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RETHINKING THE HOLOCAUST NOVEL IN YUGOSLAVIA: FROM HINKO GOTTLIEB TO ALEKSANDAR PETROV'S *LIKE GOLD IN FIRE*

Since the works of Hinko Gottlieb marking its inception, Yugoslav Holocaust literature has evolved through several phases which we seek to identify and explain in terms of a double perspective – one showing traits it shares with the global development of Holocaust literature and another showing certain specifics of this corpus in the Yugoslav literary framework. Special attention will be dedicated to one of the key issues of Holocaust literature – the complex relationship between fact and fiction, documentary material and the literary devices used to process it and produce literature, the latter viewed in contrast to testimonial writing. The final goal is to show why Aleksandar Petrov's novel *Like Gold in Fire* holds a key position in the process of rethinking the Holocaust novel, especially in the post-Yugoslav period.

Keywords: Holocaust literature in Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav period, fact and fiction in historical and Holocaust novels, testimony and memoir versus fictional narratives, the Holocaust in meta-narration

1. The beginnings of Holocaust literature in Yugoslavia. Writing in real time

Holocaust literature is as old as the Holocaust. This is certainly true for Yugoslavia, where the works of Hinko Gottlieb (1886–1948) mark the inception of Holocaust literature. Gottlieb was a Yugoslav Jewish writer, lawyer, editor and translator living in Zagreb. He began writing and publishing stories on the persecution of Jews in Hitler's Europe two years prior to the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia and continued writing during the Holocaust. Gottlieb was arrested in Zagreb in early May of 1941, very soon after the invasion of Yugoslavia by the Axis Powers on April 6, the capitulation of the country, its dismemberment, occupation, and the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia on April 10. His fate testifies to the variety of Holocaust experiences in Yugoslavia: he experienced a Gestapo jail in Vienna, a concentration camp in the Italian occupation zone (Kraljevica), he joined the ranks of the Partisans, and towards the end of the war was evacuated to the allied base in Bari, from where he emigrated to Palestine.² During the Holocaust, he wrote poems, plays, stories, and a novel. Gottlieb is best known for his short story "Kaddish in the Serbian Forest" and his novel *The Key to the Great Gate*.

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2 Together with other Yugoslav Jewish lawyers arrested at the same time, he was deported to the *Staatsspolizei* in Vienna. After his release, he went back to Zagreb, but was soon deported to the Kraljevica concentration camp (in the Kvarner region) held by Italian authorities and later to a camp on the island of Rab. Following the collapse of Italy, he joined the Partisans. In 1944 he was sent by the Partisan authorities to Bari, where the Allies had established their base, and from there he emigrated to Palestine, where he passed away in 1948. Gottlieb had two sons. The elder, Danko, was arrested by the Ustasha in May 1941, deported to the Danica camp, then to Jadovno, where he was killed. The younger son, Vlado, lost his life in an accident in Bari.

During the Holocaust, 85% of the Yugoslav Jewish community perished in death camps in Germany and Poland (Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau), death camps in the Independent State of Croatia (Jadovno, Danica, Djakovo, Jasenovac, Pag, Rab), the Judenlager Semlin (run by German occupation authorities on ISC territory), in mass shootings (in Serbia). Many of those deported to POW camps survived, others survived by fleeing to safer places, by hiding and living under false identities, or by joining the ranks of the Partisan armed resistance.

In conditions of existential threat, few wrote Holocaust literature³ in real time. Those who did, mostly wrote diaries. The diary as a genre was able to endure Holocaust conditions better than others, so it is a major generic representative of Holocaust literature written in real time. However, this type of Holocaust narrative is represented by few Yugoslav authors. Hanna Levi Hass was a Sephardi from Sarajevo who wrote about her experience in Bergen-Belsen 1944–1945.⁴ Evgenije Ženja Kozinski was born to Russian Jewish parents who emigrated to Yugoslavia. He wrote about life in German POW camps, where he was killed. His diary was published posthumously (see Vidaković Petrov 2015: 88–136). Lea Abinun and her fiancé Ervin Sulzberger fought in two separate Partisan units. Both wrote diaries and survived the war (their diaries were published recently). Milojka Mezorana was arrested in Rijeka and later deported to Auschwitz. Their contributions to Yugoslav Holocaust literature are very valuable, but just as the works of Hinko Gottlieb, up until recently, they were almost unknown, either because it took a long time to get them published or because their publication attracted scarce attention. Until recently, they were relegated to the margins of Yugoslav mainstream literary history.⁵

2. Transition from documentary to fictional genres

Holocaust literature written in real time tends to be documentary and autobiographical. In this respect, Gottlieb was a clear exception because his opus included poetry, a play, short stories, and a novel (begun during and completed after the Holocaust).

In the early post-war period, the diary genre gave way to other forms of documentary narratives, namely, autobiographies and memoirs, both relying on recollection and implying mediating factors affecting memory. Written by Holocaust survivors, their essential veracity was not questioned despite possible and unintentional failures or distortions of memory. Nonetheless, this period brought a shift from purely documentary/autobiographical genres to hybrid genres that featured an ever-stronger fictional element.

