

The Holocaust World of Yechiel Fajner.

By Dvir Abramovich

The near destruction of European Jewry by Nazism is still at the forefront of scholarly pursuit and has produced a remarkably diverse canon.¹ Yet, despite the critical spotlight cast about the Holocaust and its subsequent artistic representation, the powerful literary forays of Yechiel Fajner (Denur), who spent two years in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz, and who is arguably one of the Holocaust's most significant chroniclers have been noticeably overlooked. Indeed, Omer Bartov has expressed dismay at the almost universal sidelining by critics of Denur's corpus and the author's relative obscurity outside Israel.² Leona Toker concurs with Bartov's assessment, noting that although Denur's books have been part of the curricula of the Israeli education system, and have been translated into many languages, "...academic criticism has not done well by him."³

Yechiel Denur was born Yechiel Fajner in Sosnovich, Poland on 16 May, 1909. For a while, his date of birth was erroneously given as 1917. His parents were Hassidic Jews, and he was one of three children. He studied at the renowned Talmudic Yeshiva in Lublin and later enrolled at Warsaw University. A gifted violin player, he began penning music and poetry in Yiddish at an early age, becoming well known within the Jewish community. His first collection of poems *Tsveiuntsvantsig: Lider* was published in Warsaw in 1931. It is noteworthy that after WWII, he burned copies of this book that he found in the Library of Congress in Washington and in his local library in Jerusalem. He claimed that this book "belonged to a world that no longer existed."⁴ He was captured by the Gestapo in 1943 and transferred to Auschwitz, where he spent the next two years until rescued by Soviet troops in February 1945 from a death march. His sister was earlier

¹ See: Saul Friedlander. (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992; Geoffrey H. Hartman. (ed.) *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994, David Hirsch. *The Destruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz*. Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1991; Dominic LaCapra. *Representing the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994; Berel Lang. *Act And Idea In The Nazi Genocide*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990; Lawrence Langer. *The Holocaust and the literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

² Omer Bartov. *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press: p. 189.

³ Leon Toker. "Truth and testimony," *Haaretz*. March 26, 2003.

⁴ Noah Klinger. "Haish Mi-kokav Haefer, " *Yediot Ahronot*. July 23, 2001.

raped and murdered by the Nazis, along with his entire family and wife. He wandered throughout Europe following his liberation. Fortunately, he was hospitalised in a British army camp in Terra-Viso, Italy, by members of the Jewish Brigade, fighting alongside the allies. Once recovered, and after completing his first novel over a two and a half week period, he clandestinely entered Palestine. In 1947, he married Nina Asherman, who became his trusted translator. They had two children, Daniella, who he named after his twin sister, and Lior. He died of cancer in 2001, aged 92. He kept writing until his last days. According to his son, Denur asked that his death not be announced to the public. He left a list of people who were to be told.⁵

Denur's novels can be accurately described as profound fictionalised chronicles of hell, as stories related by a man who was able to transmit the shattering truth without once lessening its true dimensions.⁶ Publishing under the pen name K.Zetnik 135633, Denur took the moniker from the German abbreviation KZ (Konzentrationslager) for concentration camp inmate, stating, "I must carry this name as long as the world will not awaken after the crucifying of the nation to erase this evil, as humanity has risen after the crucifixion of one man"⁷ He also observed, "It does not matter that I, Yechiel Denur, pass away. The most significant fact is that K. Zetnik will stay alive".⁸ In his book *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* (1960) (Translated as *Star Eternal* 1967), the main protagonist vows that with "Your ashes which I embrace with my arms, I swear to be your voice...I will not stop to tell about you until my last breath."⁹

To be sure, this pseudonym further reinforced the anonymity and seclusion the author chose to embrace for many years until his death in 2001, while at the same time ironically pointing up the obliteration of identity and individuality the Nazis sought to achieve.¹⁰ It is worthy of note that Denur wrote his first five books cloistered in an isolated cabin away from family and friends.¹¹ Besides the pseudonym, the fact that the

⁵ Tom Segev. "Met hasofer Yechiel Denur, aval K.Tzetnik yichye la-netzach," Haaretz. 18 July, 2001.

⁶ See: Tom Segev. The code of Ka. Tzetnik," *Koteret Rashit*. 27, May 1987: -. 11. See also Yechiel Szeintuch. "Discerning key terms in the Writings of K.Zetnik" *Hulyot: Studies in Yiddish Literature and its links with Hebrew literature*. Vol 5, (1999): 275-290.

⁷ <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-068-01.html>

⁸ Shmuel Shnitzer. "The Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem," *Maariv*. June 8, 1961.

⁹ K. Zetnik. *Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad 1989: 78.

¹⁰ Jeremy D Popkin. "Katzetnik 135633: The Survivor as Pseudonym," *New Literary History*. 33.2, 2002.

¹¹ K.Zetnik. *Haimut*. Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1987.

author adopted the name 'Denur', which in Aramaic means 'of 'fire' after settling in Palestine, clearly attests to the motif of transformation through the inferno that constituted a central pillar in his oeuvre.

