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Sheltering from the Pain of Others

Trauma Dynamics in Ida Fink's Holocaust Short Stories

Abstract

In this article, I analyse the short stories of Ida Fink, a Polish writer and Holocaust survivor. I focus on how she writes about traumatic memories, showing the perspectives of the victims and survivors, as well as listeners, witnesses, and bystanders. Relatively little has been written about Ida Fink's works apart from in Polish literary studies, and even less from a trauma studies perspective. This article aims to fill this gap. I show, through psychologically oriented close readings of several short stories, how Ida Fink presents various trauma dynamics and trauma moments, as well as denial, indifference, and the inability to listen to the trauma of others. Some protagonists attempt to process and integrate their traumatic experiences through sharing and storytelling, but they are constantly rejected by those around them. Observers and bystanders often see the traumatised as "the other", and they do not acknowledge their painful memories. Other stories show how changes in social norms brought about by war contributed to the ruptures of societal networks and the shattering of social norms, leading, through silencing trauma, to the formation of collective traumatisation, in which the social environment, despite the best individual intentions, invalidates and trivialises the traumatised person's experience. On the other hand, at another level, for the reader, the stories can become an experience of working through collective historical trauma.

Introduction

In Ida Fink's short story, *The Shelter*,¹ the narrator meets a couple on a train. The woman is crying, the man is trying to comfort her. The narrator is embarrassed, but they tell her their story anyway. They have just visited the family who had given them shelter during the war. The couple spent two months in a hiding place in a cellar so narrow that they could not even lie down. They had made a deal to pay the host family for a new house after the war. They worked and paid the family monthly. They are now on the train returning from the visit, having seen the new house. It is nice and large, has three rooms, and a pretty kitchen. Their former host said, proudly and with pleasure: "And we kept you in mind, too. Here, take a look! (...) just in case something happens, you won't have to roost like chickens, a shelter as pretty as a picture, with all the comforts!"²

This is an intriguing story. It is not easy to dismantle it to see how its complex impact is built in the narrative structure, but I will attempt to do so here later. This article stems from the wish to understand the impact that Fink's short stories have on the reader, from interdisciplinary, trauma studies (psychological and cultural), and literary studies (literary theory, textual analysis) perspectives.

1 Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, trans. Madeline Levine and Francine Prose (New York: Random, 1987).

2 Ibid., 133.

Fink, an acclaimed Polish-Israeli writer,³ is a central figure in Holocaust literature and Holocaust education. Her short stories are available in several languages and included in the educational materials of many Holocaust education institutions.⁴ In his foreword to *A Scrap of Time*, Alan Sillitoe states that “[i]f ever there was a book suitable for teaching in schools, this is it”.⁵ However, relatively little has been written about her works in literary studies,⁶ apart from Polish literary studies recently.⁷ The analyses tend to take a thematic approach or use close reading or other methods of literary analysis. A recent study (in Polish) by Aranzazu Calderón Puerta has opened up the interpretative scope, interestingly looking at how Fink’s short stories depict the social relationships in Polish society which made the persecution of Jews and the Holocaust possible.⁸ Another analysis by Calderón Puerta drew attention to the representation of gender-based violence in some short stories.⁹ The trauma studies perspective, however, is still scarce in the existing interpretations,¹⁰ which is surprising because Fink’s short stories fundamentally lend themselves to a trauma-focused reading, as they represent trauma dynamics at various points in the traumatising process.

As many writing about her have noted, Fink’s narratives are different from the Holocaust writings of other writers. Her narratives are subtle and lack loud emotions or cruelty: the descriptions of violence, even murders, lack force. If anything, they are, seemingly placating, calm, comforting, delicate. The stories convey “discreet horror”,¹¹ their “tone is subdued”,¹² they are written in “restrained, calm understatement”,¹³ and they “orchestrate disconcerting and tragic situations with reference to benignly indifferent nature”.¹⁴ This “measured, restrained art”,¹⁵ “modest, simple

