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# Everybody's Holocaust? Tova Reich's Satirical Approach to Shoah Business and the Cult of Victimhood

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**Abstract:** This paper sets out to demonstrate the changes that post-Holocaust fiction has been undergoing since around the turn of the new millennium. It analyzes the highly innovative and often provocative approaches to the Holocaust and its memory found in Tova Reich's novel *My Holocaust*—a scathing satire on the personal and institutional exploitation of Holocaust commemoration, manifested in the commodification of the historical trauma in what has been termed “Shoah business”. The novel can be seen as a reaction to the increasing appropriation of the Holocaust by popular culture. This paper focuses on Reich's critical response to the cult of victimhood and the unhealthy competition for Holocaust primacy, corresponding with the growth of a “victim culture”. It also explores other thematic aspects of the author's satire—the abuse of the term “Holocaust” for personal, political and ideological purposes; attempts to capitalize on the suffering of millions of victims; the trivialization of this tragedy; conflicts between particularists and universalists in their attitude to the Shoah; and criticism of Holocaust-centered Judaism. The purpose of this paper is to show how Tova Reich has enriched post-Holocaust fiction by presenting a comic treatment of false victimary discourse, embodied by a fraudulent survivor and a whole gallery of inauthentic characters. This paper highlights the novel's originality, which enables it to step outside the frame of traditional Holocaust fiction.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; Tova Reich; commodification; trivialization; victimhood; particularism vs. universalism; inauthenticity; Judaism

## 1. Introduction

Post-Holocaust authors who have only vicarious experience of the Holocaust are obviously aware that their artistic response to the mass genocide must be different from the writings of those who have witnessed this historical tragedy at first hand. This is the reason why second- and third-generation authors are searching for new narrative modes and strategies that are distinct from testimonies and from the more traditional Holocaust fiction of survivor-writers. These later authors attest new ways and possibilities of addressing this topic—a topic to which they are not indifferent, despite their generational distance from the original traumatic events.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that in the last decades of the twentieth century and especially at the turn of the new millennium, these authors have broken with conventional patterns and genres of Holocaust fiction. While authenticity was one of the principal

<sup>1</sup> New narrative strategies of the interpretation of the Holocaust and inherited trauma are the subjects of several inspiring and thought-provoking monographs such as *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* by Berger (1997), *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* by McGlothlin (2006), *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* by Grimwood (2007), *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction*, edited by Aarons (2016) and *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* by Aarons and Berger (2017).

tenets of earlier Holocaust literature, the later generations of authors have abandoned this tenet, and the approach taken by many of them can be labeled as antirealistic. They often employ postmodern techniques, manifested in inconsistent narratives and fragmentation (e.g., Thane Rosenbaum). Some of them even use elements of the supernatural and techniques of magic realism—for example, Jonathan Safran Foer in his novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (Foer 2002) and Joseph Skibell in *A Blessing on the Moon* (Skibell 1997), in which the novel's protagonist is a ghost who has not survived the massacre of Jews from an unnamed Polish town and is now wandering in the hope of finding the World to Come. To avoid accusations of the unethical appropriation of events that these writers did not personally live through, they often avoid direct representations of the Holocaust, instead thematically turning to depictions of the hardships experienced by the (grand)children of Holocaust survivors—hardships which result from the intergenerational and transgenerational transmission of trauma and which are manifested in the highly complicated relationships between these children and their (grand)parents. Changes in the artistic representation of the Holocaust are also perceptible in a shift towards genres that are traditionally perceived as belonging to popular culture—though such works as the graphic novel *Maus* (1st volume—(Spiegelman [1986] 1992)), 2nd volume—(Spiegelman [1991] 1992)) by Art Spiegelman indicate that the generic borders between so-called high culture and low culture are problematic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the Holocaust has also been addressed by works in which, as Rothe says, “the pain of others was transformed into commercially successful entertainment commodities by being emplotted as kitsch-sentimental melodrama”. According to Rothe, Holocaust trauma kitsch was foreshadowed “in the mythification of Anne Frank [ . . . ] and exemplified by the queen of trauma kitsch, Oprah Winfrey, daytime TV talk shows . . . depicting victimization experiences as redemptive trauma-and-recovery tales” (Rothe 2011, p. 42).