In 1961, he was summoned, along with hundreds of other survivors, by state prosecutor Gideon Hausner to give evidence at the Eichmann trial. It was not surprising that Denur's submergence within the reality of the Holocaust was so intense, so unforgettable, that upon seeing the face of the architect of the final solution in the glass booth, he fainted, overwhelmed by the blackening, nightmarish images of what he lived through. Before collapsing, this is how Denur described Auschwitz on the witness stand:

The time there is not a concept as it is here in our planet. Every fraction of a second passed there was at a different rate of time. And the inhabitants of that planet had no names. They had no parents, and they had no children. They were not clothed as we are clothed here. They were not born there and they did not conceive there. They breathed and lived according to different laws of nature. They did not live according to the laws of this world of ours, and they did not die...¹²

The strong emphasis on authenticity and naturalism is evinced and underlined by Denur's own commentary on his role: "It was not a pen name. I do not regard myself as a writer and a composer of literary material. This is a chronicle of the planet of Auschwitz."¹³ In essence, the thematic quilt of his sextet of novels titled *Salamnder: A Chronicle of a Jewish Family in the Twentieth Century* shimmers with a rasping objectivity that primarily dwells on the complete brutality and physical torture perpetrated upon the prisoners, the sexual exploitation and the total dehumanisation that was carved into the charred soul of the Jews. Accordingly, in *Salamandra* (1946) (translated as *Sunrise over Hell* (1977) *Qaru Lo Piepel* (1961) (Translated as *Atrocity* (1961) *Bet Habubot* (Translated as *House of Dolls* (1955) *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* (1960) (Translated as *Star Eternal* 1967), amongst others, the absurd and insane universe of the *Shoah* is spotlighted through the figure of Harry Preselshnik, who as the author's alter ego, witnesses and reports on the ugliness and misery embodied in the

¹² <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-068-01.html>

¹³ <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-068-01.html>

surreal and at times, supernatural, reality of Auschwitz. Concomitantly, the prose is often deliriously frenzied, slipping into over the top stylised kitsch and sadism.¹⁴

Unable to exorcise the demons of the past, the former inmate, numbed and tormented by post-traumatic syndrome, was haunted and besieged by the burden of memory that he considered all his pre-war output and life as non-existent. As a matter of fact, he retrieved several of his early works from the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and the Hebrew University Library and subsequently tore them to shreds.¹⁵ It has been noted that whilst in the nascent days of Israeli statehood, the author's books were treated as pornography by its teenage readers who were titillated by the remarkably explicit portrayals of sexual abuse, his corpus is now studied in Israeli high-schools and by IDF soldiers.¹⁶ It is of particular salience that the inclusion of his writing in the educational syllabus, flowed from the writer's particular wish that his royalties be directed to funding the teaching of the Holocaust, reflecting his deep concern that memory of the event be preserved. Incredulously, despite the hobbling, unyielding evil he saw, Denur's vision of life was not entirely that of a broken man. Rather, in his later novels, such as *Phoenix over the Galilee* (1966) for instance, he conveyed the message of universal peace and encouraged common dialogue and understanding between the warring Jews and Arabs.

After escaping from the death marches in 1945, K. Tzetnik, then known as Yechiel Fajner, was taken to a hospital in Italy to recover. Compelled to record the unspeakable brutalities of his tormentors and fearing he may not live for long, he feverishly wrote *Salamandra* over two and a half weeks.¹⁷ Close to the bone and swathed in scenes of devastating violence, the work is painful to read. Yet, in rendering the seemingly unreal, it is a blow to the solar plexus of indifference, for it leads one to ponder the palpable, unforgettable sorrow of the victims and prevents a turning away from the distressing and confronting material. It's noteworthy that the horrendous images presented in the book, one of the first published on the subject-matter, led one Israeli soldier, writing to his girlfriend from the front in 1947, to explain that after reading K.

¹⁴ Bartov, p. 188.

¹⁵ Segev, *The Seventh Million*. P. 4.

¹⁶ Bartov, 189.

¹⁷ Segev, *The Seventh Million*. P. 4.

Tzetnik he has decided to train as hard as he could and become strong so as to ensure that such a thing as the Holocaust never happens again. And commenting on the novel's lingering effect, Gershon Shoffman, one of Israel's finest wordsmiths, similarly opined: "The book overpowers all others not only in its insights and vision, but also in the naked facts...the author forces on you the feeling of death with a mighty hand, so after reading you feel as if you were also there, really there, and now you are one of the miraculous survivors."¹⁸

At the outset, it is important to explicate the meaning of the original title, as it underpins the thematic matrix upon which most of the author's concerns can be mapped out. According to Hebrew lore, the *Salamandra* is a phantasmagorical animal that emerges from a fire that was burning in one place for seven years.¹⁹ In essence, it denotes a being that has been born of fire and out of destruction, whose threads to the past have been bluntly severed and whose entire being has been crafted out of the flames (it is interesting to observe that in Israel K. Tzetnik changed his family name to Denur, meaning "of the fire").²⁰ During therapy, K.Zetnik revealed to his doctor that on the way to the crematoria he hid in a barrel of coal, and that it was out of that barrel that he was born, "as a child coming out of the womb of his mother, from the darkness to the light of the world."²¹

More broadly, it is this central trope that frames the dramatic backbone of the author's sextet of novels. Like the *Salamandra*, some of the heroes who populate K. Tzetnik's literary landscape have survived the total mayhem of camp life but have come through spiritually and physically demolished, re-created from the maelstrom of anarchy into another person. On another level, it has been suggested that since the cycle of six novels is entitled *Salamander*, the ur-message knotted throughout is that without those individual *Salamanders*, those brave souls who preserved and endured the mind numbing assault, the truth would not have been transmitted to future generations.²²

¹⁸ Gershon Shoffman. *The complete writings of G. Shoffman*. V (4) Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1962.

