



HAL
open science

Second Generation, Third Generation, and State Political Postmemory: The Holocaust and Its Literary Effects in Contemporary France

Frédérique Leichter-Flack

► **To cite this version:**

Frédérique Leichter-Flack. Second Generation, Third Generation, and State Political Postmemory: The Holocaust and Its Literary Effects in Contemporary France. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 2016, 4 (1), pp.67–77. 10.1353/jlt.2016.0000 . hal-01769170v1

HAL Id: hal-01769170

<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-01769170v1>

Submitted on 11 Mar 2019 (v1), last revised 10 Feb 2020 (v2)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Second Generation, Third Generation, and State Political Postmemory: The Holocaust and Its Literary Effects in Contemporary France

Frédérique Leichter-Flack

A paraître dans le *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 4-1, fall 2015, University of Nebraska Press.

Actes du colloque « Postmemory and Creation », Columbia University, avril 2013.

This paper offers a reflection on the interaction between literary creation, the postmemory of the Holocaust as Marianne Hirsch described it, and politics in contemporary France. In the fields of literature and film, many works have dealt with the Holocaust. Indeed, France is maybe the European country where the idea of a “duty of memory” regarding the genocide of the Jews, and the country’s own past under Nazi occupation, have been most discussed. One may observe the same interest in direct testimonies by survivors of the genocide in France as in the US. However, the last fifteen years have been characterized by two simultaneous phenomenons: first, the arrival of a “third generation”, who with their own specific questions, are willing to take over from the second generation, who have been extensively studied by psychoanalysts; secondly, a complete renewal of the political context: the Holocaust – and the active role played by the French State in it – are now considered as an integral part of national memory politics.

Through a discussion of a number of particularly striking French-language contemporary works, this paper will explore the effect, in terms of literary creation, of the interaction between a generational phenomenon and highly interventionist memory politics. First, what is happening to literary creation regarding the family memory of the Holocaust, in this third generation context? Secondly, beyond family and community legacy, are we moving towards a national postmemory highlighting passivity in front of the genocide?

To begin with, two books published last year present themselves as grounded in this third generation experience. Both are characterized by a highly structured critical reflection/metadiscourse on their own approach. In *Histoire des grands parents que je n'ai jamais eus* (*A history of the grandparents I never had*), the historian Ivan Jablonka uses the methods specific to his disciplinary field – through which he usually explores subjects unconnected with his jewishness – to investigate the story of his grandparents who died in

Auschwitz : the author followed their trail through archive centers to piece their lives together, from their youth in Poland, to their involvement in the Communist Party, their activism in France, their going underground, and finally their arrests and deaths. So this is a work of micro-history, but the assertion of subjectiveness that accompanies it is rather unusual among French historians. The author, who is of Jewish descent and who was born in France in the 1970s, writes in the first person, questions his own quest and motivations, and asserts his identity as a writer as well as a historian. But he explicitly forbids himself from resorting to literature to fictionalize episodes insufficiently documented by history. Cultivating attention to the singularity of individual lives in the midst of anonymous crowds, the book may remind of *The Lost* by Daniel Mendelsohn, which was extremely popular in France when it was released. However, Mendelsohn's book is not its only model: micro-histories, biographies, literary investigations, first-person narratives, family stories... this book is based on a form of reasoned hybridity, extremely aware of its own status, sources, commitments and limits.

Another "third-generation" work is *La vie après* (*Life after*) by Virginie Linhart, an essay that she wrote to accompany a documentary film that she directed for the French public television. Virginie Linhart, a film-maker and writer, is the granddaughter of Jewish grandparents who escaped the Holocaust by hiding in Switzerland during the War. Linhart says she embarked on the project to answer her own questions about identity and shed light on the darker episodes of her family's history. Her approach is original, since she does not, or no longer, wonder about what the friends of her grandparents went through, in the camps or in the secret hiding places thanks to which they survived, but about what, after it, they made of that traumatic experience: how they got themselves back together, how they managed to return to ordinary after leaving the camps. Indeed, Linhart observes that the period after, is the blind spot in the otherwise abundant historiography devoted to the Holocaust in France. In spite of 2500 of the 75000 Jews sent to the camps returning after the war, it also remains the blind spot of the many testimonies which have been published by survivors. Linhart therefore undertook to get around twenty survivors to talk only about the return and the difficulties of getting themselves back together. She explains that it was not easy, for, quote: "describing life *after* means accepting to disclose intimate, singular moments, the ups and downs of life... Telling about life *after* means abandoning the "we" of the collective tragic destiny and saying "I" as an individual. [...] The collective "we" protects, the "I" leaves you exposed". Indeed, the hardship that returning to ordinary life after the camps entailed for the generation of survivors was underestimated. This was the moment when a traumatized individual's psyche had to