3 Ida Fink was born as Ida Landau in 1921 in Zbarazh, which at the time was situated in Poland and is now in Ukraine. She was born into an assimilated intellectual family with strong Jewish roots. She wanted to be a pianist, but in 1939, when the Nazis invaded Poland, she had to abandon her studies. She lived with her family in the ghetto in her hometown until 1942, when she and her sister escaped by obtaining false identity documents. She spent the subsequent years in hiding. After the war she, was in a Displaced Persons’ camp. In 1957, she emigrated to Israel with her husband and daughter, where she lived until her death in 2011. She worked in Yad Vashem, collecting testimonies. Fink started writing and publishing in the second half of the 1950s. She wrote in Polish, but her first collection of short stories was published in Hebrew in 1974, and it was not published in Polish until 1983. She was awarded the first Anne Frank Prize for Literature in 1985, the Yad Vashem Prize in 1995, the Moravia Prize in 1996, and the Polish PEN Club Prize in 2003.

4 The London University Centre for Holocaust Education, Yad Vashem, and the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center.

5 Alan Sillitoe, “Foreword”, in Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, i–ii.

6 Marek Wilczynski, “Trusting the Words: Paradoxes of Ida Fink”, *Modern Language Studies* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 25–38.

7 Janusz Waligóra, “The Discreet Horror of the Holocaust in Ida Fink’s Stories”, *CLEAR* no. 3 (2016): 27–38. DOI: [10.1515/clear-2016-0003](https://doi.org/10.1515/clear-2016-0003).

8 Aranzazu Calderón Puerta, “Doświadczenie wykluczenia widziane od środka: ‘Skrawek czasu’ Idy Fink i jego polska recepcja” [The Experience of Exclusion Seen from the Inside: Ida Fink’s ‘Skrawek czasu’ and its Polish Reception], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 106, no. 3 (2015): 73–104.

9 Aranzazu Calderón Puerta, “The Theme of Rape in Ida Fink’s Aryan Papers and Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s Our Class”, *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2017): 27–37.

10 Ruth Ginsburg, “Ida Fink’s Scraps and Traces: Forms of Space and the Chronotope of Trauma Narratives”, *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 2 (2006): 205–218; Dorota Glowacka, “Disappearing Traces: Emmanuel Levinas, Ida Fink’s Literary Testimony, and Holocaust Art”, in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, eds. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 97–115.

11 Waligóra, “The Discreet Horror of the Holocaust in Ida Fink’s Stories”.

12 Renata Gorczyński, “Review”, *The Polish Review* 32, no. 2 (1987): 465.

13 Ginsburg, “Ida Fink’s”, 207.

14 Reuel K. Wilson, “Review of Ida Fink’s Traces”, *World Literature Today* 72, no. 2 (1998): 412.

15 Eva Sartori, “Reviewed Work: *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories* by Ida Fink, Madeline Levine, Francine Prose Sartori”, *Prairie Schooner* 62, no. 2 (1998): 132.

prose”,¹⁶ and “a soft whisper” which “breaks your heart”,¹⁷ however, is capable of evoking very strong emotional reactions from some readers, precisely because of the stark contrast between the softness of the text and the harshness of the themes. Other readers though do not necessarily feel that the texts are strong enough, they find them slow and packed with too many insignificant details, lacking tension and suspense. Some readers thus seem to miss the implications of the emotional subtleties in the stories, which are necessary to perceive in order to fully understand how trauma dynamics are represented.

Many interpretations thus reveal similar impressions and opinions, yet they do not inquire into how these texts work both in terms of making a very strong impact and of representing, transmitting, and potentially processing and resolving the historical, collective trauma which they talk about. I will attempt to fill this gap by examining Fink’s texts as literary representations of the Holocaust as a multifactorial trauma, through psychologically oriented close readings of selected texts. I will apply a trauma studies perspective that allows for the taking of readers’ emotional reactions into account as well, using them to understand more accurately how these unique short stories work. Among “readers” I count myself and previous researchers of Fink, as well as the participants of several university classes which I have taught during the last decade and the audiences of several talks which I have given on this topic.¹⁸

Trauma Dynamics in Ida Fink’s Micro-Histories of the Holocaust

According to most trauma theorists and trauma psychologists, trauma equals a rupture, a break, a “seismic” life event that shakes previously held stable beliefs about the world.¹⁹ It overrides all former ideas about life, the world, human relationships, and trust. To rebuild and continue their lives, victims must let go of pre-traumatic beliefs and assumptions, develop new life narratives, and include the interpretation of the trauma-story, placing it in the continuity of a new life story.²⁰ I have written about these topics in several of my books and articles on trauma studies,²¹ so in this article I will make references to the most important concepts of trauma theories that are relevant for the main focus of this paper, the analysis of Ida Fink’s short stories. There is also a large body of scholarly writing about Holocaust trauma and literature; again, I have written about the general interrelations elsewhere, linking my stand-

16 Gorczynski, “Review”, 466.

17 Jerzy J. Maciuszko, “Reviewed Work: *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories by Ida Fink, Madeline Levine, Francine Prose*”, *World Literature Today* 62 no. 2 (1988): 304.

