

# ***Narrating the Holocaust to Younger Generations: Memory and Postmemory in the Cape Town Holocaust Centre***

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**Abstract** *This paper looks at the role of primary witnesses and their narratives in the mediation of traumatic memories of the Holocaust to the younger generations who visit the Cape Town Holocaust Centre as part of their formal education. Oral history interviews were conducted with seven museum facilitators in 2003. Two of the interviewees are Holocaust survivors.<sup>i</sup> The Cape Town Holocaust Centre is the first Holocaust Centre on the African continent. It opened its doors officially on 10 August 1999. The Centre strives to further South Africa's transformation process by making explicit links between the racial ideologies of Nazism and apartheid. The Centre is extensively visited by school groups and has developed lesson material and specific programmes for teachers and learners.*

*The crux of the paper is an exploration of the pedagogical myth –prevalent in education and the heritage industry- that full understanding is possible if primary narratives are conveyed to the next generation. This myth entails a paradoxical relationship between the following claims: On the one hand mediators pedagogically justify remembrance: the younger generations have to remember and understand the traumatic event so that it will not happen again. On the other hand they stress that the younger generations struggle to or even cannot understand the trauma because they did not experience it. This paradoxical relationship is rarely investigated.*

## **Introduction**

To understand the process of generational transmission it is crucial to make a distinction between primary and secondary witnesses of the Holocaust and their respective narratives. Primary narratives are narratives of the victims of the traumatic historical event as opposed to narratives of secondary witnesses or commentators of the event. Secondary witnesses have what Hirsch calls 'postmemory'. She defines this term as follows:

[P]ostmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation.<sup>ii</sup>

As Ashplant, Dawson and Roper argue:

[Postmemory] signals the shift from narrative based on direct memory to cultural productions which explore what it means to live under the shadow of past wars. It is constantly negotiating events and experiences which are outside personal experiences, but which nevertheless shape the subjectivities of the 'outsiders' in profound ways.<sup>iii</sup>

The seemingly uncomplicated distinction between memory and postmemory however needs to be nuanced. While mediators, such as teachers and museum facilitators, expect (or desire) a full understanding and change, their own and learners' responses to the traumatic character of the event might impede these very expectations. The traumatic character of the historical event of the Holocaust is one of the reasons why 'Holocaust education means internalizing a number of disturbing questions.'<sup>iv</sup> These disturbing questions relate to what the goals of Holocaust education are or should be, namely what is precisely to be remembered, which narratives, how and with what effects. Analysis of pedagogy, the philosophy and

practice of teaching, however is rare not only in the education of traumatic events but also in museum studies.<sup>v</sup> This is worrying, especially when the teachers and/or museum facilitators are primary witnesses to the traumatic event that is the subject of their teaching. Various writers such as Bar-On and Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert have pointed out that people do not merely change their identities and values when political or social changes occur.<sup>vi</sup> Paying attention to the subjectivity of mediators is pivotal if we want to understand how 'change' (as a historical 'event' but also as changing moral values, behaviour and thought) is taught.

### **Experiencing and narrating the Holocaust**

Testifying, the creation of narratives, is especially complex when people experience a totalitarian regime such as Nazism that—figuratively and literally—tried to erase and reshape individual and collective memories that were not compatible with its ideology.<sup>vii</sup> For the survivors of the Holocaust the actual loss of their physical and metaphorical place in society and thus of their identity is traumatic because with it they lost their trust in others and in the safety of the world. The challenge for the survivor is to create meaning out of an experience that is unprecedented, 'not normal' and thus traumatic.<sup>viii</sup> The survivor (as all human beings) tries to fit the experience in their previous personal experiences and cultural understandings of the world and according to Ashplant, Dawson and Roper also the culturally constructed templates society has of previous conflicts.<sup>ix</sup>

When a primary witness conveys a story to a secondary witness these challenges are influencing not only the primary witness' attempt to understand, but also the listener's. Assumptions about the listener's knowledge and potential to understand, and the social practices of forgetting/remembering that both parties share, shape the dialogue.<sup>x</sup> For example, survivors can make the assumption that the listener has a basic understanding of what the Holocaust was about. I had the following dialogue with Isabelle Lagrange\*, one of the Holocaust survivors, who testifies at the end of some of the educational programmes at the Centre:

*Sofie Geschier*: so, how, how, how was, how was it in the camps?

