

Coming to grips with the Shoah in Hebrew fiction

Dvir Abramovich (The University of Melbourne)

The first woman to become a full member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language and Winner of the Prime Minister's Creativity Prize in 1971 for her novel *Ir Yamim Rabim* (*City of Many Days*), Shulamith Hareven was one of Israel's pre-eminent authors. Over forty years, her finely tuned plots and perceptive, intimate portraits of lonely frayed individuals, as well as her commitment to civil rights, had earned her the respect of readers and critics alike. As a matter of fact, in a 1992 *New York Times* article Hareven was acclaimed as achieving, "a level of success and acceptance among the literary elite in Israel known by no other woman".¹ Likewise, she was hailed by the French publication *L'Express* as one of the hundred women "who moved the world", and in 1988, on the occasion of Israel's fortieth anniversary she was selected by the Council of Women's Organisation as one of eleven women to be honoured for their extraordinary achievement.²

Shulamith Hareven was born in Warsaw, Poland on 14 February 1930. Her father Abraham Ryftin was a lawyer and her mother Natalia Wiener was a teacher. She published her first poems in a Polish children's magazine when she was six. Her parents escaped Poland and travelled throughout Europe using fake documents until they arrived in Palestine in 1940, settling in Jerusalem. She studied at the Rehavia Secondary school, graduating in 1947. A member of the Haganah³, she served as a medic during the 1948 War of Independence and later was one of the founders of *Galei Tzahal*, the Israeli Defence Forces radio network. In the 1950s she worked in transit camps, helping new immigrants from Arab countries with their absorption, and was a military reporter during the 1969 War of Attrition and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She married Alouph Hareven in 1954 and together they have a son Itai Hareven (born 1957) a mathematician, and a daughter Gail Hareven (born 1959) a journalist and award-winning author. Hareven's awards include The Wallenrod Prize and the ACUM Life achievement award.

The author of 19 books (translated into 21 languages), among them novels,

¹ Fein, Esther B. "Two writers who keep their fiction free of political realities: Tatyana Tolstaya and Shulamith Hareven's characters struggle with daily life." *New York Times* (17 March 1992): B1(N) & C13(L).

² Chertok, Haim. *We Are All Close: Conversations with Israeli Writers*. New York: Fordham University, 1989. P. 90.

³ The Hagana was the Jewish settlement's paramilitary organisation during the British Mandate of Palestine.

short stories, collected essays, volumes of poetry, a play, a children's book and a thriller (penned under the pseudonym Tal Ya'ari) Hareven also translated poetry and prose from Polish and English, including Dylan Thomas. Often categorised as a feminist writer, Gershon Shaked argues that along with women-authors such as Yehudit Hendel and Amalia Khana-Carmon, Hareven is one of the "swallows heralding the spring of the eighties in which women's literature captures a pivotal place in Hebrew fiction, moving from the margins to the centre".⁴

A joint founder of the *Shalom Akhshav* (*Peace Now*) movement, Hareven was a forceful advocate for co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians, based on the land for peace formula. Her essays, lectures and columns that mostly appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, shimmering with her secular-humanist philosophy, were gathered in *Otzar Ha-Milim Shel Ha-Shalom*⁵ (*The Vocabulary of Peace: Life, Culture and Politics in the Middle East*⁶) a penetrating clarion call for pragmatic, rational compromise in the conflict. While casting an impartial eye on the seemingly intractable dispute, she transmits, with piercing understanding, the Palestinian point of view, especially during the first Palestinian uprising – The *Intifada* – (when she reported from Arab villages), using her unique lexicon of empathy to promote peace. The collection also includes Hareven's meditations on culture, language, literature, philosophy and the role of the law to tackle hatred and violence. Not surprisingly, she won the Avrech Prize for essay writing in 1989. Shulamith Hareven died on November 25, 2003 after a long battle with cancer.