decide how to deal with the trauma, how to manage it. Nothing was provided, of course, for the camp survivors, most of whom had no resources and no families – no official period of mourning, no help from the community, no public assistance, no emotional and psychological support, no social recognition. As a new family life was improvised, “life *after*” was also the foundation of what psychologists have called the second generation. Maybe even of the third generation, Linhart asserts, quote, “because in the conditions of this return lie the foundation of my present obsession, the silence which enveloped their lives and marked our childhood – the childhood of the descendants of that tragedy”. In Linhart’s work, the whole process of transfer of memory involves the grandparents and grandchildren. The second generation is completely left out, outside the frame.

The second generation is, however, the central theme of another work that matters a lot in my opinion, and which was also published last year in France and in French: a masterly graphic novel by the Belgian-born Israeli caricaturist, Michel Kichka. *Deuxième génération* (*Second generation*) deals with the way in which, in the author’s family, the father, who was a teenager when he left Auschwitz as a survivor, managed his family life and raised his children in the shadow of the Holocaust. In *Deuxième génération*, there is a clear inspiration from *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and at the same time it is distinct, in a number of ways. First, there is an explicit shift in focus: *Deuxième génération* does not aim at telling the father’s story in Auschwitz through the medium of pictures, but only the story of the author, the son, from his childhood in Belgium up to his present-day adult life as a husband and father in Israel. This is a sort of biographical graphic novel about the author as an example of that “second generation”, which is well known to psychologists. And because the picture of this second generation is so well known, it is possible to approach it with humor, complicity and tenderness. This is what makes this book a masterpiece and the indication of changing times.

Indeed, one finds in Kichka’s graphic novel, as in Spiegelman’s *Maus*, all the characteristic elements of the experience of what is known as the second generation: a childhood marked by the telling silence of a survivor father, who measures everything by the yardstick of Auschwitz; the discovery of the genocide by himself, through pictures seen when he was 7 or 8 in the history books about the Holocaust which his father collected, and the nightmares he had as a result; an adolescence which offered no possibility of revolting because of the weight of the father’s suffering (quote: “I couldn’t graduate from school because of the Nazis, so please, make sure you are always the best in your class”); the repressed memory of the second generation coming back, when the author’s brother committed suicide as an adult; and the difficulties of the father and son relationship characterized by the discrepancy between the

public persona of the father, a star witness and hero of the Holocaust, and his private personality, self-centered and grumpy. However, since all these characteristic features of the second generation syndrome have already been documented, and since Kichka writes from his position as a father who has led his own life and nursed his own wounds, he can offer, as a caricaturist, a sensitive and humorous picture of it. For instance, the father's obsession is illustrated, as early as the first page of the graphic novel, in a scene where the family has dinner and the father exclaims: "Yum, this soup reminds me of Auschwitz! You know why?" "No, daddy", the children answer. "Because we never had any in that place!" This should give you an idea of the tone. Time has passed since *Maus* was published: enough time for the adult caricaturist to be able to sketch, with humour and quirky tenderness, his own nightmares as a child haunted by the Holocaust. For instance his own father, dressed as a sheriff and holding in a cell a baddie named "Adolf the ugly", for whose capture a 6 million dollar bounty was offered, as a poster on the wall reveals...

Through this intertextuality and this complicity with readers, *Deuxième generation* has what the informed readership will clearly perceive as a tongue-in-cheek relation with *Maus*. It looks very much like the way an era saturated with psychoanalysis would cast an amused and sympathetic look on an older period, where there were no psychoanalysts and where nobody thought of warning fathers against repeating to their young sons "you are my revenge on Hitler!" Indeed, in this sense, *Deuxième generation* is a post-second generation work, a graphic novel in which psychology is obviously there, but only as an old familiar figure who has no longer anything to teach you, and from whom you cannot expect anything new, but with whom you are comfortable and can have fun... because one has to deal with trauma, not necessarily try and repair it... as is evidenced in the wild scene at the end of the graphic novel, where three generations – the grandfather, the son and the grandsons – sit around a table and laugh and share dreadful jokes and puns about the Holocaust, with the readers' benevolent complicity.