18 Many times, I made notes of the readers’ reactions after my talks and in my classes. I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the dialogue about Fink’s writings, at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Jewish Studies and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the University of Florence. I would also like to thank Gábor T. Szántó for inviting me to give a talk on Fink in his series on “Trauma and Belated Impact: Seminars on the Literature of the Shoah and the Second Generation”.

19 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Anna Menyhért, “Trauma Studies in the Digital Age”, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. Davis Colin and Hanna Meretoja (London: Routledge, 2020), 241–256.

20 Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence”, *Psychological Inquiry* 15 (2004), 17.

21 Among these works is Anna Menyhért, *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant: Trauma és irodalom* [Saying the Unsayable: Trauma and Literature] (Budapest: Anonymus-Ráció, 2008), and others that I refer to in this article at several points.

point to other concepts,²² so here I focus on Fink and the way she writes about Holocaust-related trauma.

Fink's Holocaust-stories depict all three levels of traumatising as well as vicarious traumatising. Primary traumatising is the stress and trauma reaction of victims to what happened to them during the traumatic event. Secondary traumatising is a second layer of trauma caused by the indifference of others, bystanders and witnesses, who are not willing or not able to listen to the victim, thus forcing them into isolation. Tertiary traumatising means societal silencing in general; in this case, it refers to post-war societal taboos about the Holocaust in Poland. Vicarious traumatising – the transmission effect of the victims' trauma on others, listeners, witnesses, who are all prone to taking over some level of stress if they do not look away – is also present in the plots: in fact, the fear of such a trauma transmission is one of the causes of indifference towards victims.²³ Fink makes her readers aware of why it is demanding to face the trauma of others, and how and why people give inappropriate, often even embarrassing, humiliating, rationalising, or negating denial reactions to the traumatic experiences of others.

Fink focuses on micro-histories embedded in trauma. As Gilead and Perlman have put it, "Ida Fink captured the rupture of time, which her readership now recognizes as the Holocaust".²⁴ Despite the large time span, her stories feel close and fresh, and the ruptures caused by the war are portrayed vividly. She sometimes writes autofiction or uses elements of her family's and friends' experiences; at other times, she turns accounts narrated by survivors and eyewitnesses into stories,²⁵ using her work experience from Yad Vashem.²⁶ The short stories in *A Scrap of Time* create a chronological mosaic,²⁷ depicting life under Nazi occupation in Poland during and until shortly after the war. Most of the time she works with a broad temporal perspective, beginning fictional stories with hints that what is to follow is emphatically in the past, or by precisely defining the date of the events narrated, thus giving the stories a reminiscent character. The short stories describe events that play an important part in the lives of a few people, and these stories focus on moments that gain a broader significance by being symptomatic of how individual life stories happen to cross historical processes.

There are many recurring motifs, themes, and situations, including the first encounters with the war (a razzia, forced labour, hiding), facing violence, unspoken tensions in relationships due to threats caused by the war, the impact of the broken social net on individuals, the indifference of bystanders and witnesses, and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews during and after the war. Sensitive impressions reveal the differences and oscillations between reactions that – as we get to understand during reading – only used to be considered normal, and the ones that form as a new normal during, and later, after the war.²⁸ Seemingly insignificant events and unimportant gestures open for the reader the path towards understanding, and this

22 Anna Menyhért, "The Acknowledgement of Helplessness: The Helplessness of Acknowledgement: Imre Kertész: *Fateless*", *Hungarian Studies Review* 44, nos. 1–2, (Spring–Fall 2017): 67–94.