It is true that breaches of the tenet of authenticity in the representation of the Holocaust—with “imaginative investment”, to use Marianne Hirsch’s term (Hirsch 2008, p. 107), replacing realism—have elicited criticism from traditionalists, who have generally rejected alternative narratives that subvert this “untouchable” topic. Already in the 1980s, Terrence Des Pres in his seminal essay “Holocaust Laughter?” questioned three main principles that had previously restricted writing about the Holocaust—the conviction that the Holocaust should be represented as a unique event, remaining accurate and faithful to the facts, and approaching the Holocaust “as a solemn or even a sacred event admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor the dead” (Des Pres 1988, p. 217). His question—whether laughter is possible in literary treatment of the Holocaust (Des Pres 1988, p. 218)—pointed to prejudices that existed against the employment of humor in Holocaust fiction. Having analyzed specific works about the Holocaust, he rejected concerns that the comic mode is irreverent, that comedy lessens the significance of the topic and pulls it down from the pedestal of its untouchable sacredness.

One of the works that has broken all the above-mentioned tenets and sparked particular controversy is the provocative novel *My Holocaust* (2007) by the Jewish American writer Tova Reich (born in 1942). Although her parents are not Holocaust survivors—her father grew up in the Polish town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz), but he left Poland before World War II (Kirschenbaum 1997, p. 305)—her novel reveals that the Holocaust is a vital topic for her. The aim of this article is to explore in which aspects Reich’s novel enriches Holocaust fiction and is innovative within its genre.

## 2. Commemoration of the Holocaust as a Profitable Business

The cover of Reich’s novel shows scenes from a concentration camp made of plastic Lego blocks, figures of camp prisoners in striped uniforms, barbed wire, a sign with the Star of David, a cattle car, and also signposts with the names of Auschwitz and Birkenau. It is a pictorial reference to the Danish Lego company, which produced a concentration camp set designed by the Polish artist Zbigniew Libera. Later, after protests against the unethical trivialization of the Holocaust, the production of

this set was stopped.<sup>2</sup> However, besides items related to the concentration camps, the cover design also shows other Lego pieces which are incongruous with the Holocaust, for example an ice cream truck or a figure of a boy with a Mexican sombrero on his head. The concentration camp entrance gate welcomes us, the readers, with the word “A Novel” instead of the sentence “Arbeit Macht Frei”. This graphic design precisely expresses one of the central themes of the novel—the commodification of the Holocaust. In other words, the abuse of the commemoration of this tragic history for commercial purposes—a practice that has been wittily termed “Shoah business”.<sup>3</sup>

The commercialization of the Nazi genocide is embodied by two of the novel’s protagonists, Maurice Messer and his son Norman, who run the travel agency Holocaust Connections, Inc. Although three quarters of their family perished during the war, this tragedy does not prevent them from abusing the memory of six million Jews for their personal enrichment. The company organizes costly tours of the Auschwitz camp for affluent Holocaust tourists, which enables the Messers to live a very comfortable life. Subsidized by the government, they can afford to travel first class and stay at expensive luxury hotels. In a way, they are practicing a form of “dark tourism”—similarly to the tours of Chernobyl and other disaster sites that exist today.

Reich’s satirical view of the commodification of the Shoah is captured most vividly in the second part of the novel, called “Camp Auschwitz”, in which the camp museum and the entire town are depicted as a highly commercialized place, full of stalls selling Holocaust souvenirs and trinkets such as T-shirts, bumper stickers, postcards, Jewish prayer books, memorial candles, yarmulkes, but also Christian crosses, rosaries and holy images of Jesus and Mary. Right next to the camp, there is a large shopping center, and the whole place is designed to turn the memory of the Holocaust into a profitable business. Similarly to the book cover, a strange mixture of varied objects forms a kitsch mishmash, giving an impression of inauthenticity and corruption which is further heightened in the episode recounting Norman’s encounter with a vendor named Tommy Messiah who trades in fake Holocaust memorabilia, passing off Nazi helmets, striped camp uniforms, armbands, Yellow Stars of David or cans of Zyklon B as allegedly genuine concentration camp artifacts. The death camp is pictured more as a theme park, and the whole town as a tourist destination, parading mass murder as the main attraction, after which visitors can consume fast food at restaurants and shake off the specter of past horrors at the Auschwitz disco club. Perhaps such a description may seem irreverent, even offensive—but this is how Reich reacts to the trivialization and sentimentalization of the Holocaust in popular culture, a phenomenon that is sometimes termed “Holocaust kitsch”.