Stanislav Vinaver, one of the best Serbian Jewish writers from the interwar period, published his book *Years of Humiliation and Struggle. Life in the German 'Oflags'* right after the war (1945) (Vidaković Petrov 2015: 100–106). Although autobiographical and documentary, Vinaver's memoir tends to be interpretative rather than descriptive, especially in passages imbued with literary references, powerful images, and rhetorical tropes. Oto Bihalji-Merin published *Good-Bye in October* (1947), based on the diary of

3 Holocaust literature in the meaning proposed by David Roskies, including not only literature as works of art, i.e. literature in the strict sense of the word, but also all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it (Roskies 2005: 166).

4 Hanna Levi-Hass "self-published" her *Diary of Bergen-Belsen 1944-1945* in 1946. "She printed the diary she had written in a tiny notebook in Bergen-Belsen and distributed it. She realized people were not overwhelmed or even interested." (Hass 2009: 28)

5 There are several reasons that provide insight into this fundamental question. However, this article is not the right place for this discussion.

Ženja Kozinski, a fellow prisoner of war, and his own notes from German POW camps where they were both interned. However, despite the factual base of the narrative, he insisted on its fictional construction and qualified it as a novel. Another example of this process of generic transition in Yugoslav Holocaust literature was József Debrezenci's *The Cold Crematorium* (1950), which reads like an autobiographical novel.⁶ Andraš Deak's documentary narrative *Under the Yellow Band* (1952) describes the massacre of civilians in Novi Sad by Hungarian occupation authorities in January 1942. Ivan Ivanji's novel *They Didn't Kill Man* (1954) is based on his experience of Buchenwald. A particularly influential work was *The Heavenly Squad* (1956), co-authored by Đorđe Lebović and Aleksandar Obrenović. It was the only play in Yugoslav Holocaust literature of the time. Lebović was deported to Auschwitz as a fifteen-year-old boy. The play focuses on key existential issues posed by the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz. An especially interesting author in this early period was Magda Bošan Simin. Her works, also based on autobiographical material, included both documentary and fictional genres. Her autobiographical novel *When the Sour Cherries Bloom* (1958) was one of the earliest examples of women's writing in Yugoslav Holocaust literature, a field of study still neglected in post-Yugoslav scholarship (see Vidaković Petrov 2018).

The sixties begin with the publication of *The Diary of Evgenije Ženja Kozinski* (1961) and the novel *The Massacre of Novi Sad* (1961) by Erih Koš, representing two poles of Holocaust writing: the non-fiction diary written in real time and the fictional novel written in post-Holocaust time.

3. Fact, fiction, and identity in Yugoslav Holocaust literature

Unlike the majority of Holocaust survivor authors in Yugoslavia, whose writing is essentially autobiographical, Koš and Isak Samokovlija chose in some instances to write about events they had not experienced or witnessed personally.⁷ In doing so they opened the consideration of a key issue of Holocaust literature⁸ that would keep reappearing in the decades to come.

Within the perspective of Jewish authors, we can distinguish several categories: (1) Holocaust survivors writing about their own Holocaust experience (based on autobiography); (2) Holocaust survivors writing about experiences of other Holocaust survivors (based on the biography of others, collective witness accounts, and historical sources); (3) authors of the 1,5 and post-Holocaust generations (based partially on personal memory, more on communicative memory, and mostly on other sources, such as books, films, etc.). If we intersect this parameter with another one – non-Jewish authors – we observe several additional categories: (4) Jewish authors writing about other victims of genocide, and (5) non-Jewish authors writing about the Holocaust.

Writers who wrote in real time – Gottlieb is a good example – certainly confronted the question of *how* to write about the Holocaust. One of the challenges Gottlieb faced

6 It was originally written in Hungarian (*Hideg Krematórium: Auschwitz regénye*). For an updated discussion see Vervaeke 2018: 12–21.

7 In one of his first postwar stories, "Praznično večer" (1945), Samokovlija wrote about the gruesome killing of a Jewish girl in Jasenovac. Samokovlija was a well-known writer living in Sarajevo prior to the war. He was spared deportation and death, most probably in Jasenovac, thanks to his medical profession. The Ustasha exempted medical doctors from the fate of other Jews because they needed their medical skills for their own purposes.

8 Here we are not taking into consideration the many examples of testimonial narratives and memoirs which proliferated in the seventies and eighties and are still supported by ongoing video projects organized by universities and other institutions.

was: how to write a play for Purim, a joyous holiday symbolizing redemption, in desperate Holocaust circumstances when the very notion of redemption was questioned. A different issue, confronting authors *not* writing in real time, was how Holocaust events could and should be represented in literary works by authors who had not witnessed or experienced them personally. It appeared discretely *a propós* the work of Samokovlija and Koš mentioned above, only to be forcefully raised by the advent of the 1,5 generation (who experienced the Holocaust as children of various ages) and the post-memory generation (children of Holocaust survivors born in the post-war period).

