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## The Americanization of the Holocaust: Reconsidered Through Judaic Studies

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THE AMERICANIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST: RECONSIDERED  
THROUGH JUDAIC STUDIES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2020

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for the degree of Bachelor's in English Literature  
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## **Abstract**

This article explores how the Americanization of the Holocaust is in part responsible for the paradigm that the mention of the Holocaust is vital for a Jewish writer of postwar fiction to be taken seriously. In keeping with the need for people to find meaning in catastrophe, to derive humanity from inhumanity and order out of chaos, Jewish literature's apparent 'success' or international reach often depends on reflecting on the Holocaust as an empowering movement that pushed survivors and other Jews to feel a sense of unity and inclusiveness. By using the Holocaust to generate interest in audiences as opposed to educating the masses, the general perception of Jews as well as of the Jewish religion is reduced to nothing more than an acknowledgment of the traumatic historic event they endured. I argue that this perception of Jewish identity is disillusioned as well as destructive, and that survivor literature paints a more realistic image of what the Holocaust was like while still maintaining the Jewishness within the story. The aim of this article is to examine the trauma in Holocaust literature through the lens of Judaic studies, analyzing the way that it is written as well as providing an analysis of the trends in this postwar genre of writing from survivors and non-survivors. Being analyzed are the writings of Tadeusz Borowski and Cynthia Ozick; "This Way for Gas, Ladies & Gentlemen" and "Silence" by Borowski, and "Rosa" as well as "The Shawl" by Ozick. While Borowski's stories were developed based on his own personal experiences as a victim of the Holocaust, Ozick is an American-born Jewish woman whose stories correlate particularly well with Borowski's despite not having been through the traumatic experience herself. The goal in analyzing this type of literature is to bring to light the realities of the Holocaust and exactly how gruesome, inhumane and disturbing these events were and to contrast these images with more heavily edited and/or fictionalized literature, particularly

the Americanized version of “The Diary of Anne Frank”. When structured for entertainment purposes, fictional literature set in the time period of the Holocaust tends to develop unrealistic portrayals of the event itself and the Jewish population affected by it. The intention of this article to draw attention to the lack of Jewish identity and religion in postwar Holocaust literature, to challenge the accuracy in Holocaust retellings and to outline the destructiveness of both characteristics in this genre of literature to the general perception of Jewish people.

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## Introduction

*“...As though reference to genocide were now the touchstone of authenticity for all postwar fiction written by Jews...” (Alter 48).*

In his commentary in “In the Community: Deformations of the Holocaust”, Robert Alter makes a powerful statement about the trend he discovered in postwar fiction: validity for Jewish writers is found specifically in their observation of the Holocaust. Deborah E. Lipstadt expresses a similar finding of her own in “America and the memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965,” writing,

[t]his confrontation with catastrophe has become a mythic element of American Jewish identity and has served both a positive and a negative purpose. It has become stimulus for motivating Jewish identity. But, in certain situations, it has been allowed to assume a dominant role thereby distorting the true nature of Judaism and becoming a prism through which the Jewish world view is refracted (1).

This thesis explores how not only is this quote accurate, but also that this trend continues past the time in which Alter and Lipstadt published their findings respectively in 1981 and 1996. Despite Alter and Lipstadt’s critique of the paradigm that the mention of the Holocaust is vital in order for a Jewish writer of postwar fiction to be taken seriously, this paradigm continues to pervade modern day culture and literature. The representation of Jewish people as well as the Holocaust itself within texts is also often restructured for entertainment purposes, resulting in a lack of Jewishness within texts that attributes the public’s distorted perception of Jewish individuals that seeks to solely identify them as victims of the Holocaust.

This article begins by exploring through the lenses of Holocaust and Judaic studies how the Americanization of the Holocaust is in part responsible for this. In keeping with the need for people to find meaning in catastrophe, to derive humanity from inhumanity and order out of chaos, Jewish literature's apparent 'success' or international reach often depends on reflecting on the Holocaust as an empowering movement that pushed survivors and other Jews to feel a sense of unity and inclusiveness. I argue that this perception of Jewish identity is disillusioned and that positive representations of the Holocaust tend to have forged a perception among non-survivor Jewish people, especially in the modern day, that this event served unanimously to draw together the Jewish community, and others persecuted, into a united network of survivors that triumphed over adversity. I argue that this is not necessarily the reality, and that in many literary accounts we see evidence of how the Holocaust had an irreversibly fractious impact upon the communities it persecuted.

This piece centers on the investigation of what I am terming 'positive Holocaust perception', and how it has been caused by the Americanization of the Holocaust. I consider whether this is a positive or negative occurrence; on one hand the misconceptions of the Holocaust take away from what people went through, demeaning their struggles and the trauma they endured, on the other hand, it has established a pride in Jewish heritage in modern day Jews. Drawing upon my own Jewish heritage, I also note examples of scholarship citing scenarios in which this pride has the capability to be offensive to survivors and other Jews.

In order to fully understand the concepts being presented in this article, the reader must have a thorough comprehension of what exactly Americanization of the Holocaust is and what it in 'real world' examples would look like. In Rabbi Eli Mayer's thought-provoking piece surrounding Americanization, he presents the ethical debate on religion's impact on war and vice

versa. During wartime, Mayer searched for an answer as to how to be patriotic while being honest with himself and to his Jewish religion, in which peace is often the focus of prayer and imperative to the belief system. He brought his questions to other religious leaders, who had easily made the conversion from condoning violence to promoting prayer for victory in war. It seemed to him that these leaders had found the secret to being in support of the country's position while remaining faithful to their religion. What Mayer found instead was the strong influence of nationalism within the United States of America. He noted that when it came to protecting the country and its people, Americans quickly dismissed peace in favor of prayers for victory in war that would mean devastation in foreign countries. Due to Americans' strong patriotism and favoritism for America, moral and ethical codes are dismissed when it comes to their empathy for people of other countries. This strong sense of unity is conditioned into Americans daily, from the repeated phrase 'for the people' to the emphasis of American superiority that is witnessed especially during wartime. Mayer writes, "The most for which we of America can hope is that the pattern of humanity which we are fashioning may have such enduring grace, beauty and soul-worth that civilization may find it of continuous value as it reaches for material for the towering grandeur of its eternal structure" (17).