The description of the Auschwitz museum also includes a parody of a rushed and superficial guided tour. The shallow nature of the tour is illustrated in the address given to the museum’s visitors by Monty Pincus, Maurice’s deputy:

“... we’re in a rush, you know, we still have to do this gas chamber and crematorium in Auschwitz I, and tomorrow there’s still Auschwitz II-Birkenau, which is the real quote-unquote heart of darkness, not a fun place at all, believe me. [ ... ] We’re all tired. You probably want to get back to Krakow to do a little shopping for souvenirs, and maybe to freshen up at the hotel before dinner, so I really do think we ought to get moving. As the writer said, This way for gas, ladies and gentlemen,” Monty wound up, tossing out that mordant grabber title with the customary casual show of erudition, though he had never, of course, read the Borowski story, as he had also never read a word by the author of *Heart of Darkness*. (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 57)

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, the motif of this controversial product of the Lego Company is incorporated into the novel in a marginal episode.

<sup>3</sup> Shoah business leads to the trivialization of the Holocaust when this historical event is reduced to mere merchandise, yielding a profit. This is manifested for example in the growth of death camp tourism or in the employment of this topic in mass culture as a way of exploiting the suffering of millions of victims for commercial gain.

Tova Reich is not the first American writer to present Holocaust tourism in fiction. A similar motif is employed in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002); its protagonist Alexander Perchov works for his father's travel agency Heritage Touring in Odessa, organizing trips to towns in Ukraine and Poland for American Jewish clients who want to visit the places linked with their ancestors' past. In fact, the whole novel revolves around a journey to the Ukrainian shtetl Trachimbrod, which was completely destroyed by the Nazis, where Alex—together with his grandfather—accompanies the American tourist Jonathan, whose mission is to find a woman who saved his grandfather's life. The motif of Shoah business also appears in the second volume of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, in which society's materialism, represented by the horde of curious journalists and businessmen, is contrasted with Art's interior world. When a businessman advertising *Maus* vests offers Art 50% of the profits from the sales, Art rejects this offer because the commercial exploitation of the Holocaust, based on making profit from the suffering of millions of victims, is unacceptable for him (Spiegelman [1991] 1992, p. 42). What sets Reich apart from Foer and Spiegelman is her biting satirical view of the topic—and, most importantly, the extent to which she addresses the topic. Whereas in Foer's and Spiegelman's works the commercial exploitation of the Shoah function only as motifs, in Reich's *My Holocaust* it becomes a core theme.

The commodification of the Holocaust is closely connected with the trivialization of this historical trauma. It is personalized by characters whose knowledge of the Shoah is extremely limited, bordering on complete ignorance. The most prominent examples of these characters are the potential donors to Holocaust institutions Gloria Bacon Lieb and her dull daughter Bunny Bacon. Bunny turns out to be an absolutely uncomprehending person whose stupidity and insensitivity are revealed in her dialog with Maurice: "I really, really appreciate it that Auschwitz is wheelchair-accessible. You know what I mean? Was it always that way—I mean, even at the time of the Holocaust?" (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 43). Reich uses this character as a source of irony and black humor. Disturbed by an Israeli visitor who is smoking a cigarette, Bunny remarks that "Auschwitz should remain a smoke-free zone" (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 62). Considering the fact that smoke is one of the central metaphors in Holocaust literature (as there was only one way out of the death camp for thousands of prisoners—through the crematorium chimney), the author's irony becomes even more apparent. Bunny's obtuseness is also manifested when she claims that the primary, most canonical work of Holocaust literature must be Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*—without knowing that this autobiography is a notorious fake memoir in which this Swiss author falsified reality, having fraudulently assumed the identity of a Holocaust survivor. Bunny regards her knowledge of this Holocaust kitsch as her qualification for becoming a "Holocaust professional". This indeed happens, as she paradoxically becomes a Chair of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. As we can see, at times, the narrative of Reich's novel turns into farce, as in the episode in which Bunny's mother Gloria, looking at a huge pile of hair in the Auschwitz museum, feels embarrassed by its repulsive appearance and suggests that it should be presented more attractively. She wonders why all the hair in this pile has to be gray and recommends doing "something creative" with it (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 46).