In his novel *Good-bye in October* (1947), Bihalji-Merin pleaded with readers to resist the temptation of identifying the 'mostly imaginary' characters with *real* people (although the informed reader could easily identify the latter as they are thinly disguised, if at all). Bihalji-Merin makes a point of distancing himself from autobiography (Vidaković Petrov 2015: 106–116). Although Bihalji-Merin's account is based on his first-hand experiences and Kozinski's diary, he deliberately seeks to fictionalize documentary material. The reason for it is his intention of stressing that his work was to be read as a novel rather than as a documentary account. The point he makes is in stark contradiction with Elie Wiesel's contention that a novel about Auschwitz is either not a novel or not about Auschwitz. Other examples also contradict Wiesel's, as well as Theodor Adorno's, observation that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.

When Erih Koš published his book *The Novi Sad Massacre*, Ivan Ivanji, who was a witness to this event as well as to the postwar trial of its Hungarian perpetrators, immediately raised the issue of fact and fiction in Holocaust literature. In his review of Koš's book, Ivanji blames the editors for failing "to guide" readers regarding the *genre* of the book as if this were the editor's and publisher's duty. Ivanji was inclined to criticize Koš for neglecting some facts, albeit not the basic ones, if his work was considered documentary. However, Ivanji is aware of complications that arise if the book is considered a novel. It stands to reason that Koš did not intend to write a testimony on the massacre of Novi Sad, which he neither witnessed nor experienced, and that his novel would be a fictional rendering of a real/historical event. Ivanji accepts this, but not without a sense of unease:

"If Koš considers this book a work of art, all these criticisms are baseless, but then he had to tell to us what it is he invented in his imagination and what is derived from the documents he used. Even I, a person relatively well acquainted with the facts, cannot tell whether some things are real or fictional, just as I cannot be sure whether Koš really saw Feketealmi's letters or invented them. (Both procedures are legitimate, but the reader has the right to know and distinguish one from the other.)" (Ivanji 1962: 419)

Neither the writer nor the publisher has the obligation "to guide" the reader. Nonetheless, the reader cannot avoid wondering to which extent the events and their protagonists are real or imaginary. This, however, is a question pertaining to all narratives dealing with historical realities that have been "processed" in archives in the form of documents, preserved in oral and written testimonies, turned into information that has been selected, interpreted, and presented in the form of multiple, even opposing, narratives, filtered into personal and public memories, as well as policies of memorialization.

In the case of the Holocaust, a new aspect of this question was opened by the American Holocaust novel written by authors of various age groups, all of whom had no personal experience of the war or the Holocaust. Finally, the globalization of the Holocaust drew attention to new ramifications of this issue, especially considering the works of non-Jewish authors writing on the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish event. The Holocaust has also been represented in relation to other comparable historical situations/events – other genocides taking place during World War Two and after, but also

totalitarianism as a system (represented by the works of A. Solzhenitsin, for example). In addition, some writers shifted their interest from one aspect of the Holocaust to another. A case in point is Serbian Jewish writer Danilo Kiš. His novel *Psalm 44* deals directly with the Holocaust, but most of his other early novels are partly autobiographical and focus mainly on identity issues connected with his father who perished in the Holocaust. This is in contrast to his later work, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which marks a distancing from autobiography coupled with a linkage of the Holocaust and totalitarianism.

On the one hand, the Holocaust novel follows a shift from the initial documentary, testimonial autobiographical narrative towards a variety of new currents including the fictionalization of facts and the factualization of fiction. On the other, it features a thematic expansion or “multidirectionality” (see Rothberg 2009).

Finally, narratives dealing with the Holocaust themes tended to outgrow their initial link with authors who had experienced the Holocaust firsthand. The circle of authors expanded to include writers of the survivors’ generation who had not experienced the Holocaust, the post-generation, as well as non-Jewish writers. Regarding this last group, non-Jewish authors writing about the Holocaust appeared already in the early sixties. Among the best-known early representatives of the latter were Evgeny Evtushenko, author of the poem “Babi Yar” (1961) and Anatoli Kuznetsov, author of the novel *Babi Yar* (1966).

4. The Yugoslav war narrative and the Holocaust

The postwar Yugoslav communist authorities promoted an epic narrative of the wartime struggle against the enemies of the Allies – Nazism, Fascism, and the Axis Powers. The epic aspect was based on the Partisan armed resistance led by Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. This dominant narrative also had a strong ideological strain as the war against the common international enemy was linked to the struggle against the local enemies standing in the way of the Revolution. Another specificity of Yugoslavia was the multiethnic and multireligious structure of its population. The main problem was the wartime Nazi Independent State of Croatia that had designed and implemented its own racial policy consisting of the “cleansing” of the “healthy Croatian national body” of the “malignant” elements identified racially and ethnically as Serbs, Jews, and Roma. The postwar political slogan “brotherhood and unity” sought to resolve the memory of this multiple genocide by establishing artificial “balances”, diverting attention to the postwar rebuilding of people’s lives, insisting on the reconstruction of the country, moving forward, looking towards the future, and obliterating ethnic markers from the overall wartime narrative. Thus, both perpetrators of crimes and their victims were identified only as such, while highlighting their ethnic identities became politically incorrect. Political incorrectness in this respect was immediately labeled as “nationalistic”, “chauvinistic”, “hostile propaganda”, and was legally sanctioned.