23 Anna Menyhért, "Digital Trauma Processing in Social Media Groups: Transgenerational Holocaust Trauma on Facebook", *Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): 355–380; Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

24 Gilead Perlman, "Lost in Translation", 59.

25 Izdebska-Zybala, "Ida Fink".

26 Sartori, "Reviewed Work", 132.

27 Myrna Goldenberg, "From a World Beyond: Women in the Holocaust", *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 3. (Autumn 1996): 683.

28 See Mary Fulbrook's books about the changing social norms in Nazi Germany, such as *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

also brings the recognition of the fact that the protagonists of the stories did not have the time to process what was happening to them: there is an instinctive understanding that they are in the middle of a trauma moment, the shock of which very often brings denial, but there was no time to reflect. The trauma freezes the reading process too: sometimes it is difficult to continue reading. “You need time to recover”²⁹ before turning the page.

One of the key themes is how the war and the persecution of the Jews forced young people to grow up suddenly. The short story *The End*, for example, depicts a young artist couple on the eve of the outbreak of the war. The woman is convinced that the start of the war will mean the end of their youth and their just-found happiness. The man is in denial, he does not want to let the change touch their lives. He insists that they go to bed as if nothing happened that night.

On the other hand, in *Behind the Hedge*, which also falls under the youth theme, the narrator, a crippled old woman in a wheelchair, is made aware of the consequences of her previous acts by her companion, who, differently from the vast majority, refuses to look away.³⁰ The old woman had chased away a young couple from her garden when she discovered them making love there. Her companion is telling her, rebuking the old woman’s attempts not to hear her (“We have to know about it. And look at it. And remember it.”³¹) that she witnessed the very same young girl being shot by the Germans. When the old woman had earlier blamed and shamed only the girl, not even addressing the boy, about their behaviour at such a young age, the girl had replied: “We’re not allowed to do anything. We’re not even allowed to love each other, or make each other happy. All we’re allowed to is die. ‘At your age,’ you say. And will we get any older?”³²

This is what the old woman must remember when she learns about the girl’s death. In the garden scene, she had applied a gesture in accordance with what used to be a norm in a prewar righteous sense, and now she must understand and painfully acknowledge that the world changed and she “could not honestly say that she is not guilty of anything”.³³ Sending away young people trespassing in her garden used to be all right, but such an act has a different impact in the new reality. This rupture of social norms and collective trauma also impacts those who are not directly involved as victims or perpetrators. Bystanders can also be traumatised. In this case, it happens when the woman understands the consequences of her ignorance.

In *Alina’s Defeat*, right after the German occupation of their town, her boyfriend asks Alina to go to his apartment to learn whether the Germans had been there asking for him. He is a journalist known for his anti-Nazi articles, so he cannot go. The request does not make sense: it is dangerous to go out, and knowing whether anyone had asked for him would not mean anything for the future. Alina does not want to go, but she agrees after the man puts subtle pressure on her. To look confident, she puts on makeup. The streets are empty, she is anxious, and panics – with a freeze reaction – as she sees the Gestapo checking papers, people “disappearing behind the gate”. Finally, she turns back. “. . . she couldn’t move. She stood there helplessly, struggling with herself. (. . .) She stood there a long time. Finally, she gave up.”³⁴

29 Maciuszko, “Reviewed Work”, 304.

30 Glowacka, “Disappearing Traces”, 105.

31 Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 17.

32 Ibid., 22.

33 Ibid., 20.

34 Ida Fink, *Traces: Stories*, trans. Phillip Boehm and Francine Prose (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1997): 20–21.

At the end of the story, Alina's maid asks, judgmentally, where the man will sleep as Alina has only one bed (she is then heard murmuring "War's war and shame's shame"³⁵). Only at this point do we understand that the need to visit the man's apartment arises because of a tension in their relationship, which was caused partly by a social pressure (i.e. that they should not sleep in the same bed) tied to norms that lose their meanings under the imminent threat, and partly by the fact that their relationship is not at a stage at which they want to live together. When Alina is "defeated" in the trauma moment in the street, she also loses her agency in terms of making decisions about her life in accordance with her social status, a status that loses its rootedness as the society is shaken by war ("things would never be the same. It shouldn't be like this now, she thought, just when we ought to be closer than ever"³⁶). The shock reveals how trauma and fear pervade the social fabric.