Hareven's first work was a volume of poetry, *Yerushalayim Dorsanit*⁷ (*Predatory Jerusalem*) and her first novel was *Ir Yamim Rabim*⁸ (*City of Many Days*) a sweeping, historical saga, set in 1936 multicultural Jerusalem during the British Mandate period. Charting life against the backdrop of the emerging state of Israel, the central character is the independent and strong-willed Sara Amarillo. Also looming large are Sara's Sephardic family as well as an assortment of idiosyncratic characters including an Arab family, an English captain who is in love with Sara's mother, a depressed German immigrant, and a member of the Jewish underground. The novel depicts the simmering tensions between the city's inhabitants, and the explosion of riots that shake the once prevailing harmony between Jews and Arabs. At the same time, Sara's clan faces its own internal calamity as it fragments when the father leaves them for a Lebanese woman. At the heart of the narrative is Jerusalem, a city in turmoil, lyrically painted as a source of nourishment and comfort for the central protagonist and her gaggle of eccentric friends.

One of Hareven's monumental works are the three novellas in *Tzimaon*⁹

⁴ Shaked, Gershon. *Hasiport Ha'ivrit* 1880-1980: *Be'harbe eshnanim biknosit tzadadiyot* (Hebrew Narrative Prose) Volume 5. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Hakkibutz Hameuchad and Keter, 1998. P. 340.

⁵ Hareven, Shulamith. *Otzar Ha-Milim Shel Ha-Shalom*. Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1996.

⁶ Hareven, Shulamith. *The Vocabulary of Peace: Life, Culture and Politics in the Middle East*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1995.

⁷ Hareven, Shulamith. *Yerushalayim Dorsanit*. Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim.

⁸ Hareven, Shulamith. *Ir Yamim Rabim*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1972.

⁹ Hareven, Shulamit. *Tzimaon*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1996.

(*Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* 1996) which tell of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt, their wanderings in the desert, and their battles to settle in the Promised Land of Canaan. The triptych rewrites well known scriptural episodes from a modern perspective, subverting familiar meanings in re-imagining the Biblical past. In tandem with the author's Holocaust tales, it follows the life of outcasts – deracinated characters, who are wandering in a physical and spiritual wilderness and are emotionally disconnected from their surroundings.

The first novella, *Soneh Ha-Nisim (The Miracle Hater)* is told from the perspective of Eshkhar who, very much like Moses, is rescued at birth from Pharaoh's edict and given to a young woman who joins the caravan of Hebrew refugees in flight from Egypt. During the transit across the desert, the boy grows into an embittered man who suffers profound emptiness and despair and abandons both God and his fellow nomads. On one occasion, the woman promised to him is given to another. He seeks out Moses for counsel to set things right, but is told by Joshua who stands guard outside the leader's tent that justice is not their concern. Eshkhar, in his progressive alienation from his fellow-Jews, is convinced that it is the deception of miracles performed by Moses that keep the people "purblind and lost" in the desert for forty years, though the area can in fact be traversed in weeks. According to Hareven, Moses is not the romantic hero that Jewish history and their lore make him out to be. Rather, he is portrayed in a tragic-comic manner as a stuttering, weak-willed, accidental commander who does not inspire his followers. The Israelites meanwhile, are a lowly, alienated and unruly band of impoverished folk whose prime motivation is simply to stay alive, ready to cast aside any belief in God and give themselves to erecting a Golden Calf in Moses' absence, in a scene which resonates in its unity of primal instinct and poetic force.

In *Navi (Prophet)*, Hivai, the central protagonist is a pagan prophet from Gibeon who has lost his ability to foretell the future during a crucial period for his people. Will their city be attacked by the Israelites? Feeling besieged, the residents are infected with spreading panic and shut the city's gates, allowing only a few to smuggle themselves out in search of safety. In the course of the story, the heathen's primitive brutality is chronicled. Hivai sleeps with his 12-year-old daughter and, in an attempt to regain his prophetic voice, seizes a slave child and disembowels him, reading the entrails to provide the false prophecy that the city will be destroyed. After the Gibeonites deceive the Hebrews into agreeing to a protective pact, Hivai decides to remain with his captors for seven years. This narrative device – of putting a pagan among the Israelites – pays off because the observations made by Hivai of the peoples' credos and moral code are full of an outsider's reflections. Hivai cannot understand, for instance, why murder is prohibited, why the mothers are so caring of their offspring and how the Israelites live by one law. Living in their midst, Hivai slowly comes to realise the true meaning of a prophet, with Hareven judiciously illustrating the shift from paganism to Judaism's major precept – monotheism.