This is part of the explanation of why Yugoslavia failed to develop a stronger tradition of the Holocaust literature despite its history of World War Two genocide and the Holocaust. Authors avoided the theme for a variety of reasons, mainly political, but non-political as well. The dominant model of writing was to “tread lightly” and avoid stepping on others’ feet. Or to “clean own’s own yard”, avoid stepping into someone else’s yard but hoping they will do the same. Although Serbs and Jews were persecuted on the same basis and exterminated in the same way in the Independent State of Croatia, one can detect a sort of hesitation of Jewish writers to write on Serbs and vice versa. The only ones who refused to adhere to such political correctness were the survivors

who did not allow any editing of their firsthand experiences. The legitimacy of writing about the common fate of these victims was rooted in real time reality. Jewish survivors of Jasenovac, for example, testified about Serb fellow inmates who were far more numerous in the camp. In these testimonies there is no line distinguishing the genocide of Serbs from the Holocaust of Jews because the same fate, extermination, awaited both.

5. Jasenovac and how to write about it

However, there is a key difference between testimonial (documentary) literature and fiction. We have already highlighted this issue regarding Koš's novel about the Novi Sad massacre and Ivanji's critique of the latter. The Jasenovac system of camps, run by the *Ustasha* government of the Independent State of Croatia, was by far the largest and most bestial killing site on Yugoslav territory. However, in contrast to the large number of testimonies provided by survivors and historians, there are relatively few works of fiction referring directly and mainly to this theme and even fewer of prime literary merit.⁹ Considering the large number of Jews exterminated in Jasenovac, it is somewhat surprising that so few Yugoslav Jewish authors have written literary works about it. Isak Samokovlija, a Holocaust survivor, was one of them. He wrote about Jasenovac in a story titled "Holiday Evening".

The same holds true for Yugoslav non-Jewish writers. We will mention some of them based on the bibliography compiled by Jovan Mirković. Firstly, there are novels written by Jasenovac survivors: *Lump of Sun* (1958) and *Man Hunt Jasenovac* (1985) authored by Zaim Topčić (from Bosnia, a Partisan who was captured and interned in Jasenovac); *No Return* (1955) by Vladimir Čerkez (a Jasenovac inmate who later joined the Partisans); *Around Europe Through Barbed Wire* (1973) and *Hell by the River* (1986) by Đorđe Đurić (interned initially in Stara Gradiška and later in camps in Germany and Poland). Vojin Jelić belongs to the same generation, but it seems that his work *We Will not Let you Die* (1961) is not based on his personal experience of the camp. The 1,5 generation is represented by Ljubo Jandrić and his novel *Jasenovac* (1980). The post-war generation features Goran Čučković with his novel *The Eating of Gods* (1988). There are more examples regarding hybrid genres such as *Djevojka na grkim tlima* (1961) by Milan Nožinić (a novel based on the biography of Nada Dimić, a communist heroine killed in Jasenovac), *Operation Guardian* (1958) and *A Trap for the Slaughterers* (1975) by Goran Vuković (about the capture of Ustasha criminals from Jasenovac), and *Just do Your Job, My Son* (1999) by Goran Babić (Mirković 2000: 329–333).

Political correctness may be one of the reasons for such a small number of literary works on Jasenovac. However, another reason, a non-political one, was the perplexing question of *how* to write fiction on real life events imbued with almost unimaginable horror, how to create fiction essentially reflecting such a reality and how to make it convincing in literary terms? Samokovlija was aware of these issues. "Holiday Evening" is about the slaughtering of a Jewish girl by an *ustasha* just to prove to another one that her young age, beauty, and innocence could not prevent him from killing her.¹⁰ As mentioned above, Samokovlija had no personal experience of Jasenovac. The event

9 The recent film *Dara of Jasenovac* reminded the public that this was the first film on this topic made by a Serbian director. Unlike films on the epic struggle of the Partisans and the cult of Tito, which received full state support and were followed by international acclaim, the few films on Jasenovac that were made had little or no impact in the public domain.

10 „Dvije su ruke bile spremne svaka na svoj pokret. Pokreti su bili snažni i jedan i drugi. Jedna je ruka zgrčila prste i zarila se u bujnu Rikinu kosu, potegla je glavu unatrag, a druga je držala nož, vješto i zrački, mirno i sabrano, i klala je. Nož je prelazio s jedne strane na drugu kao da režeš dinju. – Prskala

that motivated him to write the story was horrific and it was one of similar arbitrary murders that took place in Jasenovac all the time.

