Humour as a Way of Dealing with the Trauma of the Holocaust

Discussion of the Use of Humour to Approach the Holocaust by Two Members of the Second Generation; Melvin Jules Bukiet and Roberto Benigni

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Were the novelists and poets and dramatists and cartoonists of the Second Generation born writers or were we compelled to write by our proximity to extremity? I don’t know. I only know that these are the stories I heard at the dinner table. Thus, rendering life with people who are capable of saying, “I’d rather be hung tomorrow than shot today. Pass the salt,” becomes one’s most enduring subject.

Melvin Jules Bukiet, Nothing Makes You Free (20)
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(27.912 words)
1. Introduction

“Why does he always smile?” “What do you want him to do? Cry? Sometimes you smile, sometimes you cry. And when you live, it’s best to smile.” (Lanzmann 04:10:04-09)¹ This noteworthy statement is expressed in Claude Lanzmann’s interview with Mordechaï Podchlebnik, a Polish Jew who was imprisoned in the concentration camp of Chelmno (USHMM)². There, he recognised the bodies of his wife and children when unloading the corpses from the gas van (USHMM). This statement is particularly remarkable because of the combination of humour and trauma and its remarkableness is emphasised because of Lanzmann’s reference to it in the middle of the interview, completely out of context. One has to admit that it is indeed challenging to accept and understand this reaction, especially in a case as extreme as the Holocaust. Why does Podchlebnik, and so many others, seek solace in humour after this event that “stands as the defining mark of the twentieth century”? (Berger and Cronin 9). Is it a way of making the remembrance bearable, or rather a way of escaping it?

The difficulty of accepting this contradictory behaviour has been illustrated by numerous incidents. In February 2015, an Estonian art gallery exhibited “My Poland: On Recallin g and Forgetting”, an exhibition of eight works of contemporary art (videos, illustrations) works that discuss the aftermath of World War II in Poland and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the camps by the Allies (AFP). One of the videos that figured in the exhibition showed naked children playing tag in the gas chamber, another one showed smiling people in the death camp. The outrage after the opening was enormous and many failed to see the humour in the artist’s intentions³. While the curator perceived it as a “starting point to approach this very unpleasant and uncomfortable historical event”, Dr. Inna Rogatchi proceeded to attack not only the curator, who she considered a “nobody”, but also branded the exhibition a “boorish, arrogant, intentionally insulting mockery of the Holocaust using the genres of video, photography, comics and the other garbage” (AFP, Rogatchi).

Due to the – to say the least – indignant reactions, the gallery was forced to stop the exhibition two days after it started and offered their apologies: “The topic is difficult and emotionally exhausting. We have unintentionally insulted the local Jewish community by exhibiting these artworks. We are sorry. The time is not right to discuss historically painful topics […]” (Tartmus) Another artistic branch, literature, also gives evidence of a certain type of intolerance. Martin Amis’ novel *The Zone of Interest*

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¹ Original excerpt: “Pourquoi est-ce qu’il sourit tout le temps?” “Qu’est ce que vous voulez qu’il fasse? Qu’il pleure? Une fois on sourit, une fois on pleure. Et quand on vit, il faut sourire.”
² Claude Lanzmann is a French filmmaker, “renowned for his unprecedented ‘cinematic history of the Holocaust’, the 9 ½ hour documentary film *SHOAH* (1985)” (EGS). In this iconic work, Lanzmann addresses “questions of Jewish identity by turning to topics such as the Holocaust, openly opposing its prevailing commodification by the film industry” (EGS).
(2014), a “brutish comedy” based on the point of view of three concentration camp commanders, failed to find a German publisher because the script was not “sufficiently convincing”, however it is believed that it was rather because the book was “too frivolous” and the topic too sensitive (Oltermann and Penketh). In March 2015, it was announced that the book was finally ready to be published in German, six months after the rejection, and surprisingly enough not by a German publishing house, but by Zurich-based house “Kein and Aber” (Connolly). These illustrations show that from the moment there is a slight hint of humour; controversy is sparked. What is specifically interesting is that while some find humour in certain artistic expressions, others are indignant. This makes one question in what measures the ethical boundaries limit the artistic landscape.

There are many conflicting opinions in the literary domain on the interaction between Jewish humour and trauma. Some scholars, Ruth Wisse for example, find that too much has been said about the topic: “Almost as daunting as the corpus of Jewish humor is the supply of scholarship and commentary that threatens to overwhelm it.” (12) Wisse is distrustful of laughter and notes, “Laughter may be the best medicine, but conscientious doctors also warn against overdose.” (28) Nevertheless, if there is such an excess of studies on Jewish humour, why is it that when one consults academic material on the Holocaust, the entry “[Jewish] humour” is rarely found in the index? This is also what Alan Berger and Gloria Cronin remark in their study: “Given how little has been published on humor in Jewish American literature in the last twenty years, this essay points to the need for further such humor studies.” (9) It is curious that so many complexities prevail on the subject of humour and trauma, especially since the link between Judaism and humour is so prevalent “Humor has been so much a part of Jewish culture that any kind of activity at all is impossible without it.” (qtd. in Oring 261)

In the light of the previous remark, this thesis aims to analyse why and how (Jewish) humour is used as a way of dealing with the trauma caused by the Holocaust. The interaction between humour, trauma and artistic representations, and also the received criticism on this interaction will be at the core of this analysis. Throughout the discussion, we will argue that the use of humour when addressing traumatic events is not an inexplicable peripheral phenomenon that functions as an arbitrary and provocative leitmotiv, but that it originates from a profound psychological reasoning. We plan on exploring these issues by offering a careful reading of both theoretical works such as Saul Friedlander’s, Ruth Wisse’s and Alan Berger’s findings and two works, After by Melvin Jules Bukiet (1996) and Life is Beautiful by Roberto Benigni (1997), which serve as illustrations for the purpose of this thesis and will provide a solid foundation.

As Pearl S. Buck mentioned, “If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday”. Consequently, in order to understand the different tendencies, a discussion of the theoretical framework that lies at the basis will start this thesis. As mentioned earlier on, the “bond between the Jewish people and the joke” is inextricable (Oring 261). Over the centuries, Jewish humour has become a concept on its own and its tragic and sometimes cruel character often leaves the listener
shocked, mainly because of the confronting truthful content, for “A joke is a half-truth”, as a famous Yiddish expression says (Rovner). Therefore, we will first cast a look at the factors that influenced the origins and the evolution of Jewish humour. Next, we will move on to the modern conceptualisation of Jewish humour and to a discussion of a number of important themes that are at stake. Having discussed the ‘course of life’ of Jewish humour, we will move on to the application of humour during and after the Holocaust. In addition, how is this application received and what are the physical benefits? Thereafter, the focus shifts to the impact of the Holocaust on the Second Generation. How does this generation react to the traumas of their family’s past and how do they proceed to digest their own trauma? After this theoretical exposition, the artistic representation of the Holocaust will be explored. Melvin Jules Bukiet’s ironic remark: “Jews are good at two things: being killed and writing about it.”, clarifies the surprisingly high amount of artistic creations about the Holocaust (vii). We can confirm this by the quantity of critical opinions that arose every time a new work appeared, and still appears, for that matter. We will draw a detailed image of the conflicting opinions and thoughts that illustrate the complexity of the Holocaust and its representations. Why does one wish to artistically represent such a loaded event and what do these representations actually discuss? Moreover, why is the use of humour so regularly attacked? In the next two chapters, we will focus on the novel After by Melvin Jules Bukiet (1996) and the film Life is Beautiful by Roberto Benigni (1997). How are these works suitable illustrations of the collaboration between art, the Holocaust and humour? In order to give this question a corroborate answer, we will first analyse the atmosphere in which the works are to be situated: respectively Jewish Holocaust fiction and film. In both cases, we will give an overview of the reception, whereupon we will commence the actual analysis of the works. In the last resort, a concise comparison between the novel and the film will expound on the significant parallels and differences in regards to the thesis’ research question: for what reasons and in what way is humour applied in order to deal with the trauma caused by the Holocaust?
2. Theoretical Framework: Historical Context
2.1. Origins and Evolution of Jewish Humour

Elliott Oring states that Jewish humour is “simply that humor which has been conceptualized as uniquely, distinctly or characteristically reflective of, evocative of, or conditioned by the Jewish people and their circumstances.” (262) (emphasis added) However, we should be aware that this concept is not that “simple” at all. It is actually much more complicated than Oring gives it credit for. Establishing an exact definition of “Jewish humour” tends to be a rather hazardous undertaking, and we will see that determining its origins will turn out to be just as challenging. In her book No Joke (2013), Ruth Wisse confirms that Jewish humour is a complex phenomenon: “[…] Jewish joking is the product of an intricate culture, conceived in a Jewish language or idiom, drawing on Jewish memory, and responsive to shared experiences, especially of the deleterious kind.” (10) As Hershey and Linda Weiser Friedman point out in God Laughed (2014), many scholars disagree on what can be considered as its starting point, and this is what will be discussed in the following chapter.

Where does the Jewish joke come from? We can distinguish many opinions: some consider Jewish humour a late nineteenth-century invention; others state that it has existed since the very beginning of Judaism or that its origins cannot be pinned down. Before discussing those tendencies, one needs to mention that there are different types of humour and one must be careful not to generalize this extensive concept. Usually, Jewish humour is specifically related to self-derogatory criticism, but when we dig deeper in Jewish history, it is hard to find this typical mocking humour. The reason for this is that we are looking for a type of humour that was introduced by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), but that cannot (or hardly) be found earlier. In Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious (1916), Freud conceptualizes our current conception of Jewish humour as self-critical: “They [Jewish jokes] are stories which were invented by Jews themselves and which are directed against Jewish peculiarities.” (166) According to Freud, Jewish jokes are particularly critical of the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person, that is, (the subject’s own nation for instance). The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes […] have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. (111-12)

What Freud considers Jewish humour, however, cannot be found in literary form before the nineteenth century, according to Hillel Halkin. Of course, this does not mean that it suddenly surfaced in this century. Jokes have a particular oral tradition, which dates back to before their literary registration. In his essay “Why Jews Laugh at Themselves” (2006), Halkin goes back to the roots of Jewish self-criticism, which he finds in the medieval Arabic tradition of the “Qur’an” (also, Koran). Halkin says that this scripture is “regarded as a touchstone of literary excellence” to such an extent that the Muslim authors tried to enhance their work “with scriptural quotations […] and secular prose and poetry as well.” This practice of embellishing was called “iqtibas”, which means “lighting one coal
or fire from another—that is, heightening the beauty of one's words with the greater beauty of God's.” (Halkin) There is nothing funny to iqtibas in se, but medieval Arabic literature had comic elements too. In the course of time, it “came to be used for humorous purposes by turning Qur’anic verses into pointed doubles entendres.” (Halkin) These Arabic models were heavily influenced by medieval Hebrew literature because “a great deal was written by Jews living in Muslims lands” (Halkin). Both the Arabic iqtibas and the Hebrew iqtibas, the latter being known as “shibbuts” (insetting), are often represented in Hebrew literature during this period. Hebrew writers also borrowed the comical version of the Arabic iqtibas, “maqama”. Maqama can be described as “rhymed-prose narrative” and “lengthy, picaresque accounts that generally featured two main characters, an itinerant rogue and a narrator who relates the rogue's escapades.” (Halkin) The humorous element in these Hebrew narratives comes from “the burlesquing of religious tradition and its texts” (Halkin). The ideal world from the Bible is contrasted with life’s expectations and its realities, which provides a deeper kind of humour, the result being that the Hebrew version of maqama surpasses Arab humour. Halkin considers the Jewish historical experience one of the reasons for this surpassing:

The Qur’an promises the followers of Islam glory and dominion, and medieval Islam, which triumphantly expanded all over the world, fulfilled this promise handsomely. The Bible promises Israel the same—and Jews in the Middle Ages were everywhere a small and often downtrodden minority. If they learned to laugh at the same Scripture they fervently believed in, this was not only […] to help them “navigate the seven seas of misery,” but because contradiction, especially on a grand scale, is comic in itself. The humour in Hebrew rhymed-prose narratives should be looked at from two different directions. First of all, Halkin stresses that “this humor is no different from that of other peoples”, which contradicts Freud, who wondered if there existed another people that was capable of making “fun of its own nature to such an extent” (Freud 166). However, it also becomes unique because of the practice of “insetting”, which was mentioned earlier on. The Jew has to accept that God has disappointed him, but is also reminded that “he belongs to God's chosen, the proof being that only a Jew can understand such virtuoso games with God's Word” (Halkin). Another factor that contributes to the persistence of Jewish humour is the fact that it was “longer-lived than the comic Arabic iqtibas.” Because of their extremely conservative views, the Muslims ended their blasphemies, while the Jews never intended to do so. On the contrary, their mocking of their own faith “only grew as it spread from Arab lands to Europe” (Halkin). These traditional Hebrew narratives continued to exist until the nineteenth century (Halkin).

By outlining and structuring the complex history of Jewish humour, Halkin offers us an interesting viewpoint. He makes a clear distinction between Jewish humour as we conceive it, influenced by Freud’s conclusions, and a Judaism that goes back to “the bare foundations of biblical law” (Halkin). While Halkin’s conception presents an extensive and elaborate overview, it is still interesting to contrast this with the evolution of other, perhaps less elaborate, sources and to analyse their continuous interaction.
Elliott Oring considers Jewish humour a late invention. In his article, “The People of the Joke” (1983), Oring establishes four interesting hypotheses, which will be discussed throughout this theoretical introduction. The first hypothesis that Oring established emphasises that Jewish humour is a phenomenon that originated in the nineteenth century. Secondly, he adds that Jewish humour was a way of partaking in society and showing that the Jews belonged in it. Thirdly, Oring goes on to point out three different functions of Jewish humour. Finally, Jewish humour is considered “distinctive” because it originated from suffering and pain, which differentiates it from other “humors which are not born of despair” (266).

The first hypothesis states that “Jewish humor is a relatively modern invention. The conceptualization of a humor that was in some way characteristic or distinctive of the Jewish people begins only in Europe during the nineteenth century” (264). According to Oring, there was humour in “biblical, Talmudic, and medieval Jewish society”, but no attention was paid to its importance, and neither was there an indication “that the composers of the Bible or the Talmud or the later commentaries held any awareness of a distinctive Jewish humor.” (264-5) Even more so, Oring argues that it can be proven that the rabbis “were not particularly well disposed toward humor in general [...]” (264). Salcia Landmann also confirms Oring’s argument by saying that “[b]efore their emancipation, the Jews were actually a humourless people.” (qtd. in Ben-Amos 118) She declares that “das neue Israel ist daher witzlos wie die Bibel” (122). Oring’s and Landmann’s opinions clearly conflict with Halkin’s statement. Dan Ben-Amos, in turn, objects to Landmann’s view. He claims that “she is empirically wrong on both accounts; there was humor in biblical society and there is wit in modern Israel.” (119) Even though he has refuted opinions such as Landsmann’s that the Jews are a humourless people, he does not think there is such a thing as Jewish humour. Ben-Amos says that considering self-criticism a quality of humour is “conceptually incongruous” (121). According to him, humour is an “abstract notion” while self-ridicule is a “behavioural pattern” (121). Instead of trying to “analyse [them] in their accumulated form in literary anthologies, abstracted from their contextual setting”, Ben-Amos wants the jokes to be observed “as they are told during the communicative events of joking within the Jewish community” and in regards to “the network of the community itself” (122, 130). Ben-Amos also criticises the blind belief in Freud’s insights. While scholars not only misinterpreted these insights, they also “continued to advance hypotheses concerning the primary causes of this apparently unique type of humor. They did so without questioning for a minute the validity of Freud’s insight [...]” (115, emphasis added)

Instead of emphasising the sudden emergence of Jewish humour, Theodor Reik sees “a continuity in the social relations between Jews and other nations” (116). Because of this continuity, it is logical for Reik to link the psychic pattern he notices in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish jokes with ancient Israel (116). In this way, Reik likens “the position of the ancient Hebrews among their neighbors to that of the Jews among European nations” (116). By considering the Jewish joke a constant in Jewish history, almost an inherited psychological trait, he refutes the assumption that
Jewish humour was only a late invention and that, even if it had existed earlier on, it was not well regarded. While Reik stresses the interaction between Hebrews and their neighbours, other researchers underline the “radical difference between the relationship ancient Israel had with its neighboring peoples and the position of the Jews in European society” (Ben-Amos 117). Instead of establishing a link between the old times and the situation of the Jews in modern society, they do not see Jewish humour as “an inheritance of psychic dispositions”, but rather as a “reflection of certain given socio-economic environmental factors” (117). Consequently, they conclude that “Jewish humor is not an expression of the genius of the Jewish people, but just a particular case of a general sociological principle” (117). They see it as a more recent phenomenon, linked to the socio-economic situation in Europe. Edmund Bergler, for example, suggests that the “European ghettos and small towns bred self-ridicule in humor” (qtd. in Ben-Amos 117). Also Dan Ben-Amos thinks the Jewish psyche and “the social environment in which the Jewish people lived” are the source of self-mockery (115).

2.2. Conceptualisation and Important Themes

As we have explained in the previous section, the modern conception of Jewish humour is mainly linked to self-mockery. Otto Weininger indicates that “humor could be and was used as a criterion for bestowing or denying the status of full partnership in civilization” (Oring 266). We notice that being a part of a community, and even more so adjusting to a new community, is one of the key catalysts for Jewish humour. Ruth Wisse notes that the “representation of the Jew fallen from ancient homeland” came from deep in the Jewish psyche (16). Often, we get an image of the Jews as a people who have suffered (and suffer) immensely, wandering from country to country where they are rarely welcomed with open arms. Melvin Jules Bukiet confirms this common image in his introduction to *Scribblers on the Roof* (2006):

> [...] our greatest story is, despite its conclusion in liberation, one of generations of enslavement and death in pharaonic Egypt. All of our historical holidays – as opposed to the seasonal ones – are stories of suffering under larger empires, be they Roman, Persian, or, in the case of Yom Hashoah, German. Even Yom Ha'atzma'ut, the Day of Independence celebrating the birth of Israel in 1948, is also a story of attack by the new nation’s assembled Arab neighbors. (vii)

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4 According to the Egyptian State Information Service, the Pharaonic Era dates back to 3000 years B.C. till Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 323 B.C.

5 Yom Hashoa, or Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah, is Hebrew for “Day of (remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism.” It is held on the 27th of Nisan (April/May), unless the 27th would be adjacent to Shabbat, in which case the date is shifted by a day (Jewish Virtual Library).

6 “Held on the fifth day of the Hebrew calendar month of Iyar, *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is a modern holiday celebrating Israel's independence in 1948. Israeli Independence Day is always immediately preceded by *Yom Hazikaron* - Memorial Day for the Fallen Israeli Soldiers. The message of linking these two days is clear: Israelis owe their
Bukiet adds that while the Jews continuously suffered, and “whatever [the] cultural dynamic distinguishes between the ages and the continents” were, they also continued writing in “whatever native or diasporic language” that was available (vii-i).