Although this particular writing was published in 1920, Mayer's point still stands: Americans are encapsulated within a bubble of self-proclaimed superiority and importance that they feel distinguishes them from the rest of the world. Although many other countries may share this same trait, it is widely known that the United States of America is referred to by many of its own citizens as 'the greatest country in the world' with 'the American dream' being a commonly known and used term to describe the supposed desirable lifestyle achievable solely in 'the land of freedom'. The establishment of an 'us/them' binary lends too often to a lack of consideration for the people in foreign countries, as exemplified by Mayer's findings. Furthering his theory, he



states, “Let it be further conceded that when nationalists lived and battled for their nations their chief concern was not so much the exaltation of their own particular state but rather the welfare of all mankind” (Mayer 19). It is undeniable that some of the most atrocious human acts have been committed in the name of the greater good. For example, the tragedy that was the Holocaust began with the belief that the eradication of the Jewish people would be beneficial to Europe and the economy.

In relation to the Americanization of the Holocaust, nationalism plays an unrecognized but major role. The grandeur that permeates the conceptualization of American citizenship has led to the alteration of American cultural products; specifically, in this case, Holocaust literature. The best representation for the Americanization of Holocaust literature is the modification and re-writing of “The Diary of Anne Frank”. Frank, a young Jewish girl who famously lived in an Amsterdam attic hiding from the Nazis until her and her family were inevitably found and sent to their deaths at concentration camps, kept a diary during her time in hiding. Her father, the only surviving member of the Frank family at the end of the war, published her diary which led to further publications of other versions of the diary as well as a movie.

In Hilene Flanzbaum’s article “The Americanization of the Holocaust”, she questions the accuracy of the published version of Anne Frank’s diary. One of her main arguments is that the omitted sections of the diary contained a more accurate portrayal of the Holocaust and the feelings Anne Frank experienced while hiding from persecution with her family in an Amsterdam attic. Due to producer interference, the image of Anne Frank that was sold to Americans was of a hopeful child full of light and positivity. Through consideration, the thought comes to mind that it is entirely possible for a young child such as Frank to simply be unable to adequately convey through the constraints of the English language the extent of the fear and despair she and her family felt in

the attic. However, the idea that Anne Frank was feeling unfailingly optimistic as she starved to death is laughable at the very least, and offensive when taken into consideration. More importantly, the question to consider here is why the producers felt it necessary to edit out what they found to be the most troubling aspect of the story: Anne Frank's Jewishness. This thesis will probe this question at length and attempt to explain the underlying reasons as to why the Jewish cultural and religious aspects of Frank's diary needed to be excluded in order to sell her Holocaust experience to American audiences.

In addition to presenting my findings in American Jewish postwar fiction, German postwar literature is comparatively analyzed. The purpose of this demonstration is to prove that although misconceptions of historic events are common regardless of their origins, the Americanization of the Holocaust takes the route of promoting optimism and unity for the community as is American custom, whereas retelling in other countries has other purposes that do not align with the originally interpreted goal of this particular form of Americanization. Additionally, this secondary form of postwar literature presents an altered view of Jewish people themselves that is contrary to what is seen in Jewish Holocaust survivor literature. Evidenced through Ruth K. Angress's findings in "A 'Jewish Problem' in German Postwar Fiction", the post-Holocaust fiction written by Germans depicts Jews either through the lens of antisemitism or as victims to quell their guilty feelings after the Holocaust. The issue with this type of literature featuring Jewish characters is that although the varied interpretations of the texts indicate that their authors are empathetic to the plight of the Jewish people, it also presents the Jew as a character to be pitied and protected. This depiction presents Jewish people as a weaker species, as the Nazis believed. Alongside its other purpose, this analysis of German postwar fiction helps defend my argument that survivor literature presents Jewish and Nazi characters in a more realistic sense, leaving no room for misinterpretation and

instead a clear understanding that the acts committed against the former were immoral, unjustifiable and horrific. Through the works of Tadeusz Borowski and Cynthia Ozick, I will provide examples of survivor literature and how the Holocaust should properly be represented in literary texts – accurately, instead of as distorted nonfiction.

## **Chapter 1: Evaluating Survivor Literature**

Tadeusz Borowski was a Polish writer that did not live to see his thirtieth year after committing suicide by gas at the age of 28. Tormented by his memories of the three exterminating camps he spent time incarcerated in for 2 years out of his life (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dautmergen and Dachau-Allach), Borowski wrote stories about life within them. His short story “This Way for Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” suggests that there is “systematic dehumanization [in] the camps: prisoners are equated with lice, and they mill around by the naked thousands in blocked-off sections” (Borowski 694). This concept is backed up by Borowski’s own personal experiences in which he worked as an orderly within an Auschwitz hospital where they performed experiments on prisoners, as well as his time spent working in the women’s camp where he picked up the corpses of infants.

Borowski’s “This Way for Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” is told through the narrative of a prisoner within one of the concentration camps during the Holocaust. The narrator is tasked with removing personal belongings from incoming prisoners that are being led to slaughter. As he goes through the motions of his job and daily life, he observes through cold detachment the brutality of the camp:

People... inhumanly crammed, buried under incredible heaps of luggage, suitcases, trunks, packages, crates, bundles of every description (everything that had been their past, and was

to start their future). Monstrously squeezed together, they have fainted from heat, suffocated, crushed one another. Now they push towards the opened doors, breathing like fish cast out on the sand... In the corners amid human excrement and abandoned wrist watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. We carry them out like chickens, holding several in each hand... I shut my eyes tight, but I can still see corpses dragged from the train, trampled infants, cripples piled on top of the dead, wave after wave... (Borowski 701-2)