Aharei Ha-Yaldut (After Childhood), which concludes the trilogy, is set in the time of the Judges, a few generations later. In a small stone hut, not far from the valley of Zin, lives a young man whose father had sought to kill him. That young

man is Salu, and ever since that early trauma he keeps blinking repeatedly. The Hebrews, though still guided by the Mosaic Law, wrestle with the notion of living in an ordered community. Salu, who cannot find a bride among the women of his small village, marries the feisty and assertive Moran, who soon gives birth to a boy. One day the child disappears. Salu has given him to his barren Hittite mistress, telling the distraught Moran that God will fill her womb. Once again, the themes of justice and the absence of God inform the plot – the young mother's anguish echoes throughout as she cries for her baby, preferring that God stay away.

Hareven steadfastly eschewed divulging any information about her childhood in Poland, choosing in interviews to begin her biographical sketch with her period as a combat medic in the Haganah Underground during the 1948 War of Independence. One could cite her conversation with Haim Chertok in *We Are All Close* in which she was quizzed about her upbringing. In response, she charted her role in the 1948 War of Independence as a teenage medic, calmly ignoring her interlocutor's plea to elucidate on her pre-Palestine days in Europe.¹⁰ That said, in her autobiography *Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya (Many Days: An Autobiography)* 2002 comprised of essays and short stories, she recounts the terrifying events that led to the destruction of Warsaw and her entire childhood world. In the piece "Mahogany" she derides the lack of foresight on the part of the Jews for failing to anticipate the impending catastrophe, lamenting their self-delusion:

You told us not to talk nonsense, Poland will protect us, and besides, England and France will come to our aid.... So we obeyed and tried not to be frightened. What could we have done? Now, that the whole world knows what idiots you were, and how you had no idea how to protect yourselves, not to mention protect us.... Never again will you be able to fool us, dear adults, we were much smarter.¹¹

In a complementary piece to "Mahogany" titled "Hadodot Hagdolot" ("The Great Aunts") Hareven recalls the naiveté of her aunts, startlingly ignorant of the fate that awaited them. In the following passage, Hareven recalls her aunts' assumptions about the impending German invasion:

We are fortunate that it is the Germans who are invading and not the Russians. At least with the Germans we could converse as we did in the previous war. A cultured nation, with respect for a cultured home. The aunts polished their good German, as well as the gold frames of their paintings, did not hide the crystal and rings, placed Schubert's Lieder on the piano, prepared tea, and waited for the necessary evil of the war to end, and for the conquerors to enter. They resolved amongst themselves that they would have the colonels over for tea.¹²

¹⁰ Chertok, Haim. *We Are All Close: Conversations with Israeli Writers*. New York: Fordham University, 1989. Pp. 77-78.

¹¹ Hareven, Shulamith. *Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya*. Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2002. Pp. 13-14.

¹² Hareven, Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya, 11.

At first sight, maintaining a stern silence over her past may reinforce the well-worn axiom that writers wish to reject any hermeneutical move to adopt a meta-textual approach in articulating an interpretation of their work. No doubt, this examination which calls for, in part, seeing diegesic characterisations as a mirror of the author's personal life, is an attractive proposition. Why? Because of Hareven's pointed reluctance to discuss her private life candidly and her literary preoccupation with the Holocaust, despite the fact that she has said that there is little of the "Polish diskette" residing in her system.¹³