In his second hypothesis, Oring goes on to point out that “[i]n the end of the nineteenth century the faculty of humor was felt to be one of the signs of a civilized humanity” (265). Therefore, Jews felt the necessity “to demonstrate that they had participated in this humanity since their emergence as a people” (265). This statement gives us the impression that the Jews used humour as a way to be part of a community, to fit in. Ruth Wisse indeed emphasizes the Jews’ insecure position during the late nineteenth – early twentieth century. According to her, “[a] Jew in mixed European company introduces an additional level of insecurity […]” (3). Because the collective identity is reinforced, “such joking necessarily calls attention to the difference between Jews and non-Jews […]” (10). By criticizing their own people, they stress what these others, non-Jews, object to: “The better the joke, the more it separates Jews from those it excludes.” (10) According to Irving Howe, the use of humour is a way of ridiculing the Jews themselves, of “poking fun at the weakness of his own people; their impatience and overconfidence” (211-2). He continues: “though a joke usually involves a thrust at someone else, Jewish humor is often a thrust at the Jews themselves” (217). Freud too mentions that the narrator of Jewish jokes is actually the “butt of his story” (Ben-Amos 112). Yet, Ben-Amos does not agree with this. He feels that “the narrators do not laugh at themselves altogether, but rather ridicule a social group within the Jewish community from which they would like to differentiate themselves.” (125) In 1983, Elliott Oring predicted that the notion of Jewish humour would persist “as long as there remain conceptualizations that fundamentally distinguish Jewish history and experience from the history and experience of a world of nations.” (271) This confirms our assumption that Jewish humour draws its strength from the differences with other nations. He clarifies that this status of always being in-between typifies the situation that the Jews are trapped in. According to him, nowadays, American Jews “find themselves caught in a social double-bind”: “they measure themselves in relationship to normative American culture”, but they also set “themselves the standards of traditional Judaism. Since they resemble none of these, they consequently indulge in a self-derogatory humor. (119) (emphasis added)

Because of Jewish insecurity, their self-criticism could be seen as a kind of defence mechanism. Martin Grothjahn sees it as follows: “[…] It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: “You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves – and even better.” (25) Oring also identifies this defensive characteristic, and sees it as a way of expressing and dealing with their suffering. In his third hypothesis, he distinguishes three characteristics of Jewish humour: it is transcendent, defensive and pathological. Even though Oring states that these distinctions are quite entangled, they do offer us an interesting perspective on the conceptualisation of Jewish humour.

independence—the very existence of the state — to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for it.” (Jewish Virtual Library)
The first characteristic is that humor is transcendent. It transcends the desolation of the ordeals that the Jews have had to endure over the centuries. Oring describes it as the “unwillingness of the individual to surrender to the impossible conditions of existence and attempts to achieve a measure of liberation from the […] forces that remain beyond one’s control.” (268) It is this unwillingness that typifies the Jews’ courage and imperturbable “optimism and zest for living.” (268) Secondly, their humor is also defensive. Oring illustrates this characteristic by quoting Adler, who defines it as a “weapon […] whereby the Jews […] have been able to survive in the fierce struggle for existence” (qtd. in Oring 268). This defensive feature can even be seen as retaliatory, as an act of vengeance. As such, Wisse notes that “the antagonism of surrounding European societies made Jews eager for the only kind of payback they could afford to indulge”, which is their wit. (4-5) The Jews’ imagination was, according to Leslie Epstein, what started the war: it was in some ways “a war against certain qualities of the Jewish imagination […]” (261). Yet, “[their] greatest imaginative leap of all” was that the Jews, instead of clinging to “vision of hell or tortured afterlife”, defended themselves against the Nazis by “comprehending, out of nothingness, a burning bush, an empty whirlwind, the “I am that I am”” (Epstein 262). Oring typifies the escape to pathology as the last characteristic, and so does Avner Ziv (Jewish Humor (1986)). This pathological aspect is an “irrational response to the Jewish condition”, supported by Freud’s opinion that Jewish jokes are critical of their own heritage (269). According to Ziv, this irrationality surfaces when “a man can no longer bear reality” (53). Ziv perceives this behaviour as “one of the mechanisms of schizophrenia” (53).

Several scholars have associated Jewish self-mockery with suppressive sentiments, such as masochism, paranoia and sadism. “The seclusion, poverty, absence of opportunity and bitterness of life in the ghetto certainly favoured psychic masochism,” according to Bergler (111). Avner Ziv defines masochism as “a psychological phenomenon which is the underlying factor in behavior that derives pleasure from humiliation and self-abuse. The reason for the self-hate […] is connected with deep and basic guilt feelings.” (7) The introduction of the word “guilt” offers an interesting view on the concept of masochism and self-mockery. According to Ziv, this feeling of guilt originates in the indestructability of the Jewish religion and faith. While the Jews have suffered numerous hardships without complaint, the impact of their misfortune is undeniable. Because they cannot blame God for this – God is never wrong – “this aggression is directed inward, that is, towards [themselves]” (Ziv 7). Since God never fails, and since He challenges relentlessly, it seems that assuming that the Jews are doing something wrong is the only solution. Ziv notes that masochism operates “as a mechanism that causes a man to forego his strength and self-dignity in order to gain love and forgiveness for aggressive impulses that he cannot express outwardly” (7). Also Theodor Reik, one of Freud’s first disciples, points out that Jewish behaviour is marked by masochistic tendencies, and even adds a paranoid inclinacion:

The masochistic attitude of ancient Israel was recognized at least in their relationship with God, whose punishment they took as deserved without complaint. They considered also the cruelty with which they were treated by their powerful neighbors as punishment for their sins, especially for deserting God. The
paranoid attitude in the form of an idea of grandeur is obvious in the Jewish claim of being the “chosen people”. There is even a subterranean tie between the masochistic and the paranoid attitude in the idea that God chastises those He loves. (qtd. in Ben-Amos 115) (emphasis added)

Especially the phrase “whose punishment they took as deserved without complaint” is a remarkable observation. Because the Jews are capable of putting up with whatever hardships crossing their path, they are in a way superior. This sense of superiority, which is highlighted by their characterisation as “the Chosen People”, contrasts sharply with their capability of resigning themselves to their fate. In this way, the Jews oscillate “between masochistic self-humiliation and [a] paranoid superiority feeling” (qtd. in Ben-Amos 115). The shift from masochism to paranoia occurs when “aggression targets social institutions rather than persons” (Dorinson 29). Dan Ben-Amos goes even further and does not perceive Jewish humour as masochistic, but as sadistic (Ziv 53). As we have stated earlier on, Ben-Amos does not believe that “self-mockery is a distinctive quality of […] the humor of the Jews” (130). The Jew does not despise the Jews’ own characteristics, but “his ability to disassociate himself from his traditional past.” (130) Therefore, he sees Jewish mocking as “a proclamation of social distance” (130).

While masochism, paranoia and sadism definitely do have their importance in the joking process, it would be short-sighted to use only one of them to characterise the Jewish joke. Perhaps, as Ziv remarks, these reactions are not pathological, but rather “a healthy element of actively coping with life.” (53)

2.3. Jewish Humour During and After the Holocaust

As we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, Ziv thinks that humour might have been a response that would have been just as normal or “healthy” as plaintive despondency, for example. However, as we have seen earlier, the Jews have been subjected to a course of life that is anything but “normal”, and their response to their sufferings is therefore even more extraordinary. Given that there was nothing much to laugh about during the Holocaust, their response to their hardships is remarkable, which Elliott Oring points out in his fourth hypothesis: “that they do laugh and jest can only signal the existence of a special relationship between the Jews and humor” (266). Even after they were the target of derision, criticism and hate, after they had to put on yellow stars, and even after they were locked up in ghettos and concentration camps, uncertain of their outcome, they were capable of keeping their heads up and fighting their way through. “Jews whose modern culture had specialized in accommodation and self-mockery, were the least equipped to imagine the pathological criminality of the Final Solution […]”, Ruth Wisse says (147). Aharon Appelfeld, well-known Holocaust survivor, also confirms the historical importance of humour: “The need for self-expression in a time of sorrow is ancient and longstanding, and is interwoven throughout the length and breadth of Jewish history.” (83) Given their sombre circumstances, and despite Ziv’s belief that it is just a human response, seeking solace in humour has definitely raised questions.
2.3.1. Laughter and Traumatic Events: Reception

As we will see in further chapters, the idea of being humoristic in traumatic circumstances has been widely regarded with suspicion. In his article “Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions”, John Morreall notices a “long tradition of prejudice against humor, especially in connection with anything as tragic as the Holocaust”. While tragedy was perceived as a grand genre, comedy was frivolous and “light”. When comedy is featured in tragedy “it is usually discounted as mere “comic relief”” (Morreall). However, Morreall looks at many playwrights, such as the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare. Instead of dividing tragedy and comedy into two separate fields, they decided to combine them since both these genres look at the same world, focusing on its problematic side. Humour should be respected as much as tragic and religious views, since it is just as serious. Therefore, seriousness and comedy are definitely not mutually exclusive. Comedy “is not “time out” from the real world; rather it provides another perspective on that world” (Morreall). This comic perspective is just as valuable as the tragic outlook. According to Conrad Hyers, comedy indeed articulates a “stubborn refusal to give tragedy […] the final say” (qtd. in Morreall). This is exactly the behaviour that one can link to the Jews: they refuse to give the Final Solution the final say.

2.3.2. The Purpose of Laughter

Despite the guarded reception of laughter in traumatic circumstances, it is very interesting to have a closer look at its benefits, more specifically at its physical consequences. But first of all, why humour? Jacqueline Garrick describes it as “a human trait that is often summoned to combat a stressful situation, whether it be to enhance a sense of belonging in a social situation (i.e., “the life of the party” or the “class clown”) or to diffuse tension” (173). One might say, “A joke a day keeps the doctor away” or “Laughter is the best medicine”, but the beneficial influence from a humorous approach actually goes much deeper than these witty sayings seem to acknowledge. Many psychologists and physiologists have agreed on the physical benefits7. Beneficial effects such as the release of endorphins can be compared to the “adrenaline rushes” that athletes experience when they “increase their heart rate and feel euphoric” (Garrick 172). Laughter can definitely be helpful and “in dark times, [it] lightens the burden” (Des Pres 218-9). It is important to mention that also after the trauma (which will be discussed more thoroughly later on) humour can be beneficially applied to let survivors digest its impact. According to Jacqueline Garrick’s theory, humour can be “a powerful

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7 Researcher Dr. Lee Berk and fellow researcher Dr. Stanley Tan, state that “[Laughing] lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, increases muscle flexion, and boosts immune function by raising levels of infection-fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called Gamma-interferon and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of well-being.” (qtd. in Wisse 250)
healing tool when [...] willing to discuss it” (169). She emphasises that “humour does not minimize the significance of a terrible event, but it does allow the survivor to see how they can cope and thrive in their environment” (169).

2.3.3. The Purpose and Characteristics of Holocaust Humour

In the previous section, we have seen that laughter is beneficial during and after (a) traumatic event(s). John Morreall mentions the following three main functions of humour during such a traumatic event, the Holocaust: a critical, a cohesive and a coping function.

Ruth Wisse points out that much of the joking might be considered as a way of freeing “some truth from within a punishing system of lies” (178). Exposing evil and striving for the good gave their struggle meaning and purpose (Appelfeld 86). Several researchers have pointed out that humour is “the most effective way to block indoctrination” (Morreal). “More than supplying pleasure, joking in extremis could also speak truth where power was wielded through webs of deception and truth was forcibly prohibited,” Wisse adds (178). She determines four concepts as unconquerable: “the German army, the British fleet, the American dollar, and Jewish smuggling” (152). The fourth might be the odd one out in this list, but “Jewish smuggling in the ghetto was a form of triumph over those who allowed no traffic in or out” (152). If the Jews had let their heads down, this would have meant that they were giving in to the incorrect system, but caving in was definitely the last thing the Jews had in mind, which is emphasised by the following pun: “God forbid that the war should last as long as Jews are able to endure it.”8 (Wisse 154) Instead of responding to their misfortune in a solemn or tragic way, humour was a method that was more “resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror” (Des Pres 220). Another joke that highlights the Jews’ perseverance and, in a way, their superiority, goes as follows:

Goebbels was touring German schools. At one, he asked the students to call out patriotic slogans.
“Heil Hitler,” shouted one child.
“Very good,” said Goebbels.
“Deutschland über alles,” another called out.
“Excellent. How about a stronger slogan?”
A hand shot up, and Goebbels nodded.
“Our people shall live forever,” the little boy said.
“Wonderful,” exclaimed Goebbels. “What is your name, young man?”
“Israel Goldberg.” (Morreall) (emphasis added)

This critical attitude was highlighted by their humoristic approach: “Finding humor in a situation is finding some incongruity [...] between the way things are and the way they should be; and that requires a critical mind” (Morreall). Morreall makes an interesting observation in saying that Hitler's

8 The original Yiddish pun goes as follows: “Opgehit zol men vern, di milkhome zol azoy lang doyern, vi lang zidn kehen oys’haltin” (qtd. in Wisse 154). It was recorded in the Ringelblum archives of the Warsaw Ghetto.
first critics were not politicians or clergy, but cabaret entertainers and newspaper cartoonists. The Great Dictator (1940), starring Charlie Chaplin, for example, alerted the United States to the dangers of Nazi Germany. Jacqueline Garrick notes that making jokes about the threatening other decreases this particular threat and danger. This individual is no longer perceived as intimidating and hence, the power balance is restored (177). The ridiculing of the enemy was particularly based on the use of stereotypes. Wisse notes that because “jokes often designate people by a single characteristic”, they depend “for its effect on brevity.” (2) Hitler and his entourage were ridiculed in numerous jokes, for example the jokes that mocked the striking difference between the Aryan ideal and the appearance of Hitler and Goebbels themselves. As Morreall notes, the Jews were once again unstoppable: they even performed a satirical play in Dachau for nearly six weeks. It seemed that the humoristic approach did not miss its goal: Hitler was horrified of being ridiculed, which is pointed out by Robert Waite in The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler (1977). Accordingly, Nazi Germany created a law “against treacherous attacks on the state and party and for the protection of the party uniform.” (Morreall) Any joke that ridiculed the Nazis was seen as an act of treason. Even listening to anti-Nazi jokes was an offence. Despite the harsh measures that were taken, provocative anti-Nazi jokes increased in numbers, which was in turn a subject for new jokes. Outside of Europe, people were less restricted to criticise and ridicule Nazi Germany. For example, in 1934, cars disguised as Nazi tanks and marchers wearing mock Nazi uniforms were featured in the Purim Adloyada parade in Tel Aviv. The description of the first function (i.e. the critical function) has explored the tension between the Nazis and their counterparts, especially the Jewish community. Within this Jewish community, Morreall discovers another function of humour: the creation of cohesion. Thus, the Jewish community did not only ridicule the enemy, but also themselves. It seems that humour is able to gather people, to connect them, and that it alleviates the burden. Several jokes illustrate this connection, one of which Ruth Wisse mentions: “Two old Jews meet in the Warsaw Ghetto, and one complains to the other of hunger, typhus and people dying like flies. “Not one of us will survive to the end of the war.”

9 For example, Hitler’s Mein Kampf was referred to as Mein Krampf (transl. “My Cramp”) and another pun went as follows: there are two kinds of Aryans, non-Aryans and barb-Aryans (Morreall). Similarly, Hitler is the object of derision in the following disparaging joke: “H[itler] is trying to imitate Napoleon. He began the war with Russia on the 22d of July, the same day Napoleon invaded Russia. But H. is already late … . They say that at the beginning of his Russian campaign Napoleon put on a red shirt, to hide the blood if he should be wounded. H. put on a pair of brown drawers.” (Des Pres 223)

10 The effects on the well-being of the prisoners was accurately described by one of the inmates: “Many of them, who sat behind the rows of the SS each night and laughed with a full heart, didn’t experience the day of freedom. But most among them took from this demonstration strength to endure their situation. […] They had the certainty, as they lay that night on their wooden bunks: We have done something that gives strength to our comrades. We have made the Nazis look ridiculous.” (qtd. in Morreall)

11 “Originating in Tel Aviv during the days of the Yishuv in 1912, the parade features floats and vibrant costumes, often with a Jewish historical or political spin. […] The name Adloyada itself is the condensed version of the Aramaic phrase: “Ad Delo Yada” – “Until one no longer knows”, the rabbinical measure for how drunk one needs to get on Purim.” (Jewish Virtual Library)
second comforts him. “Don’t worry. It’s true that you won’t survive, and I won’t survive, but we will survive.” (242-43) Sharing the joke creates an alliance between two people with the same fate hanging over them. Getting the joke “may be […] the last cultural bond among Jews headed for doom” (Wisse 243). Humour is a catalyst for unity and creates “a wider solidarity among all those who resisted the Nazis” (Morreall). According to Terrence Des Pres, Ringelblum saw in these jokes “an entrance to the hidden spirit of the ghetto through its jokes, a view of communal underlife [...]” (223). The cartoonist David Low (1891-1963), who created many anti-Nazi cartoons from the 1920s onwards, illustrates this: “If Hitler has not succeeded in establishing his New Order in Europe, certainly he has established the United Nations of Cartoonists.” (Morreall) (Appendix B) Cabarets were one of the first places where this solidarity flourished. However, it did not take long for the Nazis to forbid these activities, and they did not stop there. Many artists had sealed their own fate by performing and, as a result, were sent to concentration camps. Aharon Appelfeld notes that there was actually quite a “bustling” – if one may say so – life going on in the ghettos and camps (85). Appelfeld even says that “it did not seem like a death camp but, rather, like a summer camp for overgrown children deeply engrossed in their play” (85). By insisting on the fact that life still went on, the prisoners realised that “even the most dreadful life of all was nonetheless life” (85).

The third function of humour that Morreall mentions is one that “serves as a sword, a spiritual weapon, against the oppressors”; it allowed the Jews to cope with their sufferings. Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003), a philosopher who survived Auschwitz, said that by indulging in witty puns, the (Jewish) inmates “kept [their] morale” (qtd. in Moreall). For them to be able to cope with their circumstances, they had to dissociate themselves from the aggressors, the Nazis (cf. critical function), but also from their own situation. Little, trivial matters, “such as taking a bath”, was a way of refusing to spend much time thinking about the approaching end of their lives (Appelfeld 85). For example, the lack of food was trivialised by making jokes about it: the bombs that were dropped were called “Matzah balls” and the Soviet planes were characterised as “red hens” (qtd. in Lipman 144). Another joke that circulated was the following: “Before the war we ate ducks and walked like horses, now we eat horses and waddle like ducks.” (qtd. in Moreall) Death was also a common topic for jokes. This subject feeds “on our common anxieties” because it “sides with mortals who enjoy the advantages of life at the expense of the deceased” (Wisse 223). The prisoners adapted the maxims to local conditions. “Arbeit mach frei”, the slogan that was placed over the entrance gate at Auschwitz, was adapted to “Arbeit mach frei, fund lebn.” (Wisse 151) Morreall claims that humour in the camps “helped prisoners to face the reality of their predicament without going insane”. Victor Frankl (1905-1997), an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, describes how the prisoners tried to get through their days. In Man’s Search for Meaning (1959), he tells that he and a comrade made a pact to tell “at least one funny story about something that could happen after liberation” (Morreall). For example, one imagined that when he

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12 English translation: “Work liberates you – from life.”
arrived back home, he would ask the hostess of an imaginary dinner party to “ladle the soup “from the bottom”” (Frankl 64). Being humorous also helped the victims during traumatic events themselves, such as the prisoners’ preparation for the shower in the gas chambers. Towards the end of the Holocaust, we notice that the humour became more and more grim. As Ruth Wisse says: “Jewish irony darkened with Jewish fate.” (151) Their wit became “more and more attenuated toward the end” (qtd. in Wisse 154). Ruth Wisse even states that Holocaust humour really came into its own “after the end of the war and [after] the absorption of the enormity of […] the genocide” (179).