Although the story is already horrific in its nature, the cruelties of the camps is the lesser concern when taking into consideration the thought process of the narrator. Aside from the physical traumas that the Holocaust and its death camps yielded, it becomes apparent throughout the story that there is also a deep psychological impact on victims. Perhaps the most horrific aspect of Borowski's story is that there were "no saintly victims and demonic executioners, but rather human beings... going about the business of extermination or, reduced to near-animal level, cooperating in the destruction of themselves and others" (Borowski 695). The narrator's conversations with his friend Henri throughout the process of stripping people of their possessions and clearing out train carts reveals a lack of empathy that has presented itself within these characters as means of self-preservation. After lashing out at some of the newcomers, the narrator turns to Henri and questions whether they are good people since he feels so much anger towards the Jews. He states that he is "furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity. I am not sorry they're going to the gas chamber" (702). To this, Henri responds, "Ah, on the contrary, it is natural, predictable, calculated... the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I'd even call it healthy" (702). Henri is deadly serious in what he's saying, but Borowski has written this sentiment so that there is a heavy underlying sarcasm. First, he describes inhumane conditions and

the gory details of the narrator's job, and then he refers to this rerouting of hatred as 'healthy'. Borowski then continues to describe through his narrator the cruel treatment and effortless disposal of the camp prisoners:

I see a pair of human beings who have fallen to the ground locked in a last desperate embrace. The man has dug his fingers into the woman's flesh and has caught her clothing with his teeth. She screams hysterically, swears, cries, until at last a large boot comes down over her throat and she is silent. They are pulled apart and dragged like cattle to the truck... Several other men are carrying a small girl with only one leg. They hold her by the arms and the one leg. Tears are running down her face and she whispers faintly: 'Sir, it hurts, it hurts...' They throw her on the truck on top of the corpses. She will burn alive along with them...a little girl pushes herself halfway through the small window and, losing her balance, falls out on the gravel. Stunned, she lies still for a moment, then stands up and begins walking around in a circle, faster and faster, waving her rigid arms in the air, breathing loudly and spasmodically, whining in a faint voice...The whining is hard on the nerves: an S.S. man approaches calmly, his heavy boot strikes between her shoulders. She falls. Holding her down with his foot, he draws his revolver, fires once, then again. She remains facedown, kicking the gravel with her feet, until she stiffens. (Borowski 705-6)

Repeatedly, the reader is tossed back and forth between observing the horrors of the camp and the horror of how the narrator processes the events unfolding around him. He has become a part of the system in order to survive and feels the same unwarranted hatred towards the Jewish victims that the camp officers feel, and Henri's character is there amidst the chaos to remind the narrator that how he feels is 'healthy'. The narrator is able to recognize that everything happening around him is wrong, but he does so with zero emotional investment as it's the only way to get by.

Borowski ends this short story with two simple facts: that the total number of people annihilated that day was fifteen thousand, and that this transport of victims (Sosnowiec-Bedzin) will be talked about throughout the camp for the next few days as a “good, rich transport” (707) due to all of the materialistic gain that came from the people who were now burning in the crematoria.

While Borowski’s stories were developed based on his own personal experiences as a victim of the Holocaust, Cynthia Ozick is an American-born Jewish woman whose stories correlate particularly well with Borowski’s despite her not having been through the traumatic experience herself. Analyzing Ozick’s works also show the reality of this traumatic event through the experiences of characters who are specifically engaged in a particularly unpleasant and much-documented instrument of the Holocaust: the concentration and death camps. For instance, Ozick’s “The Shawl” detail the experiences of a mother within the camps who has been hiding her baby underneath a shawl. When the baby, Magda, manages to sneak away in search of her shawl, she is caught outside in a public area and promptly picked up and carried to the electric fence then tossed against it by one of the camp guards:

...Rosa [wanted] to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. She only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda’s body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf’s screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda’s shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf’s screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda’s saliva; and Rosa drank Magda’s shawl until it dried. (Ozick 42)

Magda's death scene in Ozick's short story is quick and the reader does not see a complete breakdown of Rosa's character following the death of her daughter. For an individual in a more common situation, there might be an emotional outburst or surge of irrepressible feelings at the death of their young child. However, the situation here is outlined very clearly by Ozick and emphasized by the repetition within its description. Rosa knew that "if she ran they would shoot... if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through her skeleton break out, they would shoot"; therefore, Rosa is forced to repress her own emotions in this traumatic situation in order to salvage her own life after the loss of Magda's. "The Shawl" is written in a way to make the audience feel the same helplessness and sense of dread that Jewish victims felt during their times spent in concentration camps. The only way to survive in this type of environment is to make yourself small, do not resist, and do not draw attention to yourself. This survival instinct is so strong that it overpowers Rosa's maternal instincts to run to her dead child's body. Ozick uses repetitive language in the short story to emphasize how traumatic and horrific the scenario is. As Rosa shoves her daughter's shawl deeper into her mouth, she suffocates her own horrified and devastated scream that racks her bones from the inside out. Similar to the character in Borowski's story, Ozick's character is forced to repress her emotions as well as her empathy – two attributes that are arguably what makes us human.

Cynthia Ozick did a service to survivor literature by continuing Rosa's story with her short story "Rosa". The importance of both "Rosa" and "The Shawl" is outlined in *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World*:

Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" is a stringent example of Irving Howe's demand that Holocaust fiction communicate to the reader both the external Auschwitz (factual events and experiences) and the internal Auschwitz (individual suffering, coping with memories).