Most revealingly, Hareven's stories constantly emphasise the profound estrangement and sadness of life that her immigrant principals experience as they are burdened by a stifling past and a smothering psychological legacy that cannot be shed. Lacking comforting and sustaining relationships, their inner balance is vulnerable to the assault of the indelible European tragedy that is engraved and carved onto their damaged psyche, persistently threatening to unravel their personal peace or sanity. Substantively, the fragmented, harrowing memories, foregrounded in a constellation of quotidian gestures, accents, longings and nightmares, deeply overshadow the lives of the characters trying to reconstruct a shattered existence in Israel. Homologously, Hareven revels in exploring the irony of a people who left the Diaspora to find a home in Israel but failed to do so, emotionally severed from society and living as outsiders in their new adoptive country. In alliance with the sorrowful undertow of the tales, the author infuses her settings, in particularly Jerusalem, with a wounded landscape, redolent with shadows and inescapable darkness. Turning to Hareven's words, we find she employs a pared, terse style of expression that evokes complex, breathtakingly lyrical images of melancholy and ragged souls besieged by earlier scars. Although elusive at times, the tales nevertheless allow a space for the reader to enter and proffer their own meaning, for the stories unfold in a psychological landscape.

Told in the first person, in the compact, dreamscape *Dimdumim*¹⁴ (*Twilight*) a nameless Israeli woman mystically enters a city which she describes as "a city of sorrow". As the surrealistic story opens, the dreamer says, "Last night I spent a year in the city where I was born. I had long known the password for getting there: Dante's line, 'I am the way to the city of sorrow'."¹⁵ In keeping with its disturbingly apocalyptic and Kafkaesque tone, we learn that every night, after the audience watches the opera, the members are taken away to freight trains by the waiting soldiers posted in the square. Attending *The Marriage of Figaro*, the protagonist asks the man who saves her and whom she will later marry, why the victims never escape their grisly fate. He explains that this ritualistic rounding up is repeated every night. He goes on to say that the next evening the Jews return to the Opera House and again the process is repeated. However, upon their return, the victims are "a little less alive each time. They fade, like pictures in an

¹³ Halter, Aloma. "Words well chosen." *The Jerusalem Post* (1 May 1992). N.P.

¹⁴ First published Hebrew in 1980, Shulamith Hareven. *Bedidut*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. I am using the translation found in the author's 1992 collection: Shulamith Hareven. *Twilight and Other Stories*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992.

¹⁵ Hareven, *Twilight*, 1.

album”.¹⁶ There is no denying the shocking effect of the scenes of mass arrest that Hareven constructs, arrests made by soldiers whistling the aria *Voi che sapete*:

The floodlights of the soldiers’ trucks came on and suddenly, tearing the darkness, glaring and terrible, and with this evil light came the wails, the shouts, and the curses....The people in their festive clothes piled up on the trucks, and there was no more telling them apart, batch after driven batch¹⁷

In one telling sequence, that seems to offer the subtext of identification with the dead, the narrator, watching her neighbours herded onto trucks, wishes to leap from the tall roof into the courtyard and join them, even though she knows it means certain death. Hareven has remarked that the woman is, “working out guilt about the Holocaust and the feeling: why didn’t I go with them ...”¹⁸ More to the point, it calls attention to the search for identity by the European immigrants who, though absorbed into the new Israeli society, were strangely living a personal diaspora and were drawn to their old homeland. In various ways, Hareven’s *Dimdumim* articulates a collective, irreducible and unsettling desire to unplug repressed memories in a pilgrimage towards a clearer understanding of one’s psyche and the post-war individuation.

In blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion the author is referencing the indescribable nature of the Holocaust and the limits of representation. Moreover, it is hard not to read the dream allegorically as a metaphor for the Holocaust, as the storyline is redolent with rich allegory that absorbs, mosaic like, into its fabric multiple motifs that inform and fuel the Holocaust canon. For example, darkness as a repository of menace is deployed in an early, arresting image of the city: “The city of my birth was very dark, extinguished because the sun had left it and gone away a long, long time ago ...”. And later:

All that night we wandered through the streets, as there was no telling day from night except for a slight shade of difference in the depth of the darkness; everything was shrouded in the same no-light of the extinguished city....They never went so far as to break into laughter. They already knew they would live without sun from now on.¹⁹

In a chapter entitled “Ani Levantinit” (“I am Levantine”), appearing in her autobiography, Hareven explicitly interweaves the motif of darkness into her life story: “I was born in Europe, and it is if all my days there passed in darkness and impatience, like a mistake, like a prison sentence, like a miserable marriage...”²⁰

The ghetto-like universe in *Dimdumim* is beyond the rational or the normal, where women and men walk aimlessly, where statues are smashed, a hellish incubator where people are clean as smoke. It is a nightmarish world where

¹⁶ Hareven, *Twilight*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Hareven, *Twilight*, 4.

