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**The Construction of Israeli Collective Memory of the
Holocaust in the Formative Years of Israel**

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Ever since the establishment of Israel, the Holocaust and the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis are always at the fore of Israeli consciousness. Reference to the Holocaust was the strongest argument for the establishment of the State of Israel; it was present in the Israeli discourse as well as in its silence.¹ In recent years, several studies have been published regarding the Holocaust recollection and its effects on the first years of Israeli society. Works such as *The Seventh Million* by Tom Segev (1993) and *Death and the Nation: History Memory Politics* by Idith Zertal (2002) have shown the Holocaust to be a major contributor to the formation of the Israeli identity.²

This paper examines the construction of Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust in the formative years of the State of Israel (1948-1967).³ My primary aim is to suggest a three-stage historical mapping, in order to reveal the gradual development in the process of the Holocaust recollection. A major theme to be examined is the attitude of the “*sabras*” (the native Israelis) towards the Holocaust survivors.

Examining several significant historical and political developments, I introduce the collective memory as an expression of a nation’s choice of knowing or “not knowing, remembering and forgetting.”⁴ I illustrate the ambivalent attitude towards the Holocaust, beginning with silence and repression concerning the destruction of the Jews, followed by the rise of moral and political conflicts.⁵ For considerations of time and space, I confine my presentation to a rather narrow framework, which provides a narrative of a concrete political evolution. Hence, my main focus is on the historical-political level and to a lesser extent on the psychological-individual level. Consequently, this narrative will not include an account of the intensity and psychological implications of the individual’s share in the collective memory of the Holocaust.

Maurice Halbwachs was the first to develop a comprehensive theory of collective memory.⁶ He asserts that “a person remembers only by situating himself within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought”.⁷ A person is never alone;

she is a social being by nature and is always “enclosed within some group”.⁸ In belonging to a group, people identify themselves with it and merge their personal past with the past of the group.

Collective memory is actually a “borrowed memory,” relying entirely upon the memory of others. Often a person recalls events that she has not experienced herself. These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, although not all individuals have witnessed them.⁹ According to Halbwachs, collective memory is a “reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present.”¹⁰ Thus, it is not always accurate - it relies on others’ stories, testimonies, and evidences.¹¹

In order to understand how collective memory works, we have to take into account not only historical knowledge or narratives but also, as Iwona Irwin-Zerecka stresses, “the construction of our emotional and moral engagement with the past.”¹² We should ask ourselves – are we willing to remember our past? How do we frame events, heroes and places? What are the “right” ways to remember? Pierre Nora emphasizes that there must be a will to remember. An absence of remembrance is also a part of collective memory. Hence, as Halbwachs argues, collective memory is always selective.¹³

Memories, Halbwachs underlines, are localized in space and time; with this arises the following significant question: what are the relations between history and collective memory? The latter, according to Halbwachs, “retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. By definition it does not exceed the boundaries of this group.”¹⁴ Moreover, he stresses, there are several collective memories, whereas there is only one unitary history.¹⁵ Hence, the need to write history arises when there are no more testimonies left of certain events or a period.

Other questions that are left to be asked are: “who owns collective memories?”¹⁶ What are the relations between the collective memory and the individual memories? As Wagner-Pacifici emphasizes, collective memory often brings “public event-memories and private memories together.” Thus, she continues, there are “inevitable tensions and, potentially, contradictions

experienced when private individuals enter public arenas.”¹⁷ While examining the construction of Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust, I will illustrate these kinds of tensions and contradictions.

In order to understand the construction of Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust in the formative years of the State of Israel, we must first examine the period that preceded, namely the period of the “*yishuv*” (the Jewish settlement in Palestine). Hence, the **first stage** in the historical mapping I present is **1933-1948**, from the rise of the Nazis, through the Second World War, until the Israeli Declaration of Independence. This stage introduces a historical background and deals with the attitude of the *yishuv* towards the Holocaust and its survivors.