Irving Howe's comment...that the distinguishing feature of Holocaust writing is the presentation of facts that have either been recorded or are remembered by witnesses, applies here...The combination of two individual narratives set apart by thirty years into one combined narrative seals event to memory, whereby remembering becomes an experience excruciatingly parallel to the witnessing of the actual events themselves... Ozick's tale moves within the sphere of Holocaust survivors' narratives whose psychological scars are deep and likely to be torn apart again at any given moment...[it] is representational of survivors' tales... (Berger 81-2)

Set in the future after the war has ended, "Rosa" follows an aged Rosa as she tries to navigate her new life in Miami, Florida, where she has moved at the suggestion of her niece Stella. The character of Stella was also present in "The Shawl" and was inadvertently responsible for Magda's death since she was the one who had taken the shawl from Rosa's young daughter and caused her to search for it. Rosa writes letters to Stella in this story, referring to her as an Angel of Death and maintaining the same opinion that she'd had while still in the camps that Stella was a cold-hearted individual:

Sometimes Rosa had cannibal dreams about Stella: she was boiling her tongue, her ears, her right hand, such a fat hand with plump fingers, each nail tended and rosy, and so many rings, not modern rings but old-fashioned junk-shop rings...To pacify Stella, Rosa called her Dear One, Lovely, Beautiful; she called her Angel; she called her all these things for the sake of peace, but in reality Stella was cold. She had no heart. Stella, already nearly fifty years old, the Angel of Death. (Ozick)

Stella and Rosa, both survivors, are foils to each other in both stories but even more apparently so in "Rosa" where we are able to see clear differences in their responses to the trauma



they experienced during the Holocaust. Rosa suffers from a self-inflicted mental prison in which she is very much still in Auschwitz, reliving her horrific memories and mourning the loss of her daughter. She hates America, is inherently suspicious and dismissive of new people, continuously writes letters to the deceased Magda as if she were still alive, and clings to Magda's shawl that Stella returns to her in "Rosa". She is unable to detach herself from the concept of an unrealized adult Magda, and even fabricates in her letters to her dead daughter that the father was the son of her mother's friend. This concept is not backed by textual evidence in either story, and Magda's physical attributes suggest that her father might have been a German officer that raped Rosa; "...[they] studied Magda's face. 'Aryan,' Stella said, in a voice grown as thin as a string; and Rosa thought how Stella gazed at Magda like a young cannibal. And the time that Stella said 'Aryan,' it sounded to Rosa as if Stella had really said 'Let us devour her'" ("The Shawl"). Rosa goes so far as to insist in her letters to Magda that Stella suffers from dementia and imagined Magda's death, adding to the delusional narrative she has created in order to comfort herself.

Different from her aunt, Stella insists in her letters that Rosa needs to let go of the past, live her life and stop acting so crazy. While there is no textual evidence in "Rosa" that Stella has moved on herself from her own history since she is not a present character, her behavior in "The Shawl" combined with Rosa's perspective of her creates the image of a character that actively attempts to be passive in the face of trauma, which could be considered another form of repression. Stella is considered by her aunt to be insensitive, cruel and evil; her perception that Stella was suggesting they eat Magda at one point in "The Shawl" leads to Rosa's cannibalistic dreams about her niece in "Rosa" and adds to her distaste for her. When Rosa requests the shawl be sent to her by registered mail, Stella sends it through the usual post with a lack of concern for where the parcel would end up and insists that Rosa is making a relic of Magda.

It is clear through the actions of Rosa's character in "Rosa" that she suffers from a severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although at the end of the short story, Rosa finally lets another person into her life and releases the idea of Magda being alive, it takes around thirty years for her to reach this point of acceptance after much misery. What makes Stella and Rosa foils to one another is their different means of coping with trauma that makes them representative of two means of survival with "Rosa [being] the survivor who hangs on to threads. She is the mother who refuses to bury her child. The very moment of her murder 'does not enter into the chronology of events that have a past, a present, and a future, but possesses a durational integrity that exists outside the flow of normal time'...The history of her murder eclipsed. Hers is a desperate re-visionism" (Sivan 152). Rosa desperately tries through the process of writing to alter the story of what happened to her in the camps, as well as what happened to her daughter. On the other hand, Stella has seemed to fully accept the truth of what happened, and this might be partial cause for why Rosa dislikes her so much and identifies her as cold. In the story, it seems as if Rosa has completely forgotten that Stella was also very much present in the camps at the same time she was and suffered the same losses of family and freedom. Both Rosa and Tadeusz Borowski's character in "This Way for Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" suffer from emotional repression and disillusioned logic in gauging what an acceptable level of empathy should be.

In comparison to these very disturbing narratives is the Americanized version of Anne Frank's diary. Frank, a young Jewish girl who famously lived in an Amsterdam attic hiding from the Nazis until her and her family were inevitably found and sent to their deaths at concentration camps, kept a diary during her time in hiding. Her father, the only surviving member of the Frank family at the end of the war, published her diary which led to further publications of other versions of the diary as well as a movie.

Hilene Flanzbaum has made a case against the accuracy of the published version of Anne Frank's diary, saying that it was heavily edited. In her article "The Americanization of the Holocaust", she states, "...scholars in the 1990s routinely observed that *The Diary of Anne Frank*, whether in past editions of the text or in those versions produced for stage and screen, soft-pedaled the devastation of the Holocaust" (92). She continues on the next page to reveal why the play version had been so heavily edited; "...the most troubling, as well as the most identifiably Jewish, parts of the *Diary*... never appeared on stage or screen because the producers, who were themselves Jewish, felt compelled by their own sense of what would sell, to 'tone down' the play's Jewishness. Anne's story... would have greater appeal if it were told as a story not about Jewishness but as a story of universality, about unfailing optimism and the strength of the human spirit as manifested in the face of terrible deprivations" (93). What was seen by producers as the most troubling aspect of the story was the same thing that made stories like "This Way for Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen", "The Shawl" and "Rosa" so emotionally impactful: the horrors of the systematic dehumanization that was taking place. The idea that Anne Frank was feeling unfailingly optimistic as she ran from persecution and hid in an attic with her entire family while living in constant awareness of what was happening to other Jews in Europe is absurd. This decision made by producers raises the question of whether the intention in releasing Frank's diary was to bring to light the reality of the tragedy that was the Holocaust, or if its purpose was instead to tell an 'entertaining' story. There was no interest in Anne Frank, the Jewish girl who lived during and died in the Holocaust. Instead, the interest was in Anne Frank, the figurehead for lightheartedness and optimism during a postwar time period in which people craved positive narratives over dark ones. There was consideration taken regarding what would sell, but none for whether the story would still be Anne Frank's at the end of all their editing.

