(8) 2nd Generation

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Memory Shot Through With Holes*

This is the text of a presentation entitled, "Exil, mémoire, transmission," which was read at a colloquium of Jewish writers held at the Sorbonne on 12 January 1986.

My place here is somewhat paradoxical. I am supposed to speak, yet I have nothing to say. No lesson to teach, no advice to give, no message to deliver, no strategies to propose. I bear tidings neither of war nor of peace. Like everyone else, I have opinions about everything, but my opinions are no more interesting than anyone else's.

There is one thing of which I can speak: my work as a writer. I do not necessarily believe that a writer is best suited to speak of his work. A careful, somewhat impassioned critic can do just as well, perhaps even better. But I can shed some particular light on one aspect of my writing: the Jewish concerns that run throughout.

The paradox I mentioned—my speaking while not having anything to say—is not simply a more or less gratuitous rhetorical figure. The paradox becomes clear to me as I think of when I began to write, or rather, first decided to write. I had an overwhelming desire to write, which has never left me, yet at the same time I felt I had nothing to say. The theories of the "new novelists" appealed to me. They took delight in repeating that they had nothing to say, that they needed to devise new forms of fiction. I thought I was attracted to such theories for purely ideological or esthetic reasons, but that was not at all true. Some years later I came to understand that I did *not* have *nothing to say*. Like many others I could have said, or written, just about anything. Rather, I had *to say nothing*, which is not the same thing. As the years went by, as I wrote more, I discovered that the nothing I had to say, to write, to

* Henri Raczymow, "La Mémoire trouée," *Pardès* 3 (1986): 177–82.

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explore—the nothing I turned into sentences, narratives, books—the nothing I could not escape saying as a positive nothing, was my Jewish identity.

My Jewish identity was not nothing, it was *nothingness*, a kind of entity in itself, with its own weight, value, stylistic possibilities, contours, colors, moorings. It might seem that my view is similar to the one expressed by Alain Finkielkraut in *Le Juif imaginaire*, but that is not the case.[1] Unlike Finkielkraut I would not say that Jewish identity is necessarily defined by absence, that it has to be an empty category, something imaginary. For some years now I have been teaching in an orthodox Jewish school, and my students, as becomes immediately apparent, are anything but imaginary Jews. I, however, am one, and I believe that the Holocaust has nothing to do with that. The figure of the imaginary Jew predates the Holocaust. It has been around for a while, having emerged in the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment, with the secularization of the Jews.[2] If Alex Derczansky were speaking instead of me, he could address the subject quite knowledgeably.[3] He might tell you about Bialik's poem, *On the Threshold of the Beit Hamidrash* [House of Prayer] which portrays the warmth within and the cold without.[4] The warmth within is the warmth of the *beit hamidrash*, and as a *maskil*, an "enlightened" Jew, Bialik remains on the threshold:

> On my tortuous path
> I have known no sweetness
> My eternity is lost.[5]

The lost eternity of which the poet speaks is Judaism itself, at least traditional Judaism. For Ashkenazic Jewry, eternity was lost well before the Holocaust, well before emigration to the West. I could say, "We

1. Alain Finkielkraut, *Le Juif imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980). [*All footnotes to this piece are by the translator.*]

2. The *Haskalah* ("enlightenment" in Hebrew) was the movement of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish intellectuals, called *maskilim*, who disseminated Western ideas of progress among their coreligionists.

3. A well-known scholar in the field of Yiddish, Alex Derczansky has taught at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris.

4. Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) is a foremost figure of modern Hebrew poetry. A clanking, rhyming translation of *On the Threshold of the House of Prayer* appears in *Selected Poems of Hayyim Nakman Bialik*, ed. Israel Efros (New York: Histadruth Ivrit of America, 1948), 29–33. The original, *Al Saf Beit-Hamidrash* can be found in Bialik, *Collected Poems 1890–1898*, ed. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv: Dvir and Katz Research Institute, 1983), 253–55.