This last function sees humour as a way of coping with hardship. However, does coping mean that the trauma is digested or rather that it is pushed to the side in order to carry on with life? One should take into account that these shows, cabarets etc. might not have been a way of coping, but rather a way of forgetting. Instead of seeing the desire to live as the main catalyst for all these different forms of entertainment, it might actually have been the desire to forget that initiated it. As Appelfeld says, it was definitely the “latent, instinctive desire to live and to restore us to the round of life” that was a solace, but, above all, “it was forgetfulness” (87):

The wish to forget was the strongest of all. It was then that the marvellous instruments of oblivion were created: sleep, bathing in the sea, and, above all, entertainment. Let there be no mention of the war. If it were not for those few who could not repress their experiences, the victims themselves would have denied the horror. (89)

Appelfeld notes that the closer they were to death, “the greater […] [their] refusal to admit its existence” (85).

2.4. Impact of the Holocaust on the Second Generation

Alan L. Berger and Gloria L. Cronin mention that “no field of human endeavour remains untouched by the extermination of the Jewish people” (2). The Holocaust is an event that is recognised as a “turning point in history” by all generations: “the contemporary generation or the second and third generation, articulate their recognition of the Shoah […] as a catastrophe that altered the way we perceive God and humanity.” (Kremer 207) The title of Alan L. Berger’s much-discussed book, *Children of Job* (1997), refers to the story of Job, who is put through tremendous suffering. While he

13 Victor Frankl gives a painfully truthful account of being among other prisoners and having to be shaved and directed towards the showers: “The illusions some of us still held were destroyed one by one, and then, quite unexpectedly, most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays!” (11)

14 The story of Job: Job daily served the Lord and because of this God blessed his first seven sons and his three daughters with education, wealth, houses, slaves and an excess of free time. Job’s first seventy years of life were dedicated to God and care of his wife Dinah and their ten children, all of whom lived a hypocritical and sinful life. Consequently, the Lord was disappointed and allowed Satan to attack Job for several months. God allowed Satan to kill dozens of Jobs servants and leave only four alive to witness Satan’s carnage. Later on, Satan killed
Friederichs

Job loses everything that is important to him, he remains faithful to God. But, not only Job suffers, also his children are victimised: “there [children] used to be so many. Those before the misfortune and those after it. The first ones were taken to a premature and sudden death. The second ones were born after their parents’ “reconciliation” with life and perhaps also with God.” (Wiesel 1) Alan L. Berger is specifically interested in the generation of Job’s new children, seven sons and three daughters, who followed their parents’ hardship. These new children are those who Berger compares to the second-generation witnesses of the Holocaust. The tale of Job is paradigmatic for the Second Generation, who wishes “to confront the mystery of humanity and God while seeking to understand the meaning of innocent suffering” (Wiesel 5). The ‘confrontation’ that Wiesel mentions is of paramount importance to this generation. Many reasons are at the basis of their wish to deal with the prior events.

The first reason that the Second Generation wishes a confrontation is that they have no recollection whatsoever of what their parents have experienced. There are a number of reasons why they have no remembrance. Firstly, they do not remember anything because they, these “kind-of-survivors”, simply were not there (Bach 77). These “guardians of an absent meaning” were born after the traumatic experiences, often as a ‘compensation’ for their deceased (half-)siblings (Berger 2). Therefore, they were born in a world “already in process”, which leads to a feeling of belatedness and utter ignorance, as if they missed out on the starting point and on the memories that accompanied the events. The Second Generation is left with “second hand” memory (cf. Thane Rosenbaum’s novel Second Hand Smoke (1999)), left with only an imagination of “the residue of trauma without having experienced it” (Burstein 25). Melvin J. Bukiet calls it “secondhand knowledge”: “All you know is that you’ve received a tainted inheritance.” (18) Therefore, it is nearly impossible to mourn and digest the impact of their parents’ experiences and subsequently their own. Another reason for their lack of memories is that their parents remained silent after the Holocaust. Many parents generally told “their children very little about what happened to them because of the great pain involved” (Wardi 31). In Job’s ten children. Yet, throughout his painful trials, Job never doubted God’s existence, or curse him for personal losses, but in all his misfortune glorified the Lord. Job’s testing was to show the devil his faithfulness to God, even though it meant the death of his ten children, servants and animals. After his test, Job showed boundless love by reconciling with his unfaithful and old wife. Because God had made her old, the wife had ten more painful childbirths but this time to birth ten new and wonderful children. Job’s ten new children manifested all of their father’s godly traits. (An adaptation to Michael Hands’ narrative)

Dina Wardi assigned these children, who had to compensate for their parents’ losses, the name ‘memorial candles’. She states that in most of the survivors’ families, “one of the children is designated as a ‘memorial candle’ for all the relatives who perished in the Holocaust” (6). Consequently, this child “is given the burden of participating in his parents’ emotional world to a much greater extent than any of his brothers or sisters. He is also given the special mission of serving as the link which on the one hand preserves the past and on the other hand joins it to the present and the future.” (6) Therefore, the role of being a ‘memorial candle’ involves “both the personal history of the parents during the Holocaust”, but also “the attempt to repair the broken links between the parents and their extended families and communities” (31). Naturally, this burden causes enormous psychological distress for the Second Generation. The enormity of living to be “a ‘compensation’ is overwhelming”, Moshe Waldoks says (qtd. in Berger 144). “The history was a crushing burden and has to some extent paralysed me”, according to Rita Goldberg (qtd. in Krista).
March 2014, the British newspaper “The Guardian” posted an interview with the author of *Motherland*, Rita Goldberg, who wrote a biography of her mother Hilde. Goldberg recalls how one daughter of a Holocaust survivor told Goldberg that her father “refused ever to talk about it” and, in addition, “insisted she had no right to ask questions” (qtd. in Krista). The woman’s father literally kept her from his past, saying that “it was nonsense that she should have a part of his history, since his life and hers were separate. It was his way of coping with the past.” (qtd. in Krista) It is also common amongst the Second Generation that they do not remember the stories that their parents told them. Burstein notes that in many interviews, the children of the First Generation confessed that “they couldn’t remember what they had heard of their parents’ stories” (29). Helen Epstein notes that, at first, she was “puzzled by how little she remembered of the scraps of narrative she heard her mother tell” (qtd. in Burstein 29). But, then, she understood that it was because “her own feelings were blocked when her mother spoke of the past” (29). Burstein adds that, in part, “memory was baffled by [this] intermittent, fragmented nature of the narratives” (29), which shapes a third reason. Their parents’ experiences were often told “dispassionately … The rage and pain remained beneath the surface.” (34) Rage was a part “of the buried residue carried out of Europe into […] families after the Holocaust” (32). Epstein remembers her father “exploding in sudden rages, triggered by inconsequential offenses” (32). This was “anger welling up at an entire civilization that had wronged him irreparably” (33). She also remembers that, frequently, her father started to talk but that he then “got lost […]. He would stop in the middle of a sentence and his eyes would go vague … I was sure he was in that brown-toned world of photographs among all the people who live in the yellow envelope in his desk” (qtd. in Burstein 29). Epstein’s testimony illustrates that these feelings were the great obstacle that “saturated parental collection” (29). The children were left with the task to infuse “content into the emptiness of their [parents’] hearts and rearranging the broken and hidden pieces of the mosaic within it” (Wardi 31). Often, the children felt like they were crumbling under the weight of their parents’ experiences.

A second reason that is a drive for the Second Generation to confront the prior events is that they seem to find themselves in ‘no-man’s-land’. They want to orientate their situation, but are stuck between two environments. Firstly, they are at home “in the American cultural ethos, sharing its quest for ethnic identity and a search for meaning in existence” (Berger 186). However, they are also miles apart from the American identity, “in their having been raised in homes where the presence of the Holocaust cast an indelible shadow over their lives” (186). In this way, they are deprived from a full consistent identity, one that could finally offer them a sense of belonging. Alan L. Berger notes that because of this ‘in-between’ situation, the Second Generation has formed “a new social type in Jewish history, the “imaginary Jew” who lives after the Shoah but attempts to identify with the murdered Jewish culture of Europe” (2). Also the trivial events that happen in one’s childhood set the Second Generation apart from other ‘normal’ (American) families with ‘normal’ childhoods, mainly because they were often unable to share these events with their parents. Since “[o]ther kids' parents didn't have numbers on their arms. Other kids' parents didn't talk about massacres as easily as baseball. Other
kids' parents had parents”, these ‘normal’ children cannot conceive what the second-generation children have gone through in their household (Bukiet 13). In Maus (1991), Art Spiegelman remembers that once, when he was ten or eleven, he fell because his skate came loose, and his friends did not wait for him. He came home crying and told his father what happened, whose reaction turned out to be rather unpleasant and aloof: “Why do you cry, Artie?” Vladek says (6). Spiegelman replies, “I-I fell, and my friends skated away w-without me.” (6) Suddenly, his father becomes enraged and yells, “Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week … THEN you could see what it is, friends!” (6) (Spiegelman’s emphasis). It would be no surprise that ‘Artie’ was even more saddened after his father’s remark, because his answer does not apply to a situation as trivial as this one. The advice that Vladek gives, what Alan L. Berger calls a “Shoah lesson”, is not relevant for what happened to Spiegelman, which was a rather minor childhood experience (66). Instead of protecting the child with useful life-advice, which could well be the intention of the parents, the child is wounded (Burstein 66). Here, the obstacle lies much deeper, because what happened to Art Spiegelman is nothing compared to what happened during the Holocaust, which he points out later on when talking to his psychiatrist. Whatever Spiegelman, or any member of the Second Generation, suffers from, “doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz” (204). Furthermore, whatever these children accomplish, it will never measure up to the efforts that were needed to survive Auschwitz, as Rita Goldberg notes: “We were measured against our grandparents' martyrdom on the one hand and our parents' exceptional courage on the other. And we failed abjectly to live up to that sublime standard.” (qtd. in Krista) Consequently, these children are eaten up by guilt “for not having experienced the Holocaust” (Berger 67). Their guilt often leads them to exposure to “extreme situations such as mental hospitals in order to experience what their parents lived through” (Berger 67). Spiegelman notes that by staying in a mental hospital, “he felt that he “echoed” his father’s experience” (67). Also Alain Finkielkraut illustrates this: “I owed to the bond of blood this intoxicating power to confuse myself with the martyrs … no trace of them remains, except perhaps my taste for poppy seed bread, scorching hot tea, and the way I hold sugar in my teeth rather than let it dissolve.” (qtd. in Bukiet 18)

This feeling of guilt leads to the discussion of a third reason. The second-generation witnesses feel as if they owe it to their parents to comprehend them and their motives. Like Rita Goldberg notes, these children often feel that they need “to be responsible and protective” towards their parents (qtd. in Krista). By attesting to “their parents' continuing survival”, the Second Generation is on a “mission to bear witness for them” (Berger 3, 186). The importance of reflecting on the past (which will be discussed more in depth later on) gives the children a liberating feeling, which Janet H. Burstein confirms: “Understanding the logic of such distortions in family mythology is, of course, always liberating for children.” (34) Rita Goldberg mentions that “she wrote the book partly to confront her own demons”: “I'm not sure it helped, but I never wanted to remove or exorcise these ghosts. They belong to me. I only wanted to examine and understand my relationship to them.” (qtd. in Krista) For
her, writing her mother’s story was a way of finding her own voice. “It is helping all of us move forward”, she adds (qtd. in Krista). Aaron Hass emphasises that only by reflecting on and learning from the past, there can be “some appreciation of what was lost, destroyed. And, perhaps, only through knowledge of the Holocaust and [...] parents can those in the second generation fully understand themselves.” (164)

What was discussed earlier on shows the importance of the process of working through for the Second Generation itself. However, also the later generations will undoubtedly benefit and obtain relief from the previous generations’ efforts. By facing the difficulties that their environment burdens them with, the second-generation witnesses shape and ritualize “Holocaust memory”, and also “the nature of Judaism for those living in the aftermath” (Berger 2, 189). Their legacy will, in turn, “become part of the chain of tradition that helps shape future memory of the Shoah” (190).

This thesis aims to discuss two second-generation members in regards to the previously discussed background. The first member that will be discussed is the Jewish-American author Melvin Jules Bukiet, who pays “homage both to survivor memory and second-generation imagination” (Berger 72). Bukiet suffers from the typical second-generation desperation of not knowing how to deal with his parents’ past. The reason that the Second Generation has a ‘stranger’, or maybe more complicated or harder life is that “for the Second Generation there is no Before”, while “the First Generation […] could nonetheless sigh on the far side and recall the life Before” (13). “Memory,” (or lack thereof) Bukiet says, “is an inaccurate term. For anyone who wasn’t there, on either side of the barbed wire, Jew or German, thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of the imagination. All we know is how little we know.” (16) (Bukiet’s emphasis) Bukiet’s book After (1996) tells the story of those who were ‘there’, and more specifically, of those who are now ‘here’, in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Bukiet describes the lives of three ex-prisoners and what has befallen them once they are freed. In this cynical and almost unsettling humorous story, Bukiet strips the aftermath of all its sentimentality and sets out to “rehumanize the survivors and to challenge the benevolence of a God who would abandon his chosen people to fire” (Bukiet).

The other member of the Second Generation whose work (Life is Beautiful) will be discussed is Roberto Benigni (1952-), Italian actor, director and producer. Unlike Bukiet, Benigni is not Jewish. However, he was confronted with the Holocaust during his childhood. His father Luigi was “captured by the Nazis in Albania in 1943, after Italy decided to break with the Nazis” (Benigni). Luigi landed up in a work camp and stayed there until the end of the war. When his father was reunited with his family, he was “like a skeleton, covered with insects, and all of his friends had died there every day” (Benigni). Being little, having a simple existence and not having any toys, Benigni learned to build stories using his imagination. When Benigni received two Oscars for his movie, he ironically noted, “I want to thank my parents. They gave me the biggest gift; the poverty.” (Oscars) Another reason for Benigni’s exceptional imagination is that his father had to explain his nightmares after the Holocaust in a way that would not frighten his children. Benigni adds that later on, his father told him “that when
he started to laugh, though in a very tragic way, he started to free himself from this nightmare.” (Benigni) Life is Beautiful (1997), is the “the simple story … but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow … and, like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness” (Benigni 00:35:0:47). The script is centred on an Italian Jewish family and their experiences during the Holocaust.
3. Artistic Representation of the Holocaust

It is interesting to look at how the Second Generation responds creatively to their parents’ sufferings. Because they have their own images and indirect ‘memories’ of the Holocaust, they have a particular way of working-through, which includes “finding their own voice” and “developing their own rituals of Holocaust memory” (Berger 186). In other words, rather than creating feelings of empathy, they want to “impose a wake-up call”: they have to “activate their own strategies against forgetting and to construct meaning out of memory.” (Berger and Cronin 6) The second-generation witnesses have read the aftermath of the Holocaust “through their parents’ scars” and by “undertaking the work of mourning that their parents were unable to perform”, the Second Generation is able to imagine the wounds that lie beneath the scars to the core (49). The work of mourning, which is made possible by the work of remembering, highlights the important role of memory, which is a “particular problem in the aftermath of the Holocaust. It has been valued and encouraged for centuries.” (Burstein 26)

Berger and Cronin note that “the discussion of the meaning and message of testimonial is continuing and deepening” (2). Yet, not only the discussion about testimonies, but also about fiction – and art in general – is interesting. In his article “Who Owns Auschwitz?”, Imre Kertész warns for the danger of the intruding stylisation of the Holocaust. He goes even further and makes an interesting observation: the word “Holocaust” is already a stylisation in itself (268). Anna Richardson confirms Kertész’ statement, especially because she uses the word “Holocaust”, given that the term is more “secular than the Hebrew term Sho’ah” and that it is more “compact than the ‘Nazi Genocide’” (6). What we read further on in Kertész’ article about this stylisation is that which can be considered the core of an intense debate: “[…] its reality – the day to day reality of human extermination – increasingly slips away, out of the realm of the imaginable.” (268) The representation of the imaginable will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

3.1. Ethical Debate

There are many authors who have discussed the origins of Jewish humour, and just as many, if not even more, have discussed the possibility of an artistic representation of the Holocaust. The first
lesson that Melvin J. Bukiet learned was that trying to understand the Holocaust was a hopeless task.
The second lesson was that you cannot “realistically render it [the Holocaust].” (17) Many conflicting
opinions and thoughts show the despair that humankind was left with after the Holocaust. The
difficulty lies in the fact that no one has a ready answer for what, how and why this event happened.
Geoffrey H. Hartman notes that the more we try to comprehend it with realistic depictions, and the
more “it tries to be a raw representation”, the more “the Why rises up like an unsweet savor” (321).
While the events are described, they are still not explained. Hartman goes on to ask himself whether
unrealistic depictions would relieve the discrepancy: “Is it a […] type of mimesis that troubles us, so
that a more abstract […] art might escape our discontent – those works […] whose artifice we most
admire, or which seem to embody a reflection on representational limits?” (321). In addition, we are
stripped of our rational capacities, says Irving Howe. Howe emphasises that the Holocaust might be
described and the pain might be “registered”, but finally “we must acknowledge that it leaves us
intellectually disarmed, staring helplessly at the reality or, if you prefer, the mystery of mass
extermination” (175). One could ask if art is a way to get close(r) to this “reality” that Howe mentions.
Aharon Appelfeld finds that when art tries to describe reality, it “always demands a certain
intensification” (92). The reality of the Holocaust has such “enormous, inhuman dimensions” that
removing these dimensions and bringing it (i.e. the reality) closer to humankind is problematic (92).

Nevertheless, we are rational beings and in an eternal search of the truth. It is no surprise that,
even though many critics condemn it, there is an unstoppable desire to capture and understand the
impact the Holocaust. Some insist on the fact that no matter how hard one tries to understand the
events via books, articles, newspapers and so forth, one will never be able to attain that goal
Alan L. Berger notes that, maybe, we are simply “not destined to know all there is to know” about the
Holocaust, and, furthermore, that not all is “knoweable” (415). Whereas some, like Rosenfeld, deny
the efficiency of representations, others do resort to several forms of aesthetic representation. Robert J.
Lifton explains it as follows: “Artistic re-creation of an overwhelming historical experience has much to
do with the question of mastery.” (qtd. in Naveh 105). The need to attain “mastery” is a need “to
reach a closure, that is to say, to push […] the atrocities of the Holocaust – into some remote region of
our psyche, and, as Freud claims, to “fore-close” it.” (Naveh 105) Appelfeld notes that art was the only
expression that would be able to represent the trauma and that could bridge the doubts between the
desire to speak and the desire to be silent. Many had no words for what they had experienced and
witnessed, therefore, according to Aharon Appelfeld, it is no surprise that the first artistic

17 Isaac Rosenfeld, for example, noted: We still don’t understand what happened to the Jews of Europe, and
perhaps we never will. There have been books, magazine and newspaper articles, eyewitness accounts, letters,
diaries, documents certified by the highest authorities on the life in ghettos and concentration camps, slave
factories and extermination centers under the Germans. By now we know all there is to know. But it hasn’t
helped; we still don’t understand … there is no response great enough to equal the facts that provoke it (129).”
However, do we know all there is to know? Rosenfeld’s statement makes us sincerely question if it is possible for
us to have knowledge of every single detail of the Holocaust.
representations were children’s drawings (and poems). Appelfeld notes that children already started making drawings while being imprisoned, as in Theresienstadt for example\(^\text{18}\) (91) (Appendix C). These representations are innocent and honest, and “allow us to see through the eyes of the children what life was like in the ghetto” (89). Appelfeld states that only they – “in their blindness” – would be able to create a “new form” of artistic expression, which had a particular “new kind of melody” in it (89). The reason that Appelfeld considered the children capable was because unlike the adults, they did not absorb the full horror, only that portion of it which children could take in. Children lack a sense of chronology of comparison with the past. While the adults spoke about what had been, for the children the Holocaust was the present, their childhood and youth. (90)

While the adult survivors often had a desire to flee from their experiences and their memories to their former life, the children knew no other life or another childhood (Appelfeld 90).

