In doing so, they also witness a part of themselves. This manifestation takes place during an undercover religious ceremony held by the Jews within their covert synagogue. Despite being prohibited by the Germans from practicing their faith, Rabbi Goldflamm and his fellow Jews utilize a hat and gloves store as a meeting place. The ceremony, which was making progress unevenly, was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of three German soldiers. The sergeant leading them demanded to see the rabbi, causing a hush to fall over the congregation. The rabbi remained silent, as did everyone else. Then Schpunt bravely declared himself to be the rabbi. However, the Nazis made a mockery of his act by forcing him to dance in the middle of the street. "An insane, fixed grin appeared on Schpunt's face, which made him look dreadfully comical," noted Levinson in his diary. "I heard laughter all around me in the hat and gloves store, and I myself burst out laughing. Schpunt seemed to be laughing too, as if he was aware of his clownish appearance"⁴.

Schpunt's absurdity and the trickery played on the Nazis appeared to cause amusement to the Jews as well. Following that initial instance, Schpunt continues to act as a fool. He becomes a sort of Jewish jester, constantly belittling his oppressors through his own personal humiliation as a buffoon. Similar to a jester, he can occasionally make shrewd use of his character disguise. At one point, he even distracts the Germans from guarding the ghetto gate. This facilitates Berson's illicit passage to the non-Jewish side. Where the pitiful jester Rigoletto beckons to his beautiful daughter, Gilda, "Cry, cry," the Jewish Schpunt essentially says, "Laugh, laugh, it will make you feel better, and the Nazis will never know." The text discusses the role and nature of the internal enemy that exists within oneself. While Rigoletto shouts "Si vendenta, tremenda vendenta," believing he has the power of revenge, Schpunt also

¹ Ibid 11

² John Hersey, *The Wall*. 1950; r p t. New York: Bantam, 1967. p20

³ Ibid p 20

⁴ Ibid p71

believes he retains some power over the Nazis. Both men eventually crumble when the illusion of their strength disintegrates before the reality of their impotence. Among the Jews, the various types of laughter that Schpunt arouses indicate their insecurity over the gap between their behavior and their feelings. Levinson senses this instinctively and seems to feel some self-doubt over his own participation in what was, in truth, a form of self-slaughter. "We laughed," he writes, "that was our mortification"¹. He then goes on to intellectualize about the various meanings of the situation.

Rachel Apt immediately recognizes the underlying horror of Jewish life that Schpunt represents, despite his smiles. Dolek, who is also disturbed by it but in a less sensitive manner, queries Rachel, "Why did we find it funny?" After explaining it to him, Rachel proceeds to scold him angrily. "You seem to have no empathy," Rachel tells Dolek. "You should be ashamed of yourself. I saw you laughing in there with the others. You're...you're a foolish person"². Comprehending the escape artist duality stemming from insecurity comes naturally to Rachel. Her looks create a sense of separation within her. The division present in Rachel is reinforced by the division within her family and its members. The Jewish family, described by Levinson as an exemplary social unit embodying the finest in Jewish life, actually proves highly vulnerable to the damages inflicted by the Nazis. Initially, the Apts, as part of the broader disintegrating society, quickly separate. When they reassemble, it is as part of a new family created out of the ghetto experience.

The potency of the Nazi tyranny to annihilate the individualities of the people residing in the ghetto becomes most conspicuous to Rachel when she witnesses it in her father and younger sibling. Observing it in juvenile David, possibly, wounds Rachel the most as she was not anticipating to discover it there, particularly in the ambiance in which it transpired. David was directed to the Rukner Home in the slum, a proficiently managed and cozy establishment for youngsters. One day, Rachel observed from the culinary area of the residence as her sibling and the other kids frolicked in the courtyard. She pondered on how lucky David was to be protected in such a safe atmosphere amidst the Nazi epidemic. The environment was filled with healthy, typical, and developing children, and the only moments of sadness were the occasional crying outbursts of the very young. However, the main character's blood ran cold as she realized the true nature of the game. David was leading the other children in a game of "selection," mimicking the actions of the Nazis and Jewish officials who chose which Jews would be "resettled" from the ghetto to the East on freight trains. At the time of this incident, the Jews did not realize that these trains were bound for Treblinka. In the game, David played the role of a Nazi military official, directing the other children where to stand as a sign of his decision regarding their resettlement. The other children pretended to be terrified to conceal their delight as they imitated adult Jews appearing at the selection. "With an unspeakably cruel and

¹ John Hersey, *The Wall*. 1950; r p t. New York: Bantam, 1967. p 71

² *Ibid* p 71

delighted expression, David shouted: 'Right...left...left...right...Send that bunch to the Umschlagplatz. Nechmiah...Get me some more Jews!...Left...left...right...'" ¹.

Rachel is terrified by David's game as it reveals how susceptible children are to the forces around them. Furthermore, the game represents the behavior of many adult Jews in the ghetto. While it is a relatively innocent game for children, it is potentially dangerous. For adults, the game takes what has been normal security and raises it to an early schizophrenic state. Laing explains that the false self tends to assume more and more characteristics of the person or persons upon whom its compliance is based. This assumption of the other person's characteristics may amount to an almost total impersonation of the other. The hatred of the impersonation becomes evident when the impersonation begins to turn into a caricature. Schpunt's behavior, his comical imitation of Nazi soldiers, which delighted and entertained both the Jews and the Nazis alike, was indicative of such a condition.