It should be noted that Anne Frank was a young child and therefore might have been simply unable to adequately convey through the constraints of the English language the extent of fear and despair she and her family felt in the attic. However, the targeted material of her diary to be edited out had more to do with her 'Jewishness' as opposed to the translation of her thoughts and feelings about the Holocaust while in hiding. In a way, this is another form of exterminating Jewishness: rewriting identity and culture so it becomes more understandable and comfortable for others that do not share the same background.

Anne Frank's diary is not written or published from a narrative within the concentration camp she inevitably died in, but her father who gave away the right to her diary did spend time within a camp himself. The trauma that he must have endured could have played a key part in telling his daughter's story, however it was decided that this would be a story about the 'optimism' that a young Jewish girl held onto despite constant fear and undoubtedly horrific treatment. A characteristic that all three texts analyzed share is that they are all lacking Jewish representation. While the characters themselves were Jewish, they did not practice their religion or culture within their narratives. This raises the question of whether Jewish identity is accurately represented within the texts, or if the Jewish identity of these characters was overshadowed and replaced with representation of the Holocaust alone. The problem with this is that the public perception of Jewish people has been dwindled down to nothing more than an acknowledgment of their historical background during World War II.

## **Chapter 2: Modern Jewish Identity and the ‘Americanization’ of the Holocaust**

The concept of the Americanization of the Holocaust has been researched and documented by scholars such as Hilene Flanzbaum and Deborah Lipstadt. Particularly, in Flanzbaum’s “The Americanization of the Holocaust”, she goes into detail explaining how the landmark text “The Diary of Anne Frank” was Americanized by the public in its retelling. She argues that the idea that “the darker narratives of the Holocaust conveyed by these latter names [Adolf Eichmann, the Warsaw Ghetto, or Dachau] have been obscured by Frank’s unfailingly optimistic text” is “what troubles so many today – and also what opens the door to looking at the complicated event that current scholars call the Americanization of the Holocaust” (2).

The manipulation of Anne Frank’s diary originally was decided upon in order to increase its appeal to American audiences. What began as an attempt to bring forth a story of impenetrable optimism, quickly turned into an eradication of Jewish culture and identity from within the pages of Frank’s diary. Throughout the editing process, Otto Frank himself contributed to this rewrite by removing chunks of the diary in which Anne explored religious thought and expressed an awareness for her own Jewishness.

In the book “The Stolen Legacy of Anne Frank”, author Ralph Melnick presents evidence of the hand Otto Frank played in reworking the original diary:

Two letters from Otto to Meyer surprised me more than anything else I found, for here was evidence of how easily Otto could have been manipulated into becoming an unwitting coconspirator. ‘I am sure that it is necessary to have sensitiveness for the Jewish sphere, but in the whole play it must not prevail,’ [Otto] had written shortly after consulting with

others... about Meyer's script... Otto had followed this letter by writing Meyer the next day, 'There is to my mind, little doubt that the play would be much more readily accepted on its merits if it were written by a non-Jew'.' (Melnick xiii)

It is possible that in order to share his daughter's story, Otto Frank was prepared to omit some of the Jewishness from her written words in order to appeal to a greater audience. However, this conformity to the demands of a public audience did more harm than good in the grander scheme of things. Taking away Jewish culture and religion from a story that is so deeply and directly entangled with these exact ideals forces the story down a path irrelevant to that of Jewish identity, and instead towards the overall intended takeaway of the narrative itself: unflinching optimism in the face of oppression and certain trauma. What could have been an opportunity for knowledge of Jewish religion and culture to expand instead became a spectacle, a story formatted for entertainment and to touch the heart while uplifting it at the same time. It also left gentiles with little less than the Holocaust as a signifier for the existence of Jewish people and their religion.

There is proof within Anne's diary that despite her age, she had a firm grasp on her religious faith and an understanding of the Jewish religion. These entries that exhibited her beliefs and religious ponderings were also omitted from her diary. In one entry, for instance, Anne wrote about how her faith in God and religion has helped her to maintain strength throughout her time spent in hiding:

'My fear vanished, I looked up in the sky and trusted God.' Two months later she added: 'I know that I have God... and that's what keeps me going. Without the voice that keeps holding out comfort and goodness to me I should have lost hope long ago, without God I should long ago have collapsed. I know I am not safe; I am afraid of prison cells and concentration camps'... Otto chose to delete all of this, together with numerous other

entries expressing similar thoughts, thereby offering a distorted portrait of Anne. (Melnick 10)

As time passed for Anne, she became more deeply aware of her identity as a Jew. She recorded in her diary incidents in which she'd heard of other Jewish people being dragged from their houses. As she continued to detail the events surrounding her life in seclusion, she remarked, "If I just think of how we live here, I usually come to the conclusion that it is a paradise compared with how other Jews who are not in hiding must be living" (Melnick 10). This level of empathy as well as an acknowledgment of her kinship to those suffering at the hands of the Nazi regime shows that Anne fully embraced her identity as a Jew. Furthermore, Anne recorded in her diary each missed Jewish celebration or holiday as if marking the passing of time by the Jewish calendar. Her excited exclamations in which she found jubilation and comfort by connecting on a deeper level to her own religion were regrettably omitted from the published versions of her diary as well. Otto continuously deleted entries of this type from his daughter's diary. A possible explanation for this is written in Melnick's reflections, where he states that "having carefully molded the Anne [Otto] wished the world to see, an Anne reflective of his own background – secular, uneducated in Judaism, and anti-Zionist – Otto could not allow others to reshape his daughter's portrait in her own image" (10).