¹⁹ Sheintuch, 126.

²⁰ Yechiel Szeintuch. *K.Zetnik 135633: A Series of Dialogues with Yechiel De-Nur*. Jerusalem: Beit Lochamei Hagetaot/Dov Sadan Institute.

²¹ K. Zetnik. *Hatzofen*. Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1987: 73.

²² Moredechai Ovadyahu. "The other planet of K.Tzetnik," in *The Storm and the Silence: Characters in our new literature*. Tel Aviv: Alef, 1976.

Cut from a cloth splashed in blood, the nucleus narrative of *Salamandra* takes place in the Ghetto and Auschwitz and tells the story of Harry Preselshnik, the author's alter ego (this fact is undisputed- in the book, Harry is given the same inmate number that the author adopted for his pseudonym, 135633).

The time is just before the war. The place is Poland. Watching with dismay the surfacing of rampant anti-Semitism, the talented and brilliant musician senses the looming danger about to engulf Polish Jewry. For instance, walking home with his fiancée Sonia, he notices a neon sign on the main street that declaims that, "whoever buys from a Jew is a traitor."²³ Earlier, he hears the account of an esteemed Professor of maths, who is attacked by a gang of students that beats him and paints on his coat, "Leperous Jew."²⁴ In response, Harry decides to immigrate to Palestine, where his future father in law, Schmidt, has settled. However, when the elderly industrialist hears of Harry's plans, he informs him through a letter, that better he drown his daughter in the sea than bring her to the inhospitable land. Reluctantly, the Zionist Harry agrees.

Appositely, K. Tzetnik deftly shades in the prevailing mood among the Jewish community, using a gaggle of characters drawn from the arts and business, with each persona an archetypal representation of the various societal postures that existed at the time. We should not forget that since K. Tzetnik was armed with first hand knowledge, he was able to deftly proffer a historical portraiture interwoven with the personal tale of Sonia and Harry that is mesmerising in its eye for details and breadth of realism.

A few days later, the narrative surges headlong into the world of the irrational and the grotesque as the Germans invade Metropoli, rounding up Jews in the street, burning books and prayer shawls and throwing into the fire beards that have been torn off the men's faces. Before long, the Jewish councils are established followed by the establishment of the Ghetto. The author shows the wretched, imprisoned existence of slavery, humiliation and public executions in the Ghetto as well as the extreme starvation in the work camp to which Harry is transferred. Arriving at a labour camp in Germany Harry is struck by the thousands of bony men, head shaven and protruding jawbones greeting the newcomers with a plea for bread. In a telling moment, Harry tells himself

²³ K. Tzetnik. *Salamandra*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1946: p. 25.

²⁴ K. Tzetnik. *Salamandra*. p. 20.

that he is in another world. Later, the staggering, wrenching horror wrought by the Shoah is emblemised in a scene that involves Harry discovering the carcass of a friend next to the camp clinic. In the dead man's face, Harry sees the true image of God, and touching its head, he touches the head of the twentieth century. Such sentiments haunt Denur's pages, most notably the silence of heaven and the collapse of faith. The belief in the divine is ceaselessly shaken in view of the mountains of ritual prayer objects, the cutting of beards and forelocks and the liquidation of pious Jews. An inmate whose entire family has been transported to the killing centres looks up at the sky and asks, "And for this I glorified and sang your name on this earth?"²⁵ And when Harry picks up a body and carries it to the mound of corpses, he turns it upside down since, "The heavens are not worthy of seeing the image and character of this Musselman."²⁶ In other words, a God that has allowed a Jew to reach such severe emaciation and fate is not entitled to see the individual's face.

Ultimately, Harry is transported to Auschwitz without Sonia, where he is assigned the duty of removing the gold teeth from the mouths of the charred corpses. The arrival at Auschwitz signifies the end of the journey and of life, "The train enters the new planet. The doors slide and the masses fall out the freight cars to large yard." At one point, a prisoner asks if there is a life in Auschwitz, to which another responds, "Whoever wants to survive here, must kill another."²⁷

In addition to the daily savagery, there are also the *Musselman*, those emaciated, half dead prisoners, who are the touchstone, the reflexive marker for the unsettling dehumanisation of Auschwitz. Unable to eat or feel hunger, the *Musselman* eject any food that they ingest because of their ravaged intestine and are immediately dispatched to the gas chambers once identified by the camp doctor. Unsurprisingly, at one point Harry is reduced to the state of the *Musselman*, joining the row of the totally skeletonised group marching towards to the crematorium. Yet he is able to draw on his last nugget of internal strength and attempt escape. And although captured, the S.S men, impressed by his daring act, decide to spare him immediate eradication and send him back to work.

²⁵ K. Tzetnik. *Salamandra*. p. 122.

²⁶ K. Tzetnik. *Salamandra*. p. 157.

²⁷ K. Tzetnik. *Salamandra*. P. 142.