Such events were described by the survivors in their testimonies which the reader would accept as truthful. But would the same reader accept this truth expressed in a literary work? It is well known that when after the Holocaust camp survivors described their experiences, the general response of those who had no such experience was incredulity. The truth about what survivors had experienced firsthand was often interpreted as fiction or an exaggeration and distortion of their memories. Samokovlija's narrator, whom many readers would identify with the author, needed to stress that the account was factual, not fictional, but that it had been witnessed by someone other than the narrator. The story, therefore, opens with the sentence: "A friend told me..." and a *quote* from the account of an anonymous witness:

"... Yes, it happened in summer... It was one of their holidays... Seven or eight of them were seated at a table... Yes, something happened in that hell on earth. Thousands of horrors and dreadful things happened all the time, by day and at night and at every step, and this small and little thing also happened..." (Samokovlija 1984: 238–239)

Jandrić's *Jasenovac* stands out as the novel on this topic with high literary merits. Jandrić was deported to the camp as a child and therefore had some memories of that horrific experience. Nonetheless, he spent ten years researching archives and all sorts of documents in order to write this novel. He too needed to base his story on historical evidence provided by documents and firsthand testimonies. However, his choice of genre – the novel – and of the character-narrator – identified as a perpetrator rather than a victim – points to the "most obvious fictional ingredient of the novel", as emphasized by Zdenko Lešić (Lešić 1984: 15).¹¹ Therefore, Jandrić's novel highlights two problems regarding writing on genocide and the Holocaust. The first one, as mentioned above, was the need of those who were neither survivors nor witnesses to base the story (fiction) on history (fact) by relying on documents, testimonies, and memoirs. The second problem appeared in terms of literary devices and rhetoric. In other words, it had to do not with what to tell but with how to do it.

Regarding the first problem, if we position Jandrić's novel on one extreme end, Ivo Andrić's story "The Titanic Bar" could be positioned on the opposite. Obviously, there is a significant generic difference between a 500-page novel and a short story, but we would like to focus on an issue not directly influenced by the latter. On comparing Jandrić's novel to Andrić's "The Titanic Bar", the first thing one notices is a shift from the sweeping realistic rendering of the camp to a deliberately minimalist rendering of several almost stereotyped scenes. In addition, there is a shift from a wide array of characters participating in a large number of events to only several scenes and a focus on only two characters, both frustrated, unaccomplished and socially marginal: an *ustasha* and a Jew. Andrić is from the very beginning of the story interested primarily

je krv na sve strane. – Vidite li kako se i ova može lijepo da zakolje! – rekao je koljač mirno." (Samokovlija 1984: 249)

11 Lešić highlights the ambivalent nature of the narrative technique in *Jasenovac*: "Međutim, Jandrićev postupak *ich*-forme pomalo je ambivalentan, jer čak i onda kada potpuno prepušta riječ logorniku Jakovu, Jandrić nije uvijek dosljedno pratio način njegovog mišljenja i istražavanja (...) Čas čujemo naratora, čas onaj drugi glas, doista glas njegovog oporbenika, koji se objavljuje u ironičnom komentaru, u protestu, u zgražanju, u užasnutosti, ili pak likovanju moralnog raskrinkavanja (...) Ne smatram da je Jandrić kroz cijeli svoj dugi roman uspijevao da održi diskretni paralelizam te ambivalentne, paradoksalne i ironičke *ich*-forme..." (Lešić 1984: 19–20).

in the characters' states of mind played out in their fateful encounter, thereby minimizing the need for documentary props.

Andrić sees their relationship as a variation of a paradigm he described in another one of his works – *The Bridge on the Drina*. At the end of this novel, Andrić describes the social and political situation which breeds hate and makes possible socially permitted (even instigated) violence. The comment refers to the fate of the Serbs following the 1914 assassination in Sarajevo which laid bare a long-standing hatred of Austro-Hungarians towards Serbs:

“As it often happens in the history of man, violence and pillage are tacitly condoned, killings also, under the condition that they be implemented in the name of higher interests, under certain slogans, over a limited number of people of a certain name and conviction. A man of pure spirit and open eyes who lived in these times could see how this miracle was performed and how society as a whole changed overnight.” (Andrić 1963: 306).

It is paradigm referring to World War One in *The Bridge on the Drina* and to World War Two in “The Titanic Bar”. This is why the documentary aspect of “The Titanic Bar” does not play a key role in Andrić's story as it does in Jandrić's novel.

Lastly, although the Holocaust was a marginal topic in Andrić's opus, this writer should be considered as the predecessor of non-Jewish authors writing on the Holocaust in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav literatures.

6. *Like Gold in Fire*

Aleksandar Petrov is the first non-Jewish Yugoslav writer after Andrić to place the Holocaust in the center of one of his works – the novel *Like Gold in Fire*. Jewish themes had been present in Petrov's poetry for a long time before that and continued appearing after the novel was published. His poem “Warsaw. Jerusalem” (1985) is one of the best and most compressed expressions of the Holocaust, while another one of his poems, “The Wailing Wall”, is intertextually linked with the novel *Like Gold in Fire*.