The result from all the modifications made to Anne Frank's diary was the directors, producers and Otto Frank getting exactly what they were hoping for – Anne's story was selling and sending the intended message to American audiences that optimism and bravery conquer all. Erasing Anne's religiousness left no room for an exploration or appreciation of Jewish religion or culture. Perhaps if Anne Frank's story had been edited and published at a different point in time, those involved in the story's production would not have felt the need to omit so much of the

‘Jewishness’ as well as the gruesomeness of war from the original story. During this time period, Americans were attempting to bounce back from the war and push forward in a more positive direction. The needs of the public audience were that of stories about ‘the American dream’ or feel-good tales that helped uplift the spirits of those who had felt the impact of the war.

In her article “American and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965”, Deborah Lipstadt attempts to explain American’s attempts to disconnect from the reality of the Holocaust in the wake of the war ending. She states that, “First and foremost... America was not ready to confront the issue. From the end of the war until the early 1960s, a ‘can-do’, optimistic spirit pervaded America” (197). This positive attitude provides reasonable explanation for the Americanization of “The Diary of Anne Frank” as well as a reason for why Americans tended to avoid the topic and discussion of the Holocaust altogether. However, not wanting to deal with the negativity and gruesomeness of the situation is not the only reason that the Holocaust became a ‘dead’ subject to Americans for some time after the war. Politics, as always, came into play here as Americans “[turned] away from an active confrontation with Germany’s wrongdoings” since they were now dependent on the country as an ally against the war on communism. (Lipstadt 198). The post-war boom meant that everyone was doing their best to achieve and live the highly glorified ‘American dream’, even if that meant pushing the horrors of the Holocaust and the aftereffects on its victims to the back of their minds.

Americanization itself is considered “the accepted view among leading theorists of cultural globalization, practitioners of cultural studies and kindred scholars in other fields within the humanities and social sciences that globalization rules out Americanization in the sense of a relatively more powerful influence exerted by the United States... upon other regions, nations and



people of the world” (Van Eletren 1). Americanism (a similar term to that of ‘Americanization’) is further defined by Mel Van Eletren, where he states that:

Americanism... adoption or display of American ideas, habits, etc. A peculiarity in manners, views, conduct, etc., thought to be typically American... ‘Americanism’ is a dual phenomenon. In its positive sense it refers to ‘America’s hallowed repertoire of guiding ideals, explaining its course and destiny to the American nation, while at the same time providing an aspiration to non-Americans abroad. (Van Eletren 101)

Here Van Eletren attempts to assert that the influence of American beliefs and customs is practically contagious to other countries and regions, particularly those exposed to it consistently through marketing, entertainment, the news, etc. In the case of the Holocaust, the cultural products produced regarding this event contain American philosophies and influence, such as the unfailing optimism seen in the heavily edited “The Diary of Anne Frank”. It seems as if it has been assumed by the masses that the representations of Jewish people presented to them through Holocaust cultural products are accurate depictions, but unfortunately it has been overlooked that Jewish identity and culture were not represented in any recreations or retellings of the tragedy that befell their people. Instead, the takeaway from narratives such as “The Diary of Anne Frank” had less to do with humanizing Jews and giving them recognition as people instead of victims, and more to do with pushing the American ideal that people can prevail with determination and good spirits. This lack of Jewish culture only contributes to the paucity of Jewish identity in literature, which in turn lends to the masses being unable to differentiate the idea of Jewish people from the event of the Holocaust. In the case of Jewish people themselves, these narratives teach them that their Jewishness is not valid without observation of the Holocaust and may be partial cause for why some Jewish writers feel the need to relate their stories to this historical event in some way.

Although Americanization is a concept centered around its origin country of the United States of America, that does not prevent the impact that this phenomenon has on countries and regions of various cultures, especially the Jewish community. Mel van Eletren elaborates further in his passage from “Americanism and Americanization: A Critical History of Domestic and Global Influences” on his thoughts regarding Americanization, stating that, “I take as a starting point that Americanization, in all its manifestations and interpretations, refers to the real or purported influence of one or more forms of Americanism on some social entity, material object or cultural practice” (3). In other words, Americanization is nothing more than an influence inflicted upon the masses that are left exposed to it and has the power to alter practices of other cultures as well as change the perspective of those born in other regions towards Americans and vice versa. While “The Diary of Anne Frank” was a key player in facilitating positive Holocaust perception, there were other productions that commercialized the Holocaust and Americanized it as a result. German author Richard Chaim Schneider observed this in his writing on the fetishization of the Holocaust. It was concluded from his writing that “it is safe to say that, after the United States, Germany is the country with the second highest number of publications on the Holocaust and its aftermath... thousands profit from, and millions participate in, the continuing commodification of the Catastrophe of Western Civilization. Jews and non-Jews around the world join what Schneider calls the ‘dance around the fetish’, the ‘Golden Calf’ of the Holocaust” (318). In the same review of Schneider’s writing in *Modern Judaism*, it also states that, “Schneider sees Ignatz Bubis, the media-savvy chair of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, ‘basking, thanks to the Holocaust, in the shining glory of the spotlight’; and the author himself concedes self-deprecatingly that his own book is ‘part of what it criticizes’” (319). All the publications and productions that came into existence after the Holocaust profit from the suffering that took place

during the event itself. *Schindler's List*, a movie centered on the horrors inflicted on victims of the Holocaust, received a massive amount of publicity when it premiered. "When the film was finally released in Germany's movie theaters, the whole nation was seized by a 'Schindler fever' lasting for months. Never has the world of glamor and sensation been so intertwined with mankind's suffering and horror" (319). This commercialization of the Holocaust by the United States as well as Germany has been destructive to its remembrance, since it has become so publicized that the two concepts of Jews and the Holocaust are forever tied together in the public's memory.

The commercialized popularity of "The Diary of Anne Frank" has overcast much of the Holocaust survivor literature that paints a more tragic and realistic image as to what this time period had been like. Optimism, bravery and courage lack from stories like that of Tadeusz Borowski and Cynthia Ozick, which are incredibly dark in comparison to Anne's diary. Instead, readers see how cold Jewish prisoners could turn in those camps as they slowly lost their empathy as a means for survival, as opposed to the supposedly optimistic outlook Anne hung onto. However, more troublesome than the idea of the Holocaust being misrepresented through literary pieces that have been modified for American audiences is the concern regarding the lack of representation of Jewish culture and religion presented in these same literary texts.