5. Vv. 41–43. We translate from the French version that Raczymow quotes.

are all German Jews," as the student slogan had it in May 1968.[6] But here that would mean that we are all modern Jews, all orphaned Jews, bereft of Judaism. We would not have seen, in the last few years, such a forceful return to the Judaism, to the Talmud, to Jewish languages, if precisely all that had not been lost. To return implies having left. Nonetheless, some fragments had been transmitted. "An I-don't-know what and a next-to-nothing," as Vladimir Jankélévitch would say.[7] But a few words of Yiddish do not constitute a legacy, but merely a remnant, the "next-to-nothing" that remains of what was lost. It is the proof or the mark of the loss—its trace. So a trace remains. In turn, we can lose the trace. Lose loss itself. Lose, if you will, the feeling of loss. And dissolve into nothing.

At the end of the 1970s, I made a voyage. I did not know then that I was not the only one. It was an imaginary voyage. I went to Poland, to the Jewish Poland that my grandparents had left. From this imaginary trip—I have never set foot in Poland—I brought back a short book in which I attempted to explore the "next-to-nothing" in my own memory.[8] A memory devoid of memory, without content, beyond exile, beyond the forgotten. What did I know about Jewish life in Poland? What had been told to me? Once again, nothing—or next to nothing. The unsaid, the untransmitted, the silence about the past were themselves eloquent.

Itzhok Niborski and Annette Wieviorka, in their work on *Les Livres du souvenir*, attempt to explain why immigrants from Poland could not or would not transmit their heritage.[9] They write: "The *shtetl* generation possesses a treasure that they are unwilling or unable to share. They feel that those who did not know life in the *shtetl* cannot

6. During the May 1968 student uprising in Paris, this slogan became a popular protest against the planned explusion of Danny Cohn-Bendit, a German Jewish student leader.

7. Vladimir Jankélévitch is a contemporary French philosopher whose works include *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le presque-rien* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

8. Raczymow is referring here to his *Contes d'exil et d'oubli* ("Tales of Exile and Forgetfulness"), an excerpt of which is translated in this issue of *Yale French Studies*.

9. Annette Wieviorka and Itzhok Niborski, *Les Livres du souvenir: Mémoriaux juifs de Pologne* (Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, 1983). "Livres du souvenir" and "memorial books" translate *yisker-bikher*, the Yiddish term for the volumes of commemorative texts, maps, and photographs published by survivors of Eastern and Central European towns whose Jewish populations were decimated. For a presentation in English of such works, see Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, trans. and ed., *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1983).

understand or identify with anything about it."[10] After the Holocaust, for that generation and even more so for the second and third generations born in France, the prevailing feeling is one of nostalgia, something very ambiguous. Nostalgia is an ambiguous sentiment because it is rife with mythology about a lost paradise, an idyllic "before," summed up here in the word *shtetl*. But well before the Holocaust, the *shtetl* was a world already belonging to the past and falling apart.

You have to distinguish between two kinds of nostalgia. The nostalgia of the generations of Jews born in France is not the same as the nostalgia of the generation born in Poland. That generation, as Niborski and Wieviorka have shown, has to imagine their place of origin beyond death, beyond the extermination of their families, towards whom they feel a debt. The "memorial books" they produced after the war to commemorate their towns take the place of graves for those who had no graves. Those works embellish the past simply because it was the past, the world before the Holocaust. In some way, the authors are lying to themselves, for they knew that world only too well. Roman Vishniac's photos of Jewish Poland, taken in 1938, hold no secrets for them.[11] How could they be nostalgic for the filth, the wretchedness, the poverty shown in those pictures? In turn, those born in France, especially the third generation looking back to the vanished world of their grandparents, also mythologize the past, but they do so unconsciously. We are submerged in mythology, and in their case even their nostalgia is mythical, for it is for something that they never knew, that no longer exists and that will never again exist. Their nostalgia is devoid of content, like the memory devoid of content I spoke of earlier; it is motivated by the very fact that the world they long for is no more, having been entirely reduced to ashes.

However, it is not the world Vishniac shows us that is missed, but rather the community, the "warmth within" (to repeat Bialik's phrase), a world where Jews truly formed a people whose very language was Jewish. They were a people, not a lobby, or a fad, or a topic for cocktail

10. *Les Livres du souvenir*, 174. The term *shtetl*, a diminutive of the Yiddish word *shtot* ("town" or "city"), is commonly used to designate the semirural localities in which many Jews lived in Eastern and Central Europe. Folklore on the *shtetl* has fostered a largely romanticized conception of Jewish history, exemplified by the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Actually, on the eve of World War II, great numbers of Jews lived in large cities such as Warsaw, Odessa, Kiev, Budapest.