The book lays particular emphasis on the notion of love, glaringly absent among the chimneys of Auschwitz, through the Harry and Sonia dyad. Against incredible odds, the couple manages to remain devoted to each other, in spite of the fact they are separated and can only communicate through a fragmented exchange of letters. It is fairly evident that Sonia carries a deep sense of guilt for listening to her father and not leaving for Israel and it is this feeling that guides her actions. To be sure, she sees herself responsible for the fate that befalls Harry. As the story develops, Sonia saves Harry from a certain death by storming into a government office demanding his release out of a labour camp and Harry refuses a friend's offer to smuggle him out of the country, opting instead to remain with Sonia.

Significantly, in complete opposition to the stereotypically erroneous image of the Diaspora Jew held by many Israelis in the 50s, the author repeatedly overscores Sonia's heroism, painting her as the exemplar of the proud Jew, suffused with pride and dignity, constantly on the guard for her loved ones and unwilling to bend to the Nazi rule. In fact, she is the one who fights in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and later joins the partisans. Indeed, throughout the book, her fierce determination to fight rather than surrender is on display front and centre. For instance, she tells Rabbi Fromkin who opposes armed resistance, that while he has chosen for himself and disciples a shameful death, she and her comrades are sanctifying the name of Israel and that they are the ones acting in accordance with the Law of Israel and the name of God. Lamentably, Sonia is ultimately trapped by a Gestapo operative after boarding a train destined for Auschwitz that she believes is headed for Switzerland. Thrust into the belly of the beast Sonia quickly becomes a *Musselman* and is discovered by Harry who recognises his wife's corpse by the mole on her cheek. Given her construction as a woman of valour, and the fact that throughout the tale she is adumbrated as a woman of action, who is able to elude the Nazis time and again, and who defies her inevitable fate with all the cunning she can muster, Sonia's death is all the more shocking because of the state she is found in and the fact that it is the gentle, passive Harry who endures. Above all, Harry survives the annihilating smokestacks so he can testify to the truth and tell of the calamity to those who were not there. It is only then that we can truly and tangibly incubate the dead in our memory and in our soul.

In his book *The Seventh Million* Tom Segev writes: “I was a boy when I first read *Qaru Lo Piepel* (the original Hebrew title of *Atrocity*). I have never read anything about the Holocaust that so disturbed me.”²⁸ More striking is Haim Shorer’s 1961 plea to Gideon Hausner, the state prosecutor in the Eichmann Trial:

Leave aside your concluding speech and take K. Tzetnik’s latest book *Piepel* and read it out loud to the court and its listeners and don’t stop...Read in a loud voice and we will listen and cry for two-three days and nights. All of us, all of Israel, we will cry and wail without end; perhaps we could wipe away with the sea of tears the great horror, whose depth we yet not know. We will cry until we faint with our dear K. Tzetnik, with his pure and holy book.²⁹

Likewise, the book’s English version contained on its jacket a quote from a reviewer, who noted that, “The author regards himself as the keeper of a chronicle. Indeed, the essential importance of the book is its documentary side second to which is its literary rendering. It is the very documentation which I see as a major literary achievement.”³⁰

A layered mosaic of unimaginable, inconceivably traumatic vignettes, the main subject of *Qaru Lo Piepel* is the sexual exploitation of children in the camps. The nub of the narrative follows Moni, the seven-year boy who is forced to become a child prostitute, a *Piepel*, to serve the needs of the older guards and section orderlies. First appearing in *The House of Dolls*, the naïf, tender and refined child, modelled after the authors’ own brother, arrives at Auschwitz and is immediately noticed by Block ruler Franzel because of his tempting, gentle eyes. Traversing familiar territory, K. Tzetnik manages to brilliantly transcribe, from the perspective of a youthful hero, the horrifying crimes committed against children in the Holocaust and to embed the story’s fabric with illuminating insights about the torture and destruction of innocent lives.

At its epicentre, the book is a rites of passage tale, unfolding in an insane universe where cruelty and subjugation go hand in hand. Further, the story is also about the struggle of children to grasp the intolerable reality they are thrust into and to behave heroically in a corrupt, abnormal world. In many respects, *Atrocity*’s keynote theme is

²⁸ Tom Segev. *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and The Holocaust*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993: p. 5

²⁹ Haim Shorer. “To the prosecutor in the Eichamann Trial: about a terrible and holy book,” *Davar* June 1961: p. 21

³⁰ Quoted in Alan J. Yuter, *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: From Genocide to Rebirth* (New York and Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1983)

Moni's attempt to preserve his sanity and integrity even as he is ceaselessly preyed upon by the vicious, evil men of the block.³¹

Looming large among the pages of *Atrocity* are consuming images of the sadistic debasement of human life that chillingly flash throughout. In one disturbing passage, Fruchtenbaum, a Jew and scion to a Zionist family who was once a *Piepel* and now runs one of the blocks, hacks to death a fellow Jew for recognizing him and reminding him of his suppressed heritage. Repeatedly, K. Tzetnik hammers home the idea that perversity and murder were polymorphous in the Nazi phenomenon. Furthermore, he stresses that the camp inmates, with their abject existence, would do anything to survive, even if it involves violence against their brethren. Clearly, it underscores K. Tzetnik's core tenor—that Auschwitz was a planet separate from the rest of the world, a place where one must not be good, where one must reverse traditional morality and act with total callousness. The survival instinct looms large. In a terrifying catalogue of scenes a Nazi officer chokes a young boy to death after his rape; an old *Piepel* is seesawed from side to side with a cane laid across his neck; a cellblock master smothers one his captives by pushing his head into the latrine hole; an adolescent is punished with death for stealing jam for the Rabbi who yearns for the sweet taste.

