

EVERYTHING IS NOT ILLUMINATED: THE POST-HOLOCAUST REINVENTION OF THE JEWISH IDENTITY

JEWES HAVE SIX SENSES

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing ... memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like? (Foer, ch. 18)

Memory took the place of terror. In their efforts to remember what it was they were trying so hard to remember, they could finally think over the fear of war. (Foer, ch. 24)

It seems if though it has almost become an unwritten rule that every Jewish author should at least once in their career dedicate a work to the ever relevant and inexhaustible subject of the Holocaust. The young American writer Jonathan Safran Foer also proves to be no exception in that regard. Born in Washington D.C. as a second generation descendant of the Ukrainian Holocaust survivors, Foer appears to have drawn a great deal of inspiration from his own personal background. The novel in question – “Everything is Illuminated” often times transcends the boundaries of pure fiction and not merely dabs, but freely ventures into the world of real life people and events alike. As mentioned earlier, Foer's work is highly autobiographical and bears a striking similarity to the author's own quest of rediscovering parts of his heritage that have long been buried beneath the ashes of burned shtetls and forcefully erased from the minds of the great few who lived to tell the tale of those who perished in Europe's darkest hour. In a labored attempt to recover that of his heritage what might have not succumbed to the sands of time, Jonathan Safran Foer made a trip to Ukraine, the land of his grandfather, and took it upon himself to find the woman who, many years ago, saved him from certain death by Nazi hand.

Much like his creator and namesake, the protagonist of the novel, a young American Jew driven by the urge to lift the veil of mystery from his own past and shed more light on the family history, embarks on a journey to find Augustine – the woman who saved his grandfather’s life during the destruction of a small town of Trachimbrod. This seems to be the point at which fact and fiction start to visibly deviate from one another, for there has never been an Augustine nor has there been a shtetl known by the name of Trachimbrod (it is a fictional shtetl modelled after a village known as Trochenbrod). Armed with nothing but determination, a story of his grandfather’s great rescue that could in no way be backed up by any firm evidence, and a sole photograph of an unknown woman dubbed Augustine by the inscription on the back, Jonathan travels to Ukraine in hopes of discovering the true story that the photograph hides. In order to do so, the protagonist manages to acquire help from “Heritage Tours”, an Odessan company specialized in providing assistance to the Jews eager to learn about their families lives during and before the Holocaust, where he meets a Ukraine-born translator named Alex Perchov whose English is not quite first-rate since he is not so ‘premium’ with it, his not-actually-blind grandfather, and his ‘seeing eye bitch’ Sammy Davis Junior, Junior (named after the African-American musician, and unintentionally – a Jew). And so the real journey begins.

Even though the author’s portrayal of Jonathan’s experience might at first seem too lighthearted and even rather unfitting for the subject matter, just a quick peek under the surface of broken, not-so-premium English, deranged dogs and humorous misunderstandings reveals a much darker and beyond doubt tragic foundation upon which the novel was truly built.

Throughout the novel the reader is gradually introduced to the other face of this Eastern-European country that seems nothing like Ukraine of today. They are introduced to a world of strangely mesmerizing and even surreal beauty reminiscent of that found in folk fairytales. At times it might even resemble picturesque Yiddishkeit¹ scenes portraying joyous fiddlers and an occasional peyos-framed² face of Chagall’s paintings. It can, without a doubt, be argued that the world of the novel is neither the world that is nor the world that ever was. It is an imagined history of the Jewish people that never existed save for the stories passed on through generations (with each new generation adding or removing details as they may see fitting)³.

However fictional as it may at first seem, the world of the novel is also in many ways designed to represent a reflection of our very own. The time when it was only fitting to “dream of the end of the world” (Foer, ch. 25) has long since passed and the Messiah never came to save the children murdered by their own mothers to spare them the suffering. As it has always been, people survived and carried on to create new lives devoid of their painful past.

Almost nothing was left that could tell the true story of the survivors and victims alike. Houses were destroyed, synagogues burned, possessions stolen and the story often remained too painful to ever be told. At times, one could even think that no Jews ever did exist. Everything comes at a price, and in order for the man to live, the Jew that he once was had to die. It seems as though pre-Holocaust Jews simply vanished and in their place came the Jews of Western Europe who, as Jonathan Sacks once phrased it, decided in favor of Judaism as religion-without-peoplehood, and those of Eastern Europe who in turn decided in favor of Jewry as peoplehood-without-religion.