¹⁸ Halter, “Words well chosen”.

¹⁹ Hareven, *Twilight*, 1, 6.

²⁰ Hareven, Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya, 69.

nothing is certain, where in a nightlong year a woman marries, becomes pregnant and then gives birth to a child who fantastically grows up and disappears into the mantle of evil. By story's end, the narrator awakens from her Kafkaesque nightmare in an operating room. The surgeon says, "Turn the light on", and the narrator is able to flee the perpetual darkness of her hometown back to her family and to the blistering sun of Jerusalem:

I lay still, waiting for my soul to flow full in me again, and I knew it was all over and completed. I would no more go back to the city of my birth, to the lightless city....My past was commuted. From now on I would find nothing there but the stones of Jerusalem, and plants growing with might, vigor and a vast light. I got up to make breakfast, my heart beating hard.²¹

This particular passage chimes with Hareven's previously mentioned essay "Ani Levantinit" in which she contrasts the European eclipse with the liberating blaze of Jerusalem:

Until I first saw the strong light splashed over rocky fences on the mountain, a stooping summer olive tree and a stone-carved well—and I knew that this is it. That I arrived at some deep, tangible ancientness, the womb of the world, in which everything was created and will be created. That this is the right light, the right smells, the right touch.²²

Feldhay Brenner expounds on the import of the surgery scene, arguing that it, "...indicates the necessity of the excision of the Holocaust memory. For this to happen, the personal ties with the irretrievably lost world must be acknowledged. Even if imaginatively, the Holocaust must be reconstructed before the source of the trauma can be effectively removed".²³

In summa, one does not want to make too much of the parallels between fiction and fact. One could, however, draft Feldhay-Brenner's observation onto the author's life story as she was spared the destruction her characters suffer by the fact her parents fled Europe for Israel. On one level, *Dimdumim* represents the excruciating attempt by Holocaust survivors to amputate the past from the present through a cathartic revisiting of their childhood in order to lift the enormous burden that transition to a new land brought. In the words of Gila Ramras-Rauch, the woman's "'return' is a final cutting of the connection cord, a reaffirmation of life and sun".²⁴

*Bedidut*²⁵ (*Loneliness*) is a highly revealing tale of sorrow and alienation. The story is structured around Dolly Jacobus, a wealthy, middle-aged, childless Holocaust-survivor whose husband, a successful architect and scion of one of Jerusalem's most established families (their origins in the city, we learn, go back

²¹ Hareven, *Twilight*, 10-11.

²² Hareven, Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya, 69.

²³ Brenner, Rachel Feldhay. "'Ideologically incorrect' Responses to the Holocaust by Three Israeli Women Writers." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11:1 (2009): 1-11 (8).

²⁴ Ramras-Rauch, Gila and Joseph Michman-Melkman (editors) *Facing the Holocaust: Selected Israeli Fiction*. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1985. P. 11.

²⁵ First published in Hebrew in 1980. Shulamith Hareven. *Bedidut*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

nine generations) is abroad at a conference in Malta. While the elegant Dolly enjoys the luxuries of a comfortable existence, she is nonetheless lonely, without love, friends or purpose. Wrapped in ennui, she is mired in a plodding stifling marriage, frustrated at never feeling at home, despite living in the city for twenty-five years after arriving in Israel aged 14. Constantly ruminating about the meaning of home (she keeps a notebook in which she scribbles her thoughts), at one point, sitting in the car on the way home she is fearful about her life: "If she were to return to it this minute, she felt, the key might not fit the door, so that that she would remain trapped outside in impersonal space. And if it did fit, her memories might not".²⁶ Elsewhere, she reflects:

Only somebody who had never been a refugee could dare dream of oceans and great expanses of space. And twenty-five years ago Dolly Jacobus had been a refugee. To this day she was astonished by such things as central heating, which kept on burning warmly, really burning, while the rain remained outside. Truly outside, it wasn't just an optical illusion.²⁷