In his novel, Petrov followed Andrić in one important respect. Andrić highlighted variants of the same historical paradigm in two of his works – *The Bridge on the Drina* and “The Titanic Bar” – with reference to two wars affecting the Balkans – World War One and World War Two, respectively. Going a step further, Petrov integrates two variants of this paradigm into a single work, *Like Gold in Fire*, where the first variant involves World War Two, while the second refers to the civil war in Bosnia 1992–1995. The complex narrative structure of this novel makes possible the dual manifestation of this paradigm. In addition, it enables the thematization of key issues of writing Holocaust literature, introducing a meta-discursive level in the narrative. The novel is basically structured by the technique of “story within a story” or more precisely “narrative within a narrative”. This implies an *interior narrative* nested in an *exterior narrative* that frames, contextualizes, and comments on it (introducing a meta-discursive perspective)

The *interior narrative* is a short novel presenting the history of a Jewish family in the Balkans (Yugoslavia). The family history covers roughly half a century: from the death of the matriarch Ruth in 1890 to the death of her grandson Solomon, alias Monika, in 1944. The narrative is focused on the character of Solomon – his childhood in Sarajevo, student days in Belgrade and Paris, his dedication to art (painting and music), his transfer to Belgrade in 1941 as a “foreign” correspondent (just in time to witness the Military Coup of March 27 and the bombing of Belgrade by Nazi Germany on April 6, 1941), his return to Sarajevo and, finally, his death in Jasenovac. The

author of this novel, his niece Laura, is a representative of the fourth generation of this family. Laura Opriško (pen name Vujanov) is a young woman from Sarajevo. Her background is Jewish, Serbian, and Russian. Her novel is titled “War and Unrest”. Its Serbian rendering, “Rat i nemir”, contains an ironical allusion to the classic *War and Peace*, suggesting also that Balkan history is a succession of war and unrest rather than war and peace.

However, Laura is introduced as a character-narrator in the exterior narrative, which evolves as an encounter and dialogue between her and the main character-narrator, who is anonymous but resembles in some respects the author of the novel, Aleksandar Petrov. He comes from a family of Russian emigrés in Belgrade, but he has been living for many years in the United States.¹² He introduces the diasporic perspective rooted in the general theme of migration and exile so characteristic of the 20th century. Memory plays a key role in his perspective. In this dialogic novel, his perspective, however, is intersected with Laura’s perspective highlighting generational and gender differences, but also a shared historical awareness and need to link reality and literature in the novels they want to write – he about the ongoing conflict in Bosnia – which he had not experienced – and she about the Holocaust which she must reconstruct from the few traces left in family memory. Thus, the exterior narrative is, among other things, a dialogue between two writers, both confronting the issue of *how* to write about historical events – one that happened in the past (World War Two and the Holocaust) and another ongoing conflict (in Bosnia 1992–1995).

The dialogue on this issue is highlighted in the chapter titled “Discourse on the Method”, an obvious reference to René Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. Unlike the French philosopher, the two writers seek “the truth” in fiction rather than in sciences, in an attempt to resolve an old issue in art posed over and over again by the Holocaust literature. Here, the Holocaust is the topic of a meta-narrative as the two characters discuss how they would approach this issue and how other writers have done so, including Yugoslav writers (I. Samokovlija, I. Andrić, Lj. Jandrić, D. Kiš), survivors (N. Nikolić), foreign writers (P. Celan, V. Shalamov, J. L. Borges, J. Brodsky), and critics (T. Adorno, M. Krleža). Thus, writing about the Holocaust, genocide, and war becomes part of the story constructed in the dialogue of the character-narrators. The meta-discourse of this chapter illuminates subsequent segments of the narrative with a discrete ironic light, and lastly, it reminds the reader of the essential nature of the literary text, including the novel *Like Gold in Fire*.

Like Gold in Fire presents two approaches to writing about war and the Holocaust, but we will refer only to the one reflected in “War and Unrest”, the interior novel presented as the family history of the “author” Laura Vujanov. In this narrative she appears as a heterodiegetic narrator. The real author, Aleksandar Petrov, uses several types of documentary sources in the construction of the characters and the story. Some characters are modeled after real life personalities,¹³ while others are completely fictional.

12 He is a friend of Laura’s mother Meli, who found refuge with his family in Belgrade during the Holocaust in 1941. Meli is a symbol of the linkage of the two historical conflicts described in *Like Gold in Fire* and the encounter of her friend exiled in the United States and her daughter who found refuge in Belgrade.

13 One of the main female characters, Esther, is modelled partially on the personality of Laura Papo Bohoreta (1891–1942), a Sephardic writer from Sarajevo. Papo spent part of her childhood in Istanbul where she attended the French school Alliance Israélite Universelle. This explains Esther’s appreciation of Paris, where her son Solomon would stay for his university studies and art education. Another key female character, Meli (Laura’s mother) is a combination of two real people whom the author, Aleksandar Petrov, knew personally. Other characters, such as artists and writers in Belgrade and Paris (Tin Ujević,

The settings are partly real and partly fictional. For example, the encounters and socializing of artists and writers in the restaurant of the Moscow Hotel in Belgrade reflect real people and events documented in historical and literary studies (some of them authored by Aleksandar Petrov) and memoirs of the participants. The central male character, perhaps inspired by Moni de Buli, plays a key role. This character develops a very interesting personality which represents the young intellectual elite of this generation in interwar Yugoslavia. The segments regarding the Coup of March 27 and the Nazi bombing of Belgrade on April 6, 1941, are based on historical sources and Petrov's personal experience. The foreign journalists appearing in this segment are real and the narrative is based on their writings, which Petrov himself researched and presented at an international conference in 1996 (Petrov 2011: 307–320). Solomon, a student and artist-turned-journalist, who interacts in the narrative with these foreign correspondents, is easily integrated into the setting and the vivid dialogues the latter recorded in books such as *Nor Any Victory* by Ray Brock (New York, 1942) and *From the Land of the Silent People* by Robert St. John (New York, 1942). All these sources function as embedded or implicit intertextual links that readers of the novel might or might not identify. Only one source is identified and marked as such. It consists of memoirs of Jewish prisoners about the Jasenovac extermination camp.