In common with K. Tzetnik's other texts, the *Mussulmen* once again comprise a central part of the symbology of depravity and expunction of life. The *Mussulmen* relate to one of the operating themes in the author's works, namely that of re-creation, or miscreation, as Howard Needler puts it.³² In k. Tsetnik, we are presented with the deformed creation of man in the form of the *Mussulman*, the walking dead, whose very existence symbolises a reversal of the vision described in Genesis. Needler observes that, "Instead of being in the 'image of God', we have a creature from whom the image of man has been all but effaced."³³ The *Mussulman*, sardonically and grotesquely labelled by the author as "the flower of the twentieth century" are the result of Nazi transmogrification.

At one point, Moni, escaping the unprecedented savagery of Robert, seeks shelter among the *Mussulmen* and is hardly noticed by the men who have had any trace of life snuffed out by the debauchery of their enslavers. Notably, the *Mussulmen* are entrusted

³¹ Tzvika Dror. "K.Tzetnik's literary and documentary corpus," *Davar* April 20, 1990: p. 12

³² Howard Needler, *Red Fire Upon Black Fire: Hebrew in the Holocaust Novels of K. Tsetnik*. P. 241-242.

³³ Needler, p. 241.

with safeguarding the food rations for it is known that their desire to eat has dissipated and that they no longer possess any consciousness of their surrounding. Above all, the blank, hollowed out, spiritually emaciated corpses, slowly crawling towards their liberating death, personify the surreal and subhuman depths a person can be reduced to.

As to be expected, Moni's odyssey into the netherworld is graphically charted, emphasising his inability to shake off the 'fetters' of his Judaic past. Doubtless, Moni is acutely aware of the fate that awaits him if he allows those values to surface, as they are in direct opposition to the demands of Robert, the block chief. For instance, Moni refuses to eat, though he has access to all the food he craves and though he knows that these acts will surely lead to death for his tormentors like their sexual objects to be of supple and round flesh. Inevitably, the sensitive young protagonist, who longs for his parents, grows too thin to continue his function as a *Piepel* and is replaced by Lolek. Still, he cannot hate his substitute, because he believes that Lolek, just like him, yearns to see his mother who is interned at the women's camp. Indeed, despite the relentless suffering and pervasive anguish around him, Moni never loses his humanity. We reflect, for instance, that he embraces the Talmudic teachings of The Rabbi of Shilov, who through his Yom Kippur prayer and mere presence in the camp, is able to infuse Moni's wretched existence with a modicum of meaning and hope.

In the end, after stealing a turnip and receiving a ruthless beating for his 'sin', Moni finds release when he valiantly attempts to escape by lunging at the barbed wire. Significantly, his brave, life-affirming act elicits unexpected praise from Robert and Vatzek, a German Kapo, who recognise his courageous refusal to succumb to the impending death from starvation that awaits the others. Perhaps the deepest message of the book is that it is only in the world of Auschwitz, where all values had been so overtly inverted, where all moral prescriptions were eclipsed by ritualised monstrosity, where the usual distinctions between right and wrong vanished, that the death of a little boy is preferable to life.

Gershon Shoffman, one of Israel's pre-eminent authors once wrote that K. Tzetnik's *Beit Habubot* (*House of Dolls* 1953) is a holy book.³⁴ Certainly the most famous and widely read of his novels, *Beit Habubot* centres on a young Jewish girl,

³⁴ Gershon Shoffman. *The complete writings of G. Shoffman*. V (4) Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1962.

Daniella Prelesnik – in reality the writer’s own sister. Three days before the outbreak of the war, the fourteen year old is captured in Poland while on an end of a school year trip and transferred to a Nazi woman’s camp, the ironically named ‘Camp Labor Via Joy’, where she is forced to become a prostitute for the German soldiers. Formally, the plot is ‘based’ on the notebook kept by Daniella.

Told in flashback, the narrator is Harry, Daniella’s brother, who is assigned to the sick bay, though he had never graduated medical school and although there are no medicines, no beds, no instruments, and most importantly, no patients. Instead, he is charged with overseeing the burial of the piles of Jewish bodies, all the while struggling not to surrender to the impending debasement of life that turns those interned into *Mussulman* or shadow men. These are the deformed, crippled, near dead human skeleton, who are the embodiment of human misery and lost hope. Over the course of the novel, Harry loses all those who are close to him, including his friend Tedek, once a member of the Ghetto resistance who is now enamoured with Daniella.

As the girls enter the camp and are directed to their division, they are at first sterilised and then indicted into the abhorrent master-slave relationship of the ‘House of Dolls’ for which they are simply not prepared. The extreme sexual abuse and their treatment as mere objects in this brothel limpidly illustrates the familiar trope of K. Tzetnik’s series of novels – the Holocaust as the most horrifying, obscene and unique of modern situations.³⁵ We learn, for instance, that the ‘dolls’ must be in perfect physical condition for the visiting soldiers, en route to the Russian front or those coming from the transit terminus, who stop by to prey upon the weak and vulnerable Jewesses. In addition, the discovery of any venereal infection means immediate doom, for any damage results in transportation to the ovens. Worse, if the concentration camp guards or other ‘German warriors’ leave unsatisfied with their entertainment, they only need to convey their displeasure and report the number tattooed on the girl’s breast. In the event that three such complaints are recorded, death is instant. Over and over, the tale is intent on exceedingly reinforcing and reminding us that within the framework of the barracks, every act leads to the distortion and the elimination of life. To take but one example.