More than once, the tormenting, rippling effects of Dolly's Holocaust trauma become evident, as in a brief throwaway passage apprising the reader that she has had four consecutive miscarriages of unknown cause. Her childless state stamps her with a never-ending frustration and a craving in her soul for a wholeness that has gradually abated. Although dreading abandonment, it is significant that it is only when she is home alone, apart from husband (whom she discovers is sleeping with his secretary) that her primary emotions emerge and that she begins to gain insight and a sense of her true self. In one episode, after a thin, young, dark skinned girl standing next to Dolly in the post-office intentionally brushes against her right breast (an encounter which stirs within her an obsessive lesbian passion), Dolly makes up her mind to, "understand everything about herself once and for all. It was time she knew".²⁸ The portrait of the teenager who tries to seduce Dolly yields a trail of echoes which invoke the image of the Holocaust victim, "emaciated, almost monkey-like appearances of a stunted child...There was something pitifully sharp and shrunken about her, as though privation had caused her to stop growing in the womb ... a snuffed out, light-less little child".²⁹ At home, she yearns to deepen her knowledge about her childhood and establish a nexus with a life that long ago has been buried away:

She rummaged through the closet, took out all the albums and began feverishly looking for the few rare snapshots of herself from her refugee days. None lit the faintest spark. She could not find herself in any of them. Perhaps, she thought, if only, if only, I had some pictures from my childhood, from the age of four or five, perhaps then. But such a picture was not to be had anywhere on earth. It was as if Dolly had been born twice, and her first, perhaps truer, life had ended abruptly at the age of fourteen. Afterward, another post-diluvian

²⁶ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 29.

²⁷ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 16.

²⁸ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 23.

²⁹ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 27.

life had begun, with its disguises and new names.³⁰

Ultimately, the exploration of memory and the search of her family ancestry are unsuccessful for, as Yael Feldman remarks, “Her (pre-Holocaust) childhood seems to have been erased without a trace. All that is left is a wrenching pathos, a pathos rendered all the more powerful through Hareven’s circumspect style”. It is of note, Feldman continues, that even her first name, Dolly, is a clear marker of foreignness, heightening our impression of the heroine’s detachment from her surrounding.³¹ We might also infer that the moniker hints at a woman whose childhood has been stunted during the war, which would also explain her enigmatic homosexual desire towards the teenage girl who presses her mouth against her breast when the two are in line at the post-office. In a sense, Dolly’s upsurge in desire for the girl underscores her attempt to reclaim a stolen childhood, typical of many survivors.

Visiting her mother-in-law, Grandmother Haya, Dolly observes the 89-year-old woman confidently gazing out of her window onto the old city. “Yes, yes, she said. It all belonged to her. She could look out on it all, she who had never been young starving refugee with a funny family name that had to be changed in a new land”.³² Yet, for the disenfranchised Dolly, the stern environs of Jerusalem exacerbate her growing sense of isolation. A crucial vignette earlier testifies to the sharply discomforting existential emptiness gnawing her solitary self. Staring out of a window, a friend from the university where she attends lectures, asks Dolly how she can go on looking without feeling nervous. As a grin ghosts around her lips, she replies, “‘I must be a butterfly … But I want you to know,’ she added, ‘that being a butterfly is something that I have to work at very hard’.”³³ Quite exactly what this comment means is far from clear. Nevertheless, the glimmering symbolism of a butterfly that never lands is of such specificity that the reader cannot help but suspect that they are being nudged towards conclusions that have to do with Dolly’s rootlessness.

A story that exemplifies the oppressive prevailing Israeli attitudes towards the survivors in the Palestine of the 1940s is *Ha-ed* (translated as *The Witness*).³⁴ Manifestly, it demonstrates how in attempting to promote the pillars of Zionist dogma, Israeli society stifled real identification with and understanding of the world of the Diaspora Jews. Interestingly, Hareven claimed that this was the one tale shorn of an autobiographical base, explaining that its purpose was, “...to remind us of the atmosphere that existed in Israel, and that in that period – perhaps – [lies] the genesis of the weaknesses that are still in us today”.³⁵ Negotiating various elements, Hareven shows how instead of affording the survivors the respite they so craved, as well as the opportunity for some psychological relief by having someone listen to and believe their descriptions, the *Yishuv* and its

³⁰ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 35.