Often, the question remains what these artistic representations are about. Berel Lang defines this issue as the “more general problem for aesthetics of how an artistic or literary work’s representation […] is determined” (315). He continues that often, “the problem is not to determine whether that event is [the] subject but to assess its “representation as” [the] subject […]” (315). Lang adds that the representation of the Holocaust is especially problematic when “they reach or pass its representative limits” (315). One of the problems that are encountered within the limits of representation is the boundary between the representation and the “mythification” of the Holocaust. Gila S. Naveh considers this problem a serious dilemma. Naveh claims that representing the Holocaust artistically equals “partaking in the process of its mythification” (103). Rather than trying to extract the Holocaust from its realistic implications, writers (and filmmakers, for example) should include the Holocaust in everyday life, which will consequently create a “mind engraved with the Holocaust”, as Cynthia Ozick terms it (Berger and Cronin 7). Also Aharon Appelfeld expressed his concerns about this mythification, or mysticism, as he calls it. He condemns the mysterious, mystical way the Holocaust is spoken of: “There is a tendency to speak of the Holocaust in mystical terms, to link the events to the incomprehensible, the mysterious, the insane, and the meaningless.” (92) While he does understand this tendency, he declares it dangerous because mysticism is not appropriate in this case. Above all, he considers the Holocaust not “meaningless” or “mysterious”, but rather “a blow directed against the central pillar of the Ten Commandments” (92).

Earlier on, Imre Kertész’ article was mentioned, in which he questions the identity of the true

\(^{18}\) The USHMM (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) dedicated a special collection to these children’s drawings and poems: *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942–1944* (1993). Approximately 15,000 children lived in the Terezin Concentration Camp between 1942 and 1944, and fewer than 100 survived. This concentration camp was unusual in that “it was created to cover up the Nazi genocide of the Jews” (USHMM). This camp, or “the Führer’s gift to the Jews”, functioned as a “model ghetto” when the Red Cross inspected the site in 1944. The USHMM notes that the poems and drawings express “the daily misery of these uprooted children, as well as their courage and optimism, their hopes and fears”. Each piece of art gives “the overwhelming tragedy of genocide a human and individual face” (USHMM).
owner of the Holocaust. Kertész is particularly frustrated because “more and more often, the Holocaust is stolen from its guardians and made into cheap consumer goods” (268). In addition, he claims that the artistic representations “institutionalise” the Holocaust. “Around it is built a moral-political ritual, complete with a new and often phony language”, he adds (268). As Kertész sees it, the true survivor – or witness – is disregarded, and even worse, “is or will soon be perceived as being in the way, and will have to be shoved aside like the obstacle he is” (268). Consequently, “the survivors watch helplessly as their only real possessions are done away with: authentic experiences” (269). Kertész continues his argument with an attack on these “kitsch” representations that are incapable of understanding or unwilling to understand the organic connection between our own deformed mode of life [...] and the very possibility of the Holocaust. Here I have in mind those representations that seek to establish the Holocaust once and for all as something foreign to human nature; that seek to drive the Holocaust out of the realm of human experience. (269)

In fact, Kertész aims at the whole “industry” of the Holocaust. According to him, along with the stylization of the Holocaust, “a Holocaust conformism has arisen, along with a [...] sentimentalism, a [...] canon, and a system of Holocaust taboos together with the ceremonial discourse that goes with it; Holocaust products for Holocaust consumers have been developed.” (269)

Given that the artistic representations had a rocky road to recognition, if they are recognised at all, a whole complex of rules was established, which was – and is – then again violated numerous times. Gila S. Naveh claims that one has to ask himself a “different set of questions” when trying to represent the past, “namely, by making it present in film or in fiction to the millions who never experienced it” (103). In order to deal with the past, there has to be reflected on it. Also Proust mentioned the importance of the past: “Reality takes form only in memory”19 (qtd. in Naveh 103). Naveh clarifies this quote and says that finding “significance and meaning in our present life necessitates at some level relating to our historic past. We need to confront it honestly, to reflect upon it, to learn from it, and to build upon it in some constructive way.” (103). An honest reflection on the past enables us to reveal “with most vigor the particular, as well as the universal aspects of the Holocaust, and relate most effectively the deeds of history [...]” (103). The question remains what kind of artistic genre would best represent the past. Naveh stresses that “we need to ask ourselves questions about the kind of artistic techniques which can make the Holocaust “real” to us (104). While Naveh – and Berel Lang – insist on certain limits; Geoffrey H. Hartman declares that representations such as literature and art “have almost total freedom of expression” (320) He says so because when a set of rules is imposed, “they do so mainly as a foil, in order to be breached” (320). Consequently, Hartman emphasises that “even in the case of the Shoah, there are no limits of representation, only limits of conceptualization” (320).

However, whereas some have a clear view on what is acceptable and what not, many other critics are still not sure why one would want to occupy oneself with, and rely on, “historical

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19 Original citation in French: “La réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire.”
memory. Others are torn by doubt about whether art and “horror”, as Appelfeld denotes it, can coexist and if this connection is viable. Appelfeld notes that linking art and horror might be “merely another expression of horror, revealing the depths of human degradation” (83). Also, can art give us a rational explanation for what happened? Just as Isaac Rosenfeld, Anton Kaes goes even further and stresses that it is impossible to understand, let alone represent, the events. Kaes quotes Saul Friedlander who asked himself how an event that lacks rationalism can possibly “find a rational explanation” (207). Besides, how can an event that has more and more become the centre of attention – but that more and more people fail to grasp – “be represented in the mass media of today’s entertainment industry?” (207) Also, many questions are raised about the correctness of aesthetic representations. Gerhard Bach notes that the narratives demand “definitive constructionist efforts” from the readers (88). It is often unclear where the facts end and imagination begins. Ultimately, the main and foremost problem remains “how to come to terms with the Holocaust” (Des Pres 233). In the meantime, one is left with rules and an etiquette that are limited.

It is hard to imagine that this debate can become even more complicated, but it certainly does when the topic “humour” comes in. Sander L. Gilman proposed a thought-provoking question: is laughter the “intention of the creator of a work of art or the response of an audience” (281)? The criticism on many artistic creations often assumes that the humoristic implications of the work are intentional rather than situational, despite the fact that, according to Gilman, “laughter is rarely the desired reaction” (282) (emphasis added). Yet, if humour envisions to make the Holocaust bearable, why is it so “uncomfortable imagining laughter in the context of the Shoah” (Gilman 285)? Many reasons lie at the basis of this difficulty.

These attacks on the use of humour might actually be a premature reaction stemming from a feeling of anxiety. Suddenly, the reader could find himself laughing at comic depictions of traumatic events, giving him or her a fright when realising the comedy is directed at events that have hurt and disadvantaged so many people. After all, laughter and horrific events are considered taboo and should be mutually exclusive according to the critics who were discussed in this and earlier section(s).

Humour also seems to break all the rules. Terrence Des Pres remarked that Holocaust fiction is restricted by a “definite decorum, a sort of Holocaust etiquette that encourages some kind of response”, one of the rules being that representations should be serious and sacred (218). Des Pres argues that literature of the mimetic category (i.e. ‘realistic’ fiction) often fails because of its tribute to seriousness. Humorous works, on the other hand, escape the responsibilities that the mimetic category is burdened with (233). Comic works are not hindered because “laughter is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends” (219). The various artistic responses

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20 This is also what Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) illustrates: “But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this monstrous corpse of your memory […]? […] It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand eyed present, and live ever in a new day. Trust your emotion.” (14)
to the Holocaust have caused a wide variety of shocked reactions and the addition of comic elements, or humour in general, to these reproductions has been equally—if not, more—controversial. Des Pres questions the possibility of “laughter […] in literary treatment of the Holocaust” (218). The ready answer to that question would be that “toward matters of the Holocaust the comic attitude is irreverent, a mode that belittles or cheapens the moral severity of its subject” (218-9). But, Des Press, who describes his progression of accepting humour in the artistic reproduction process, realises that comic works afford “laughter’s benefit without betraying convictions. In these ways they foster resilience and are life-claiming”. (232) He adds that creative artists “are quicker to break taboos” than critics like Des Pres himself “who must, to perpetuate discourse, accept some degree of protocol” (232-3).

This chapter has attempted to draw an overall picture of the several complications that are encountered when discussing the artistic depictions that emerged after (and also during) the Holocaust. The next sections will discuss the collaboration between art (and literature), the Holocaust and humour, which will be illustrated by two works: the book *After* (1996) by Melvin Julies Bukiet and the much-discussed film *Life is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni (1997).
3.2. Holocaust Humour in Literature: After (Melvin Jules Bukiet, 1996)

3.2.1. Jewish American Fiction and the Holocaust

3.2.1.1. Literature

The previous chapters have pointed out that the subject of the Holocaust is a minefield of delicate issues. To situate the Holocaust in the field of Jewish American literature, one first has to cast a look at its evolution. Berger and Cronin situate the beginnings of this type of literature with “the arrival of Jewish immigrants on American shores in the 18th century” (2). In 1880, the Norton Anthology distinguishes a shift, called “The Great Tide” (1880-1924) (qtd. in Berger and Cronin 2). This phase ended when Ellis Island shut its gates due to the intensification of xenophobic reactions (Berger and Cronin 2). Subsequently, there was an increase of Jewish American writers “on Broadway, in Hollywood, in radio, in the television industry, and into the American literary mainstream” (2). Berger and Cronin situate the culminating point of the literary Jewish American tradition with Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel Prize in 1976 (2). Upon this peak, a discussion arose on the phenomenon of introspection, or “self-meditation” about Jewish identity in America (2). Berger and Cronin note that it “includes a significant tradition of humor writing, scholarly commentary, literary criticism, contemporary religious commentary, Holocaust literature, post-Holocaust literature, and second-generation Holocaust literature” (2). Specifically (post-) Holocaust literature is of interest here. According to Terrence Des Pres, “writing about the Holocaust is like any other writing […]” (216). Both Jewish American literature and Holocaust literature share a characteristic in that they experience a “renewal” (Berger and Cronin 3). Because the authors are from various backgrounds, they offer the Holocaust an escape route from trivialisation and repetition, and in doing so, their stories provide “another indication of the fresh winds of imagination that blow from various sectors of the Jewish scene” (xxiii). Berger and Cronin note that this renewal consists of a confrontation and a reflection on, “the meaning of being human, the place of tradition in modernity, the content of Jewish identity, the issue of memory, the nature of evil, and the role of God in history” (1). “Composed against a tumultuous background of great cultural transition and unprecedented state-sponsored systematic murder, this literature addresses the concerns of human existence in extremis,” they add (1).

Many models have been introduced to structure and give sense to this grouping of (Jewish American) Holocaust fiction. Because the Second Generation does not have direct Holocaust memories, many novelists include a “documentary link” to the camps, for example, by “fabricating an eyewitness authority” (Young 200-1). In this way, the “docu-novelists”, as James Young calls them, manufacture both “their own testimonial authority” and their “fictional discourse” (200). Essentially, the writers “seem to share the fear that the essential rhetoricity of their literary medium inadvertently
confers a certain fictionality onto events themselves” (200). Therefore, some writers employ “flashbacks of life before imprisonment, so as to allow for some of that interplay of character and extension of narrative which his essential to works of imaginative fiction” (Howe 189). This imaginative factor leads to a distinction that the Israel critic Hannah Yaoz imposed: a historical (mimetic) approach that includes the past events in a “continuum of history and human experience” and a transhistorical (antimimetic) approach that transfigures the events “into a mythic reality” (Howe 191). Writers whose work is classified in the latter category try to “escape from the vice of historical realism” and rest therefore present an imaginative ‘reality’ in which “madness reigns and all historical loci are relinquished” (191). They rebel against the seriousness of historical mode, while the writers from this first category (e.g. Tadeusz Borowski and This Way To The Gas Ladies And Gentlemen) submit to it (191).

Furthermore, Terrence Des Press adds that the transhistorical mode is “proper to comedy because the comic spirit ridicules what comes to pass” (220). Comedy is used because “laughter revolts (and from the perspective of lament appears revolting)” (220). The mimetic mode, on the other hand, “is proper to high seriousness because tragedy celebrates the mystery of what comes to pass” (220).

While the First Generation struggled with the choice of integrating real life experiences into their texts or rather preferring comic ridicule, the Second Generation has to choose another path in their literature, partially because – as mentioned earlier on – they do not have these direct experiences. Therefore, they proceed to ‘re-collect’ images of the Holocaust. In doing so, they challenge the existence of a god, of “divine authority”, and place redeeming work “into the hands of human writers” (11). This questioning of authority leads to a division of second-generation Holocaust literature based on tikkan21, which Alan L. Berger imposed. Berger notes that instead of trying to ‘rescue’ the Holocaust, the Second generation wishes the “tikkun of bearing witness to the Shoah’s continuing and multidimensional sequela, of which the second-generation creative works themselves form a significant part” (19). According to Berger, the fictional works share the belief that their work should play a moral role (188). The first branch, the particularist path, is focused on the tikkan atzmi, the mending or repair of the self. The other branch of the dichotomy is the universalist path. Instead of a repair of the self, the universalists strive for tikkan olam, “the moral improvement or repair of the world, and struggle against all forms of prejudice and racism, ranging from anti-Semitism to homophobia. This tikkan consists of a mission to build a moral society.” (4) While the particularists test God, the universalist path believes that “God is a universal deity; Abraham addresses God as “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25)” (4). Despite the tension between the two fields, both groups have an identity that is linked to the Holocaust. As such, “the members of each group desire to bear witness” and they are all “the daughters and sons of survivors”, both frequently existing “as “replacement” children, their (half-)siblings having been murdered by Nazis during the Shoah (4).

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21 Tikkan means repair, improvement, perfection and/or healing. The term originates in kabbalah, a school of thought that originated in Judaism and focuses on God’s essence (Temple Isaiah).
3.2.1.2. Restrictions and Criticism

As we mentioned earlier on (cf. Friederichs 29), artistic representations are limited by a defined set of rules, and this is not less the case for literature (more specifically, fiction). The writings are dependent of “principles of organization”, which Terrence Des Pres finds “shocking” (216). According to Des Pres, these limits “function as regulatory agencies to influence how we conceive of, and write about, matters of the Holocaust” (217). Terrence Des Pres enumerated to following prescriptions:

1) The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
2) Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason – artistic reasons included.
3) The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead. (217) (emphasis added)

In other words, “the Holocaust is unique, its data cannot be trifled with, and we respect these conditions by staying within the bounds of high seriousness” (217). Specifically the third prescription, the importance of solemnity and seriousness, illustrates how constricted – especially second-generation – Holocaust fiction is.

The following statements will illustrate the numerous occasions upon which the Second Generation’s literature was attacked. According to Leslie Epstein, works of fiction written by the generation after the Holocaust are “so much less successful in comprehending it than the plain words of those who had lived through the events themselves” (236). Epstein stresses that

Holocaust fiction has by and large failed at [showing] what life in the ghettos and camps was really like – that is, reproducing, re-creating, restoring to life, in such a way that the reader feels a sense of connectedness, not dispassion and distance, least of all horror and repugnance, to the events and the characters that, Lazarus-like, are called back from the dead. (264-5) 22

Also Aharon Appelfeld questions the worth of Holocaust fiction because, according to him, what has been written about the Holocaust – i.e. “actually literature” – is “quite a small part” (84). “I do not include all those fantasies about the Holocaust, those commercial productions, perverted stories, and sensational and scandalous writings,” he adds (84). Works of fiction should be read with caution, Appelfeld says, “so that one sees not only what is in it, but also, and essentially, what is lacking in it.” (84). Imre Kertész shares Appelfeld’s opinion: “I can count on ten fingers the number of writers who have produced truly great literature […] out of […] the Holocaust” (268). While some attack the worth of literary works about the Holocaust, others criticise the fact the Holocaust is too prominent in literature altogether. Berger and Cronin observe that often, writers are accused of paying too much attention to the Shoah, and – above all – that is it time to move on (12).

22 In an article that was written later on, Epstein recognised that his earlier comment was risky: “This was not a very smart remark for one engaged in writing a Holocaust novel of his own: indeed, that stick of a sentence was used to bang me over the head more than once after the book in question actually appeared.” (261)
3.2.2. *After* the Holocaust

Melvin Jules Bukiet’s novel *After* (1996), and his work in general, is directed towards the achievement of *tikkun atzmi*. Bukiet concentrates on salvation, and more specifically, on the salvation of the self. Bukiet sets out on the journey of “re-entering the world” his parents lived in, “fuelled partly by the rage that would have diverted [his] parents’ energy” (Burstein 59). According to Burstein, only Bukiet and the entire Second Generation are able “to pick up the tale abandoned for the sake of memory and of life by those who came out when the camps were liberated” (59). The fact that many were not able to tell their story is because many survivors focused on remembering, as the character Der Schreiber (Gentle Benya) does for example, who can talk about certain events of his Jewish past, but is “unable to enter the last chapter of his own saga” (Bukiet 271). While some focused on preserving their memory, others concentrated on returning to life, such as Isaac for example, an immensely stubborn and cynical character, who desperately wants to go to America. *After* starts right where the Nazis took off: with the liberation of the camps. The world that the novel is situated in is “reshaped by those who survived” (Burstein 56). Bukiet criticises the actions of the “too-late liberators of Auschwitz through his cynical young survivors” (11). This group consists of nineteen-year old Isaac Kaufman (freed from Buchenwald (Aspenfeld)), the dentist Marcus Morgenstern (freed from Dachau), the rabbinic scholar Fishl (freed from Mauthausen) and others who team up with these three to start up a ‘business’23. Throughout the novel, there is a constant going back and forth between before and after, emphasising the contrast between the old and the new world in a cynical and bitter manner. The post-war world that these characters live in is “dominated, like the world of the lager, by commerce and cynicism” (56). Cynicism is a constant in Bukiet’s novel; it “was a new and strangely satisfying emotion; it assumed a distrust of benevolence, yet it also assumed a benevolence to distrust” (Bukiet 17). Constantly, losses of all kinds of concepts are mourned. The next three chapters will thoroughly discuss the implications of the Holocaust on the world, on the physical aspect and on the mind.