In Reich's novel, trivialization has not only personal but also institutional dimensions. The author's critique is directed at the concept of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is the setting for the last two parts of the novel. She rejects the museum's earlier practice, in which visitors at the entrance received an ID card with the data of a real victim of the Holocaust. Each visitor was supposed to assume the victim's role and identify with him or her. In Reich's ironic presentation, this practice in fact backfires against the well-meaning intentions of the museum, as one of the visitors leaves the following note in a comment book: "I enjoyed it very much, thank you for making the Holocaust possible" (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 232).

### 3. Competition for Holocaust Victimhood

Tova Reich's satirical take is wide, encompassing another important target of her criticism—the competition for Holocaust "primacy" and the unhealthy rivalry among various social groups in their

struggle to achieve the status of victims of any form of oppression. This topic corresponds with the growing cult of victimhood which has appeared in stark contrast with the dominant cult of heroism in America. As Peter Novick notes in his book *The Holocaust in American Life*, “There has been a change in the attitude toward victimhood from a status all but universally shunned and despised to one often eagerly embraced. On the individual level, the cultural icon of the strong, silent hero is replaced by the vulnerable and verbose antihero” (Novick 1999, p. 8)—although in modern Jewish American literature, verbosity is more pertinent to shlemiels than to Holocaust victims. *My Holocaust* reflects these changes in attitudes toward victimhood in American culture, and it can be seen as Reich’s response to them.

The basic question highlighted in the novel is to whom the Holocaust belongs and who has the moral right to appropriate it. Various groups, each following their own political and economic agenda, demand equality in victimhood and do not hide their pragmatic attitude to this profitable category. Groups’ historical victimization in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual orientation is perceived as a constituent part of their distinctive identity. It can be said that in the novel, almost every social group stakes a claim to victim status, leading them to call for the recognition of many Holocausts. Thus they struggle for the recognition of the African American Holocaust, the Native American Holocaust, the Roma, Tibetan, Palestinian, Muslim, Catholic, Mormon, Polish, Russian German, Japanese, Feminist, Women’s, Gay and Lesbian, or Animal Holocausts, the Holocaust of all aboriginal and indigenous peoples, and many more. As a matter of fact, in Reich’s comic treatment of this topic, based on hyperbole, it can be Everybody’s Holocaust. As Norman Messer says, “everyone wants a piece of the Holocaust pie” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 63). They rail against the monopoly of the Jewish Holocaust and its dominancy in terms of victimhood.

It is clear that Reich mocks the overuse of the term Holocaust; for example, one of her characters opposes poor conditions in poultry farms, chanting the slogan “All broilers are my brothers, all fowl are my ‘family’” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 287). On the other hand, Reich’s protagonists Maurice and Norman are against the arbitrary appropriation of the name of the historical Jewish trauma, and they usurp the right to include or exclude various groups from having the status of Holocaust victims. They have only one criterion for granting this status—the prospect of financial gain for themselves. They also jealously guard their own elite status among victims—which explains why in one episode, Maurice is irritated when he discovers that the tour of the museum in Auschwitz is not solely reserved for his group. Reich depicts the rivalry in claiming Holocaust victimhood even among Holocaust survivors, who are hierarchized into those who were

the crème de la crème of survivors, more authentically survivors than those who had also been in the camps but had not been branded, those who had been in work camps but not death camps, those who had been in the greatest number of camps for the most years, those who had been in ghettos, but not camps, those who had survived by hiding, by blending in with the local populace, by fleeing to Russia, by being rescued by a Schindler or a Sugihara or a Sousa Mendes, those who had been evacuated on a Kindertransport, those who had been hidden as children in monasteries and convents and stables, those who could claim passage aboard the doomed ship *Saint Louis*, those who left Europe before the war but could boast the greatest number of family members killed [ . . . ] The blue numbers etched into their flesh were an indelible code that admitted them into the inner circle of the exclusive Holocaust club now, by popular demand, being opened to the general public. (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 264)