³⁵ Yosef Heftman. “The House of Dolls,” *Haboker* April 19, 1953: p. 6

When the new girls arrive, the veterans know that soon a selection will follow to replace those whose bodies have deteriorated. In effect, the newcomers are their executioners.

In a similar vein, we read that every girl must smile to show her appreciation of the pervasive cruelty meted out day and night, knowing that her life depends on seeming happy and content for the 'guests'. One could venture the observation that in portraying such events and situations, there exists the risk of triviality and objectionable eroticism, of seducing the reader to voyeuristically participate in the sexual victimisation presented, rather than focus on the horror perpetrated.

Still, it is equally clear that on a different reading, the text does gravitate to that other central theme hovering above – the strength of the women-victims to spiritually survive the gory dehumanisation of the Nazis in spite of the beatings and rape. In fact, there are various instances of the will to live and preserve one's sanity and dignity that can be found among the pages of the book. One is the tale of Tzevia, an orthodox girl from the seminary of *Beit Ya'acov* who purposefully and stubbornly refuses to acquiesce to her tormentors' advances, though she knows the result of such repudiation. And thus, inevitably, Tzevia is bludgeoned to her death, standing naked in the execution arena, defiant and strong, admirably victorious in keeping her chasteness and virtue whole. Another striking case in point is Daniella, who keeps her head up and who against the odds upholds her moral integrity. As the novel draws to a close, the heroine seeks to escape her dreaded existence by saunters towards the barbed wire fence. Not surprisingly, she is shot by an S.S sentry who knows he will be rewarded with three days leave for ending her bid for freedom. Following the murder, he bursts out singing, intoxicated with euphoria since he knows that tomorrow he's going to his family, to his only daughter whom he so misses.

Doubtless, the dark, violent barbarism of the German officers knows no bounds. A panoply of abominations abound. Elsewhere, the same sentry clobbers Tzevia's sister Hanna to death, in a methodical, gut wrenching display. To the pious woman's shouts of 'God all mighty, save me,' he responds with well-directed and vicious blows to her head, legs, arms and ankles, watching calmly as she writhes in pain, plunges her teeth into the ground and tears her hair out. Afterwards, he coolly rests to devour his sandwich. And then there are the medical experiments conducted by the German professor on the girls,

including artificial inseminations, tests on twins, coerced abortions and castrations or the raw cruelty of Elsa, the brothel overseer.

Significantly, Daniella's family photographs, the only means she has to recreate the safe childhood she once took pleasure in, to which she clings to, are destroyed upon her entering the camp, foregrounding the callousness of the Nazis and their desire to denude the prisoners of any emotional ties to their former life. Not surprisingly they succeed in obliterating every remnant of the past. Early on, it is revealed that old photographs fall lifeless to the floor of the cutting room where the young women work, ripping the seams of the garments taken from the victims in search of anything hidden. The scattered pictures, some of brides and grooms, some of babies in their cribs, are stepped on and swept by 'Rivka into the rubbish heap.

And while the narrative limns in graphic detail Daniella's, Harry's and the other inmates' ordeals and sexual exploitation, K. Tzetnik ensures that the teenager's memories of family love and tradition engraved deeply in her psyche, are not erased. To wit, as a counterpoint, the author undercuts his sequences of sheer Dantean hell with the quotidian innocence and loyalty that guied Daniella and her brother Moni's life before the war in the town of Kongressia. Among other things, this serves to further underscore the nauseating degradation they are subjected to and to emphasise the two realities, each as stridently polar as the other. Compositionally, K. Tzetnik employs the device of flashback to paint life in the ghetto as well as the mass deportations, eerily shading in the pitiful images and mood of the destitute and condemned residents, sent by the Judenrat councillors, who favour the rich over the poor in their selection of the daily quota. It is also abundantly evident that the rabid anti-Semitism not only emanates from the Nazis, but also from the Polish peasants and partisans. At one point, Daniella, fleeing from a carnage of her school friends in the Yablova market, pleads with a Polish farmer to take her in, but is told to get out. And in the same breath, she kisses the hands of the farmer's daughter, hoping she can convince her father to have mercy on the little Jewess begging for help, but to no avail.

Through the succession of vignettes padded with interior monologues, K. Tzetnik pulls the reader into Daniella's world, dramatising and compounding the sadism to which the protagonist must adapt, but ultimately cannot. Interestingly, the scenes of battery and

psychical defilements are inscribed in a non-judgmental, neutral manner, perhaps as a tacit acknowledgment that what is being chronicled is at the peak of the objective mode since the satanic acts speak volumes and do not require a braiding of the subjective.

In different ways, K. Tzetnik's *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* (1960) (Translated as *Star Eternal* 1971) is a remarkable, seminal achievement in the Holocaust canon. At once a disturbing and edifying work, it depicts in vivid, yet simple and direct detail, the unspeakable horrors of concentration camp existence, functioning as a summum of K. Tzetnik's thematic template. Above all, it describes the gruesome events of the 'final solution' in a pared down, staccato style and language that tangibly pierces the impenetrable thick wall erected by readers that often prevents any cognitive or emotional engagement. Put simply, it arouses and extracts a deep chill of empathy and shock from the spectator and in the process opens a window for the young generation so as to allow it to connect with the world over there.

Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh possesses a mimetic surface clarity, severely filleted, that is aided and abetted by the brevity of the basic Hebrew, pruned of metaphor and hyperbole. Laconic, trimmed and controlled, its effect is so natural that the bewildered reader is increasingly unaware how much detail is being described. For example, a scene that conveys the twisted reality that day begins at night in the death camp is typically compressed, "A march of naked bodies into the night. The silence of midnight in Auschwitz."³⁶ In a similar vein, when Harry attempts to verbalise his torment at Auschwitz he plainly remarks, "Human language came to an end."³⁷ Elsewhere, forcible labour is thus limned, "With every plunge of your hoe you bury the sun."³⁸ Admittedly, the conflation of razor sharp sentences with fragmented descriptions underscores the author's desire to reflect the crushed, disjointed reality that is outside any normative framework and does not fit into any logical, coherent mould. Likewise, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the message foisted upon the audience is that here is a perverted reality, stripped bare of the conventional constituents of time and space. Originally published in Hebrew under the title *The Clock*, it is small wonder that the central operating motif that informs the narrative is that of 'time' and more specifically

³⁶ K. Tzetnik. *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960: p. 34.

³⁷ K. Tzetnik. *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh*: p. 35

³⁸ K. Tzetnik. *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh*: p. 13

the parallel time frames of normal Europe, where people live a typical, ordinary life and 'Planet Auschwitz', where Jews suffer terror and inhumanity. In construction, the book is made up of a series of jarring, loosely coupled episodes, which the author terms as 'stages'. Each chapter is self contained, encasing within its midst a separate title and storyline, and pivots around disparate threads of camp living, leavened, for the most part, by a welter of jolts, gnomic words and twists.

Bookended by a prologue and an epilogue, *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* begins in the narrator's eerily quiet street, bathed in the searing heat of the sun and featuring a boulevard of display windows. The author adumbrates the tranquillity of the place, heightened by snippets of banality peppered throughout the opening pages, and then quickly dismantles it when the intensity of the date is revealed: September 9, 1939, the day when Hitler's army marched in Poland, marking the start of the Second World War. It is then, as one critic asserted, that humanity's cultural clock reverts to zero, when the sand hour suddenly trickles to a different, one is tempted to say, an otherworldly beat. Even more starkly, the city's electric clock is in synchronicity with the unfolding of events- its hands rest on 9 am. And thus, we have an application of a direct and realistic portraiture, devoted to the profound and sober chronicling of a specific place and time, setting down a visage of the 'other planet', to borrow from K. Tzetnik once more, in precise detail and lineament.

After the hero, Ferber, is taken to Auschwitz, the narrative lens zero in on this world with uncompromising eyes, capturing with perfectly modulated metrics the indigestible tableau, images of annihilation and the doing of evil that defies description. With a raw filmic gaze, the author, possessing such a strong grip on his material, leads the reader into the vertex of Auschwitz, into the black hole, condensing into a few passages the feeling of omnipresent death. As the narrative is written in the second person, the reader is addressed openly and is thus positioned to see the inmate's world and co-opted into participating in an experience from which, by reason of distance, he was explicitly excluded. In other words, the reader is interpellated to adopt and comply with mood, vulnerability and torment which the shaping of the plot seeks to present.

There are moments of uninhibited infernal magnitude. In one episode, we step into the 'showers', surrounded by the bony, living dead and stare into the sprinklers

above our head in anticipation for the stream of Zyklon B to spurt blue gas into our lungs. In another, we join the column of men the author names *Musselman*, the nearly dead skeletons, standing crowded among the block walls, trembling in fear of the camp commander who may arbitrarily sentence any one to death. And in yet another, the reader shudders as he joins the roll call of prisoners “Bones butting against bones” lined straight for selection to the crematorium, hoping against hope that they will be overlooked. If anything, the unflagging pace, the leaping from one visceral episode of agonizing torture to another, the repeated catalogue of atrocities presented in explicit specificity is all chokingly disturbing. One need only consider a sequence where a group launches at the ground to lick the remains of some spilled soup, ones’ teeth biting into the other, to understand the reduction of the human condition to its most basic level.

There are many other such incidents that dapple the book. A man is set to be beaten to death for attempting to obtain another plate of soup or because he urinated during a curfew and then is mercilessly killed; a row of musicians, made up of Europe’s most talented and gifted, accompanying those sentenced into the chambers, playing in thunderous tones so as to silence the wailing of those who cannot bear their fate; a Jew digs with his own hands a mass grave for his brethren about to be shot.

And still, in the midst of the machinery of death, a note of optimism for the future can be drawn from a striking theological conversation between Ferber and the Rabbi of Shilev, titled ‘The Last debate’. At one point, Ferber ponders the question of the Jewish people’s destiny, asking the Rabbi why God has deserted his children and delivered them to the hands of the beast. In response, the Rabbi states that out of the ruins and ashes of the night, the nation of Israel will rise in the Promised Land with its eternal star brightly shining. On the face of it, false hope. Yet, for our hero, a nourishing vision.

At the novel’s conclusion, when the main protagonist returns from Auschwitz to his hometown Metropoli, the same clock has not stood still but is still running, only this time it a changed world that he encounters. A compendium of the devastating effects of the camp is supplied in the text’s concluding lines. Here, Ferber pleads that one hair of his sister’s golden locks be returned, along with one of his father’s shoes, one wheel of his brother’s bicycle and one speck from his mother’s back.