³¹ Feldman, Yael. *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women’s Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Pp. 131-133.

³² Hareven, *Bedidut*, 125.

³³ Hareven, *Bedidut*, 16.

³⁴ First published in Hebrew in 1980. Shulamith Hareven. *Ha-ed*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

³⁵ Hareven, Yamim Rabim: Autobiographiya, 3.

native-born dealt the survivors a crushing blow by attempting to obliterate their biographies, thereby crippling any opportunity they sought to reconcile with the damaged self of the past.

The first person narrative begins in 1941 with the arrival of Shlomek, a young Polish Holocaust refugee, at the Drom Yehuda agricultural boarding school. From the outset, Yotam Raz, the teacher who is entrusted with helping the newcomer with his integration and whose viewpoint relates the unfolding drama (35 years after the event) stresses to his new pupil the importance of shedding the vestiges of the past: “You will get used to things, and soon you will look like us and talk like us and no one will feel that you are not from here.... Soon you will be a *Sabra*, Shlomo, don’t worry, everything will be all right”.³⁶

Yotam, himself a Polish survivor in denial of his origins, shows acute thoughtlessness about and insensitivity to Shlomek’s anguish in his relationship with the young victim. He tells his pupils that he is certain that they will welcome Shlomek, “...warmly and provide him with a feeling of home”.³⁷

Any possibility of kinship or empathy for Shlomek’s past suffering is given a short shrift by the guidance counsellor from the moment the adolescent reaches the village. This *topos* finds fruitful embodiment in a startling sequence that takes place as Shlomek enters the class for the first time. Facing his Israeli classmates, he is asked by Yotam to describe the war in Europe. In his answer, the young man says that there is no war as no one can fight the mighty Germans. When Boaz, one of the students accuses the Diaspora Jews of cowardice, the upset Shlomek rises to their defence claiming that it was not impotence but, “the simple inability to stand up to the Germans and display a kind of heroism”.³⁸ It is immediately afterwards that Hareven illustrates, through Boaz, the widespread and dominant view of European Jews collectively shared by Israeli culture: “‘I’m sure there are,’ Boaz said. ‘I’m sure there are people who fight the Germans like one should even under occupation. I’m sure not all are cowards like some people standing here.’”³⁹

Next, Shlomek describes in detail his family’s massacre; his father is hanged, his mother and two brothers shot. The group reacts with sheer disbelief to the newcomer’s honest report, regarding it as an incredible flight of the imagination. One says, “What is he telling there? What is he concocting? Why would the Germans kill citizens who go out to get breadwhat is all this nonsense?” One-girl attributes it to shock, while another complains, “Really, he shouldn’t tell tales...it is just his inventions”.⁴⁰ Worse, later that afternoon, reflecting on the episode, Yotam offers the following assessment of the boy’s testimony:

Shlomek’s words attested to a degree of exaggeration and an unrestrained imagination. I surmised that his family perished in the bombings, or that he was suffering from feelings of guilt for leaving them there....maybe he does

³⁶ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 38.

³⁷ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 35.

³⁸ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 37.

³⁹ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 37.

⁴⁰ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 37.

not know of their fate, and he is making up for it by thinking up shocking stories about their strange deaths.... here for the first time as an educator, I came across a child who imagined the killing of his parents in such a way.⁴¹

At this moment we understand that the wish to nullify and eradicate the survivor's chronicle epitomises a psychological distance that condemns that remnant of the Shoah as figures that the Israeli must shun. Equally, in the same week, the mistrust continues when one of the high-school students protests to Yoram that Shlomek is again lying when he says that during a siege they ate nothing but potatoes for two weeks. The student pleads with his teacher to confirm for him that it is nothing but a fib, that it cannot be true. Considering the excessive resentment and the bitter reaction to his plight, it is small wonder that Shlomek chooses silence, realising that there is no way that he can open a dialogue with his peers, whose human experience is far removed from his. Stung by the pressure to forfeit his past, but still yearning to mourn and memorialise his family's murder, Shlomek clandestinely keeps a diary in Polish in which he records his eyewitness accounts and heritage. Furthermore, he ubiquitously engraves a secret code for all to observe, including on the wall above his bed. It consists of four letters and numbers (Y39, B37, E12, Y9). Towards the end we learn these represent his slain family members and the ages at which they died.