If somebody does not meet Maurice’s criteria and becomes uncomfortable for him, then in his view that person “does not represent *our* Holocaust” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 161, emphasis mine).

In the novel’s last two chapters, the conflict over the status of Holocaust victims develops into overt violence. As has already been mentioned, this part of the book is set in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is attacked and occupied by the proponents of equality for the victimized groups who are demanding an end to the Jewish primacy over the Shoah. Their rhetoric, resembling



the text of the Declaration of Independence, exposes the unethical running of the museum and the hypocrisy of its management, now controlled by the incompetent Bunny Bacon.

Reich obviously censures the appropriation of the Holocaust for various purposes, be it ideological, commercial or personal, and denounces attempts to capitalize on the suffering of millions of victims. For this reason, various groups that sponge off the Holocaust are not spared her ironic derision. However, she also subverts the sacredness of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, their extraordinariness and elitist status as represented by Maurice and Norman. On the one hand, she condemns the debasement of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, while on the other hand she criticizes the abuse of the Jews' suffering in their power politics. She questions their superiority to other social groups and pours cold water on the idea of Jews as the only chosen nation in victimhood.

#### 4. Particularism versus Universalism

The conflict aroused by demands for the recognition of Holocaust victim status is essentially a conflict between the proponents of two distinct approaches to this historical event—particularism and universalism. While particularists emphasize the uniqueness of the Holocaust (given the scale of the extermination and the introduction of modern technologies of killing), universalists claim that the nature of the Holocaust is comparable to that of other genocides, such as ethnic cleansing in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda or Bosnia.<sup>4</sup> They see the Holocaust in the context of these other genocides and also colonial mass murders, and regard the “Final Solution” as the climax of historical anti-Semitism. Universalists' rejection of particularists' insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust draws on the argument that every historical event in some ways resembles other historical events, and the atrocities in World War II are no exception. One of Reich's characters even sees a parallel with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Actually, the takeover of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (when a group of dissenters opposing the museum's policy occupied its building) may evoke the events of 9/11 and may be read as Reich's allegoric response to them.

The role of the novel's protagonist Maurice in this conflict is rather complicated. On the one hand, he inclines towards particularism and jealously protects the memory of the Holocaust lest it should be stolen by the other groups who lack direct experience of this evil chapter in history. On the other hand, as the pragmatic chairman of a museum that is dependent on government funds, he implements programs that universalize the Shoah. During his “reign”, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum becomes an institution that is open to diverse political and ideological streams within the so-called “Lessons of the Holocaust”. This is also the title of the third part of Reich's novel. As Novick says, “it is the rare Holocaust commemoration, or Holocaust institution, or Holocaust curriculum, that is not dedicated to promulgating ‘the lessons of the Holocaust’” (Novick 1999, p. 239). The touch of irony in Novick's statement cannot be overlooked, as he is critical of the frequent emptiness of these lessons. An ironic tone is also perceptible in Reich's title as well as in the content of the chapters set in the museum—an institution which is exposed to the author's severe and merciless criticism. She presents it as an opportunist and corrupted institution, and her satire does not spare any aspect of its policy. Maurice believes in the re-educational power of his “lessons”, and thus he invites even ideological enemies and Holocaust deniers to the museum, for example an Arab proponent of jihad. It is no wonder that his universalist program is attacked by Jewish protesters, who accuse him of desecrating the Shoah. Herzl Lieb, a prominent protestor, does not hide his anger in his accusation of Maurice: “How dare you invite Jew killers and Holocaust deniers into the shrine to Hitler's victims! How dare you undermine the uniqueness of the Shoah by implied comparisons! We are outraged! We are shocked! Shame, shame!” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 204). Moreover, the organization of an event

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<sup>4</sup> The Holocaust is often paralleled with the repression of black slaves and Native Americans in America. For example, William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* (Styron 1979) draws a parallel between the Shoah and slavery.

called “Tibetan Holocaust” is unacceptable for these activists, whose objections indicate that they are on the side of particularism.