3.2.2.1. Ruins of the World

When the concentration and extermination camps got in the hands of the Allies, the world was left dismayed. The Allied troops started moving across Europe and encountered “tens of thousands of concentration camp prisoners suffering from starvation and disease.” 24 (USHMM) It is

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23 Location of these camps : Appendix D
24 The eighth of May 1945 is widely considered as the end of the Holocaust. The Jewish Virtual Library offers us disconcerting numbers: a total of 6,258,673 million Jews passed away. In reality, it is nearly impossible to determine an exact number of deaths. Approximately between five and seven million people were killed. It is equally difficult to decide on the number of survivors, partly because the numbers are not precise and also because there are different views on the definition of a “survivor”. Carl Nordling notes that according to the AMCHA office, there were approximately 900,000 Holocaust survivors in 1945.
made clear that the Allies treat the people they found in the camps similarly to the state they found them in: as dehumanised creatures. After years of neglect, civilisation has become “a learning process”; the survivors have to become used to ‘normal’ and proper human behaviour, which is the opposite of how they behave now (Bukiet 20). The newsletter “Herald Tribune” gets the nickname “The Daily Shitrag”, since “it was being used merely to clog the facilities” (Bukiet 20). Mr. Foyle, the person in charge of the survivors is so “chagrined by his people’s lack of proper deportment” that he apologises to Major Hamilton (20-1). As if talking about a group of primitives, he states “They’re not ready for Boston, yet.” (21) The continuing objectification of the survivors is often pointed out. While they were objects of malice before, they are now objects of sympathy: “So what if the Yanks had opened the gates to Aspenfeld. It was obvious that the Jews were no more people in their eyes than they were to the Germans. “(Bukiet 16-7) The objectification continues because, now, they are the objects of pity, of officials who still group them in masses – “Who could tell the skeletons apart?” –, erase them as individuals, list, regulate, [and] even exploit them as a ‘refugee industry’” (Burstein 56, Bukiet 44). The ‘industry’ that develops after the liberation is heavily and ironically criticised:

> “Of course, these tourists needed a memento to take home as proof of their stay in the world’s capital of atrocity – words would not do justice – so a market in striped uniforms and yellow stars was immediately established on the bourse next to the booth that already sold Iron Crosses for deutschemarks and Swiss kroner.” (Bukiet 18)

Also the unification of two siblings is cynically recounted: “A brother and a sister discovered each other […] Their joyous unification was duly re-enacted for the cameras. Amid much hoopla, twin skeletons embraced, and one reporter whispered to another, “I can see the resemblance.” (74) “A shaved head and exposed ribs were a passport universally recognized in the new, borderless Continent. A striped suit helped, but was not mandatory”, the narrator cynically adds (67). The photographing of a newly liberated Isaac also illustrates this exploitation: “Could you stand there?” “Why?” “So I can take a picture.” (10) However, Isaac does not exactly have a perfect set of teeth, which is described quite ironically: “There was something about the pose that made Isaac break into a grin. As soon as she saw his winning expression, the journalist […] handed him a dollar. Such a mouth was a real asset.” (10) (emphasis added)

After the liberation, these survivors lived in Displaced Person Camps (DP Camps), which “were set up in […] former labour camps, military camps, hotels, monasteries, hospitals …” (Yad Vashem).25 The residents of the DP camps, a ‘Displaced Person’, are ridiculed in After: “Not Displaced Persons – Dead Persons,” Isaac explains (110). The protagonists, or DP’s, who are presented in Bukiet’s novel are not older than twenty (except for Marcus), which is explained: “It seemed that

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25 In Western Europe, many survivors ended up in DP (Displaced Person) camps. While the Jewish survivors were able to start a new life in various countries, many “non-Jewish victims of Nazi policies continued to be persecuted in Germany” (Jewish Virtual Library). Until 1970, the Roma were discriminated in some parts of the country, and until 1969, homosexuals were still imprisoned on the basis of a law that was established in Nazi Germany (Jewish Virtual Library).
nobody between Paris and Moscow was any other age; the old and the very young had disappeared. One category had faded into history, while the other failed to enter.” (123) According to the survivors, the reason for this disappearance is that the Germans “ran low on hate” (292). Hate, they say, must have been the catalyst, because it “is invigorating” (292). Even though “they had guns, they had men”, the Germans could not hate the Jews any more and (292). Therefore, they lost.

The Allies, and more specifically, the Americans are ridiculed more than once; they are nicknamed “the Lucky Boys”, or “Yankee doctors” (11). Of course, the Germans or “Teutons” are also stereotyped and ridiculed on numerous occasions (258). Their efficacy, or “Teutonic thoroughness” for example, is often a topic of laughter: “Clean, the Germans did, with a native talent and enthusiasm that were miraculous to behold. […] They scrubbed the floors and scoured the walls. Even the village children […] lifted bits and pieces of dead Jews […].” (84, 9) Not only the Allies and Germans are ridiculed; the slogan “Arbeit macht frei” is numerously adapted and trivialised. In the beginning of the novel, the slogan is changed “with a hand-lettered plywood sign strung ungrammatically over its first word” to “TANKS MAKES ONE FREE” (7). Later on, the sign is once again altered, this time to “$ MAKES ONE FREE”. (17) Near the middle of the novel, when Isaac’s paper business is taking off, Isaac sneers: “‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ ought to be changed to ‘Papier Macht Frei’” (105). The adaptations of this slogan show how much contempt the survivors feel for the population who just stood by and watched the atrocities happen. When Fishl arrives at the train station, “the 5:14 train was not on time” (57). The mention of such an exact time makes one wonder if Bukiet had a symbolical meaning in mind for this moment. In the Jewish Bible, it says the following: “For the whole of the Torah is summed up in this one sentence: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:14) (emphasis added). It could not be a coincidence that the train, or “Love your neighbor as yourself”, is late: the public was not present when the prisoners needed them most, but now, after the war, it seems as if the organisations that take care of the survivors wish to compensate for their absence. To the utter dismay of the survivors, many claim they did not have any idea of “what was happening” (Bukiet 72). More than once, the survivors approach these claims with due suspicion. Isaac vents his dissatisfaction by a critical sneer: “Neither did we”, and later on: “I still don’t know” (72-3). The implied question here is “why didn’t they use their great American power when it might have made a difference?” (73) “What [one] knows and what [one] admits he knows are different”, the narrator says later on in the novel (169). Yet, how could they not have known? After all, “more people were killed than apartments were destroyed,” Isaac points out (Bukiet 93). The post-Holocaust world is shattered, which is illustrated by the reference to the story of Cinderella in the beginning of chapter

26 This makes us think of “Wir haben ess nicht gewusst” (transl. “We didn’t know.”). There are a lot of clashing opinions on this statement. Many are livid at those who pretended that they did not have any knowledge of the Holocaust, which is illustrated by the following Holocaust Remembrance website: “Extermination camp Majdanek was visible from the Lublin City Suburbs. It is incomprehensible that none of the residents even claimed to have had knowledge of what took place behind the barbed wire fences and machine-gun towers.” (The Holocaust – Lest We Forget) (emphasis added) (Appendix E)
fourteen. Intertextuality is often a source of humour in this novel, and it is definitely the case with this fairy-tale that is adapted with elements of the (post-) Holocaust world. When Cinderella magically disappears at the end of the night, she does not accidentally drop her glass slipper in this version; “the glass slipper slipped off and smashed into a thousand shards, and Cinderella was barefoot, bleeding”. The Blitzkrieg has taken off.” (243-4)

Isaac and his companions are unhappy and discontent in their environment and want to get out, especially Isaac himself: “Isaac immersed himself in his maps, comparing mileage charts and deciphering the symbols that distinguished population centers from provincial capitals in India, examining topographical gradations of the Andes, […]” (227). However, from the moment he gets a map of America, Isaac is sold. “Isaac […] pointed on a map of the world, his forefinger covering half of the Eastern United States, and said, “That’s where I want to live.” (228) He sees America as “the land of opportunity” (182). Intrigued, he spends “hours poring over the turns the A train took on its path to a seashore resort called Far Rockaway located at the farthest extremity of the municipality whose streets were paved with the precious mineral he coveted.” (227). In America, Isaac thinks, where there are rewards, “death made a difference” (265). But in Europe, “death was no threat.” (265) However, for someone who has faced death more than one time, any country would seem like the land of Milk and Honey, and therefore, one could question Isaac’s belief in America. At the end of the novel, Isaac gets the news that things will not work out with his American visa: “The visa didn’t arrive through the system. You don’t qualify for a normal visa.” (346) It turns out that Isaac is “on a state department list of undesirables, along with Nazis” (346). As usual, he laughs off his true feelings with a typical cynical reaction: “Maybe I’ll go to Paraguay instead. I hear Germans are welcome in the jungle.” (346)

Upon his liberation, aged seventeen, the survivor George Salton remembers that he was free, “but what it meant I wasn’t sure” (USHMM). Freedom is a much-discussed topic in the novel. When Schimmel says to Isaac “You’re famous”, Isaac replies, “I’d rather be free.” (20) However, it becomes clear that the concept of being ‘free’ is a mystery to him: “So, what is freedom?” Isaac asks (12). Later on in the novel, he seems to have grasped what it means to be free: “Forget three years of lager life; nine months of freedom made an enormous difference; here they were still skeletons, but Isaac had a little excess flesh and a little counterfeit cash.” (134) The character Fishl who goes ‘home’ to look for his wife who was taken by the Nazis also illustrates Salton’s testimony. By sending Fishl on this journey, Bukiet “contrasts the world of ‘now’ with the one ‘before’” (Burstein 56). The train tracks are still there, but more modern wagons are riding, there are still conductors, but they do not turn Fishl in to the Gestapo. Fishl asks the conductor “[…] what are the rules for this train?” (Bukiet 60). The conductor smiles and answers: “Only one rule, no chicken plucking” (60). Fishl is shocked: “That’s it?” “It. No rules. No schedules. No laws.” (60) Bukiet points out how ambiguous the modern world as become: “If, during the War, one wondered, “Will he turn me in?” one received an answer. There was a clarity to experience. Now, every question was hypothetical, like, “Would he have turned me in?”
and one could never be certain” (60). The Jewish survivors find themselves in a new world, which has evolved while they were not ‘participating’. This becomes clear when Schimmel sees a “Negro chaplain” and is stunned that the man is black: “Who’s that?” Schimmel whispered. “Like a Rabbi.” Isaac replied. “From Africa.” “Was he in a fire?” “No, idiot,” Isaac scoffed, “you were.” (8)

In the post-Holocaust world, there are no certainties, which is illustrated by the numerous entertainment groups that popped up after the Holocaust: “a mixture of old and young people, among them former actors, singers, youths who had grown up in bunkers, and all sorts of emaciated people who found relief in that distraction” (Appelfeld 85). These groups visited many DP camps where “they sang, recited poetry, and told jokes” (87). Aharon Appelfeld was not that fond of these troupes: “At the time, I found these efforts at entertainment disgusting and repugnant. But we ourselves had not yet grasped the depth of the need for them, the innovation, if it may be permitted to say so, in that form.” (87) Also new religions arose, according to Appelfeld, because “the soul seeks a foothold in superstition or, on the contrary, in metaphysics” (88). He notes that on the coasts of Italy, “penitents would wander – rebukers, comforters, preachers, and all sorts of characters within whom metaphysical feelings kindled fiery words” (88). These new religions and entertainment activities fused, which created a kind of grotesque. Therefore, all limits vanished and “moral expression was missing” (88). In this “drunken hurly-burly everything seemed like madness” (88). Survivors seek solace in alcohol, women and so on, “anything, just so as not to be alone with yourself” (87).

While some found solace in these new entertainment expressions, others – the “more entrepreneurial veteran[s]” – started looking for more serious outlets, for example Isaac (Bukiet 85). While other “inmates were too happy in their fairyland of pillows and chocolate”, Isaac “had had enough chocolate” (24). When he is going to the yacht party, instead of looking for a costume, “he tended to a have more economic view of the party. Where there was a demand, there was a place for a supplier […].” (248) Since the survivors lived on unstable fundaments and did not know “how to assuage [their] pain and grief”, some decided to gain control by starting smuggling and “shady business deals” (Appelfeld 87). For them, activities such as trade and smuggling became their support and it offered them a way to escape their haunting memories. For Aharon Appelfeld, these practices lowered “people to the lowest level of existence” (87). Burstein adds that these “damaged men”, who where once “devout and simple Jewish boys”, transformed in to “grotesque versions of their former selves” (Bukiet 130).

Already in the concentration camps, there was contraband and bribery: “Sometimes it was teeth that kept one out of the ovens, more often it was cunning or cash, […].” (143) In the camps, they learned indeed that nothing was more valuable than money and gold, except for blood (295). “Credit was nice; power was better; blood was supreme.” (143) The first instance of smuggling occurs right in the beginning of the novel. A Jewish man, Berger, trades three diamonds for his coat and thus, “the camp acquired its first rich man, and Isaac studied the lesson well” (15). While Isaac first did not know what freedom was (cf. Friederichs 39), he now does: “money was freedom” (16) (emphasis added). Over
the months, Isaac develops a nose for trade: “He could smell it, not only sex, not only money, but business, trade, opportunity.” (87) Later on, when Berger loses his possessions, it becomes clear that some are very attached to their wish to re-establish their identity with wealth: “Berger, meanwhile, wandered around like a Musselman, lamenting his lost fortune more bitterly than his lost family.” (18) It is thanks to Isaac that Berger’s honour is re-established: “It was Isaac’s doing that led to the establishment of a bank with Berger the bankrupt as its president.” (19) Of course, this occurrence is accompanied by a witticism: “six working days … And on the seventh day, he kept working.” (19) Once Berger becomes the head of the bank, the smuggling business takes off. “Everything broke into components of value. Liquor, eggs, even vehicles were currency […].” (131) The trading practices are often exaggerated: Isaac “had already committed to trade for a package of wax candles, which he had already decided he was going to trade for more yellow cloth […].” (24). Also the smugglers themselves, the Jews, which is already a stereotype in itself (cf. Friederichs 18), are often described in regards to this cliché: “Finding Isaac was easy. If he wasn’t contemplating the horizon from his perch atop the guard tower, he was bound to be trading favors, fabric, or currency at the position he had staked out in the center of the bourse.” (69) Another cliché is presented when Isaac is talking to Morgenstern about counterfeiting, Morgenstern’s language “started to bear a Yiddish inflection” (92). These examples reinforce the clichéd image of the ruthless trading Jew.

Apart from smuggling and counterfeiting, other crimes are not far away. Theft just as prevalent in the novel. When Isaac orders Schimmel to take a taxi, he gives him money but then changes his mind: “Here. Take a taxi. Better yet, steal a taxi and bring the cash back home.” (224)

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the hiatus between the world of “Before” and “After” is immense and this is illustrated by a central event in the novel: the yacht party (31). The metaphorical meaning of this decadent feast is already alluded to with the following invitation: “You are invited to a reception on board the Anubis. Dress for the sake of deception. Pier 14. The boat will debark at midnight.” (238) (emphasis added) ‘Anubis’ is an Egyptian deity who is associated with “death and funerary procedure” and is the master of “embalming, enshrouding, and burial skills” (245). Generally, Anubis is perceived as a boundary crosser. The crossing or transgression of boundaries is primordial both during this event and in the entire novel. The party is “an elaborate metaphor for both the transgression of all conventions and the transformation of all characters” (Burstein 131). All awareness of proportion is lost, “fact mingled with fiction; it was all too strange” (Bukiet 256). These characters have “lost the ability to differentiate dream from reality”; they struggle “to learn the world again in the post-war European frenzy of carnival that turns everything upside down and inside out” (Burstein 131). Due to this reversal of values, “all rules, regulations, and hierarchies” and “any order that claims to be preeminent or fixed” are attacked (Des Pres 222). What Mikhail Bachtin considered ‘the carnivalesque’ in his book on Rabelais, can be linked to the post-Holocaust world, a world of death in which “the spectacle of life depending on itself is open to unusual
perspectives” (222). Like the world of carnival, “everything meant its opposite” and “excess was the only principle” (Bukiet 296, 251).

While the bridge between past and future is immense, it is also easily crossed. “It’s a new world,” says Schimmel, to which a girl cynically responds: “Funny, it looks just like the old one.” (250)

Some things have not changed, for example the synagogue that Fishl revisits during his journey:

“the synagogue had been neither burned nor desecrated, just abandoned […].
The same books they had left stood on the shame shelves, accumulating dust.
[… ] Tears came to Fishl’s eyes; the book flipped open tot the correct page; the words came tumbling out. Prayer had not changed [… ] (52)

During the party, the survivors are not only confronted with the unreality of the post-Holocaust life, but also with the beginning of a new life. Below the deck, Rivka, Fishl’s wife, is giving birth, which brings along an interesting metaphorical implication. The birth of Rivka’s child is for many reasons a special event. Firstly, pregnancy was rare after the liberation: “Even among the Germans, there were virtually no births during the first half of the decade.” (230) It was only when “Rivka’s belly began to expand they did begin to realize the biological process that was as inevitable as War was in August 1939” (230). This transition between the old and the new world is made clear by Isaac’s reaction to the blood: “There was blood all over the place, not the blood Isaac was familiar with, leeching life’s energy from bodies without count, but blood meant to harken in a new life … the reverse of the world he thought he knew”. (298) The baby is delivered “by his mother’s tears and blood”: “For three years I didn’t make a sound,” she cries, “not when they shot my father … not when they dragged away my mother … not when I dreamed about what they did to my sisters … Now.” (301) Then, “her cry shook the room” (301). The pain that she endures during the delivery is more painful than what she has experienced in the past, for “the terror of the past was tolerable” and “the future was ineffable” (269).

The baby’s delivery is also accompanied by Der Schreiber who tells the story of the Jews while Rivka is in labour. Therefore, “this baby figures the emergence of energies directed not toward survival alone but also toward the renewal of meaning” (Burstein 131-2). Once the story has been told, the baby boy appears, “evoking finally the response it requires” (132). The gap between past and future is bridged by Rivka’s pain and sorrow, whose labour mourns the past and gives “birth to the future” (132).

3.2.2.2. Ruins of the Body

After the Holocaust, the world was in ruins, and so were the prisoner’s bodies. The carnivalesque elements that were mentioned before, appear even more centrally in the physical aspect: “damaged male bodies of just liberated Holocaust survivors testify to the moral, social, and spiritual outrage they have endured” (Burstein 130). Those who survived resembled “skeletons because of the demands of forced labor and severe lack of food, compounded by months and years of maltreatment”, an appearance that is often mockingly referred to in After (USHMM). The prisoners are sketched as “skeletons” with waists “so thin that the pants circled them like the ring around Saturn” (Bukiet 14).