The harsh events in Germany were known to the Jewish leadership in Palestine from the early 1930’s, however, the *yishuv* had to deal with its own problems, for instance, the political fate of Israel, security matters and immigration to Palestine. Towards the end of 1942, the fact that Jews were being systematically murdered by gas was known to both the Jewish Agency and the *yishuv*’s leadership. In March 1943 the extermination of the Jews was at its peak.¹⁸

Interestingly enough, in his book *The Seventh Million*, Segev mentions that “the Holocaust was often spoken of in the past tense,”¹⁹ either at the beginning of the Holocaust or when it was at its height. One example of the inclination to exile the Holocaust “from real time into history”²⁰ was the planning of memorials for the victims, sometimes when they were still alive. For example, the idea to establish “*Yad Vashem*” – today known as the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority – came about in 1942.²¹

Broadly speaking, the relations between the *yishuv* and the Holocaust survivors were poisoned by mutual accusations and a sense of guilt. The native Israelis felt a “psychological detachment” from the European Jews during the Holocaust, and many survivors blamed the *yishuv* for not doing enough to rescue them. The *yishuv*, on the other hand, was not always interested in the survivors’ suffering, and expressed harsh criticism and resentment against the

victims' behavior during the Holocaust.²² The phrase “like lambs to the slaughter,”* which was coined by Abba Kovner, already in 1941, became over the years an expression of a “national trauma.” This phrase was often used by the *yishuv* in order to express what they considered a passive and humiliating behavior of the victims during the Holocaust, as against the “Zionist heroism in the Land of Israel.”²³

From the very start there was a great difficulty for the native Israelis to understand the meaning of the survivors' stories “as part of their personal experience.”²⁴ The survivors came from a completely different world, from ‘another planet,’ and there was often no readiness or ability to listen to and believe their stories.²⁵ The testimony of the survivors was unprecedented; they told things that had never been heard before: it was a description of “radical evil,” to use Hannah Arendt's expression.²⁶ Hence, the survivors, those men and women who “live beyond the boundary of life,”²⁷ were ‘forced’ to completely change their personality in order to be part of the new society.²⁸

After the arrival of the Holocaust survivors, “a kind of ideological-emotional compact”²⁹ was built between the Israelis and the survivors. As Segev emphasizes, several significant assumptions constituted the basis of this compact. One assumption, as Segev formulates it, was: “the less everybody talked about the Holocaust, the Better.” This assumption led to an unspoken agreement of silence regarding the Holocaust.³⁰ Another assumption, which over the years became a major part of the Israeli “memorial culture,” was about the role of Jewish heroism during the Holocaust. Hence, the emphasis of the ghetto uprisings contrary to the extermination of Jews was a primary characteristic of the Zionist narrative,³¹ which found expression in the following stages, to be discussed below.

The **second stage is the first generation of the State of Israel (1948-1958)**, characterized as “a memory without subjects of the memory,”³² in which the voice of the survivors has been silenced. The ambivalent attitude towards the Holocaust in the formative years of Israel was in

* Abba Kovner was an Israeli poet and a Holocaust survivor, who took part in the uprising in the Vilna Ghetto.

many ways a continuation of the *yishuv*'s treatment of that event. A significant distinction, offered by Avihu Ronen, is between the political level and the social level of the attitude towards the Holocaust.³³ Concurrently, and not necessarily subject to each other, we notice two different phenomena.

On the national-political level, the Holocaust received an honorable place as a major historical event, which greatly impacted the establishment of the Jewish state and its nature. The Holocaust was mentioned in the Israeli Declaration of Independence as one of the state's sources of legitimation. It constituted the judicial-moral basis for the claim of reparation from Germany, which made it possible for the young state to establish its economic stability. The Holocaust appeared as a political issue in election campaigns, especially that of 1955, in which one of the major issues was the Kastner affair (as I will discuss later).³⁴

On the social and personal levels, however, the issue of the Holocaust was repressed to the margins of society and culture. Israeli society's attitude towards the survivors was often patronizing. The survivors, who were recognized as the symbol of the Jewish Diaspora, were forced to change their identity and adopt a new one. They were regarded as the negation of the deeply rooted, strong, "new man", or perhaps "new Jew," created in Palestine. Furthermore, the Israeli state was not able in its first years to deal with the Holocaust experience and the persons who survived it, as it needed soldiers, workers, and peasants.³⁵