Alongside the development of a postmemory by the Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors, France has gone through a major period of conflict about memory over the last fifteen years. A number of public initiatives have thoroughly altered the status and uses of the memory of the genocide of the Jews. These state-sponsored memory policies have, first, contributed to the inclusion of the Jewish memory into the national memory. A central, emotional interest in the Holocaust can thus be identified in a large number of works of fiction published by French non-Jewish authors, who have no direct link to the genocide of

the Jews, through neither their families nor their communities. What I would like to emphasize, however, is that the inclusion of this trauma into the national memory has been accompanied by a shift of focus, from the horror felt in front of what happened to the victims, to anguished debates about responsibility and to an obsessive moral questioning.

In 1995, the French president established the 16th of July (the day when the Vel d'Hiv police raid and mass arrests took place in 1942) as a national day of remembrance for the victims of the genocide. In a groundbreaking speech, he acknowledged what no French official had ever acknowledged before, that is the responsibility of the French State in the extermination of the French Jews. While the French republic now accepted the legacy of Vichy France and courageously offered official recognition of past crimes, the theme of France's Righteous among the Nations was, progressively, taken out of its Jewish and Israeli original context – it is an honorary title conferred to people by Jerusalem's Yad Vashem –, it was taken out and adopted by the French authorities and used as evidence of French memory policies. Those policies culminated in 2007, when France's Righteous among the Nations were honored at the Pantheon, the mausoleum containing the remains of distinguished French citizens. As early as 2000, the 16th of July had become the national day of remembrance for the victims of racist and anti-Semitic crimes, as well as a day of tribute to France's Righteous.

The film *La Rafle* (*The Round Up*, 2010), directed by Roselyne Bosch, offers a synthesis of this national postmemory and its objective of reconciliation. This film, which mixes fiction with historical reenactment, brings together all the elements of the French memory pick-and-mix regarding the genocide of the Jews: the shame, indignity and guilt associated with the key role played by the French police in the Vel d'Hiv mass arrests of July 1942, but also the heroic intervention of some of France's Righteous who show the way, the happy ending – as the child hero of the film escapes. Above all, the film offers the cinematic prop that the national memory needed to stabilize this contrasted and soothing picture, as the film recreates the setting of the Vel d'Hiv in 1942, of which no photographic archive exists. The film therefore presents itself as an ideal tool for history teachers.

The double bind which characterizes the national memory of the Nazi occupation is, politically, productive. It provides a form of closure. However, on a more individual level, everyone is left with uncertainties about their worth, as compared with the exemplary Righteous and the abhorrent collaborationists. The most threatening figure is then the middle ground, the mass of people who neither resisted nor collaborated, but satisfied themselves with carrying on with their lives amidst the hardship of the occupation, and did not bother to look at whatever worse was happening to people around them. In third generation France,

different family memories still coexist, but they now have to contend with national memory: this is the case of the third generation of descendants of the Righteous, who are called upon to act as spokespeople for their exemplary grandparents who often achieved recognition lately, and this is the case of the third generation of descendants of collaborationists, as the polemic created by the book *Des gens très bien* (*Very nice people*) illustrates. This hatchet-job, which was criticized because of its excessive and therefore indulgent dimension, was published by the bestselling author Alexandre Jardin in 2010. In the book, Jardin explores the figure of his own grandfather, who was the chief of staff of the collaborationist Prime Minister Laval when the Vel d'Hiv mass arrests took place.

The change in the context of memory politics affects everyone's relationship to his or her own family history. Even when one is the descendant neither of a collaborationist nor of Jews sent to the camps, one cannot be really comfortable with one's family history, which must be assessed anew from a moral perspective. The interaction between the memory of the Holocaust and literary creation is grounded in that moral questioning about involvement: who did something? Why? Could you know how you would have chosen between good and evil when under pressure? Who would have collaborated and who would have behaved righteously? The title of a recent essay by Pierre Bayard, *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* (*Would have I joined the resistance or become a torturer?*), was clearly attuned to that public mood, to how the collective memory is grounded in a moral questioning.

This question corresponds, as Primo Levi wrote in "The Grey Zone", to a temptation, on the part of those who arrive late on the scene, to simplify things and to pass judgment, thereby separating the righteous from the wicked as the Christ on the day of the last judgment, whereas reality is infinitely more complex. Such a question is therefore, probably, misleading, as Pierre Bayard also acknowledges it : the title of his book is just a way of playing on people's doubts about themselves. Would have I been a hero? Would I have become a torturer? For most people, the answer is of course neither. The immense majority of people chose neither good nor evil. They just accepted things as they were, waiting to see what would happen. They were not able to identify, in their daily lives which had been dramatically altered by the war and the occupation, the situations which demanded that they react, intervene and make choices. What if today's trauma was based on that question? The results of experiments in social psychology, conducted by behaviorist psychologists from Milgram onwards, have been largely discussed and have popularized the notion that passivity is the ultimate weakness, evil being the result of non-intervention. Now, what is to be made of that weakness? It appears most pressing to control it, to protect it against itself, to set up social and

political devices to prevent the natural trend towards criminal passivity from having disastrous consequences....