“War and Unrest” begins with the scene of the death of Solomon, nicknamed Monika, at the hand of the *ustashas* in Jasenovac. This first chapter is titled “Harmonica”. The fact that the name of the small musical instrument rhymes with the protagonist's nickname suggests that the man and his art (music) are inseparable even in death. The *ustashas* begin slaughtering the victims one by one, but no matter what they did to Monika, the music would not stop. The following is a quote from the final scene:

Mala noćna muzika, međutim, nije utihnula. Osluškiivali su je u čudu. Ušima nisu verovali. Zagledali su se među sobom u neverici. Prišli su mu još bliže. Ležao je na strani, držeći desnom rukom malu harmoniku među usnama. Jedan se sagnuo da je uzme. Ali je on nije puštao. Nepokretna šaka stegla je i ne da. Ne miču se usne. A svira. Jedan je potegao pušku. Nanišani su i drugi. I kao po komandi pripucali. Samo u njega. I u nju. Niko nije pokušao da pokupi ono što je od nje, male, izrešetane, ostalo (...) “Dokle misli ovaj da nas ovakvo tom svojom svirkom progoni?” – upitao je jedan saučesnik i slušalac drugog. “Valjda do groba. Tvoga i moga.” (Petrov 2009: 91–92)

“War and Unrest” ends with a chapter titled “Jasenovac” which contains quotes, marked as such, from the testimonies of the Jewish survivors of Jasenovac, published in the book *Sećanja na logor Jasenovac* (Sećanja 1972). At the end of the chapter, one of the survivors describes how one *ustasha* „selected among us 20 prisoners who had been part of the camp orchestra... Right in front of us he tied their hands on their backs and took all 34 to the Zvonara prison, where he tortured them in a terrible way during 4 days. Then at night, they took them to the other side of the Sava and slaughtered them” (Sećanja 1972: 220; Petrov 2009: 220). Thus, the fate of the fictional Monika is integrated into the fate of real victims. Monika in this way becomes real and convincing, so much so that several years after the publication of the novel, Dušan Mihalek, a well-known historian of Jewish Yugoslav music asked Petrov if he had modelled Monika's character on the real musician Erich Elisha Samlaić. At the time of writing the novel, Petrov knew nothing about Samlaić, so the correspondences between the

Moni de Buli, Salvador Dali, just to mention a few) are real and well-known figures identified by name and integrated into settings and situations that are partly real, partly fictional. Still, other characters are real individuals appearing under their real names (Mihailo Jakonić, Petrov's uncle, for example), but not public figures.

fictional Monika and the real Samlaić turned out to be amazing, albeit coincidental. Samlaić was the best expert on Jewish music in Yugoslavia and an important contributor to Gottlieb's journal *Omanut* (*Art*) published in Zagreb. He and his wife Ljerka¹⁴ tried to escape from Zemun to the Italian Zone, but the *ustashas* caught them. They were killed in Jasenovac:

Among surviving victims of the Holocaust, a legend still circulates which tells the story of how Ustashi prepared a special orgy for Elisha in 1944. Allegedly, they made a pyre, tied him onto it, set fire to the pyre, and then they threw him a violin and shouted: "Play now, you Jew!" And he took the violin and played: Hatikva ("Hope"), the modern national anthem of Israel. And he burned with this melody at the age of 30.

The truth of this legend has been denied not only by the members of his family, but by his friends as well, and by Alexander Sharon who wrote it down. In the novel by Alexander Petrov *Kao zlato u vatri* (*Like Gold In Fire*), there is the shocking death scene of Monika which uncannily resembles this legend, although it is purely the writer's fiction. Nothing has been proved, but much has been forgotten: above all, Elisha Samlaich is completely absent from every dictionary, encyclopedia and history textbook in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, as well as from concert programs. This text represents an attempt to rescue him from oblivion. (Mihalek 2008)

7. Conclusion

Since the works of Hinko Gottlieb, Yugoslav Holocaust literature has gone through various phases: from real time writing and the dominance of the diary as a genre of documentary literature, to the shift from autobiographical, testimonial, and memoir writing to fiction and mediation by more sophisticated literary devices and techniques, to a general expansion of scope and approaches. The initial strong autobiographical marker of Holocaust literature started to recede with the appearance of authors belonging to the war generation but who had no personal experience of the Holocaust, then the so-called 1,5 generation, after them the post-memory generation, the incorporation of non-Jewish writers among the authors of Holocaust literature, and finally the appearance of "multidirectionality" in this literary corpus.

Within the global network of Holocaust literature, Yugoslavia featured some specific traits, such as the incorporation of Holocaust literature into the dominant war narrative promoting the epic image of the struggle of the armed Partisan resistance and an ideologized interpretation of the struggle itself. An additional feature, specific for Yugoslavia, was the blurring of ethnic, national, and racial markers of victims and domestic perpetrators (in contrast to foreign ones). This is reflected in the fact that the largest and worst killing site on Yugoslav territory, the Jasenovac system of camps in the Independent State of Croatia, is very much under-represented in postwar Yugoslav art, including literature and film.