However, the museum management also has to face protests from the other side, the proponents of universalism, who advocate the so-called “united Holocausts”. Their credo is “to respect all Holocausts equally in all their multifarious diversity of suffering and victimization” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 287). The violent occupation of the museum by a group of converted Buddhists—who accuse the management of corruption and the defilement of this “sanctuary” for those who commemorate the Shoah—testifies to the victory of universalists, which is confirmed by the slight modification to the name of the institution to become the “United States Holocausts Memorial Museum”.

### 5. Authenticity versus Falseness

As has already been stated, authenticity is one of the central tenets of the representation of the Holocaust for the generation that witnessed the Shoah at first hand—yet Reich’s *My Holocaust* is populated with false characters, and the question of authenticity is problematized. Even the real Holocaust survivor Maurice Messer inflates his personal history and makes up stories about his participation in the partisan resistance movement against the Nazis, though a narrow circle of his colleagues is aware of his fabricated past. Nevertheless, they remain silent about his lies because they themselves have spread fake stories about their own experience of the Shoah. Their silence also stems from the fear that the revelation of falsified truth might be misused by Holocaust deniers. Reich characterizes Maurice as a “pompous old liar”, a “self-promoter at the expense of the dead”, a “Holocaust hustler” and a “Shoah shyster” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 257)—and through this fraudulent character she offers a critique of the distortion of history for personal gain. She rejects people who build their reputation on manipulation, abusing the legacy of the genocide.

The author’s unfavorable picture of inauthenticity is even stronger in her presentation of the characters representing the second and third generation. Maurice’s son Norman and his deputy Monty Pincus, for whom the Holocaust is “borrowed suffering” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 75), are portrayed as people who misuse their undeserved reputation. Their response to the trauma of their parents is disingenuous, verging on narcissism. The negative image of the post-Holocaust generation is reinforced by the portrayals of many other characters. One of them is Marano, the daughter of a survivor, who has become a drug addict. However, she may have been a victim of failed parenting—similarly to Norman’s daughter Nechama, an apostate who converted to Catholicism and found a retreat in a Carmelite convent right outside the Auschwitz camp under her new name Sister Consolatia of the Cross, a decision which the Messers regard as a desecration of their ancestors’ memory.

Through one of her characters, Tova Reich conveys a certain distance from the very concept of the “second generation” and trauma theories (including the phenomenon of PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder), hence subverting academic discourse in the field of psychology, psychiatry and literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> She rejects the glorification of the status of survivors and the abuse of the cult of their descendants; this stance corresponds with her attempt to cast away the aureole of their sacredness. Whereas Norman reinforces this cult, believing that the children of survivors are “more human than other people because of what [their] parents went through” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 117), his wife Arlene takes a more reserved attitude to this adoration. Perhaps she is too implacable in her judgement of survivors, who, in her eyes, “get turned into sacred, saintly survivors with unutterable knowledge”, and of “the second generation, born and reared in Brooklyn or somewhere, far, far from the gas chambers and crematoria [which] gets crowned as honorary survivors”. For her, the second generation is only “a made-up category, an indulgence for a bunch of whiners and self-pitiers” (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 10).

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<sup>5</sup> A similar approach can be found in Cynthia Ozick’s novella *Rosa*, in which the protagonist expresses her distrust of the scientific research of Holocaust survivors by psychiatrists building their academic career in this field.

A sense of inauthenticity accompanies not only the novel's characters, but also its settings. This applies particularly to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, as can be seen not only in the author's unflattering description of this institution, but also in the passages depicting Auschwitz as an untrustworthy place, characterized by "Shoah business".<sup>6</sup> In Reich's presentation, the camp museum is a site from which the original purpose of commemoration has disappeared, as illustrated not only by its commercialization, but also by the attempts to reevaluate its history (e.g., its Christianization).