Friederichs

Appelfeld notes that the tattoos of the prisoners signify “one of the horrors of dehumanization” (83-4). The number on their arm shows the insignificance of their existence. A tattoo, or a “diploma” had marked all of them, but many were “significantly marked by more than tattoos” (Bukiet 114) (Burstein 57). Some practices went further than tattooing. The processing of prisoners’ bodies to lamp shades, for example, is shockingly described: “Yes, I’ve heard rumors of lampshades, too.” “How?” “Skin. Finely ornamented with elegant tattoos.” (Bukiet 21)

It was mentioned earlier on that the condition of Isaac’s teeth, his “trademark smile”, leaves much to be desired (164). One morning, Isaac “thought he was lucky because the round-faced Kapo singled him out for a cup of hot coffee” (5). The sadistic Nazi lets him have one sip, “as big as [he] wish[es]” (5). But, because of the poor conditions in the camp, Isaac’s teeth have become brittle and are not used to extreme temperatures. Isaac, unaware of the guard’s malice, drinks the boiling hot coffee and immediately, all of his teeth crack (5). A wide variety of mocking insults are used to refer to his teeth: “Isaac’s teeth were as jagged as the Alps”, “the teeth cluttered like castanets behind the pursed lips” (120, 175). Furthermore, Isaac’s teeth embody fear: “The line of shattered stubs in his mouth was a tool to strike pity and fear into anyone who beheld them.” (126) This is illustrated at the beginning of a novel: “The boy soldier in the tank flinched at the sight of Isaac’s teeth and said, “I guess I made a wrong turn.” (6) However, Isaac is not the only one who bears the consequences of the Holocaust horror on his body. Marcus, a dentist who was trained by the Nazis to become a forger, can see “no farther than his knuckles” and wears “coke-bottle glasses” (Bukiet 38, 31). When Marcus arrived at the camp, he was of “only modest myopia”, but his vision was severely and deliberately aggravated a pair of spectacles that had “belonged to a half-blind upholsterer in Tarnów” (38-9). Isaac’s older brother Alter, who appears now and then in the novel, is also scarred. Vilnik, an anti-Semitic “Polish horse trader”, had first “fuelled his disdain” with “local vodka”, and then “smacked Alter with a blunt cudgel that caught the child under the left eye, raised him off the ground, and dropped him flat” (Bukiet 130). Also the (or more accurately, the lack thereof) hair of the survivors is a common topic of ridicule in the novel and is used as a defining characteristic: “[…] the group forming a semicircle around him. They all had hair.” (53) A ghastly and upsetting comparison follows later on in the novel: “They [women] listened to Doris Day on Yankee radio and bought wigs made from the newly opened storehouses crammed with their mother’s hair.” (188)

Not only the mutilated bodies of the survivors show carnivalesque influence, also food and sex is openly discussed. According to Terrence Des Pres, “food and sex take on exaggerated value as the functions of the belly and genitals are magnified” (222-3). After bursts of lower forms of humour, more specifically “jokes, puns, slapstick and clowning” (222-3). Because of complete starvation, the prisoners

27 These lampshades are a famous phenomenon of the Holocaust era and are associated with Ilse Koch, the Bitch of Buchenwald, or “the Princess of Pain” (Bukiet 41). Koch was “the wife of the commandant of the Buchenwald camp” (Jewish Virtual Library). “The chief charges against her were cruelty to inmates, including murder, but what she is best-known for is the making of human-skin ornaments, including lampshades […]”(Jewish Virtual Library).
have a “hunger that had no end” (Bukiet 6). A decadent dinner for the survivors is described in meticulous detail. “A barnyard of chickens was swallowed”, yet, “Still, it was not enough.” and “Still they wanted more.” (35) Sexuality is equally abrasively portrayed. Janet Burstein notes that the traditional forms of courtship are gone: “delicate courtship rituals established across the synagogue barriers that kept the opposite sex at a remove for centuries went up in smoke” (Bukiet 187). Sex is reduced to a “purely animal exercise”: “They paired like rabbits in a cage as they couldn’t when penned in separate cages for the first half of the decade.” (Burstein 131) (Bukiet 187) Women are casually used without “making emotional commitments” (Burstein 131). There are many sexual puns that ridicule the ‘generous’ nature of the women they meet at the Green Hen, a bar that “used to be the chicken warehouse” (Bukiet 106). It is here that girls “without underwear danced almost in synch” (108). Here, Isaac gets his “delivery of maiden flesh” and if he meets “any enticing company”, he brings them home “for dessert” (158, 106). When three prostitutes, who “worked outcall from the back of the Green Hen”, arrive at the protagonists’ house, Morgenstern examines their health. “Healthy as a rat,” he says, “healthiest creatures on earth. They only spread disease, they never suffer from it. They’re lucky.” (125) At the end of the novel, when more and more survivors move away, the girls that used to pleasure men now have “cobwebs [growing] between their legs” (319).

3.2.2.3. Ruins of the Mind

The bodily scars are not the only damage that the survivors have to carry with them; also their minds are agonised and distressed. Loss is a feeling that every single one of them daily has to live with. Due to the lack of pleasant memories, there is a general loss of belief, which is in fact a continuous concern in post-Holocaust writings. After the liberation, former yeshiva boys still learn, but what they learn is different from the yeshiva lessons they had before the war. Morality and spirituality are gone and a discussion between Isaac and Fishl illustrates this. Fishl asks himself why God would disadvantage the Jews: “Tell me about a God who gives the world to the German murderers and to us, who bow and pray, he gives worse than nothing, he gives …” (Bukiet 121) From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Isaac is cynical about God’s existence and the purpose of believing. When the “Negro chaplain” orders the men, “Let us pray”, Isaac cynically comments: “For what?” (8) Isaac has no estimation for God, let alone for theology in general: “Dreck and claptrap. He gives dreck and I’ve never heard such self-indulgent claptrap in all my life.” (121) “The last thing I needed then and the last thing I need now is theology,” he says (121). Moreover, for Isaac God is dead: “God and my mother, Isaac smiled. “They’re both dead.” (168)

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28 Encyclopedia Britannica defines yeshiva as “any of numerous Jewish academies of Talmudic learning, whose biblical and legal exegesis and application of Scripture have defined and regulated Jewish religious life for centuries.”
It is clear that Isaac and many others have lost the wish to live. According to Appelfeld, “when the wings of death were folded up, the meaning of life suddenly lost its power and purpose” (86). As was mentioned earlier on; after the liberation, reality showed its true colours and the “world was now visible in all its starkness”: “nothing remained expect you yourself” (86). One could ask in what condition the survivors ‘remained’ and what was actually left of them (86). What was a Jew after the war? Who could say or imagine that what happened to them “was not a sole idiosyncratic catastrophe,” but rather “the shape of Jewishness in their age?” (72) What is left of their identity? Isaac is complete lost: “I don’t know what a Jew is anymore. I don’t think that I bear any resemblance to my father or my grandfather or some ancestor with camels. Things are different now.” (156-7) In this carnivalesque world everything is turned upside down. After the war, some things have stayed the same, but most things have changed. This is metaphorically referred to when Fishl arrives at a crossroads, marked by a square bore that “arrows in two directions”: “← BRNO 55K, BRATISLAVA 80K →” (Bukiet 50). The narrator’s comment when Fishl is contemplating which way to go, is striking: “Bratislava was in the north of Hungary, Brno toward Prague. Assuming that the distances were correct and that the sign had not revolved on its pivot, […]” (50) (emphasis added). This could well be an ironic remark, however, in the post-Holocaust world, all has “revolved on its pivot” and is indeed turned upside down.

Apart from their identity, their core, the survivors also lost family bonds. Janet Burstein notes that families were “disembodied” after the Holocaust and “reduced to scratches of ghostly fingers on the air” (59). Therefore, there is also an intensification of family bonds, as a way of getting a grip on the situation, and this is very clear in Isaac’s case. Throughout the novel, he searches frenetically for his older brother Alter. To Isaac, who seems to be so imperturbable, Alter is a weak point, which he also says so himself: “[...] had one weak spot. There was one thing he’d trade his hand for, pay his profits toward, [...] a brother with an eye patch, because the one thing that had more value than gold was blood.” (294-5). When the gang has acquired the gold near the end of the novel, Isaac thinks he recognises Alter and that he is going to save them: “Alter?” he sighed, blissfully certain that everything was going to be all right.” (365) However, this “recognition” is just a hallucination. Alter’s appearance and disappearance can be seen as a ‘deus ex machina’. For Isaac, Alter is a sort of talisman, or saviour, in difficult times. Alter is the only one whom Isaac trusts. Isaac also searches for other lost family members, which is like looking for a needle in a haystack: “Asking a stranger if he knew one’s mother was like trying to guess the serial numbers on a bill in the stranger’s pocket. (88) At the end of the novel, when the dénouement of Isaac’s plan to steal “eighteen tons of gold created from fillings pried from the teeth of the Jews of Eastern Europe” finally arrives, he has a vision of his parents, “in a flash of panic” (101, 362). It is at this crucial point that Isaac is able to reclaim this memory that he suppressed for so long: “[...] he was determined that his stocking would be stuffed with eighteen tons of gold. Then time would stand still. Then he would live in the present.” (323) The recuperation of the gold can be seen as the turning point of the novel. It leads Isaac to accepting his fate. It is only after
this event that Isaac finally agrees to let his teeth fixed. Before, he refused to get this done. One reason that Isaac did not let them get fixed could have been the terrifying factor that his teeth entailed. However, it is more probable that Isaac refused because of his struggle with post-Holocaust life, and more specifically with the rage and sorrow it brought along. Eventually, he agrees when Marcus proposes to fix them: “Your teeth,” he said. “Let me do your teeth before we say Good-bye.” (377) “O.K.,” Isaac replies”. (377) Yet, Isaac refuses to have anaesthetics: “What’s that?” Isaac said. “Anesthetic [sic], so you don’t feel anything.” “I don’t need it,” Issac [sic] said.” (377) This shows that he still has not come to terms with his own situation and with the post-Holocaust world. The procedure is accompanied by cynical remarks, such as: “All that was missing was a motto hanging across the great red opening to Isaac’s mouth, ARBEIT MACHT FREI.” (379) When Isaac finally has his new set of teeth, it seems as if the circle of life is finished: Marcus gave him some gold teeth. “I saved a portion from before. I didn’t have any chance to use it until now. But it doesn’t go bad, and I believe we have just enough for this job. It’s gold.” (379) This moment functions as a reversal of time, back to when the war was non-existent and when the Jews were not stripped of their possessions.

Nevertheless, what happens with the gold at the end of the novel cancels this reversal of time. Fishl has disappeared with the gold: “[…] there had been no word from Fishl since he fled Liebknecht with his truck full of Christmas goodies” (371). “Fishl was nowhere.” (371) When Fishl finally returns, the truth comes out: Fishl travelled to Auschwitz where he buried the gold “in sacred ground” (381). Isaac and his companions immediately start planning to get it back, but Fishl says that is impossible: “You don’t understand, Isaac. […] It’s in sacred ground”. (381) Burstein considers the burying of the gold a “dominant metaphor”, “ironically reminiscent of all the graveless dead” (56). In one way, history might not be reversed by Fishl’s act; the world just keeps spinning: “That was the most strange. […] The grass. It was growing. It was alive. And I was alive, too […]” (383) Yet, by returning the gold to its rightful owners, Fishl does attempt to do justice to them and to revoke the Nazis’ brutal actions.

In spite of the Jews’ difficulties to cope with the immense impact of the Holocaust, their “strength of character” is admired in the novel (80). Their “Yiddish pace, swift as language, fleeting as thought, strong as sorrow” is imperturbable (66). While “the Germans “shut their eyes to try to eradicate the vision of death that surrounded them while the Jews just naturally assumed that life went on.” (10) An important intertextual reference emphasises their vigour. Chapter six is introduced with a reference to Robinson Crusoe. His endurance is compared to the strength of the Jews: “survival is nine-tenths of dominion” (97). The strength of the Jews is linked to ‘fitness’ when the gang meets a German collaborator who has the volume On the Origin of Species written by Charles Darwin. Isaac remembers how Alter recited Darwin’s theory and one particular phrase stuck in his mind: “Survival of the fittest” (156). A Nazi asks them “Is that why Jews survive? Pardon me, but you don’t look so fit.” (156) Isaac ironically replies, “Hey, you should have seen me Before!” (156)
3.3. Holocaust Humour in Film: *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997)

3.3.1. Artistic Representation of Jewish Trauma in Film

3.3.1.1. Film

The previous chapter focused on the conceptualisation of literary representations of the Holocaust by the Second Generation. This chapter will zoom in on another branch of artistic representations: film. Similarly to second-generation literature, film is equally based on attempts to achieve a *tikkun*, of “self, of family life, and of society on the part of the contemporary children of Job who themselves are either married or have partners, and many of whom now have families of their own.” (Berger 129) Films that are to be categorised in the particularist branch “seek a *tikkun* of the self and of family relations” (188). They try to reinforce the existing bonds between parent and child, but also address the issues that surround these bonds, both “within and outside the Jewish world” (Berger 188). Therefore, these films bring into focus the concerns of “difficult intergenerational communication” (188). Alan Berger adds that there is also a certain suspicion of “the social world”, which is sometimes viewed as “anomic and highly dangerous” (188). The universalist films spotlight those who are capable of fighting these dangerous and murderous factors. This could be perceived as a kind of gratitude from the Second Generation expressed towards those helpers who saved their family’s lives. After all, if it were not for their courageous behaviour, the next generations would not even have been born. Consequently, this branch of second-generation films highlights the moral example of “non-Jewish rescuers and helpers who during the time of severe testing revealed the *tikkun* of ordinary decency” (189). It is important to note that the mention of “ordinary decency” stresses that what these saviours did is perceived as self-evident and as a natural reaction to the horrors. The rescuers “are united in their twofold belief that what they did was not heroic and, given the choice between saving lives and acquiescing to death, they chose life” (189). Therefore, this branch is a combination of personal and universal implications “in terms of raising fundamental moral and ethical issues by inviting viewers to respond to the implicit question, “How would I behave in those circumstances?” (189) There are similarities too between the two fields. Both emphasise the importance of theological questions: “Why did the Jewish people suffer during the Holocaust? Where was God? Why did the “moral minority” help? Where were the majority of European Christians either murderers or bystanders?” (189) Also, both realise that it is impossible to represent the Holocaust true to reality and that what they tell is fragmentary and incomplete (189).
3.3.1.2. Controversy and Criticism

It is no surprise that also this creation of the Second Generation met with much criticism. Before addressing the critique on their work, it is important to note that often, the Second Generation itself is attacked, partly because of their restricted access to the First Generation’s past. Imre Kertész, for example, attacks Steven Spielberg and *Schindler’s List* (1993) on numerous accounts, emphasizing that Spielberg “incidentally wasn’t even born until after the war” (269) (emphasis added). Basically, Spielberg does not know what he is talking about, since he has no idea “of the authentic reality of a Nazi concentration camp” (269). Kertész continues, highly indignant, and asks himself why on earth he should be delighted with these types of artistic representations: “But why should I, as a Holocaust survivor and as one in possession of a broader experience of terror, be pleased when more and more people see these experiences reproduced on the big screen—and falsified at that?” (269) (emphasis added).

The second-generation films are also blamed for not being ‘realistic’. There is “some sort of allusive or distanced realism” (Friedlander 17). Because of a “filter” that perceives reality from a distance, “the unsayable” is left unsaid” (17). However, despite Friedlander’s remarks, he does strive for this “narrative margin” and considers it as a necessity; firstly, in order that the capacity of the observer is not “blunted” and secondly, so that an “internal barrier to supplement the absence of external distancing” is created (17). Thane Rosenbaum is another critic who disputes the lack of realism. He finds that even though (American) films try to focus on “clarity and closure”, these films are more often “unrealistic and frankly immoral in the world in which we now live”, and also in regards to “the crises that we all now face” (135) (emphasis added). Rosenbaum identifies this wish for closure especially in Holocaust films, “which have life-affirming, sugarcoated, feel-good endings” (135). He condemns this wish as selfish; for wanting to feel better about a world that “doesn’t deserve it” and that will eventually leave us “empty” is a short-sighted point of view (135). Rosenbaum sees this as a disgrace to the survivors, who “deserve more than banalities and platitudes, or distortions and trivializations of truth” (135). Such films are often regarded as ‘kitsch’. The Oxford English dictionary defines this term as: “Art or objets d’art characterized by worthless pretentiousness; the qualities associated with such art or artifacts.” (OED) It also applies to the rendering worthless or “to affect with sentimentality and vulgarity” (OED). Ruth Wisse, for one, objects to “[f]eel-good comedy about the murder of European Jewry”, which she considers as “inevitably reductive kitsch” (179). It is no surprise that also Imre Kertész disapproves. Kertész especially has a down on *Schindler’s List*, which “lured millions into the movie theaters, including many who otherwise would never have been interested in the subject of the Holocaust” (269) (emphasis added). Kertész slightly adapts the definition of ‘kitsch’ to his own liking: “any representation of the Holocaust that is incapable of understanding or unwilling to understand the organic connection between our own deformed mode of life […] and the very possibility of the Holocaust” (270) (emphasis added). Kertész despises artistic representations that want to “establish the Holocaust
once and for all as something foreign to human nature” (270). According to him, the Holocaust should not be taken out of its “realm of human experience” (270).

Because of this accusation of creating “sugarcoated” films that extract the Holocaust out of the human experience, there is a lack of challenge. According to Anton Kaes, there is a dire need for films dealing with the Holocaust and/or Nazis in a manner that challenges the “narrowly circumscribed Hollywood conventions of storytelling” (Kaes 208). There should not only be a self-critical reflection “on the limits and impasses of film”, but also on its potential of representing the past (208).

3.3.2. The Questionable Beauty of Holocaust Life

*Life is Beautiful* is a simple “love story” that sets off in the 1930s, in Mussolini’s Italy, when the Jewish Guido Orefice, an extremely warm-hearted and cheerful character who works as a waiter in a hotel, meets Dora, a schoolteacher who is engaged to a Fascist officer (Benigni). After a romantic pursuit, Dora and Guido get married and have a son, Giosué. When the boy is six years old, the film switches from a joyful and idealised atmosphere to the grim setting of a concentration camp. The family is torn apart, and Guido ends up with Giosué, whom Guido tries to reassure with a ‘game’. During their time together, Guido creates a world filled with imagination and fantasy, in order to protect his son. Benigni remembers that he was not that fond of creating a story concerning such a touchy subject: “I got a little scared, because an extermination camp is an extermination camp.” (Benigni) When he envisioned himself playing the scenes, it would be “like Donald Duck in an extermination camp” (Benigni). However, he could not get the idea out of his head and started with the project.

Benigni created a story that “dares to find humor and tenderness in the midst of the Holocaust” and therefore, that “dares to laugh in the face of the unthinkable” (Maslin). In his article “Laugh yourself to death”, Slavoj Žižek categorises *Life is Beautiful* under “a new sub-genre or at least a new trend: the holocaust comedies”. However, despite the many comic elements in the film, Benigni emphasises that it is not a comedy about the Holocaust, but that it is “a comedian who did [a] movie about the Holocaust, which is different” (Benigni).

3.3.2.1. Confrontation versus Appreciation

Before focusing on the analysis of Benigni’s work, it is important to address the wide variety of opinions that surfaced after the film’s broadcast. In spite of Benigni’s well-meant intentions, his witty view on World War II is often regarded with suspicion. Especially David Denby’s attack on the film is remarkable, which is illustrated by his (not one, but two) reviews in the New Yorker. In his first review, Denby dismissed the movie “as a mistake”; in his second review he attacks Benigni personally, claiming that he is “an inept historian” (qtd. in Flanzbaum 281). However, in his conclusion, Denby
goes even further and accuses the film of Holocaust denial: “the audience can leave the movie feeling relieved and happy that Life is Beautiful is a benign form of Holocaust denial” (282) (emphasis added).

Also Terry Teachout points out that the film “consists of one historical distortion after another” (qtd. in Flanzbaum 281). In addition, “nothing that happens in Life is Beautiful could possibly have occurred in real life” (281) (emphasis added). The gist of these reactions is that the film is not “a valid depiction of the Holocaust” (Flanzbaum 273). The commotion could have partly originated from what Žižek calls “the self-cancellation of the comedy”. When the laughter suddenly stops at the end of the movie, the viewer gets “either pathetic dignity or nausea” (Žižek). The viewer is indeed surprised by Benigni’s extraordinary approach, which is even more intensified when “hero persists to the end in his survivalist stance” (Žižek). The combination of the ‘shock’ of this approach, and the sudden ending of comedy could possibly aggravate the already sceptical stance of the critics. Yet, as was mentioned earlier on, the Holocaust appears to be quite an unapproachable event, and secondly, Benigni does not present this film as a realistic depiction of the Holocaust. He emphasizes: “[…]this is not a true story. All the movies about the Holocaust, ninety per cent are true stories. This is completely an invention, a fable, but a fable invented by the truth.” (Benigni) Benigni notes that it is actually nearly impossible to create a film that “could even come close to the reality of what happened” (qtd. in Viano 6). “You can't show unimaginable horror – you can only ever show less than what it was,” Benigni adds (6). Giosué’s introduction in the beginning of the film emphasises that the story is a “fable […] full of wonder and happiness”, and therefore strips the film of any realistic intents (00:51).