This is, according to Kai Erikson, collective trauma, when the loss of norms and relationships leads to the loss of community ties, and a society stops functioning: "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality".³⁷

Alina's unspoken and partly unrecognised internal conflict surfaces in her desperate and suicidal thoughts ("Alina wondered whether she wouldn't have been better off if they had caught her")³⁸ and in her dreams about being caught by the German, when she feels "at peace".³⁹

These stories show that persecution does not mean that existing relationships would change between people in the light of danger. A tension between a man and a woman would not change because of how the situation of their world changed. Ordinary life events are seen through the prism of threat and the readers understand how actions gain a secondary significance. Yet, on the practical level, people cannot change their feelings and behaviours towards each other overnight: they are often in denial regarding the extent and possible consequences of the threat, normalising their situation as long as it is possible.

This kind of surface-normality can be found in almost all the short stories. Fink shows how the experience of trauma rewrites, recolours, and changes the dynamics of the most intimate and meaningful human relationships. How already complex relationships become even more complex, how previous norms are broken and new or temporary ones emerge. In *A Conversation*, for example, a married couple, Anna and Michael, hide in the house of a single woman. To ensure that they survive and do not have to leave their hiding place, the man is subtly coerced into a deal, into becoming the lover of their host. His wife is forced to allow her husband to leave their room to go to the other woman. Both wife and husband need to neglect their own emotional needs as well as the rules of what used to be the norm and moral of marriage. Their communication is unspoken, based on gestures, small noises, movements and looks. As Wilczynski says, there is an "unbearable distress in the soft clicking of Anna's needles and her trembling after Michael shuts the door",⁴⁰ when he leaves the room to go to the other woman to have sex with her

35 Fink, *Traces*, 22.

36 *Ibid.*, 22.

37 Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 154. See also Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning", *Frontiers of Psychology* 9 (2018): 1441. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>.

38 Fink, *Traces*, 22.

39 *Ibid.*, 23.

40 Wilczynski "Trusting", 30.

for the first time. In a paradoxical way,⁴¹ however, the fact that they make this decision in unison keeps them together in a new sense of marriage – a marriage as a cooperation of sacrifices, adapting to new requirements in a time of the need to survive.

Jean Christophe is a good example of how unexplained contexts, unspoken threats, and not mentioned but nevertheless known prospects make the reader do a lot of frightening guessing: you know that what you will learn will be hard to bear precisely by the fact that you are made to guess. A girl, one of the Jews gathered for deportation, is reading a long novel, *Jean Christophe* by Romain Rolland, and fears that she will be taken away and killed before she can finish it. Reading the novel is the last bastion of normality during persecution, a way to escape reality, and in the last hours of her life she tries to push away the knowledge of her impending death. Death is presented as something very ordinary. Why the girl is afraid that she will not finish the book is not explained.⁴² The *Aufseherin* (warden) is trying to be sympathetic, and assures the girl in an ironic way that she will have time to finish the book, as it is “not that long”.⁴³ The impact of the story derives from the absurdity of this unusual normalcy – we could call it the “Holocaust normal”. It hits the reader how the clash between normal and what used to be considered not normal disappears, when the *Aufseherin* is thinking about whether the girl would “be around” to lend her the book or she would need to get it from the library.

Fink also presents in a plastic way how children are exposed and exploited, how they willingly or unwillingly become part of the war, how in some extreme situations adults need to put their lives in the hands of their children. In *The Key Game*, the parents rehearse a scenario every night in which German soldiers break into the house to get the father. The child, while his father goes to the hiding place, must pretend to search for the key for a long time, and if the soldiers enter and ask him where his father is, he must answer that he is dead. The emotional impact here comes with the recognition that parents do not normally teach their children how to lie in a controlled manner in a frightening situation to save their lives, yet the way they practice with the child is the same as practicing any ordinary thing, the key game is part of their desperate evening routine.