11. Roman Vishniac's photographs of Polish Jews were republished in *A Vanished World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

party conversations, or learned symposia. Emigration has excluded us from that world, from that life, which themselves were wiped off the map.

It is only after something has taken place that we can measure its importance. After writing the slender volume in which I tried to recreate a Jewish Poland, I realized that my book formed a kind of parenthesis. I opened the parenthesis on a Poland that I knew led directly to Auschwitz or Treblinka, and I closed it on a portrayal of the place of immigration, the Parisian Jewish quarter of Belleville in the 1950s. In the center of this parenthesis stood a blank. Even later, quite recently in fact, I discovered that this blank had a name, but I could not bring myself to utter it. My first book, *La Saisie*, devoid of Jewish subject matter, had portrayed absence, emptiness.[12] A few years later, my first "Jewish" book, *Contes d'exil et d'oubli*, reiterated this absence, this blank, but inscribed it in a Jewish space. A parenthesis was formed by the before and after, the prewar and postwar; it was a frame in whose center lay silence. For me at that time, only silence could evoke the horror. A taboo weighed upon it.

I could, though only in my imagination, conjure up life before, claim to remember a Poland unknown and engulfed, whose language I had heard but never spoken. I could also portray what happened afterwards, in the semblance of a *shtetl* that Belleville was in the postwar years, with its simulacrum of *Yiddishkeit*.[13] It was a *shtetl*, a *Yiddishkeit*, shot through with holes, with missing links: the names of the dead. But what happened between the before and the after, when the drama was played out, when all disappeared, was off limits to me. I had no right to speak of it. Unlike Elie Wiesel, I could not ask how to speak of it, how to find the words for it. For you can always figure out how to speak, you can always find the words, in accordance with your ethics. My question was not "*how* to speak" but "*by what right* could I speak," I who was not a victim, survivor, or witness. To ask, "By what right could I speak," implies the answer, "I have no right to speak." However, as any psychoanalyst will tell you, the time comes when you have to speak of what is troubling you. That was the point of my last book, caught in the abyss between my imperious need to speak and the

12. Raczymow, *La Saisie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

13. *Yiddishkeit* (literally, "Jewishness") is a Yiddish word that can denote either Orthodox Judaism, or a Jewish way of life defined less in terms of religion than of culture. Raczymow is using the term in the second sense.

prohibition on speaking.[14] It is inscribed in what English-speaking psychoanalysts call a double bind.

What I name the "pre-past" or prehistory, along with the Holocaust, was handed down to me precisely as something *not* handed down to me. That was my case, but I believe it was quite common. Writing was and still is the only way I could deal with the past, the whole past, the only way I could tell myself about the past—even if it is, by definition, a recreated past. It is a question of filling in gaps, of putting scraps together. In my opinion, or at least in my case, "Abraham's memory" does not exist.[15] It is a myth. Abraham's memory is shot through with holes. The memory has burst, as a balloon bursts, but we spend out time sewing it back up. Sewing is an old tradition among us. In fact, sewing scraps together is every writer's task, a hypothetically endless task, an impossible task. That is why my work consists in presenting the scraps in all their diversity, in their disorder, in their dispersion, in a kind of diaspora—if I may use that well-worn metaphor.

In a remarkable essay, Nadine Fresco speaks of the "diaspora of ashes."[16] The hopeless attempt to trace down the ashes, to follow the trains (think of the recurring trains and tracks in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*), is the only thing that give me roots.[17] Mine are superficial roots, along the railroad tracks across Europe, through the paths of emigration and deportation. But I neither emigrated not was deported. The world that was destroyed was not mine. I never knew it. But I am, so many of us are the orphans of that world. Our roots are "diasporic." They do not go underground. They are not attached to any particular land or soil. Nor do they lie, as portrayed in David Shahar's work, at the

14. Raczymow, *Un Cri sans voix* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). A translation by Dori Katz, *A Cry Without a Voice*, is to be published by Holmes & Meier. For a study of this and other novels by Raczymow, see Ellen S. Fine, "The Absent Memory: The Act of Writing in Post-Holocaust French Literature" in Berel Lang. ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 41–57.

15. This is a reference to Marek Halter's *La Mémoire d'Abraham* (literally, "Abraham's Memory") (Paris: Laffont, 1983), a best-selling romantic saga of Jewish history since its beginnings. It was translated by Lowell Bair as *The Book of Abraham* (New York: Holt, 1986).