It is quite surprising that it is Imre Kertész, a critic not particularly positive about the Second Generation’s efforts, who now admires Benigni’s attempts and has sympathy for his and his generation’s struggles: “I notice that Benigni, the creator of the film, was born in 1952. He is the representative of a new generation that is wrestling with the ghost of Auschwitz, and has the courage (and also the strength) to lay claim to this sad inheritance.” (272) Kertész even defends Benigni’s film: “There is never any gigantism here, no sentimental or agonizing lingering over details, no red arrows shot demonstratively across a gray background.” (271-2) He continues, “Everything is so clear and simple, so immediate and touching, that tears well up in one’s eyes.” (272) In her review in the New York Times, Janet Maslin considers it “an unpretentious, enormously likable film that plays with history both seriously and mischievously”. As mentioned, realism is not its main concern and therefore, it gives us an authentic view on the Holocaust, which “moves us with the power of the oldest kind of magic, the magic of fairy tales” (Kertész 271). While it is also its difficulty, this fantasy world of this film opens up new perspectives. Benigni re-visions the event and presents a creation that is “an important contribution to our understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust” (qtd. in Flanzbaum 273). The film sparks an awareness and “public discussion of the Holocaust that would have seemed impossible as recently as twenty years ago.” (284) Denby noted in this reviews that Americans seems to be “sick” of hearing about the Holocaust, however, this unique approach might catch their attention (284). As Sander L. Gilman notes, laughter is indeed “the key in our understanding” of this film (303).
3.3.2.2. ‘Beautification’ of the Holocaust

The previously discussed opinions criticise a wide variety of aspects of the film. This section will provide an analytical insight in the ways Benigni tries to alter the perception of the Holocaust via humour.

A. Intertextuality

The first aspect that highlights Benigni’s particular approach to the Holocaust is the use of intertextual references and an allegorical choice of names. In an interview, Benigni noted that the title of the film *Life is Beautiful* is a reference to Leon Trotsky’s letter, which Trotsky wrote when barricaded in his Mexican compound, fearing that he would die soon (Viano):

[…] I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. *Life is beautiful*. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full.

The film’s working title was “Buongiorno Principessa”, but when Benigni came across Trotsky’s letter, he felt that it corresponded perfectly to the film’s spirit (Viano). The Italian expression “Dai! La vita è bella!” equals the English “Don’t worry, be happy!” It is often used to cheer someone up and to urge him or her to look at the circumstances in a more positive light (Viano). Several times – and this is recognised as Benigni’s main intention in this film – Guido tries to make his son laugh and make him forget the gruesome circumstances they have to cope with. By using Trotsky’s vision as the inspiration for the title, this film celebrates a character that is able to see “the beauty of life under oppressive circumstances” and who is Jewish but does not “make Jewishness the basis of his personal identity” (Viano). It does not come as a surprise that Benigni’s decision aggravated the negative criticism on his creation even more. It is the contrast, laughter and optimism versus horror, which entailed so many dismayed reactions. How could one possibly look at the bright side, or even worse, claim that life is beautiful after the extermination of millions of people? The work title did not have any “narrative justification” or puzzling aspects to it that could confuse the viewers or “force them to ask questions” (Viano). By opting for a controversial title, Benigni was aware that this would “expose the film to further critical venom”, as was mentioned before (Viano).

Also the mention of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is significant. Schopenhauer claims that the universe “is not a rational place” (Wicks). On the contrary, the world is

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29 Leon Trotsky was a (1879-1940) communist revolutionary and Marxist theorist. The Jewish Virtual Library notes that Trotsky was an “influential politician in the early days of the Soviet Union” and that he was the founder and commander of the Red Army. Because of various conflicts with Joseph Stalin, Trotsky “was expelled from the Communist Party” and deported from the Soviet Union to Mexico (Jewish Virtual Library). There, on the 21st of August 1940, Trotsky was assassinated.

30 This letter was written in Mexico, on the 27th of February 1940.
“filled with endless strife” and we should overcome this “frustration-filled and fundamentally painful human condition” (Wicks). What is most prevalent in Schopenhauer’s work is the idea that he expressed in *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), and that is somewhat altered in Benigni’s film. A concept that the philosopher calls “Will”, a “mindless, aimless, non-rational urge”, is the basis of “our instinctual drives” and “at the foundational being of everything” (Wicks). This central idea of the “Will-to-live” is therefore not “of the mind but rooted in the very fabric of our bodies” (Viano 10). It is important to note that “Will” is a universal force, and not an element of the individual human being. Schopenhauer emphasises that the Will creates discontent and should be disregarded; an “impassive and impersonal mechanism” that is regarded with wisdom and fatalism (10). However, Guido uses this reflexion as an idealistic ‘method’ to get what he wants. The concept is introduced when Guido and his best friend Ferruccio lie in bed at night. Guido is making plans for the next day, when he suddenly realises that Ferruccio is asleep. Astonished, he exclaims “You fell asleep while talking to me! How did you do that?” (Benigni 13:59-14:01). Ferruccio’s answer starts the misinterpretation of the philosopher’s theory: “Schopenhauer says that with willpower, you can do anything.” (14:06) Guido immediately turns this into his advantage and starts moving his hands to let the ‘magic’ work, a habit that he will continue throughout the film. When he pursues his romantic interest Dora, he uses the ‘spell’ to make her look at him: “Look at me, Princess. Go on, I’m down here. Look at me, Princess. Turn around, Princess. Turn around, around –” (26:46-27:17). At the end of the film, just before Guido is shot, he hides Giosué in a nightstand. He uses Schopenhauer’s method to save his son from a sniffer dog that is about to discover Giosué hiding place: “Leave! Go away dog! Go dog! Leave. Good job, Ferruccio. It works.” (1:40:54-41:16). Guido’s misinterpretation of Schopenhauer’s theory is not the only ironic factor that is important in this intertextual framework. In fact, Schopenhauer was German and his ideas were, according to Maurizio Viano, used by the Nazis, “through Nietzsche's Will-to-Power” (11). What Schopenhauer saw as a way of regulating life, the Nazis manipulated and used as “a legitimation for their aggressive search of a *lebensraum*—living space” (11)31. In this light, it is fairly ironic that a Jewish man makes use of a reflexion that is supported by his main enemy; the Nazis. Hence, Benigni is actually highlighting “their ignorance as well as the possibility of oppositional readings” (11). One could interpret Schopenhauer’s vision literally, but Benigni shows that life can also be ‘beautified’ by “an individual's sacrifice modelled after a more accurate reading of the philosopher” (11).

There are also allegorical name choices that are interesting to analyse. For example, doctor Lessing, who is obsessed with riddles, refers to the writer of the play *Nathan the Wise* (1783), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Viano). The play supports the idea of “German religious tolerance toward the Jews” (11). At first, it seems as if Dr Lessing is tolerant and is trying to get Guido out of the camps by letting

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31 Numerous works refer to the Nazis’s idolisation of “Will”, such as the controversial propaganda film, *Triumph des Willens* (1935), which Leni Riefenstahl directed, as well as “Unser Wille und Weg”, the Nazi Party monthly for propagandists (1931-41) (Bytwerk).
him serve at a Nazi dinner party. At the end of the dinner, Lessing calls Guido, who is eagerly waiting for news. However, the deception will be great when Guido realises that Lessing only wants to know the answer to a riddle. The situation becomes completely absurd when Lessing is the one who desperately asks for help: “For heaven’s sake … help me. I can’t even sleep.” (1:32:55-60) Another remarkable name is Guido’s. This name can be derived from the verb “guidare”, which means “to guide” or “to lead” (Collins Dictionary). This is Guido’s general conduct throughout the film: he is a guide to protect his family from the big, bad world Guido’s last name, Orefice, also has an interesting meaning: goldsmith (or jeweller) (Collins Dictionary). A goldsmith is someone who creates pieces of jewellery, ornaments in gold (OED). The combination of Guido and Orefice reinforces the symbolical meaning and potential of Guido’s behaviour in the film: creating stories out of daily occurrences that function as an escape route.

B. Reality versus Fantasy

Besides the intertextual and allegorical references, the main concern at stake in this analysis is the ‘rivalry’ between reality and fantasy. It appears that the fantasy world overrules reality, which is confirmed by Maurizio Viano who sees the first part of the film as a “pure farce and fairy-tale romance, with no hint of the impending tragedy” (6). However, there are in fact quite a few, although subtle at times, “hints” at the growing dominance of the fascist and later on Nazi regime. Only five minutes after the start of the film, there is a first clue that the surroundings of this film are not all roses. When Guido and Ferruccio are driving to the house of Guido’s uncle Eliseo, the walls of the city are covered with posters of Mussolini (05:43). This grim forerunner is confirmed when the two arrive at Eliseo’s home not much later. A group of men run out of the house laughing, leaving Eliseo beaten on the ground (06:11-5). When Guido and Ferrucio ask him why he did not cry for help, he responds “Silence is the most powerful cry”, and this is his general conduct throughout the film, which contrasts sharply with Guido’s (06:29). This is not the only incident in the first, more idyllic, part of the film. At the party on the occasion of Dora and her fascist fiancé’s engagement another incident happens. Eliseo’s horse is covered with green paint and is marked by the inscription “Achtung, Jewish horse” (37:16-46). Eliseo warns Guido to take this seriously, “You’ll have to get used to it, Guido”, but Guido laughs it off and says, “What could possibly happen to me? The worst they can do is undress me, paint me yellow and write … “Achtung, Jewish waiter.” I didn’t even know this horse was Jewish.” (37:46-32

In the light of this political background, it is important to distinguish between fascism and Nazism. Both fascism and Nazism were two dominant political movements during the first part of the twentieth century. The fascist doctrine goes back to shortly after the First World War (Williams). The Italian movement was led by Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) and envisioned “a patchwork quilt of ideas that suit[ed] their practical goals of achieving unchallenged political power” (Williams). Later on, Adolf Hitler adopted Mussolini’s movement for his own Nationalist Socialist party, which emphasised rather the importance of “das Volk” instead of the state (Williams).
There are other subtleties that allude to the growing influence of Nazism. When talking to Oreste, Ferruccio’s employer, Guido asks him what his “political views” are (08:48). However, Oreste’s two naughty sons disturb the conversation, upon which Oreste reprimands them and indirectly answers Guido’s question: “Benito! Adolph! Be good!” (08:50) (emphasis added). This example shows that the subtle references are often a source of ridicule. When Guido is practicing his waiter walking skills, it looks suspiciously like the marching of the Nazis (12:31-44). Later on, just before taking Dora away from the party and from her fiancé, Guido enters the room riding Eliseo’s green horse. He is greeted by the guests, among which a man who welcomes him with the Nazi salute, and remains so long in this same position that it becomes a ridiculous display (45:47). These references become less subtle once we meet Guido’s family after the birth of his son, now approximately six years old. The scenery has completely changed; there are no more joyful conversations on the market place and neither is there any economic activity. The market has been taken over by officers, houses and businesses are closed: the “Comando Germanico” has taken over (48:58-50:14). When walking down the street, Giosuè sees a delicious pie that he would like to buy for his mother Dora. While the child only has eyes for the pie, the viewer quickly notices the sign “No Jews or dogs allowed” (50:25). After convincing his father to buy the pie, Giosuè finally sees it too and asks why Jews and dogs are not allowed. From this moment on, it becomes very clear that Guido will protect his son from the gruesome reality that they live in. He downplays the sign as “everybody does what they want to” (50:45). He continues,

“There’s a hardware store there. They don’t let Spanish people or horses into the store. Further ahead, there’s a drugstore. I was with a Chinese friend of mine yesterday who had a kangaroo. I said, “May we?” No, we don't want any Chinese or kangaroos here.” They don't like them. What can I tell you? (50:52-51:02)

Guido proposes to put up a sign in their bookshop and asks what Giosuè hates. The boy answers “spiders”, upon which Guido confesses that he hates the Visigoths, which is not coincidentally, since these people were actually an important Germanic tribe from the fifth to the eighth century (51:11-14). Even though there is a mocking interpretation of the circumstances, the link with reality is maintained. In the second part of the movie that is set in the concentration camp, this link is maintained. Not much after their arrival, Guido and the other inmates have to work in wretched circumstances, suffering from the heat: “It’s got to be 3000 degrees in here!” (1:06:51) Also the tattoos of the prisoners are mentioned, which is included in the game that Guido set up. When Guido comes back from the work camp, he tells Gisoué that they are “signed up”. To prove it, he shows the number on his uniform, as well as the tattoo he got: “In fact, they gave me one. Look. I had them put it here, too, just in case.” (1:08:48-52) The link with reality becomes painfully clear when Guido stumbles upon what seems to be a foggy heap of soil or of other unidentified material, but which turns out to be a pile of unidentified dead bodies (1:34:41). Another crucial moment is when Gisoué hears the rumour that “they make
buttons and soap” out of the prisoners and that “they burn [them] all in the oven” (1:19:27-33). Quickly, Guido includes this rumour in the game and emphasises the ridiculousness of Giosué’s suspicions:

You fell for that? Again? I thought you were a sharp boy-- cunning, intelligent. Buttons and soap out of people? That'll be the day! You believed that? Just imagine. Tomorrow morning, I wash my hands with Bartolomeo... a good scrub. Then I'll button up with Francesco. Darn it all! Look! I just lost Giorgio! Does this look like a person? Come on! They were teasing you! And you fell for it! What else did they tell you? That we get cooked in the oven. They burn us up in the oven. You fell for that too! You just eat everything up! I've heard of a wood oven... but I've never seen a man oven before. "I'm made of wood!” "Take this lawyer!” "This lawyer doesn't burn. He's not dry enough. Look at that smoke!” (1:19:45-1:20:53)

This last example illustrates the ‘game’ that Guido creates and that leads to a fictional dream world in which Guido and Giosué compete with the other inmates for an enormous tank. Earlier on in this analysis, the statement that there is no place for realism in this film was repudiated. There is interaction between to the real and the fantasy world. Guido himself is competing with the “randomness of the world in which he exists” by resorting to a sort of escapism and naivety in order to cope with the cruel circumstances that were illustrated by the previous examples (Gilman 303). Viano states that there are two parts in the film; one that concentrates on slapstick comedy and a second part that is a tragedy (7). Consequently, the film is a result of this splicing together of “two halves that do not belong together because they are, in fact, recalcitrant opposites, one the negation of the other” (7). Nevertheless, the imaginary world that Guido creates is a reaction against the real world, and therefore based on a manipulation of realistic events, which means that there is in fact no strict dichotomy between realism and a dream world, nor between the first part and the second part of the film. As Benigni noted, one could think that the first and second part are separated, but this would rather be a reaction that is based on the shock of seeing the setting change so drastically: “The second part is more tragic because of the first part. Dante said in The Divine Comedy, that there is no greater sorrow than thinking upon happy times during misery.” (Benigni) Both worlds are interwoven and influence one another. There are realistic elements in the first comic part, and there are comic elements in the tragic part.

Up to the end of the film, Guido’s conduct emphasises his seemingly “childlike nature” and the need for “representing the image of innocence” (Gilman 292). In an interview, Benigni sketched Guido’s character as “a man in the most extreme circumstances who tries to convince himself he's not there” (qtd. in Gilman 293). Guido has multiple ways of displaying this magical dream world, for example finding the solution to confusing riddles:

33 It is said that the Nazis reproduced the fat of the bodies of Jewish inmates into soap. Supposedly, they boiled the victims to soap “stamped with the letters “RIF””, which stood for “Reines Judenfett” (Neander 63). In reality, “RIF” stood for “Reichstelle für Industriefette”, and was nothing more “than an abbreviation for the agency that coordinated the distribution of fat for non-alimentary use in wartime Germany” (63). The allegations are particularly supported and exploited by negativists to doubt the existence of the Holocaust itself (63).
“The bigger it is, the less you see it. Solution: obscurity.” (16:59)
“Fat, fat, ugly, ugly, all yellow in reality. If you ask me what I am... I answer, “Cheep, cheep, cheep. “Walking along I go, 'Poo poo'. Who am I? Tell me true.”
“A duckling [...].” (1:31:33-1:32:07)

It seems that these riddles have a symbolical meaning and show how Guido tries to cope with his life: by finding solutions to existential questions and trying to create a better atmosphere for those he loves. Throughout the entire film, Benigni wants to “defamiliarize violence” by focusing on the “psychological suffering among the admittedly infinite possibilities of suffering experienced in the Holocaust” (Flanzbaum 283). The world he creates resembles that of a fairy tale, “of the oldest kind of magic” (Kertész 271). Especially the romantic pursuit of Dora creates a dream-like magical atmosphere. Multiple times, Guido mysteriously pops up, out of nowhere, and greets her with “Buongiorno Principessa!”. By pursuing Dora in all the possible ways that he can come up with, Guido enthrals Dora into believing that she is part of a fairy tale (Viano). He invites her into a “mythical world in which our life overflows with secret connections and possibilities within our reach provided that we awaken to them” (Kertész 9). The carpet that rolls out when he picks up Dora after taking her away from the engagement party confirms this magical touch (32:15).

Apart from the dream-like fantasy world, there is also another important aspect that shapes the film: misunderstandings. After one minute, the film already makes the viewer laugh with the clumsiness of Ferruccio and Guido. When riding down a hill, the brakes of the car “are gone” and they rush full speed into a little village that is awaiting the arrival of the king (01:22). The villagers mistake Guido and Ferruccio for the king and his retinue and greet them enthusiastically (01:22-02:11). When the king finally arrives and is not greeted, the misunderstanding becomes painfully true. A less innocent misunderstanding occurs when Guido goes to the school where Dora works to visit the children as a ‘fascist school inspector’. The entire scene is highly ironical when the figurative meanings are taken into account. He is introduced by the principal as someone who will tell them “some very important things about our beautiful country” (21:00). Yet, what Guido tells the class will turn out to be quite ironic given the circumstances. Guido gives a lecture about the purity and beauty of the Italian race, which “is a superior race – the best of all” (22:47). “Where can you find someone more handsome than me? [...] I’m an original “superior race”, pure Aryan.” he adds mockingly (23:37-45). From there on in, the situation escalates. Guido starts analysing every body part: the ear, the belly button, muscles, the hip and so forth and describes its uniqueness and superiority (23:56-24:57). Eventually, the real inspector arrives and finds Guido dressed down to his underwear, dancing in the classroom. Quickly, Guido makes his “Aryan exit” and escapes through the window (25:12). This scene evokes “a double world of laughter” (Gilman 291). Firstly, the situation that Guido creates is hilarious for Dora and the children due to Guido’s exaggeration. Secondly, the audience sees the joke in the situation because Guido is Jewish and while he seems to glorify the fascist people, this idolisation can actually be applied to the Jewish race.
Once Guido and Giosué have arrived in the camp, Guido creates a literal ‘misunderstanding’. Having told Giosué about the ‘game’, Guido decides to translate for the German Nazi officer, even though he does not understand a single world the officer says. While the officer tells the prisoners what will be expected of them, Guido explains how the game works. For example, when the officer yells that they are there “zu arbeiten”, Guido (perhaps unknowingly) translates it to “Lucky him!” (1:04:28-33). The game goes as follows: the one who is the first to get thousand points and does not “cry”, “wants to see mommy”, or “asks a snack” will get the price of a tank (1:06:28-1:07:27). The puzzled look on the faces of the prisoners completes the hilarity of the scene. Imre Kertész recognises in this event the revealing of the “absurdity of that atrocious world, and about those who stood in opposition to the madness, unbroken in their spiritual strength” (271). What Guido does in this scene is actually what he does throughout the entire film: translating, or adapting, the circumstances and the reality to a world in which it is much more bearable to live.