This condition was also evident in some of the other members of Rachel's family. Throughout most of his adult life, Pan Apt, Rachel's father, felt more comfortable identifying himself with gentiles than with Jews. During the period when he was forcibly relocated to the ghetto and the wall was constructed, he managed to reside in a relatively safe and prosperous environment, comfortably adapted to a state of enduring uncertainty regarding his allegiance and personal identity. Yet, the Nazis' external conflict triggered an eruption of this inner turmoil.

Possibly more concerning was the path taken by Rachel's brother-in-law, Stefan Mazur. While Pan Apt's cowardice distressed and hurt his family, making them victims of his disgrace, most of his actions were still directed towards himself. Stefan, on the other hand, in destroying himself, purposely chose to destroy others as well. He joined the Jewish police force. Initially, many Jews could convince themselves that such work actually involved an act of kindness towards their own people. To a certain extent, this was true because the Jewish police, even if they were acting on behalf of the Nazis, could still treat their fellow Jews with kindness. Even Dolek Berson initially joined the force attracted to the idea of helping to enforce law and order in the ghetto during a period of utter chaos. Unfortunately, like some black policemen working in American ghettos today, the Jewish police in many cases performed their duties with a brutality that even the Nazis admired. Stefan becomes such a policeman. Acting out of fear and confusion, even out of a certain sense of love for Halinka whom he wants to protect, Stefan becomes a hideous sort of monster. Though not better than some of the most terrible situations in the ghetto, the novel reserves a special place of shame for Stefan as the betrayer of the Apt-Mazur household, the central families in the book. While observing Stefan carry out his responsibilities, Berson has a breakdown and finally comprehends that it is "some bestial sadistic other self"² driving Stefan and other Jews like him.

The situation is an extremely frightening one. The Jewish authorities, instructed by the Nazis to choose numerous Jewish individuals for transportation, instinctively

¹ John Hersey, *The Wall* 1950; r p t. New York: Bantam, 1967 p 291

² John Hersey, *The Wall* 1950; r p t. New York: Bantam, 1967 p268

apprehend the most wretched, vulnerable, and disoriented among the already devastated Jews of Warsaw: "Then Berson saw something that startled him: the parade of poverty -stricken Jews was being constrained to move by Jewish policemen , and midway along the column Berson could see Stefan Mazur his face contorted with something that was not quite rage and yet was beyond rage; Stefan was beating the miserable marchers with his wooden club , cursing them, occasionally shoving them; the handsome young man seemed possessed by some bestial , sadistic Other Self whom Berson had never met. . . ." ¹ Observing the scene, Berson comprehends all regarding Stefan and shares his detestation, "hostility towards these pitiable Jewish individuals. By what right did they have to act so contemptibly? How could they dare to showcase the depths to which Jews could be pushed, highlighting the inescapable human inequality?" ².

However, through a beautiful expansion of consciousness and identification that elevates him as an individual compared to Stefan, Dolek's hatred transforms into compassion, spilling over like tears. He too is one of the pitiable Jews, both beaten and beating. Subsequently, a lifetime of disguised internal division, confusion, and self-hatred finally erupts. "Since morning, after hearing the rapid crescendo of the rumors of alarm, he had been yearning to weep; for weeks, months, years, he had been yearning to weep; and now he does, with great racking sobs." ³

Being a young Jewish person and a human being, it is apparent that with each individual Stefan destroys, he diminishes a part of himself. His sense of self becomes more deprived. Eventually, there is nothing left, and he is entirely lost. Stefan disappears among the Jews fleeing Nazi bullets while running with Halinka from the Germans who have finally decided to conduct selections for death, even upon Jewish policemen and their families. Unfortunately, Stefan's demise does not occur until he has compelled many of his closest associates to go first. Berson realizes the harmful nature of Stefan's conduct and recognizes early on that he cannot be trusted. However, this does not stop Stefan from requesting his father to go for resettlement with his mother to prolong his own and Halinka's life. Stefan informs his father, a quietly brave and religious Jew, that the Germans have commanded all policemen to select four individuals to go for resettlement or suffer the consequences of going themselves with their families. Reb Yechiel Mazur then inquires of his son, "Why do you choose me and not your mother?" His father refuses to help him and hits him when Stefan asks for help to get two people out. Stefan then cries and warns his father that they will come for him one day. Later, Stefan takes Dolek's wife, Symka Berson, who has been incapacitated due to typhus. However, a little over a week later, the Germans decide to take some policemen regardless. Stefan cries to Halinka, saying that he didn't know this would happen and that there was nothing else he could do. Stefan ultimately chooses not to run and dies, which is actually a form of suicide. Halinka lets him go.

¹ Ibid p 268

² Ibid p 268

³ John Hersey, *The Wall* .1950; r p t. New York: Bantam,1967.,p 268

In discussing the intricate relationship between the tormented and the torturer, Sartre wrote: “Regardless of the sufferings endured, it is ultimately the victim who decides when they become unbearable and must resort to talking. The ultimate irony of torture is that if the sufferer breaks down and talks, they are using their own will to deny their humanity, becoming an accomplice to their executioners and plunging themselves into abjection.”¹

This passage is significant in describing Stefan’s existential position in the novel as a victim. There were numerous circumstances beyond his control, and he could not simply wish away the Nazis.

Conclusion

The Holocaust might be seen as a deconstructive event via the lens of Holocaust fiction through study, comparison and contrast. As we understand it, the Holocaust destroys everything—gender, religion, humanity, life, death, even the self. Holocaust literature demonstrates how all of these things are defensible and how victims frequently exist in a gray area between life and death. The transmission and impact of trauma and memory are also depicted in Holocaust fiction “The Wall” by John Hersey. His characters went through several self-transformation under the extreme oppression and this played great role in their future life.

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¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Harper Colophon, 1955), pp. 211-212.