Another target of Reich's criticism in connection with inauthenticity is Holocaust-centered Judaism and Jewishness, an approach which views the Holocaust as the sole defining attribute of Jewish identity, elevating it above the Jewish faith itself. The behavior of Reich's characters confirms Novick's assertion that the Holocaust became "the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century" (Novick 1999, p. 7). There is an episode in the novel which depicts the aforementioned conflict between Maurice and an Israeli teacher, in which Maurice complains about the inappropriate behavior of the teacher's teenage students in the Auschwitz museum. The Israeli teacher rejects Messer's complaint and turns it into a critique of American Jews who build their Jewish identity solely on the Holocaust: "Maybe you need Holocaust in the Diaspora, in America, but as far as I am concerned, we Israelis have no trouble maintaining our Jewish identity without it, thank you very much" (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 62). His words reveal his refusal to share a false game of suffering with Americans. The author's satirical view of the Holocaust as a core element of religion is personified by Bunny, who suggests making a passage from Wilkomirski's *Fragments* a part of a Jewish ritual feast—the Passover Seder. Another of the novel's numerous characters, Marano, in his dialog with Norman, claims that his father "has shifted denominations—from Orthodox Judaism to Holocaust Judaism, which has emerged as the main branch of Judaism nowadays in any case" (Reich [2007] 2008, p. 115).

## 6. Too Dark a Picture?

*My Holocaust* is Reich's response to the abuse of Holocaust commemoration, to what Norman G. Finkelstein (2000) has termed the Holocaust industry, exploiting the memory of Jewish suffering for political and financial gain.<sup>7</sup> However, the novel also implicitly reacts to the embrace of the Shoah by new forms of its representation, including genres traditionally labeled as a part of popular culture. As has already been suggested, some parts of the novel contain elements of farce and parody; furthermore, Reich tends to use caricature in the presentation of her characters. Some critics have been upset by Reich's style and her allegedly one-sided criticism. They have complained that Reich's post-Holocaust world is too dark, devoid of a positive view. As Reich's novel broke taboos and crossed the thresholds of political correctness, it could have been expected that it would have sparked considerable controversy and received a very mixed reception.

In his negative review, David Margolick characterized the novel as "wickedly clever and shocking, tasteless and tedious, infuriating and maybe even marginally constructive". He wondered how Reich "could write something so rancid and so primitive", and he concluded his review with the statement that "'My Holocaust' is far more likely to infuriate or distract than to cleanse" (Margolick 2007). For him, the novel is a desecration of Holocaust memory. Gabriel Sanders in *Forward* gave a more positive review, writing of a "deliciously wicked satirical novel", albeit one which does not offer an alternative to the serious problem of the commemoration of the Holocaust (Sanders 2007). In her defense of Tova Reich's novel in *The Jewish Week*, the outstanding novelist Cynthia Ozick described *My Holocaust*

<sup>6</sup> Tim Cole notes that "'Shoah business' is big business" (Cole [1999] 2000, p. 1). According to him, at the end of the twentieth century, the Holocaust was bought and sold; as examples, he cites the installation of many memorial projects through the United States, the establishment of Holocaust Studies as a field of academic research, and also the profit made by Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List*.

<sup>7</sup> This topic is addressed in Norman Finkelstein (Finkelstein 2000)'s book *Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, published in 2000.



as a “remarkable satiric novel, brilliantly conceived in wit and savage absurdity” (Ozick 2007). Her judgement of the novel was not surprising, because in “Praise for *My Holocaust*”, a text which introduces the novel, Ozick writes: “*My Holocaust* is a novel before which one might to fall on one’s knees . . . [It is] a ferocious work of satiric genius. I believe it to be one of the most penetrating social and political novels of the early twenty-first century, next to which the last century’s *Animal Farm* is a mere bleat” (Ozick 2008). Writing in the *Washington Post*, the second-generation writer Melvin Jules Bukiet—the author of the novel *After* (Bukiet 1996), the short-story cycle *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood* (Bukiet 1991) and the editor of the anthology of Holocaust writing *Nothing Makes You Free* (Bukiet 2002)—rejected the accusation that Reich had trivialized the Holocaust, arguing that “Reich is not trivializing. Precisely the opposite; she is writing about trivializing” (Bukiet 2007). As the second section of this article demonstrates, I agree with Bukiet’s opinion.