In Ruth Angress's "A 'Jewish Problem' in German Postwar Fiction", she provides examples of German postwar fiction that also inaccurately depicts Jewish people:

If we now look back at the figures I have discussed, certain patterns emerge... the shopkeepers in Grass's *Tin Drum* and Andersch's *Redhead*, pathetic victims without self-respect who grovel before Aryans; Andersch's Efraim, the only one of these figures with whom a reader can identify and whose thoughts carry objective weight within the context of the novel, who believes that the Holocaust was an accident whose causes and

consequences are beyond the reach of rational thought and must therefore be left alone... Fassbinder's Robert Mendelsson and his family who exploit a young [Jewish] girl's innocence and emotional vulnerability in the cause of their people with not a thought to her well-being and reap not only a moral but a material victory from her efforts... (231).

In summation, Angress found that representations of Jewish people in German literature either presented Jews in a negative or villainous light, or as victims with heroic Germans as their saviors. In other literary texts, Angress found that the Holocaust was justified or excused, such as in the beliefs of Andersch's character Efraim. The common theme in all these German texts was that they each presented Jewish characters but never presented them as anything other than a victim or a villain in a story where the German is the main protagonist or hero. Angress provides an explanation for the way in which German literature presents Jews, stating that:

[Fictional Jews] are derived not so much from observation or a study of Jewish history as from two sources, the tradition of anti-Semitism on the one hand and unresolved guilt feelings about the Holocaust on the other. The two trends seem to be opposites but they are really two sides of the same coin, as brutality is so often the flip side of sentimentality. And they can both serve the same function of self-gratification by providing a sense of superiority towards those who are presumed to be weak or morally deficient. (215)

German postwar fiction, though inclusive of Jewish characters, still uses these figures as tools to instill baseless antisemitic views in readers or to satisfy the author's own subconscious need for redemption by repainting stories involving Germans and Jews so that Germans become the rescuers as opposed to the persecutors they historically were. As Angress found in her research, "The evidence would suggest that Germans don't know anymore what their victims look like and that they have the strongest blocks against imagining what they might have been like" (231).

Angress's research shows that this paucity of Jewishness as more than just victims in literature is not exclusive to American texts. Jewish identity and culture are repeatedly erased from German postwar fiction as well as from American texts with observation of the Holocaust being the supplement to establish a character's Jewishness. Removal of the Jewish cultural aspects from stories like "The Diary of Anne Frank" and the German texts that Angress studied, particularly the omission of religious faith and deeper thoughts of the young Anne Frank from her diary, left in place of these works manipulated pieces that created a positive perception of the Holocaust and a distorted perception of Jews that perpetually attaches them to the Holocaust.

Something sacred that should never be touched by Americanization is the recounting of historical events. There is no room for speculation when it comes to factual history with which there is evidence. The Holocaust has been made more a of story than it was an actual event, due to the high American demand for entertainment post-war. The difference between stories and history is our ability versus or inability to manipulate them, although this general rule is often ignored in the production of pieces such as "The Diary of Anne Frank". Removal of the Jewish aspects of the story, alongside the omission of religious faith and deeper thoughts of the young Anne Frank, left in the place of her diary a manipulated piece that American readers found to be inspiring instead of horrific or insightful. The danger in this is how easily it becomes for the audience to forget the traumatic events that unfolded during the Holocaust, and therefore take the tragic historical event much more lightly than it should be. The commercialized popularity of "The Diary of Anne Frank" has overcast much of the Holocaust survivor literature that paints a more tragic and realistic image as to what this time period had been like. Optimism, bravery and courage lack from stories like that of Tadeusz Borowski and Cynthia Ozick, which are incredibly dark in comparison to Anne's diary. However, more troublesome than the idea of the Holocaust being misrepresented through

literary pieces that have been modified for American audiences is the concern regarding the lack of representation of Jewish culture and religion presented in these same literary texts.

The Holocaust has become a defining characteristic of Jewish identity as is clearly seen within the contemporary piece, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” by Nathan Englander. In the story, two Jewish couples (one from Israel and one living in America) discuss their lives and the vast differences in how they live them. While the couple from Israel are devout Jews who live within the more orthodox guidelines of their religion, the couple from America has been completely modernized and loosely follows Judaism.

The most important aspect of this interaction is the realization that the wife in the American Jewish couple is obsessed with the Holocaust. After hearing a story in which two Holocaust survivors from the same concentration camp run into each other years later only to act like they did not know or like on another, the wife, Deb, is disappointed. The narrator and husband in the American Jewish couple says of his wife, “Deb looks crestfallen. She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reaffirm her belief in humanity that, from inhumanity, forms” (Englander). Since the only real indication that this character is Jewish is her dedication to learning and knowing all things about the Holocaust, it raises the question; what defines a person as Jewish? Is it heritage, practice, or lifestyle? Though these questions are now beginning to be asked by scholars, it is currently evident within postwar literature that Jewish identity lies in the observation and reflection of the Holocaust as an empowering and unifying movement that is at best unrepresentative and at worst exaggerated.

In “Filming Identity in the Jewish American Postwar; Or, on the Uses and Abuses of Periodization for Jewish Studies”, Benjamin Schreier asked the question, “Why are we – Jewish studies scholars – incapable of imagining identity other than as a historic concept?” (76). One only

needs to take a look at the amount of postwar literature (published by survivors and non-survivors alike) that presents stories with Jewish characters and are able to relate them back to the Holocaust but yet are unable to properly represent the culture and religion of Jewish people within the text. Schreier continues to state that, “Jewishness can remain normative only so long as it is understood to be an essentially empty category” (84). Jewishness in text alongside the mention of the Holocaust has been normalized, similarly to how Jewishness in text without further detail regarding the group’s culture itself has also been normalized. This leaves an empty space in the literature that is completely lacking in what makes a Jewish person Jewish aside from the history of their people, which would be an acknowledgment of their daily practices and fundamental beliefs.