Another story titled *Cheerful Zofia* captures an ongoing post-traumatic state: as a young girl, Zofia was so traumatised by the particularly tragic loss of her family and the two years she spent in hiding that she can remember nothing of her past, not even her own name. She hid alone in a barn for about one-and-a-half years, living on vegetables and water, and she was there even two months after the war ended. She did not know it was over until some peasants came to tear down the building and found her. Throughout this time, she did not speak, she never used her voice: “What I remember best is the silence. But you cannot talk about silence. Silence is the opposite of talk.”⁴⁴ Her isolation did not stop though, it is never ending, because she is stuck in the moment of loss, and cannot link her past to the present. Her main means of communication and contact with the world is her forced, constant laughter. She lost her identity through losing human connections:

Other people suffered so much. ... But no one beat or tortured me. ... I never saw a German. ... But still it is as if they killed me. Because I am not a same

41 See Wilczynski, “Trusting”.

42 Waligóra, “The Discret”, 30.

43 Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 34.

44 Fink, *Traces*, 145.

person. My name, my date of birth – they are not mine. I don't know what happened before then, or what was I like. So it's as if I didn't exist.⁴⁵

Several of Fink's stories convey violence against women and gender-based trauma. In *The Aryan Papers*, a sixteen-year-old girl is raped, she needs to give her virginity to a man in exchange for Aryan identity papers. The man can be seen also as a rescuer, as he correctly keeps his part of the deal, takes care of the girl, and provides the papers. The girl's perspective, her fear and repulse, are represented through the description of her sensory and bodily sensations. They meet in a pub where "most of the customers were men", "drinking vodka", and she was the only girl there. She is in a state of sensory overload, mentally preparing for the sexual intercourse. She is trying to convince herself that the man "is good looking", "nicely dressed", "tall, well-built",⁴⁶ again reverting to a time when, according to societal norms, this would have counted, whereas in this situation her life depends on the papers.

There is a twist at the end of the story when, after the abuse, a visitor, another man, knocks on the door, and when he sees the girl, he asks who she is. The first man, who has just given the girl the papers and been counting the money he received, says

'Oh, just a whore.'

'I thought she was a virgin', he said, surprised. 'Pale, teary-eyed, shaky ...'

'Since when can't virgins be whores?'

'You're quite a philosopher', the other man said, and they both burst out laughing.

On the one hand, by not revealing that she needed papers, the man protects the girl. At the same time, he shames her, calling her a whore, forming a sexist comradery with the other man, making a crude joke and laughing rudely, indicating that the first man has just had sex, so he is up to male standards, and he is a "philosopher", too, intellectually superior. Aranzazu Calderón Puerta draws attention to how, in the victimisation process, the girl excuses the perpetrator, trying to think of him as a benefactor. This is how patriarchal social norms, such as the image of men as protectors and saviours, either embed systemic violence, or these events are reframed, thereby masking violence.⁴⁷ In this situation, the man is taking advantage of the threat of one type of violence based on antisemitism to legitimise and normalise another type of violence, sexual abuse, and to see himself as a helper who gets his deserved price in a deal, both money and sex with an underage girl.

Encountering the Trauma of Others

One of the central questions in the analyses of Fink's writings is the fragmentation referred to already in the title story, *The Scrap of Time*, and how it is manifested on narrative, rhetorical, and prose-poetic levels.⁴⁸ The fundamental problem of Holocaust literature, one of the greatest paradoxes, is also present in Fink's texts: how to write, speak, bear witness to the unsayable. Fink's prose makes this fragmentation tangible for readers.

45 Fink, *Traces*, 146.

46 Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 64.

47 Aranzazu Calderón Puerta, "The Theme of Rape in Ida Fink's Aryan Papers and Tadeusz Słobodzianek's Our Class", *Teksty Drugie 2* (2017): 27–37.

48 Wilczynski, "Trusting"; David G. Roskies, Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 28.

Fragmentation, interrupted narrative, and memory are also reflected in the characters' relationships with significant others. When given the chance to narrate trauma, the survivors, the traumatised, can only present themselves through fragmentation. Even if there is another person there to listen, to fill in the gaps of the incomplete narrative with emotional support and acceptance, they always fail. The experiences can never be reproduced in their entirety: even if narratives are created, they are always fragmentary and incomplete. They are "captured in small stories" as "the Holocaust survivor can only recover scraps of time" or, as Eva Sartori puts it, "[t]he fabric is forever beyond reach".⁴⁹