16. Nadine Fresco, "La Diaspora des cendres," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* (Fall 1981): 205–20.

17. Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour-long film on the Holocaust, entitled *Shoah*, has been discussed in many American publications. See, for example, "Seminar with Claude Lanzmann: 11 April 1990" in *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 82–99.

bottom of a well in Jerusalem.[18] Rather they creep up along the many roads of dispersion that the Jewish writer explores, or discovers, as he puts his lines down on the paper. Such roads are endless.

In a well-known passage, Kafka suggests that if Moses did not reach Canaan, it was not because he had sinned, but because his life was merely a human life.[19] We never reach Canaan. Canaan is only in sight. But for the writer, Canaan is the book that he is writing and that he dreams of finishing. Once it is finished, another Canaan is in sight, as he dreams of finishing another book. To reach Canaan would be to die. You surely know Luria's theory in the Kabbalah.[20] In order that creation could come to be, God withdrew himself from one point, so as to form a void. In my work, such a void is created by the empty memory I spoke of, which propels my writing forward. My books do not attempt to fill in empty memory. They are not simply part of the struggle against forgetfulness. Rather, I try to present memory *as* empty. I try to restore a non-memory, which by definition cannot be filled in or recovered. In everyone there is an unfillable symbolic void, but for the Ashkenazic Jew born in the diaspora after the war, the symbolic void is coupled with a real one. There is a void in our memory formed by a Poland unknown to us and entirely vanished, and a void in our remembrance of the Holocaust through which we did not live. We cannot even say that we were *almost* deported.

There are holes as well in our genealogy. We have no family trees. At the most, we can go back to our grandparents. There is no trace of anyone before. Whose graves can we go visit? What hall of records can we consult? Everything was burned. It seems that what was transmitted to a whole generation of Ashkenazic Jews was anything but a full body of knowledge. It was more like a cloud of neurosis in which the individual cannot orient himself. He must discover his own path, but through one of the perverse tricks that history plays on us, he experiences a kind of *déjà vu*. Strangely, he finds himself in the well-known, oft-discussed situation of the German-speaking Jews between the two world wars. Kafka despised them as he despised himself, a Western Jew,

18. Raczymow is referring here to a work by the contemporary Israeli novelist David Shahar, *The Palace of Shattered Vessels*, trans. Dalya Bilu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

19. Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1914–1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1949), 195–96.

20. This theory of Isaac Luria, the sixteenth century Kabbalist, is discussed in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 3d rev. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1961), 261.

but he also felt pity for them. He wrote to Milena, "I am as far as I know the most typical Western Jew among them. This means, expressed with exaggeration, that not one calm second is granted me, nothing is granted me, everything has to be earned, not only the present and the future, but the past too—something after all which perhaps every human being has inherited, this too must be earned, it is perhaps the hardest work. When the Earth turns to the right . . . I would have to turn to the left to make up for the past."[21]

So much for what Kafka wrote at the beginning of the 1920s. Since then, the earth has turned, and we know in what direction. But recapturing the past, trying to pursue it as we do the horizon, has been the purpose of my work as a writer. Of course, people will say to me (in fact, they have already said it, or I have read it here and there): "Well, that's all quite disappointing. You're always looking back, caught up in nostalgia, brooding over the past, a past dead and buried that no longer interests anybody. Why don't you follow the example of the American Jewish writers who tell us about their day-to-day lives as American Jews in the here and now? They don't bore us with stories about Poland and exile." To which I reply: "The Jews who came from Eastern Europe are inextricably tied to the past. Their world has been destroyed and the Jewish blood that was shed pollutes the entire European continent, from north to south and east to west. America is free of such pollution. Even those of us who did not live through those times tread every day upon ground where trains rolled towards Auschwitz, every day. . . . "

I spoke earlier of a cloud of neurosis, our only legacy. I believe it has to do with the feeling all of us have, deep down, of having missed a train. You know which train. What Kafka wrote to Milena at the beginning of the 1920s—"When the Earth turns to the right. . . . I would have to turn to the left"—is truer for us, more concrete and more essential. Out of the impossibility of recapturing the past, some forge the very meaning of their writing, well aware of how ridiculous the pursuit of the impossible is.

—Translated by Alan Astro

21. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, ed. Willy Haas, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Schocken, 1953), 219.