1 The Jewish way of living most often associated with food, humor, the way of living and klezmer music of the Ashkenazi Jews.

2 Sidelocks worn by Orthodox Jewish men.

3 It is stated in the novel that even Alex has at certain points modified the hero’s story.

In order to support the statement above it is important to note that many aspects of the novel seem to focus on forming two separate parts of the same whole. Firstly, the novel consists of two completely separate narratives, one of which is realistic, modern and humorous, and the other that is more historical, surreal and even tragic. Secondly, it is not only the narrative that is split. Even the characters themselves at times exhibit various degrees of separation (e.g. Hanna and Chana who are twins and the Kolker whose head literally split in half causing him to become two completely separate personalities). It is possible to say that the recurrent motifs of various people and objects being split in one manner or another is in fact meant to represent nothing other than the duality of one's identity (the Jew that exists now versus the Jew that once was) that the post-Holocaust Jews might experience.

In today's time it appears as if though Jews and the Holocaust are nothing more than just two parts of the same whole intertwined together so intricately that the former may not exist without the existence of the latter. The issues of the Holocaust and the identity became so inseparable that even the song of hope and martyrdom sung at Bergen-Belsen became the national anthem of the Jewish state. It could easily be argued that no aspect of Jewish life is anymore contemplated and considered without the looming presence of the horrors of the Holocaust.

The Jews born during or after are, of course, referred to as either survivors or the descendants of the survivors. In any case, it seems almost as though the purpose of the Jewish people has been reduced to mere martyrdom. The modern Jew has become perceived as nothing but a martyr of the past he has never experienced. The Holocaust has become the central, most important component of this newly found identity and a key fragment of one's very existence. If it weren't for the events of the Second World War it is possible that there still would not be a country for the Jewish people. The aspect that came to define the future of an entire nation turned out to be an event caused by the outside circumstances that, without its presence, renders thousands of years of strife to maintain one's tradition absolutely meaningless. The Jew can no longer simply exist; it appears as if the prerequisite needed to be recognized as a Jew is to exist and do so in spite of some harsh, inevitable circumstances. The Jew himself became an artifact, "a purposeless, useless, beautiful thing out of a past-tensed fact. It can never be art, and it can never be fact. Jews are the artifacts of Eden." (Foer, ch. 18)

Thousands of lifetimes seem to have been neglected in favor of this new set of criteria of Jewishness that relies solely on who died before the Holocaust, who survived, and how many children they lived to have.

Even though one might argue that more light is shed on the issue of Jewishness than it ever before, the statement can also easily be countered by proposing that everything is still very far from illuminated since it is never considered independently in itself.

"The strange contemporary blindness to Jewish history was born in a specific rebellion against Jewish history" a history that could be written in terms of wanderings and expulsions, inquisitions and pogroms, martyrdoms and exclusions, the powerlessness and homelessness of "the wandering Jew." It is for this reason that we cannot understand where we are unless we first understand how we came to be here. (Sacks 1)

The Holocaust cast a heavy shadow on the world and no action will ever be able to relieve the impact it left and there surely are things that have either changed or have been lost forever, for without it having been so, one might not have been able to simply carry on. One era and its people are slowly

being forgotten in favor of another, based on a tragedy never to be reconciled with, in hopes of thusly creating a new and brighter future. However, it is always important to remember that the past does not only exist in order for us to be able to forever dwell on it. We also exist for it. We are here neither to dwell nor forget, but to uncover, respect and preserve the past, and in return it will grant us the ability to learn, accept and move on. There will forever remain

(...) many experiences, feelings, and small accumulations of wisdom, about which none of us will ever know. This Yankel begot Trachimkolker. Trachimkolker begot Safranbrod. Safranbrod begot Trachimyankel. Trachimyankel begot Kolkerbrod. And Kolkerbrod begot Safran. For so it is written: AND IF WE ARE TO STRIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, MUSTN'T WE BE FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH OUR PAST? (Foer, ch. 18)

Works Consulted

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