*Isabelle Lagrange\**: how was it in the camps? [Describing one of the concentration camps] [...] [W]e lived in the barracks, these were old barracks, you see. They were not really fit for human being anymore, they were all OLD, very old, [delected], um, we slept on the floor. Um, what concentration camps are like! I mean, you know (SG: yes) with these banks, these, um, you know, and, um, it was rather difficult. It is the people around me, [describing people who were disturbed and people who died of hunger] [...] [T]here weren't any good facilities for washing. It was a camp! As all camps are (SG: ja) [...] [W]e were living like Gypsies, you know. Um, totally different existence to what we were accustomed to obviously.<sup>xi</sup> (author's emphasis)

In this dialogue Lagrange\* refers to her previous life, which was 'totally different' to the experience in the concentration camps. Four times she refers to the (assumed) commonly held present schemata of 'concentration camps', which she once equates with an assumed understanding of 'living like Gypsies'. This assumption about the listener's knowledge is made because we look back at the event, and have as the present society an assumed understanding of what a concentration camp is.<sup>xii</sup> Making this assumption however also makes it easier for the survivor not to have to go into the details of the experience, to 'relive' the experience. This 'reluctance' to revisit the experience can also be shared by the listener (see below).

The survivor can indicate the terror or painfulness of telling about her experiences also through another assumption that can be perceived as the opposite of the above:

the listener cannot fathom the experiences that she went through. Maria Dubois\* for example stressed that it is impossible for the young learners, and for the researcher/interviewer to understand what had been happening in the camps. Even for herself, a survivor of the extermination camps, understanding is an everlasting challenge and this is what makes testifying a difficult thing to do:

They [learners] don't grasp it! And another thing! We can't speak so often! You speak a few times; you have to have a break! It, it's, you yourself cannot and/you're trying to find out, you're trying to learn, you're trying to study, you will never fathom it! [...] [Reflecting on a personal, very upsetting experience in one of the concentration camps:] For a (silence) good moment I thought I must have died and I am in hell! Because it couldn't happen in reality. [...] [N]o MATTER how much you learn about it, you cannot fathom it, you cannot even VISUALISE it!<sup>xiii</sup>

The personal pronoun 'you' in Dubois\*' positioning first solely refers to 'we' -the witnesses who testify-, for whom the attempt to understand is very painful. Later on the pronoun refers to the researcher/interviewer who tries 'to find out', 'to learn', 'to study' but who 'will never fathom it'. Finally, after having reflected on a personal upsetting experience, Maria Dubois\* positions 'you' as implicitly including both the researcher/interviewer and the survivor herself who couldn't 'fathom' what happened to her 'because it couldn't happen in reality'. The complexity of this construction nuances the seemingly uncomplicated distinction between primary memory of the Holocaust and what Hirsch calls 'Postmemory'. Both primary memory and postmemory are invested, however in different degrees, with indirectness, fragmentation and what Hirsch calls 'imaginative investment and creation.'<sup>xiv</sup>

Paddy Berkovitch\*, one of the museum facilitators, says that the Centre asks the Holocaust survivors to testify only in some of the educational programs because of the emotional impact the act of testifying has on them. She states that even when the survivors talk, listeners do not necessarily understand what they say:

[...] often that is also falling, almost, on deaf ears. Because the listeners haven't got the context, and therefore haven't even got the empathy. Unless you've done quite a bit of reading, you don't really know what they are talking about. Because they never talk worst case scenario. They give you an outline of what happened to them. And these people have no idea what the worst case scenario actually was. (Silence). And we also don't LIKE to expose them to st/, even to young people, who may not appreciate what they are talking about. [...] [They do] not empathise efficiently, you know, this, to them, to a very young person, this is an old person standing and talking about something that happened 60 years ago. OK and they don't REALLY understand what it is.<sup>xv</sup>

Paddy Berkovitch\*'s reflection indicates that the construction of *a(n) (full) understanding* is challenging because of the different historical positions and needs of both parties. This challenge is complicated by dynamic and intrinsically social practices of forgetting and remembering.<sup>xvi</sup> These practices are closely linked to the above mentioned assumptions about the listener's knowledge and understanding of the traumatic event. For the survivors it is important to be able to deal with their traumatic past and to construct a morally defensible self-image while the listeners might accept and even demand redemptive narratives.<sup>xvii</sup> While Isabelle Lagrange\* is perceived as a primary witness of the Holocaust 'as a whole', having been a Jewish child experiencing concentration camps and later been hidden, she is a secondary witness to the extermination camps. She highlighted the two-way direction of wanting to forget by saying the following about a family member who experienced the extermination camps:

[S]he would never talk to me about it. About the camp. And I didn't want to know.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **The encounter between memory and postmemory**

The museum facilitators, whether they are primary or secondary witnesses of the Holocaust, define the role of the Centre as on the one hand a spiritual home, a 'place of memory' for survivors and their descendants and on the other hand an educational centre for the wider public. I would argue that the 'raison d'être' of the Centre is informed by a need to imagine a progress towards an (ideal) society without racism and prejudice. A pivotal question then is: how does this 'work' given the (seemingly) paradoxical, but constant negotiation between the 'memorial' and 'teaching'/'promotion' mission of the Centre? Isabelle Lagrange\* indicates that these different roles of the Centre are intrinsically linked with each other in the message that 'it should not happen again':

[the Centre] is very good, it's, it will HOPEfully teach in humanity to [manage] it should not happen again. And [...] the Holocaust Centre is a most, a most important place. I think also for us survivors and I said that once in a [speech], that I feel that it is our spiritual home. (silence) I really do. And that's why it is so important, that young children come through. [...] And, um, it, it serves a very good purpose to maybe avoid Holocaust, no matter, I am calling it now it not only a holocaust for the Jews, but a Holocaust for ANY human being (silence) hopefully, and, that, that is the, I think, the main importance, as far as I am concerned, of this Holocaust Centre, as a teaching, um, tool.<sup>xix</sup>

The Cape Town Holocaust Centre's Holocaust Resource Manual defines the Holocaust as

the intentional systematic, bureaucratic annihilation of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and their collaborators as a central act of state between 1933-1945. Other individuals and groups were murdered, persecuted, and suffered grievously during this period, but only the Jews were marked for complete and utter annihilation.<sup>xx</sup>

This 'Manual' definition is subject to revisions in the course of the dialogue and indicates the plural and localised character of Holocaust memory.<sup>xxi</sup> Lagrange\*'s definition of Holocaust can be read as a revision of the Centre's definition of the historical Holocaust to be able to fulfil the second part of the Centre's mission, namely the teaching 'about the consequences of prejudice, racism and discrimination' and the promotion of 'an understanding of the dangers of indifference, apathy and silence.'<sup>xxii</sup> By dissociating its 'original' periodisation (1933-1945) and victims (European Jews), possible –not necessarily Jewish- victims of a future 'Holocaust' are included.

The main argument in the interviewees' narratives seems to be: To avoid that the historical 'Final Solution' happens to other people in the future, you need to acknowledge and learn from the Jewish experience. This argument is strongly embedded in the present positioning of the Centre as a place of learning in regard to South Africa's 'own' history. Its message is that both ideologies of Nazism and apartheid are based on policies of prejudice, racism, exclusion of 'others' and when these policies remain unquestioned, unchallenged, extreme practices such as the historical Holocaust might happen.

### **Pedagogical justification of remembrance**

This encounter between Memory and Postmemory is clearly not without challenges. Even though facilitators are fully aware that the myth of 'full understanding' does not

hold, they make use of the pedagogical justification of remembrance. Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert define this as the idea that young generations should listen to survivors of traumatic events, have knowledge of and learn from these traumatic events, so that these events will not be repeated in the future. While this justification is rightly used and defended by many (including myself) it embodies an assumption about the moral vigilance of the listener which is not unproblematic. In the words of Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert:

While the promise of remembrance is that of a moral vigilance that stands over and against indifference, the continuation of local and global violence suggests that such a pedagogy rarely serves as an effective safeguard.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The facilitators do reflect on the tensions that inhabit this assumption by indicating 'the gap' between the actual and desired roles of primary and secondary witnesses. Maria Dubois\* for example stressed that the Holocaust survivors only talk to adult groups (and to Jewish learners) because it is too painful to talk to young children. Well informed teachers should speak, she asserted:

We find that for us to speak to young children is not necessary. Teachers, who are well informed, should speak, as part of their Holocaust Education. That's why we speak only to, you know, students, people over 18 and so on. Because every time we speak it/it's a PIECE of my HEART. And it's a piece of my HEALTH. That is destroyed. You know, for the young people, 60 years, 50 years, [is] long time ago! For them it is part of history! For me it's my youth that was brutally taken away from me! And even after my miraculous survival it was not given back to me! I never got my youth back! I never got my home, my parents, my, my, my relatives, my teachers, my school!<sup>xxiv</sup>

Anne Hartmann\*, a secondary witness facilitator, pointed at the fragile construction of *an understanding* within the museum by mentioning the sensitive question 'how could the survivors have faced coming to an apartheid state' that listeners ask and that she finds only the survivors can answer.<sup>xxv</sup> Eric Williams\*, another facilitator, pointed at the different positions amongst Jewish and non-Jewish people on whether or not one can compare the Holocaust with apartheid.<sup>xxvi</sup> Facilitators also regularly mentioned questions relating to the factuality of the Holocaust (Holocaust denial) and the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These sensitive questions point to the possible 'uncanniness' within the interaction between memory and postmemory.

The uncanniness evolves around the accountability of one's agency in different historical and social contexts. Secondary witnesses encode the Holocaust according to their own present needs and their imaginative possibilities and this easily collides with the 'psychic and political imperatives of survivor memory.'<sup>xxvii</sup> The memory work of both primary and secondary witnesses is informed not only by an (idealised) understanding of the past (which does not necessarily mean the same for both parties) but also by the respective present positions.<sup>xxviii</sup> One could say that survivors of atrocities experience an uncanniness that 'occurs when the boundaries between *imagination* and *reality* are erased.'<sup>xxix</sup> This uncanniness is also experienced by the listener. Human beings universally have the tendency not to think about or to build an emotional wall against painful experiences, also when these experiences are not theirs.<sup>xxx</sup>

While uncanniness and 'misunderstandings' might be experienced as restraining and even threatening, they also open a door to what LaCapra calls 'empathic unsettlement' 'in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realisation that the experience of the other is not one's own.'<sup>xxxi</sup> Empathic unsettlement provides a 'remembrance as a difficult return' instead of the redemptive myth that the future will be better if one remembers.<sup>xxxii</sup> Marian Spielberg\*, one of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre facilitators for example did not experience the suffering

of the Holocaust but directly witnessed the humiliation inflicted upon blacks during apartheid. Her reflection on the suffering of the Holocaust indicates that she will never fully understand it, despite her attempts to imagine how 'it must be like'.

I can imagine, but it wasn't me, so the best I can do is try *in limited LANGUAGE* I have, because I don't have a vocabulary to describe that suffering. And I wasn't even there! But the more I read, the more I know, the more I can give examples, and explain and engage and interact, *the closer one can get to imagining what it must be like*. I don't think one needs to have gone through it to be able to say *we/we can now relate to it, we can relate in SOME ways*, because we do have an imagination and with/with more knowledge, we can *BEGIN to understand* without actually experiencing the same emotion.' (author's emphasis)<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Marian Spielberg\*'s reflection points out that 'learning' through 'empathetic unsettlement' happens on two 'levels': on the one hand, one learns about what happened to others, in another time and space. On the other hand, one learns 'within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending these events.'<sup>xxxiv</sup> According to Schlender 'estrangement' plays a crucial role in this context: One willingly and unwillingly estranges the experiences of oneself or another human being.<sup>xxxv</sup>

'Estrangement' and the tension between 'wanting to know' and 'not wanting to know' amongst secondary witnesses are often overlooked. Too often people working in education and heritage sites, make an unquestioned, explicit link between 'knowing about atrocities' and 'not enacting atrocities in the future' while implicitly assuming that the listener bears certain moral values which ensure this link.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Isabelle Lagrange\* and Magda Goldberg\* however point at the possible hope-giving role of time in constructing *an understanding*.