Apart from criticizing the alleged desecration of the memory of the Holocaust in Reich’s novel, critics’ negative reviews have also focused on the fact that the reader cannot identify with any of the characters because they all possess problematic personality traits. It was again Cynthia Ozick who stood up for Reich, reminding the reviewers that “Satire will not give you the ‘warm, sympathetic character’ . . . It will give you what Swift supplies: the debased humanity of his Yahoos, sparing no one” (Ozick 2007). Reich’s satire is genuinely cutting; nothing related to Holocaust commemoration is spared her criticism. As a matter of fact, the scope of her satire is much broader than has been discussed in this paper. She casts her satirical eye over subjects ranging from political issues concerning Israel and Palestine to the excessive proliferation of Holocaust museums and memorials in the USA, which brings us back to the question of their authenticity and credibility. Overall, it can be argued that Reich’s view of “her Holocaust” is too dark, and yet it is nevertheless justified within the chosen genre.

## 7. Conclusions

Although the bitingly satirical tone of Tova Reich’s novel *My Holocaust* may provoke and upset many a reader, it has doubtlessly enriched the body of American Holocaust literature. Thematically, the author’s satire targets the culture of Holocaust memory exploitation and the abuse of the commemoration of this historical tragedy, which she presents as a false exploitation of the legacy of the mass murder of European Jewry, carried out for political and financial purposes. Reich mocks the commodification of the Holocaust—in other words, the Holocaust commemoration industry. In comparison with other American Holocaust novels, she devotes more space to this topic, portraying a number of characters who make money from the Shoah and misuse it for purposes of self-aggrandizement. What can be seen as innovative in the context of Holocaust fiction is Reich’s topicalization of rival claims to Holocaust victim status and the manipulation of suffering, stemming from the cult of victimhood. In doing so, she highlights the inauthenticity of those who have appropriated the Holocaust, representing the agendas of various social groups.<sup>8</sup> They are pictured as untruthfully manipulating the memory of the Jewish tragedy for their personal gain; their contest for victimhood is reflected in the conflict between particularists and universalists. In connection with inauthenticity, Reich also debunks the Holocaust-centered approach to Jewish identity and religion.

The glorification of Holocaust commemoration is alien to Reich, and her depiction of Holocaust institutions (as well as her portrayal of Holocaust survivors, and in particular their children) is unflattering. They are depicted as corrupted and distorting the legacy of the tragic historical events. This aspect of the novel is controversial, as some critics have interpreted it as a desecration of Holocaust memory. However, it can be argued that Reich satirizes the trivialization of the Shoah—a phenomenon which has numerous manifestations in the novel, ranging from the pretentious falseness of the

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<sup>8</sup> Certain analogies with Reich’s novel can be found in Shalom Auslander’s novel *Hope. A Tragedy* (Auslander 2012) in its satirical treatment of the abuse of Holocaust memory, represented by the unjustified appropriation of the Holocaust that results in an obsession with it. Similarly to Reich, Auslander also addresses the topic of false victimhood.

characters to the application of the word “Holocaust” to events that are unrelated to the Shoah. Reich’s satirical—and at times even farcical or grotesque—mode of writing should not be interpreted as an unethical denigration of the memory of the Holocaust (though this is not to say that the novel is devoid of certain shortcomings; for example, it contains too many characters and the author’s criticism cuts somewhat too wide a swath). However, Reich’s *My Holocaust* can be understood as her response to the trivialization of this historical trauma in popular culture and of its commodification in Shoah business. Simultaneously, the novel attests to recent changes in the literary representation of this dark past in Jewish history. It can be said that by its comic treatment of victimhood, including a false form of competitive victimhood, Reich’s novel has stepped well outside the common frame of Holocaust fiction produced in America.

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