There is a consensus in trauma research that, regardless of the nature of trauma, sharing and narrating the trauma, having a listener, is key to successful coping. In a supportive environment, victims could experience post-traumatic growth.⁵⁰ However, facing the trauma of others often creates frustration on the part of the listener, as learning about a trauma can lead to trauma transfer and vicarious traumatising. This is also why victims have difficulties in communicating the traumatic experience, as others are reluctant or not able to listen, or else they simply do not know how to listen. This is why, for example, there are specific methods⁵¹ to train those who make interviews with Holocaust survivors for the various testimony collections, which prepare the listeners to share the burden. As Dori Laub puts it: "The listener of the trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to experience the trauma in himself (...) comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the victim feels."⁵²

The social environment of the victim, the presence or absence of support, plays a particularly important role in developing such new narratives.⁵³ When the traumatic event cannot be narrated, the lack of an understanding listener or community can lead to secondary traumatising and isolation.⁵⁴

In some of Ida Fink's short stories, the characters find themselves in such situations: despite their efforts, they cannot share their traumatic stories. Both *Splinter* and *Night of Surrender* talk about the inability of others to listen to the stories of victims, so victims are silenced into secondary traumatising. In both cases, gender norms play a part, showing how after the war the society tries to return to the so-called normal, to what prewar normal had been – featuring strong men who do not complain about loss and obedient women who take on the name that their husband thinks is right – and has no places and space for the trauma stories, only for forgetting.

In the opening lines of *Splinter*, a girl, "touching his arm" with "her delicate, manicured hand, blossoming with polished pink nails" says: "Let's not talk about that any more. You promised."⁵⁵ The scene is outlined masterfully, only in a few words; the situation is clear right away for the reader. They must be lovers, the girl is soft, pretty,

49 Sartori, "Reviewed Work", 133.

50 Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence", *Psychological Inquiry* 15 (2004).

51 Stephen Naron, "Archives, Ethics and Influence: How the Fortunoff Video Archive's Methodology Shapes Its Collection's Content", in *Interactions: Explorations of Good Practice in Educational Work with Video Testimonies of Victims of National Socialism*, eds. Werner Dreier, Angelika Laumer, and Moritz Wein (Berlin: Books on Demand, 2018), 41–51.

52 Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, Or the Vicissitudes of Listening", in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 58.

53 Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic", 11.

54 Herman, *Trauma*; John N. Briere and Catherine Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014).

55 Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 123.

and feminine, dressed up for him, and she does not want to know about something. From the next few lines, we learn that they are young, it is June, and they are going for a picnic. Some hints again strengthen the previous impression of a conflict, between the lovers, between present and past, talking about the past or having sex, past pain or new love, represented even in the shapes of nature and geography. They are walking “along a steep road in the hills of a defeated county, in region unscathed by war, clean and radiant. The meadows with their lush, long, unmown grass looked especially lovely ...”⁵⁶ A cliché element of love stories, a girl telling a boy not to speak during a love scene, creates a painful sense of absurdity, when the readers learn what the boy wanted to say. The situation is staged in a way that sex/love and sharing trauma become mutually exclusive.

The boy explains his need to share his story, using the image of a splinter and the trauma in a simile. The text describes him as being in a traumatic state, the elements of silence and shame, characteristic of trauma, are present: “When she asked him to stop talking, the boy fell silent in embarrassment. He smiled sheepishly and said, ‘Look, I’ve got to tell everything to the end. And since I don’t have anyone but you ... It’s like a deep splinter that has to be removed so it won’t fester. Do you understand?’”

They lie down on the grass, the girl is silent, and the boy keeps talking. He and his mother had been in hiding, waiting for new papers, when soldiers broke into their home. His mother, in a matter of moments, folded the bed on which he was sleeping and threw it behind the wardrobe, shoving him behind the door. Before the soldiers could even knock, she opened the door, so he was hidden behind it. He heard his mother being slapped and ordered to go downstairs in her nightgown. He could not see anything. At this point in the narration, he shares his moment of guilt, which is crucial in trauma processing as the point which makes a painful event a trauma. He is clearly back into the time of the trauma, and he describes a frozen state and his inability to let go of the trauma memory:

He took a deep breath. ‘That’s almost all there is to say. Almost ... Because you know, when my mother pressed me against the wall with the door, I grabbed the handle and held on to it, even though it wouldn’t have shut on its own, since it was a heavy door, and the floor was uneven.’