Nevertheless, along with these steady aspects of Israeli society's attitude towards the Holocaust, we notice a trend of change, initiated with the Israeli "Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950." This law was the first political legislation concerning the Holocaust, and in fact the first public discussion of the issue.³⁶ The change is also evident in the extreme outcry that arose following the negotiation over reparation between Israel and West Germany (1951-1952),³⁷ and finally, in the crucial influence of the Kastner affair (1954). Kastner was a Jewish Hungarian leader and a *Mapai** party's candidate to the *Knesset* (the Israeli parliament)

* *Mapai* was the labor party that was the ruling party in the first three decades of Israel.

who was accused of collaboration with the Nazis.³⁸ As a result of the Kastner trial, the “great silence” regarding the Holocaust was broken.³⁹ Both the Kastner and the reparation affairs, constituted the beginning of a process of solidarity and identification with the Holocaust survivors.

The trends of change in Israeli society’s attitude towards the Holocaust regained strength during the **third stage, the second generation of the State of Israel (1959-1969)**. The first significant event was the enactment of the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day Law (1959). It was then that Israel decided “to formally establish the official Israeli national memory”⁴⁰ of the Holocaust.

Broadly speaking, memorial days play a primary role in the construction of collective memory.⁴¹ One might ask - for whom is this Memorial Day intended? Is it for the Holocaust survivors or for the rest of the nation? Who needs to remember? The survivors, who have been there and experienced the Holocaust, remember it anyway. They have a plain blue number tattooed on their arm to remind them of this experience until the rest of their life. As Jean Améry clearly formulated it in his book *At the Mind's Limits* (1980): “Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my forearm, something that touches the deepest and most closely intertwined roots of my existence; indeed I am not even sure if this is not my entire existence.”⁴²

One might say that the survivors, the individuals who have been “there,” do not really need a commemoration day to remind them of what they have gone through. On the other hand, the young State of Israel - the collective - had to remind itself of this significant event in its history. The purpose of the law was to create a collective identity, driven by a shared memory.⁴³ Furthermore, the law created an indispensable connection between the recollection of the Holocaust and the State of Israel. Thus, according to the official Israeli position, Israel was the sole place in which this kind of a recollection could take place.⁴⁴ Claiming exclusivity on the Holocaust by the State of Israel is a testimony of both the commitment and the responsibility of the Israeli Jews to commemorate the Holocaust.

Another significant aspect of the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day Law is that, from its initial proposal to its final version, which was passed in 1959, the intention of the legislators was to glorify the heroism of the rebels and the fighters. As Zertal stresses, the Zionist movement constructed a partition between rebellion and heroism, on the one hand, and the Holocaust and extermination on the other.⁴⁵ This ambiguous attitude is reflected in the very name of the Holocaust Memorial Day - "Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day" (*Yom Hashoah* in Hebrew).

The second major event in this stage was the Eichmann trial (1961-1962), which had tremendous publicity and political influence. It was during this trial that the commemoration of the Holocaust, which was built through a national project of legislation and education, reached its peak. Whereas in the first stage the Israeli nation establishment project seemed to suffer from "collective amnesia," to use Benedict Anderson's term, in the second stage, according to Zertal, it was a time for strengthening new memories.⁴⁶ The prevailing political needs of Israel in that period were, among others, to demonstrate its national strength and to provide the Holocaust survivors, who were the main witnesses for the prosecution, a chance to have their say. Hence, a significant change occurred during the Eichmann trial: for the first time the survivors had been allowed to tell their story on a public stage. On the other hand, other elements of the trial were a continuation of the common images and stereotypes of the Holocaust discourse. For example, integrating testimonies of fighters and partisans in the course of the trial, even though they often did not contribute a thing to proving Eichmann's guilt, strengthened the message of Jewish heroism.⁴⁷