Time and again, Denur's confronting novels, which were some of the first to tackle the descent into 'Planet Auschwitz', as he called it, present and bear witness to the years he and his fellow captives endured, singularly focused on the gleaming monstrosity of the German guards.³⁹ Gripped mercilessly by his concentrationary experience, Denur had said that his inability to unearth the right registers and words to document the past resulted in exhaustion and breakdown. For the most part, Denur's semi-autobiographical novels are graphically disturbing confessional pieces that allow the stunned reader an unmediated and acutely faithful glimpse into the eye of the storm, into the irrational nature of evil that shaped the author's life forever. Infused with a narratorial and stylistic obsession for outlining the violence, perversion and bestiality of the Nazi criminals writ large, fuelled by an abrasive reverence for an exact transcription of the abominable, the painful episodes are informed by the despair attendant to daily life in the camps. Also echoed throughout the books are the raging insanity of evil and the fevered attempt to maintain, among the fire of the ovens, one's dimming humanity and compassion.⁴⁰ Remarkably, despite the geysers of cruelty and pain that he witnessed, the hard lesson that Denur carried with him from Auschwitz, was not hate or cynicism, but a, "positive and universal one concerning tolerance for the stranger in a strange land...a passionate belief in the need to work for mutual understanding between Jew and Arab in the shared homeland."⁴¹

References

Bartov, Omer. *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

Brierly, William D. "Memory in the Work of Yechiel Denur," in *Hebrew Literature in the Wake of the Holocaust*. Edited by Leon Y. Yudkin. Rutherford, N.J : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993.

Denur, Yechiel. *Bet Habubot*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953. Translated as *House of Dolls*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955. translated by Moshe M. Kohn.

³⁹ William D. Brierly. "Memory in the Work of Yechiel Dinur," in *Hebrew Literature in the Wake of the Holocaust*. Edited by Leon Y. Yudkin. Rutherford, N.J: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993.

⁴⁰ Avraham Hagorni-Green. In the bounds of peace: essays on peace and the perfect *Bechavlei shalom*: Jerusalem: Reches, 1994: p.145.

⁴¹ Anthony Rudolf. "Obituary," *Independent*, July 27, 2001. N.P.

---. *Ha-Shaon Asher Me'al Ha-Rosh* Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960. (Translated by Denur and H. Zeldes as *Star Eternal*). New York: Arbor House, 1971.

--- *Qaru Lo Piepel*. Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1961. (Translated as *Atrocity*. New York: Lyle Stuart, 1963. Translated by Moshe M. Kohn.

---. *Salamandra*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1946. (Translated as *Sunrise over Hell*. London: W.H Allen, 1977). Translated by Y.L Barukh

Dror., Tzvika "K.Tzetnik's literary and documentary corpus," *Davar* April 20, 1990: p. 12.

Friedlander, Saul. (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Hagorni-Green, Avraham. *Bechavlei shalom (In the bounds of peace: essays on peace and the perfect)*. Jerusalem: Reches, 1994.

Hartman, Geoffrey H. (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.

<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-068-01.html>

Heftman, Yosef "The House of Dolls," *Haboker* April 19, 1953: p. 6

Hirsch, David. *The Destruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz*. Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1991.

Kliger, Noah "Haish Mi-kokav Haefer," *Yediot Ahronot*. July 23, 2001.

LaCapra, Dominic. *Representing the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Lang, Berel. *Act And Idea In The Nazi Genocide*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Lawrence, Langer. *The holocaust and the literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

Needler, Howard. *Red Fire Upon Black Fire: Hebrew in the Holocaust Novels of K. Tzetnik*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Ovadyahu, Moredechai "The other planet of K.Tzetnik," in *The Storm and the Silence: Characters in our new literature*. Tel Aviv: Alef, 1976.

Popkin Jeremy, D. "Katzetnik 135633: The Survivor as Pseudonym," *New Literary History*. 33.2, 2002.

Rudolf, Anthony "Obituary," *Independent*, July 27, 2001. N.P

Shnitzer, Shmuel. "The Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem," *Maariv*. June 8, 1961.

Shoffman, Gershon *The complete writings of G. Shoffman*. V (4) Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1962.

Szeintuch, Yechiel. *K.Zetnik 135633: A Series of Dialogues with Yechiel De-Nur*. Jerusalem: Beit Lochamei Hagetaot/Dov Sadan Institute, 2003.

---"Discerning key terms in the Writings of K.Zetnik" *Hulyot: Studies in Yiddish Literature and its links with Hebrew literature*. Vol 5, (1999): 275-290.

Segev, Tom. "The code of K. Tzetnik," *Koteret Rashit*. 27, May, 1987: 14.

---*The Seventh Million: The Israelis and The Holocaust*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

--- Tom Segev. "Met hasofer Yechiel Denur, aval K.Tzetnik yichye la-netzach," *Haaretz*. 18 July, 2001.

Shoffman, Gershon *The complete writings of G. Shoffman*. V (4) Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1962.

Shorer, Haim. "To the prosecutor in the Eichamann Trial: about a terrible and holy book," *Davar* June 1961: p. 21

Yuter, Alan J. *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: From Genocide to Rebirth*. New York and Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1983.