Now, why is Guido so focused on creating this imaginary world, particularly in the concentration camp? Guido is capable of manipulating the truth and does it with the best intentions: ensuring the protection of his family. Slavoj Žižek notes that there is a human need “to maintain a minimum of protective appearance” and asks himself if “not all fathers doing something similar, although in less dramatic circumstances?” To say that “all” fathers protect their family might be a little too optimistic and generalising, but Guido certainly does excel in trying to keep Giosué alive. As Sander L. Gilman states, his goal is the “physical rescuing of the child”, but one could say that it is also the psychological protection of Giosué (303). This reaffirms Trotsky’s statement that supports the fundamental thought of this film: let the next generations enjoy life to the full, without worries and burdens from their family’s past. Giosué’s future is guaranteed by his father’s “selfless act of sacrifice”, who sees his son’s life as the primordial priority (303). An important scene that highlights Guido’s sacrifice is when Giosué gets tired of the game and wants to go home. Guido plays along and says that this decision is not a problem: “What do you think they do, force people to stay here? That’ll be the day.” (1:21:20) Guido starts assembling their belongings while he expresses his regret for their departure, since they were in the lead” for the game, and this makes Giosué change his mind (1:21:30-58). Unperturbed, Guido goes outside and stands in the pouring rain, waiting on Giosué to take the bus (1:22:52). Guido’s extremely risky act – if Giosué really wanted to leave they would actually have nowhere to go – highlights Guido’s devotion to the protection of his son’s well-being. Also Dora wants to protect her family, and gets on the deportation train, despite not being Jewish. “I want to get on that train!”, she yells multiple times (59:32-58). Finally, Giosué protects his parents too. In fact, Guido’s game works both ways. Giosué does not have to deal with the reality of the gruesome events that happen around him, but neither does Guido in a way. By making up this game and by creating an entire new atmosphere of competition, Guido can also escape from reality, even though it is just for a short period of time. While he seems joyful all the time, there are cracks in his joyful façade, which becomes clear when Guido wipes the sweat of his face after his ‘translation’ of the
Friederichs 58

officer’s rules, for example (1:08:29). Near the end of the film, it gets more difficult to keep up appearances, which was illustrated by Giosué who wanted to leave, and Guido finds it hard to maintain his happy behaviour. “Desperation seeps in during his moments alone,” Gilman notes (292).

Even though Guido gets shot, he is rewarded for his efforts. All of the coincidences that happened in the film culminate in the last scene of the film when Giosué crawls out of the closet and sees an enormous tank approaching. The war is over, Giosué has one thousand points and gets to leave the camp riding in the tank (1:47:59-1:48:42). Finally, he is reunited with his mother (1:49:36). The tank functions as a kind of ‘deus ex machina’, reuniting mother and child and restoring the family order. The ending of the film is a rather slippery slope; the viewer could easily think that this is just a film with a happy ending, and this is also what caused so much criticism. Yet, this restoration of the family order and the victory on the Nazis is not a trivialisation of the Holocaust; it is the triumph of an entire people “marked for extinction” that has managed to transform their dark fate into a brand new start (Viano 12). Returning to Schopenhauer’s reflexion, this ending shows that ‘Will’ can in fact be useful for an individual and restore one’s life. After all, where there’s a will, there’s a way.

3.4. Comparison between After and Life is Beautiful

A vicious comment that Melvin Bukiet made in Nothing Makes You Free illustrates that the criticism on the Second-Generation’s creations does not only originate from (non-Jewish) outsiders. Surprisingly, there are mutual conflicts within the ‘community’ of Second-Generation artists themselves. As mentioned before, a critique that is often expressed is that the Second Generation tries to make amends for what happened to their family. Bukiet perceives this as a “fetish for ‘healing’” and argues that there is actually neither comfort nor healing in these works (21). The reason that Bukiet is so frustrated is because he thinks that healing equals forgetting:

Healing is what movies like Life Is Beautiful and Schindler’s List seek – the former with gratuitous vulgarity, the latter with insidious skill – as they concoct a spurious ray of light to falsely illumine the night. Instead of closure, the writers prefer the open wound. (22) (emphasis added)

Yet, this is a rather conflicting statement since forgetting an event and bringing it back, which resembles ripping “out the stitches”, seem to go in different directions (22). Since Bukiet considers Life is Beautiful as a “gratuitous” and “vulgar” work, it is interesting to look at the parallels and divergences in both works. Before moving on to this comparison, it is important to note that both works are centred on the ‘tikkun’. After as well as Life is Beautiful display a tikkan atzni, a repair or salvation of the self. Yet, the “self” is a wide concept and each work gives this a personal interpretation via different notions.

Humour is theme that occupies an important place in both works. The characters in After, and especially Isaac, are more inclined to a very cynical, harsh and hurtful type of humour. In order to cope with their ‘self’ after the liberation, they aggressively attack and ridicule society, one another and
themselves. Humour in *Life is Beautiful*, on the other hand, functions more as a kind of anointment, to cope with the self surrounded by the impending world. It is also directed towards the absurdities of the real world, but with a witty and less aggressive inclination.

Reality provokes different reactions and poses a challenge to the characters. Isaac and his friends struggle with the old world and the new world; Guido fights the real world by escaping in an imaginary one. The wish to escape reality is at stake in both novels. However, Isaac takes this quite literally: he is obsessed with the idea of travelling to America and leaving his past behind. Given that Guido is imprisoned, there is no way of literally getting out. Therefore, he focuses on fleeing to a fantasy world. The contrast between this imaginary world and the raw carnivalesque world in *After* shows that the latter focuses on worldly activities (such as trade, smuggling) and obstacles and that the former leaves this behind. While the newly liberated prisoners cannot seem to get past the numerous losses they suffered, Guido decides to ignore this for the sake of Giosué’s well-being.

Lastly, the mindset of the characters is shaped by this reality. In both novels, the characters often hide their emotions, but for different reasons. Isaac, for example, is incapable of showing his true feelings because he does not know how to cope with them. Guido also hides his feelings, but rather to protect his son, even though this protection is also a way of escaping from dealing with the impact of the world. While *After* shows that many characters are in a sombre mood and are practically so helpless that they are unable to be happy, Guido tries to take an optimistic view on the matter and fills his family’s lives with joy. Isaac suffers from a loss of faith in himself and the world, and Guido desperately tries to maintain his.
4. Conclusion

This study was set out to corroborate our assumption that the decision to use humour as a way of approaching the Holocaust is indeed one for valid reasons. During our research, we observed that the available theoretical material on this matter has often proven to be ‘forgetful’ in regards to our domain of interest and specifically in the case of the Holocaust. Therefore, our thesis has sought to answer the questions that surround this subject by identifying the line of thought that hides behind this particular approach. This phenomenon has not only been discussed in order to draw the attention to the existing theoretical gap, but also in order to rectify the numerous allegations of this being an inappropriate response, only set out to provoke and to draw the attention. In order to offer a detailed insight in the workings of the connection between humour and trauma, we have attempted to present a structured overview of the various factors that influence this connection. Also the context in which this thesis is to be situated has been carefully invested. Our research was supported by two illustrations: the novel After by Melvin Jules Bukiet (1996) and the film Life is Beautiful by Roberto Benigni (1997).

The complicated interaction between humour and trauma became abundantly clear when we started investigating the theoretical background of Jewish humour. In order to achieve a well-founded perception of the background of our research, we went back to the origins of Jewish humour. Before starting, we did have a vague sense of the complexity, however, it was quite surprising to realise how this embraced nearly every domain that was of interest for our research. Firstly, there was complete confusion as to the different types of humour. Some scholars, such as Elliott Oring for example, based their findings on the conception that Jewish humour is self-critical, which was an idea that Freud established. Yet, there were no signs of Jewish self-derogatory humour before the nineteenth century. By exploring the roots of this type of humour, Hilel Halkin made a clear distinction between Freud’s modern observation and what he considered a humoristic tendency that went back to the very beginnings of biblical law. This contrast emphasised that the conception of Jewish humour is heavily influenced by Freud’s theory, and even more so by the scholars that blindly adopted his views, without questioning its legitimacy. It became clear that the theoretical background of our study is extremely complex, and that it could not be analysed in a black-and-white manner. Secondly, because of the confusion concerning the origins of Jewish humour, it was equally challenging to determine its evolution. While Halkin, Ben-Amos and Reik considered it to be a constant in history, Oring stressed that it was a rather modern invention. After this discussion, we noticed the engrained presence of humour in Judaism, which confirmed the statement that was mentioned in the introduction of our research: “Humor has been so much a part of Jewish culture that any kind of activity at all is impossible without it.” (qtd. in Oring 261) What was even more striking was how often humour was linked to the traumatic experiences that the Jews had to endure in the past (and present). Oring stated
that it was particularly being part of a community, and being rejected by another one, that incited this particular (often cynical) humoristic reaction. Because the Jews wished to belong to society, they sought to fight their insecurities and suffering by criticising their own people. Oring considered this behaviour a way of transcending their desolation and a refusal to surrender to their misfortune. Also, it functioned (and still does) as a defence strategy against those who continuously attacked them. Lastly, their reaction could also be seen as pathological, and therefore being a rather ‘irrational’ response.

However, this last characteristic clearly conflicted with our thesis statement. Is this really such an absurd reaction, or rather a “healthy element of actively coping with life” (Ziv)? Because of the Jews’ hardships, their humoristic reactions definitely raised questions. We noted that trauma and humour are not mutually exclusive, especially when the physical benefits were taken into account. It has been proven by many psychologists and physiologists that laughter influences the release of endorphins, which creates a general feeling of well-being. In a case as specific as the Holocaust, John Morreall distinguished three particular functions of humour. Humour functioned as a way of criticising the “punishing system of life” and could expose evil. In addition, by turning against a mutual enemy, good relations in the Jewish community were promoted, which led to a strong cohesive union of companions in misfortune. The last function that Morreall distinguished, and which seemed to be the most prevalent one, was that it allowed the Jews to cope with their hardship. Through humour, they were able to keep their morale and could dissociate themselves not only from the aggressors, but also from their own situation. It remains an open question if these humoristic approaches were a way of forgetting or rather a way of creatively dealing with the trauma.

The first part of this theoretical discussion focused on the turbulent and often traumatic course of life of the Jewish people and how humour was involved in this evolution. Our research was centred around one specific traumatic event, the Holocaust, and before moving on to the actual discussion of two artistic works, we presented a detailed overview of its impact on the Second Generation. We mentioned Alan Berger’s book *Children of Job* (1997) as a way of situating this generation whereupon we tried to gain insight in their efforts to deal with repercussions of the event. One of the biggest issues was that they have no accurate idea of what their parents (and if so, other family members) went through. They were not there and in many cases, their parents refused to talk about what happened, and even if they did, some second-generation adults could simply not remember, partly because they were only children, partly because the experiences were told so dispassionately. Another difficulty this generation had to cope with was the feeling of always being in-between and having neither an entirely Jewish identity nor an American one. This was often accompanied by a feeling of guilt: whatever they came across would never measure up to what their parents had gone through. Therefore, their work functions as an individual and unique way of reflecting on the past and an attempt to understand what happened.

The second part of our research was centred on the debate on artistic Holocaust representations of the Second Generation. We highlighted how art fitted in the previously discussed
theoretical background and how it is received. The reception of many works was rather negative. The heart of these issues was that, always, the attempts of the later generations were not close enough and that the Holocaust seemed to be an almost unapproachable event, in that he (or her) who tried to represent it would never be able to satisfy the high expectations. In addition, it was surprising that while some survivors appreciated a certain artistic representation, many other critics (who had not necessarily been through the events) immediately attacked it and judged it extremely harshly. These critics seemed to feel obliged to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust was preserved and respected. It remained the question if this ‘obligation’ to act as a caretaker is actually useful (Flanzbaum).

The analysis of After and Life is Beautiful discussed both self-derogatory and a more ‘general’ type of humour. Both works were discussed as having the achievement of tikkan atzmi (salvation of the self) as main goal. The analysis of After situated the self in three domains: the world, the body and the mind. The world in which we met the main characters was situated shortly after the liberation of the camps. Isaac and his companions frequently ridiculed the Allies, as well as the sensationalism that rose when the world realised what atrocities had occurred in the camps. What was equally interesting was that local maxims were adapted to the ex-prisoners’ own liking, especially the ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ sign was put through the hoops. Since no one really knew how to deal with neither the world nor the self, many entertainment groups popped up, as well as more serious activities, such as smuggling. The hiatus between ‘Before’ and ‘After’ was so immense that all values seemed to be turned upside down, which was illustrated by the yacht party. The birth of a child bridged the sorrow of the past and the hope for the future. It quickly became clear that especially Isaac’s cynical humour was a sign of the inability to deal with insecurities and doubts. Throughout the novel, the group clearly did not know how to handle the new-found freedom, just as the Allies did not know how to handle the ex-prisoners. The revelation of their insecurities became particularly apparent when they mocked their (and other’s) appearance. The tattoos, the lack of hair, the skinny bodies and so forth were openly laughed at and even exploited. The mocking references to these ‘shortcomings’ were greatly influenced by the carnivalesque mode, which explained the exaggeration and abundance of lower forms of humour when they described how one another looked like. In addition, also their minds were agonised. They suffered many losses, such as the loss of belief, of the will to live, of family bonds, of identity. The theft of an enormous cube of gold was crucial in the novel. It was only after their plan succeeded that Isaac finally started seeing a way out of his misery, and more importantly, that he allowed himself to be a free man. At the end of the novel, he finally got his teeth fixed, which ended up being gold teeth. This moment functioned as a way of reversing time, as a way of returning what once belonged to the Jews. However, Fishl decided to bury the gold in Auschwitz, because he felt that it belonged there with the deceased. On the hand, this action could be seen as the annulment of Isaac’s new teeth, but on the other hand, Fishl did try to go back in time and return to the rightful owners what they lost. The discussion of this novel has shown us that the characters undeniably did not feel at ease and that they were unsettled by the overwhelming impact of post-Holocaust life. They looked desperately for an
escape route and constantly poured ridicule on actions, establishments, and appearances that they did not know how to deal with. In order to situate their self and to gain control, they had to mock their surroundings. In the light of this challenge, humour offered excellent protection.

Humour was an equally important aspect of the film *Life is Beautiful*. What was particularly remarkable in this work was the use of intertextual references. The entire message of the film was based on Leon Trotsky’s belief that life is beautiful and that it should be enjoyed. Also Schopenhauer’s ideology was fundamental. The mention and interpretation of ‘Will’ was a decisive moment since it was the complete opposite of what Schopenhauer had in mind. Guido misinterpreted it to his advantage and perceived “Will” as a way of getting what he wanted. The irony also lay in the fact that the Nazis supported Schopenhauer’s ideas and similarly used the theories to legitimise their actions. Other ironic indications were a Nazi doctor’s name that referred to a play that advocated tolerance towards Jews, and Guido Orifice’s name that literally referred to his behaviour in the film: being a leader who offers an escape route via the creation of stories and an imaginary world. What was even more prominent in this film was the contrast between reality and fantasy. For the most part, this film has been criticised on its ‘unrealistic’ depictions. Yet, many realistic references were mentioned, sometimes with a comic twist, which the critics often did not pay sufficiently attention to. From the beginning onwards, the political background was exposed, with posters, an attack on Eliseo and later on his horse, as well as other more subtle hints. Via a humoristic approach, Guido gave Giosué (and also himself) the opportunity to escape the grim world of the concentration camp. It would have been incorrect to see this film as a dichotomy between the real and imaginary world, since one was influenced by the other. Both parts of the movies had realistic and fictional elements, which interacted on numerous accounts. The reason that so many critics thought (or in some cases, wished) to recognise incongruities in this film was partly because they were anxious about the quick succession of an idyllic world to a miserable one. Many tended to underestimate Guido’s seemingly naïve and innocent conduct. While he was definitely innocent, he knew perfectly what he was doing. In the light of this innocence, the riddles and the creation of a fairy tale world had an important symbolical meaning. In fact, this represented how Guido dealt with the world: he tried to solve existential questions and attempted to create a more beneficial atmosphere. In order to achieve this goal, he created hilarious misunderstandings, such as his appearance as a fascist school inspector and his attempt to translate a Nazi guard. As such, he was in fact translating, or rather manipulating, the circumstances to a much more likeable world.

These analyses have made clear that both novels relied on an intriguing use of humour. In *After*, humour functioned as a way of despising the world, and the self for that matter, in order to get a hold on it. *Life is Beautiful*, on the other hand, depicted a humoristic approach that tended to beautify the world and that gave a rosy picture of reality. Therefore, we could say that humour in the first work had a more negative streak, while Guido offered the film a more optimistic view on the matter.
It is important to note that even though a substantial amount of arguments were put forward, we were limited by the restricted scope of this study to a confined choice of topics, which conflicted with the magnitude of the corpus of humoristic works that deal with traumatic events. In spite of this limitation, the discussed topics and works cooperated harmoniously and managed to sufficiently support the objectives of our research. In the light of these limitations, it could be interesting to build on from our research and to fill in the remaining gaps. The impact of this debate is extensive and multifaceted on many levels. In order to offer an even more extensive view on the matter, there is a need for an analysis of a wider corpus of artistic works. Further research could fuel a more sincere awareness and tolerance of this particular approach, and would perhaps reduce the number of vicious attacks on the creative work of well-intentioned artists.

In the introduction of this thesis, we mentioned the heartfelt apology of the Tartu Art Museum. They noted that, “the time is not right to discuss historically painful topics”. Yet, when will time be right? We might want to consider accepting the wide variety of reactions, which will always be highly individual and subjective. While it is certainly entirely acceptable to store one’s grief, it should also be acceptable to express this grief in a respectable way that is typical of the individual himself. We sincerely hope that our findings have soundly contributed to the existing body of knowledge within this area of study and that our research has successfully highlighted the importance of this consciousness and of the subject in general.
5. Works Cited

Primary sources


Secondary sources


Purim Parade in Tel Aviv with a Float of a Dangerous 3-headed Nazi Dragon. 1934. Tel Aviv. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.


6. Appendix

Appendix A – Purim Adloyada Parade in Tel Aviv (1934)

Figure 1. Purim parade in Tel Aviv with a float of a dangerous 3-headed Nazi dragon (1934).
Figure 2. Tel Aviv Purim float of Nazi cannons (1934).
Figure 3. Spineless Leaders of Democracy (1936).

Figure 4. Poem and drawing, Franta Bass.
Figure 5. Drawing, Mif.
Appendix D – Concentration camps: Dachau, Buchenwald (Aspenfeld) and Dachau

Figure 6. Map
Majdanek, situated near Lublin (Poland), functioned as “a concentration camp, forced-labor camp, and killing center” and was one of the largest camps (Landesbildstelle Berlin). Virtually all of its prisoners “died of hunger and exposure”. Later on, it was converted “into a death camp for Jews, transported first from Bohemia and Moravia (now in the Czech Republic) and then from Poland, The Netherlands, and Greece.” (Berenbaum)