It is no accident that Yotam construes Shlomek's subsequent curbing of his outbursts and his rejection of Ruta the psychologist, as a signal that he has finally adjusted, "As I predicted, with his status in class rising, and with his acclimation, the lies and the fanciful stories disappeared.... Maybe it's a sign that Shlomek has been born again....Shlomek has buried his past and I see in this a positive development. People after all are born anew here and you know this exactly as I do"⁴². In the end though, Shlomek does not allow the process of invalidation to continue. He suddenly flees the school and makes his way to the residence of the British Commissioner to hand over his testimony about the atrocities of the Holocaust. Half a year later, his statements (the very ones that were cruelly discredited by Yotam and his students) are published by one of the leading newspapers. Still incredulous, despite his reluctant acknowledgment of Shlomek's story and despite his keeping of the clipping in a draw along with other mementos from his students, Yotam insists on reproaching Shlomek for persisting in communicating his message and for not showing more forbearance. The final passage reveals primarily that the teacher has not abandoned his inflexible ideological posture:

Only Shlomek's arrogance caused him to exclude himself from the group. And why did he run away as if his conscience was not clear.... Don't pay attention to the fact I am angry. It is always when I remember Shlomek that I become angry, even now, years later. This boy possessed ingratitude....One needs to know how and when to tell the truth. If he had only waited a few more months, it would have been published anyway, but then he would have added

⁴¹ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 37-38.

⁴² Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 44-45.

some honour to our school, instead of such an irresponsible act....Very simply, he did not have a measure of patience.⁴³

In offering his assessment of the story's central tenor, Shaked labels the teacher an idiot for the way he treats the escapee from Poland, for his emotional frigidity and for his lack of psychological perspicuity.⁴⁴ Avner Holtzman offers a similar assessment:

Yotam is a caricature of the Hebrew educator. He is arrogant and simple, he clings to stereotypes, spouts clichéd tirades, is dishonest and foolish, blind to his own erotic drives, and perhaps worst of all – he sins in the name of rationalism. Under the guise of patience, logic, responsibility, moderation and reasonableness he mocks “the vanities of psychology”, shuts himself off to the testimony about the German atrocities his student Shlomek brought with him from Europe, and dismisses this testimony as a wild exaggeration, by a young adult, that is without logic.⁴⁵

As Rachel Feldhay Brenner contends, the tale “actually rules out the possibility of a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* between the Israeli and the Holocaust survivor....The aggressive, practically unanimous, denial of the Holocaust victim’s testimony isolates him in his new home”.⁴⁶ For Ramras Rauch, the story is a, “subtle and ironic incrimination of Israeli society of the 1940s for its sense of smugness and self-satisfaction”.⁴⁷ In an interview with Haim Chertok, Hareven was asked about *Ha-ed* and its depiction of the teacher’s and students’ incapacity to believe Shlomek. Hareven explained this in the context of Israel of the 1950s:

..Israeli society has always been very practical, very goal-oriented. A certain kind of egotism, self-centeredness goes with this – a lack of empathy...In order to start again in this land, the idealists wanted to forget, to obliterate the past. But when you amputate your past, you pay a price. Part of that is the failure of empathy.⁴⁸

⁴³ Hareven, *Ha-ed*, 52-53.

⁴⁴ Shaked, Gershon. *Hasipur Ha'ivrit (Hebrew Narrative Prose)* Volume 4. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Hakkibutz Hameuchad and Keter, 1993. P. 130.

⁴⁵ Holtzman, Avner. *Ahavot Tsiyon : panim be-sifrut ha-Ivrit ha-hadashah*. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2006, P. 580.

⁴⁶ Brenner, “Discourses of Mourning”, 73.

⁴⁷ Ramras-Rauch, *Facing the Holocaust*, 15.

⁴⁸ Chertok, *We Are All Close*, 81.