This is not the direction in which readers are taken in recent book by Yannick Haenel, entitled in French *Ian Karski*, and translated into English as *The Messenger*. The polemic which this book created, actually takes us back to the core of the present interaction between postmemory and literary creation, namely when a moral understanding of the collective trauma of memory turns into ideology...

The Messenger is a fictional “I remember” story, a vicarious “I remember” story, since the author, a French writer in his forties, puts words in the mouth of the hero of the Polish resistance, Jan Karski, the man who went to the Warsaw Ghetto to report to the world on what was happening there, who secretly crossed all the borders of occupied Europe to go and tell Roosevelt, in Washington, about the extermination of Jews that was taking place in Europe. We know that Karski reported in vain, that the Allies did *not* make stopping the genocide of the Jews a priority objective in the war against Nazism. Haenel uses the historical figure of Karski, who died in 2000 and who himself told his story in a book published in 1944, *Story of a Secret State*, and has him support a thesis which, given the success of the book in the autumn of 2009, seems to have been accepted without discussion in contemporary France: that the Allies knew what was happening to the Jews and let it happen, that they are complicit in the genocide of the Jews and as guilty as the Nazis who organized it.

Haenel uses his own vivid memory of Jan Karski, namely the impression left on him by Karski’s testimony in the 1985 film *Shoah* directed by Claude Lanzmann, which Haenel describes minutely in the first half of the book. He attributes to Karski a trauma which Karski himself never evoked, in order to imagine – and that is the third part of the book – a shadow, fictional testimony in which the elderly Polish hero, towards the end of his life, would express all his bitterness in front of the moral complicity of the Allies in the genocide of the Jews. However, this fictional memory, “borrowed” from the historical figure and “made his own” by a forty-something writer in France in 2009, is an ideological form of memory. The thesis of the moral equivalence between the passive knowledge of the Allies and the active crime of the Nazis raises all sorts of problems. Haenel reopens a historical discussion to which, in spite of its complexity, professional historians have somehow put an end. He reopens it to assess history and international relations in purely moral terms, as one would make an individual choice between good and evil. But this implies a simplistic vision of what a just war consists in, and *delegitimizes* the motives of the American intervention in Europe. Without openly acknowledging it politically, it encourages a form of generalized moral relativism, between

the moral failures of the passive witnesses and of the active criminals. If everybody is equally guilty, then nobody really *is* guilty, and one can easily segue from generalized questioning into overall self-satisfaction. However, the positive reception offered to this novel – except for the criticism offered by the director Claude Lanzmann and the historian Annette Wieworka – shows how the underlying thesis of the book resonates with a certain present state of the postmemory of the genocide.

In 1986, in a famous chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved* entitled “the grey zone”, Primo Levi developed the eponymous concept, which is essential to understand the context of the genocide and of the camps, but he also warned against the risks of misunderstanding the expression: the “grey zone” is all the rage now, but it has been affected by the same process of conceptual trivialization as Arendt’s famous phrase, “the banality of evil”. Haenel’s book may be the most striking expression of a commonsense mistake about the notion of the “grey zone”. In Primo Levi’s mind, this expression was a call to exercise one’s judgment about extreme situations with a mixture of moral restraint, prudence and sensitivity to their complexity. A certain tendency within the present postmemory is to do the exact opposite: in order to appease the anguished questioning about responsibility, the tendency is to confuse everything and stop the effort of moral reflection at the lowest level.

From “what did the victims go through and what do we owe them?” to “how do we position ourselves today in relation to moral choices made at the time”, the ethical turn of French memory politics which can be identified over the past fifteen years has been accompanied by an abundant postmemory literary creation from the third generation, in the sense of a national third generation, not just the third generation in a family or a community. Since in France, as in most of the western world, the genocide of the Jews is the yardstick by which evil is measured, this ethical turn involves moral questions, as other genocides do. The concept of Righteous among the Nations, invented in Israel and based on the Jewish tradition, is already being used widely in the context of other genocides: what political and memory uses will it serve in such a comparative perspective? Indeed, this ethical turn has made it possible to avoid, up to a certain point, memories competing with one another, and the French republic being threatened by community claims regarding memory. Here, I have mostly insisted on the risks of this ethical turn which, through the extension of the notion of genocide through comparisons, also affects the postmemories of other genocides.