The issue of the relationship between factual and fictional elements in historical, including Holocaust narratives, was highlighted early on in Yugoslav Holocaust literature and it remained a key question of *how* to write on referential reality pertaining to a view of historical reality experienced by a person in real time, as well as the impersonal historical past mediated by data and interpretations posited in archives, memoirs, history books, etc.

14 In Petrov's novel, Monika's girlfriend is also called Ljerka, but in the novel this name is connected with a poem by the Croatian writer Anton Gustav Matoš who dedicated one of his sonnets to a woman of that name. Monika, who liked Matoš's poetry, quotes the poem to his Ljerka.

Ivo Andrić marks the integration of non-Jewish writers among the authors of Yugoslav Holocaust literature. After Andrić, Petrov was the first to place the Holocaust theme in the center of one of his works, the novel *Like Gold in Fire*. Like Andrić, Petrov relies on a paradigm of condoned social violence that links historical conflicts taking place in the Balkans in the 20th century. However, in Petrov's novel *Like Gold in Fire*, the Holocaust of World War Two and the recent conflict in Bosnia (1992–1995) both appear in the novel. This dual manifestation of the paradigm is made possible in literary terms by the specific structure of *Like Gold in Fire*, which uses the old “story in a story” device in a new way, structuring a double narrative: an interior narrative nested in an exterior narrative framing, contextualizing, and commenting on it. While the interior “novel” on the Holocaust proceeds as heterodiegetic narration, the exterior frame consists of homodiegetic narration, a dialogue between two character-narrators. Thus, *Like Gold in Fire* is the first Yugoslav Holocaust novel to introduce a meta-poetic discourse on the above-mentioned key issue of Holocaust literature.

Petrov has used various sources in the writing of the interior narrative, i.e. the Holocaust novel. Among them are historical sources, literary and cultural research (including his own as he is a well-known scholar in the literary field). They appear in the novel embedded in the narrative and unmarked as sources, so they function as intertextual links the reader might or might not identify. Only one source is identified and marked as such by quotation marks. These are the testimonies of Jewish survivors of Jasenovac. Thus, the main character of the interior novel, who is fictional, is blended into this discrete documentary network. Although coincidental, this fictional character resembles in many respects a real person, a forgotten Yugoslav Jewish musicologist, who was killed in Jasenovac, about whom Petrov knew nothing at the time of writing *Like Gold in Fire*. This shows how convincing Petrov's character is and how the literary devices he used in the novel produced an impressive image of the reality in question. In addition, Petrov's novel contains one of the most powerful literary scenes of individual death in Jasenovac.

Petrov's *Like Gold in Fire* marks the development of a new phase of the Holocaust novel typical of the post-Yugoslav period – the migration of the Holocaust theme into the works of non-Jewish writers. Some of the writers that followed on this path are Daša Drndić, Miljenko Jergović, and, most recently, Igor Marojević.

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НОВО САГЛЕДАВАЊЕ РОМАНА ХОЛОКАУСТА У ЈУГОСЛАВИЈИ: ОД ХИНКА ГОТЛИБА ДО РОМАНА КАО ЗЛАТО У ВАТРИ АЛЕКСАНДРА ПЕТРОВА

Резиме

Дела Хинка Готлиба обележавају почетак књижевности Холокауста у Југославији. Њену прву фазу представљају дела писана у реалном времену, а њен доминантни жанр је дневник, мада управо Готлибова дела јасно одуарају од овог обрасца. Касније долази до померања од тестимонијалне књижевности с јасном аутобиографском подлогом ка фикционализацији грађе и њеној обради сложенијим књижевним техникама, при чему се већ почетком шездесетих година поставило кључно питање књижевности Холокауста, а и историјског романа уопште, које се тиче односа између документа и фикције, као и питање утицаја књижевних техника и проседа на презентацију историјске „стварности” у књижевном делу (сагледаном у контрасту према дискурсу типичном за писање које нема превасходну књижевну функцију). Југословенска књижевност Холокауста дели основне особине и следи магистралне правце развоја светске књижевности писане на тему Холокауста, али истовремено испољава и неке специфичности које извиру из друштвене и политичке средине у којој се развијала, а посебно из епског, идеологизованог и политизованог послератног тумачења ратних збивања преточених у један доминантни друштвени наратив којем се југословенска књижевност Холокауста прилагођавала. Кључно место у њеном каснијем развоју, нарочито у настанку нових форми које ће се појавити у постјугословенском раздобљу, заузима роман *Као злато у ватри* Александра Петрова, који је применио више новина у приступу овој теми и њеној књижевној обради и тиме модернизовао роман Холокауста у постјугословенском контексту.

Кључне речи: литература Холокауста у Југославији и постјугословенском раздобљу, фактографија и фикција у историјским и романима Холокауста, наративи сведочанства и мемоара наспрам фиктивних наратива, Холокауст у метанарацији

Кrinka B. Vidaković Petrov