I, I often wonder what happens when some of these children go home and [...] they come with these new ideas, how the parents react you know. [...] It's probably hard to go home and say, 'well how was it at the Holocaust Centre today?' I mean teaching X Y Z and we're teaching them Z Y X, you know how, 'I don't want to be disrespectful to my parents but' (silence) it's HARD, it's very hard but maybe even if it doesn't happen then, it happens at another point in time but they, ja, might just remember what happened.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

It is VERY interesting to know WHAT they come up with. So HOPEfully, even if maybe at the moment it is not the most important thing in their lives, later on, you know, they won't forget about it. Cause I think once you have seen it, you can't forget about it. So it is very important they've seen. Especially if they are living in a country like South Africa. (SG: yes) So it is very important. And if I didn't feel it is important, I wouldn't be doing it, you know. Because it is not a pleasure (SG: no). You know, it is not a pleasure to talk about all these things.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

'Understanding' is not a clear-cut fact or wish. Another option is to acknowledge its meandering and shades, and the subjectivity and humanity of both primary and secondary witnesses of the Holocaust.<sup>xxxix</sup> Seemingly paradoxically, this lens offers a hopeful alternative for the illusion of total(-itarian) understanding, exactly that illusion which Holocaust education aims to challenge.<sup>xl</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper described facilitators' perceptions of the 'generational' dialogue that is taking place in the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. In the field of education and heritage industry this kind of dialogue is often situated within the pedagogical myth that full understanding and change is possible if primary narratives are conveyed to the next generation. The facilitators' perceptions however indicate that while they

might expect (or desire) a full understanding and change, their own and learners' responses to the traumatic character of the event might impede these very expectations. A pedagogy informed by a (self-) *reflective understanding* of the uncanniness and misunderstandings in the interactions between 'memory' and 'postmemory' however can open up a dialogue in which different positions and identities are starting points for a hopeful future.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> In this paper, I use pseudonyms for all the museum facilitators. While it is important and valuable to study the perceptions of the younger generations, being born 'post-apartheid' and 'post-Holocaust', this article focuses only on the perceptions of the museum facilitators. A study of the reactions and perceptions of grade nine learners on these museum interactions will be part of future research.

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- <sup>ix</sup> Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 2000, pp 34-36. See also Young, J E *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp15-26. For a critical reflection on the complex interplay between culturally developed scripts and individual recollections, see Green A, 'Individual remembering and 'collective memory': theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates' in: *The Journal of the Oral History Society* vol.32, no 2, 2004, pp 35-44. Green argues that historians

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do not acknowledge enough the consciously reflective individual or the role of experience in changing the ways in which individuals view the world.

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<sup>xi</sup> Lagrange, Isabelle\*, Interview with the author on 24 May 2003, Cape Town. [Cassette recording in author's possession]. Transcript pp 5-6. Transcription conventions used are: '(silence)' stands for pauses taken by the narrator. '[...]' are editing and cutting interventions by the author. Words in capital indicate that the narrator raises his/her voice.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Dubois, Maria\*. Interview with the author on 2 June 2003, Cape Town. [Cassette recording in author's possession]. Transcript pp 6-7.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hirsch, 1997, p 22.

<sup>xv</sup> Berkovitch, Paddy\*, Interview with the author on 17 June 2003, Cape Town. [Cassette recording in author's possession]. Transcript pp 10-11.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Lagrange\*, 2003. Transcript p 11.

<sup>xix</sup> Lagrange\*, 2003. Transcript p 19.

<sup>xx</sup> Cape Town Holocaust Centre *Holocaust Resource Manual* (written and compiled by Marlene Silbert) Cape Town: Cape Town Holocaust Centre, 1999, p 3.

<sup>xxi</sup> Young J E, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, p.viii. For an overview of varying periodisations and differences in the understanding of the victims in Holocaust research see Michman D, 'The Holocaust as history' in: Levy M (Ed) *Remembering for the Future. The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide. Volume 3: Memory* New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp 358-366.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cape Town Holocaust Centre, *1999-2004. Realising the Vision – Meeting the Challenge* Cape Town, Cape Town Holocaust Centre, 2004, p 2.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Dubois\*, 2003. Transcript p 5.

<sup>xxv</sup> Hartmann, Anne\* Interview with the author on 15 September 2003, Cape Town. [Cassette recording in author's possession]. Transcript p 23.

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- <sup>xxxi</sup> LaCapra, 2001, p 40.
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- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, 2000, p 3.
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- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Goldberg, Magda\* Interview with the author on 18 September 2003, Cape Town. [Cassette recording in author's possession]. Transcript p 12.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Lagrange\*, 2003. Transcript p 21.
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