Aside from public perception of Jewish people, there is also to consider the effect that this empty space in postwar literature regarding culture has had on Jewish people themselves. This lack of representation leaves it so that the only public validation that can be found in being Jewish is an acknowledgment of or some relation to the tragic event that was the Holocaust. Vicarious victimhood has become something of a trend in modern day Jews’ personal identities as well as in modern Jewish literature. Having some kind of connection to the Holocaust has become one of the few ways in which they find their own identity as a Jewish person. In a critical review of Erica Fischer’s autobiography, Anne Roth wrote of the author:

In the afterword, the author describes herself as ‘fiercely protective of the perimeter around Felice, my Jewish mother, and myself’... She thus explicitly establishes her claim to the position of vicarious victim as the defining feature of her secular, post-Holocaust Jewish identity by creating a line of association between her own mother, who survived Holocaust persecution in England, Felice Schragenheim, who was not only persecuted but,

presumably, also murdered in the Third Reich, and herself, despite the fact that she has no ties to Schragenheim beyond their Jewish identity. (2)

It is not uncommon to use descriptors to help in identifying someone. Adjectives that are helpful in describing physical features or characteristics are used in writing. However, to the trained eye, to someone who reads closely, characters that speak in a narrative voice often define themselves in their word choice when describing other characters. In the case of this autobiography, the author tells us that she does not correlate herself with the Jewish religion and culture in the way she does with her mother. In her mind, they are separate entities. Yet her recognition of her mother as a Jewish woman relies on her encounter with the Holocaust as she escaped persecution in England. This is another example of Jewish identity being tied directly to the Holocaust without any involvement of religion or culture to validate their Jewishness.



## Conclusion

One of the primary reasons for investigating the relevancy of the Holocaust within Judaic studies is to address the relative paucity of scholarship that explores the question of how the perception and identity of Jewish people has changed due to the Americanization of the Holocaust. In “The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies”, it states:

Indeed, the Holocaust has become a touchstone of public and intellectual discourse – political, ethical, and religious – in the early twenty-first century. As the importance of the field has grown, so has the recognition that, if the Holocaust was the quintessential genocide – defined as the intended destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group – it was neither the first nor the last. How the field of Holocaust studies and the more recently emerging field of genocide studies should relate to one another is work in progress... arguably even more demanding is the challenge of making the ethical ‘lessons’ of the Holocaust, if they exist, credible and compelling in a world from which genocide and other inflictions of mass violence show too few signs of disappearing. (Hayes 3).

The Americanization of the Holocaust is one of the many perceived ethical lessons of the mass genocide that took place during World War II. Aside from informing audiences about the events that transpired, the belief that optimism and bravery in the face of adversity is a solution to persecution became the type of ethical lesson to which Hayes refers. That is not to say that positive Holocaust perception should be taught, but instead that this is what is being taught in the current literature. German as well as American postwar fiction paints Jewish people as victims to be pitied, to be saved, or to be looked up to for their ‘bravery’. The horrific reality of the Holocaust was that

millions of people were oppressed, stripped of their freedom, segregated from the rest of society, then systematically dehumanized and murdered for no other reason than that of their religion. The Holocaust was a major historical event, and yet there is a deficiency in the literature that engages with it: Jewish perception is built around the idea that these people were once victims, while Jewish identity is not validated without observation of the Holocaust.

In Jewish literature, such as in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” by Nathan Englander, the mention of the Holocaust is ever-present. One of the main characters in Englander’s story is obsessed with the traumatic event that seems to keep her dedication to her religion alive since she participates in American culture and does not abide by the laws of Judaism. Her strong desire to believe in the concept of inhumanity breeding humanity is unfounded and undoubtedly a result of the Americanization of the Holocaust within her culture. As shown in stories like “Rosa” and “The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick and “This Way for Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” by Tadeusz Borowski, inhumane treatment more often than not breeds post-traumatic stress disorder as opposed to empathy. In fact, the characters in these stories found themselves lacking empathy at certain points. This is especially apparent in Ozick’s character Rosa, who struggles with accepting new people and finds herself unable to move past the murder of her daughter within a concentration camp. This lack of empathy is even more apparent in Borowski’s narrator, who coldly observes the systematic dehumanization taking place around him and is unable to react emotionally.

Even in German postwar fiction, the representation of Jewish people is formatted for the satisfaction of anti-Semites, gentiles, and other Europeans that may feel guilty over the past actions of their people or of themselves.

The lack of Jewish identity and culture in postwar literature calls for more literary works that discuss the natures of the religion and culture in order to slowly extract the Holocaust from being the sole identifier of Jewish history and culture. The lack of research being done before publishing pieces involving Jewish characters leaves a vacant space in these texts that does a disservice to the culture and religion of Jews in that it offers little knowledge on them aside from their association to the Holocaust. In gauging the quality of Jewish representation within survivor literature and non-survivor literature alike, it might be pertinent to take into consideration the biographical information of the writers. Although typically frowned upon in scholarly study, for this topic it would be the easiest solution in helping to determine the accuracy of the story being told and help uncover any hidden motives on behalf of the author. Speaking from my own experience growing up as a Jew, I very rarely saw representations of my culture or people in literature. All the encounters I have had with Judaism in literary texts has been in some connection to the Holocaust. For others like me that look for representations of Jewish identity within literary texts surrounding Judaism as well as the Holocaust, it would be of help to know where the information within the text is coming from.

In order to solve this problem with the current literature, I propose more research to be done on current Jewish populations. How do modern Jews personally identify themselves as being Jewish? In order to discover the impact that postwar Holocaust literature has had on Jewish people's ability to identify as Jews, research should be done to measure the success of Jewish writers that mention the Holocaust in their works versus those who do not. Statistically, does the observation of the Holocaust validate Jewish writers more than those who choose not to touch on the subject? To redefine Jewish identity after years of it being unable to shake the Holocaust, there

should be more literature focused on accurately presenting Jewish cultural practices and beliefs without reflecting on their history as victims to a mass genocide.

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