Collective memory is a social reality but, at the same time, a cultural and political product, shaped by the changing politics and social needs of a given community.⁴⁸ Each community organizes its past according to its needs and vision. It often silences and erases bothersome events of its past, which contradict the desirable memory and consciousness of the community, in order

to build its self-image and political and cultural practices. On the other hand, it emphasizes and glorifies events that serve its interests.⁴⁹

The simultaneous presence and absence of the Holocaust in the life of Israeli society,⁵⁰ described in this paper, is compatible with this perception of the concept of “collective memory.” Constructing a three-stage historical mapping, I have tried to illustrate a gradual evolution in the process of the Holocaust recollection. What started with repression of the Holocaust and silencing of its survivors, dialectically evolved into commemoration of the Holocaust and solidarity with its “subjects of the memory.” One might ask - does the Israeli effort to construct a collective memory of the Holocaust reflect a genuine comprehension of this traumatic event, or even an attempt to arrive at one? Although this broad question is beyond the scope of this presentation, I would like to briefly refer to the relation between memory and understanding and to point out some thoughts for a further research.

Can someone who did not experience the Holocaust understand it? Can the survivors’ experience be passed on? The Holocaust, being constructed formally by the State of Israel, will always remain different from the Holocaust of the survivors. The survivors have actually experienced this major cataclysm in the history of the Jewish people as a private, concrete event. Notwithstanding, this product of collective memory, as different as it may be from the memory of the survivors, is in itself traumatic and is carried vividly in the mind and soul of most members of the younger generations. The collective memory of the Holocaust is derived from a profound need of Israel, as a nation, to deal with its open wound. It is an ever-lasting trial of self-rehabilitation, in an effort to understand its relations with the survivors, with other nations, and with its own identity and history.

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Notes

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- ¹ Idith, Zertal, *Death and the Nation: History Memory Politics* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, Publishing House, 2002), pp. 15-16. (Hebrew)
- ² Tom, Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 18.
- ³ Avihu, Ronen, "A Matter of Identity: Messages and Images in the Holocaust Teaching." (Hebrew) <<http://www.avihuronen.com/hebrew/articles/identity.html>> November 1996
- ⁴ Following Avihu Ronen's definition, I will use the period 1948-1967 as the formative years of the State of Israel. See: *Ibid*.
- ⁵ Robin, Wagner-Pacifi, "Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went," *Qualitative Sociology* (Vol. 19, No. 3, 1996), p. 307.
- ⁶ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, p. 11.
- ⁷ Suzanne, Vromen, "The French Panthéon: A Study in Divisiveness," *JAMALS* (Spring 1995), p. 27.
- ⁸ Maurice, Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 33.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 34.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 51.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 69.
- ¹² *Ibid*, pp. 69, 71.
- ¹³ Iwona, Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 7.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 7-8, 11, 13-14.
- ¹⁵ Nora, Pierre, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* (Issue 26, Spring 1989), p. 19.
- ¹⁶ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 80.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 83.
- ¹⁸ Wagner-Pacifi, "Memories in the Making..." p. 308.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 312.
- ²⁰ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, pp. 64, 75.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p. 103.
- ²² *Ibid*.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 104.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 181, 183.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 110.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 77.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 155, 159.
- ²⁸ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 85.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 81-82.
- ³⁰ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, pp. 169-170.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, p. 185.
- ³² *Ibid*.
- ³³ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 54.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 128.
- ³⁵ Ronen, "A Matter of Identity: Messages..."
- ³⁶ *Ibid*.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*.
- ³⁸ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 91.
- ³⁹ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, p. 196.
- ⁴⁰ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 120.
- ⁴¹ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, p. 185.
- ⁴² Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 125.
- ⁴³ Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁴ Jean, Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 94.
- ⁴⁵ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 127.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 61-63.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 139.
- ⁴⁹ Ronen, "A Matter of Identity: Messages..."
- ⁵⁰ Zertal, *Death and the Nation*, pp. 42-43.
- Ibid*, pp. 29-30.
- Ronen, "A Matter of Identity: Messages..."