The boy fell silent; he brushed away a bee. Then he added, ‘I would give a great deal to let go of that handle. ...’, and then, with a smile that begged forgiveness, he added, ‘You’ll have to have a lot of patience with me. All right?’

When he looks at the girl after this confession, she is asleep. She was unable to listen to his story and contain it. Yet there is another twist in the story. The boy repeatedly hints at the similarities between the girl and his mother. The reluctance of the girl to listen can also be linked to her resisting the boy’s attempts to make her, at a subconscious level, in some way the replacement for his lost mother. This could be why she emphasises the difference, the sexual nature of their relationship. Here, like in *Alina’s Defeat*, the underlying sub-conscious drives of a relationship prevent the processing of trauma through sharing. The trauma narrative is caught and stuck in the web of feelings and reactions.

In *Night of Surrender*, a seventeen-year-old girl in a Displaced Persons’ camp meets an American soldier named Mike, ten years her senior. Their relationship starts with lies, the girl does not reveal that she is Jewish. She goes by the name of Ann. She deliberately deceives the man, feeding him a sad, untrue story that, as she

⁵⁶ Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 123.

comments in the first-person narrative, “moved him as it was meant to”.⁵⁷ She also assumed that the man has a girlfriend: “I never asked him if he had a girlfriend in America. It was obvious that he did, but he never mentioned her.”⁵⁸

Mike asks the girl to go to America with him and encourages her to tell him her real story. At the same time, he treats her as a child, in a patriarchal way: “get rid of all those defenses. Trust me. I want to bring you up all over again.”⁵⁹ The war ends, and the girl confesses that she is Jewish, and that her real name is Klara. She feels tears “well up”, and explains that she saw her parents murdered, and had to hide her Jewish identity for three years, so long that it was difficult to change. Mike does not want to lose the romantic, safe story they started to live by. He says, in fear and in denial, talking in clichés: “you’ll always be Ann to me. (...) I will do everything to make you forget that nightmare”,⁶⁰ explaining that it will be better for Ann if only he knows her identity. The girl, silenced, closes again emotionally, not having been able to share the trauma: “... I saw the anxiety in his eyes. I felt cold and once again I did not know how to cry.”⁶¹

Sheltering from Trauma

The Shelter, which I promised to analyse in the beginning of this article, is a complex text that offers several options for interpretation by looking at the positions and emotional reactions of the characters. It starts by showing how complicated it is to listen to someone else’s story. In the beginning, the narrator is alone on the train, then the couple enter her compartment. The woman is crying, the man is tense, trying to comfort and “hush” her, and suggests that she “laughs it off”, after which the woman “cries out”, a “deep, raw bitterness in her cry”. Upon hearing this, the narrator, who so far felt only uncomfortable, stands up and wants to leave the compartment, thinking “it is not a laughing matter”. The man asks the narrator not to leave, “it will be easier if we’re not alone”. The narrator then interprets the man’s wish to talk that he was “dreading silence”. Then they tell each other where they were during the war: the narrator was in a camp, the couple in hiding. This is when the woman – who so far did not speak but only cried – tells their story about the visit to the new house of their host family and seeing the new shelter built for them. The narrator seeks to assure the couple of sympathy: “Yes’, I said, ‘I understand. It’s hard enough just returning to those years, not to mention going back ... I understand your being so upset.”⁶² But these sentences sound awkward, and the woman reacts angrily, explaining why she is so upset. After listening to their story, the narrator says: “Horrible’, I repeated. I said something else about how the war twisted people, and I felt ashamed; it was so banal, so polite. But they didn’t hear me. They were hurrying towards the exit, and their quick, nervous steps gave the impression of flight.”⁶³

This sequence (of the narrator being just there – feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable – sharing their identities of having been persecuted – the shared pain of remembering the past – the couple telling their story – the narrator being unable to say any-

⁵⁷ Fink, *A Scrap of Time*, 95.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 134.

thing that would help, feeling ashamed – they don't even hear the narrator's words – they seem to be fleeing) ends with showing how futile the attempt at sharing the story has been and, also, that none of the reactions and positions tried out in the sequence could present a solution. The couple and the narrator step back into the previous roles, respectively, of victims being persecuted and of a bystander who cannot do anything, because the host family revived and fixed the persecution dynamics by building the new shelter just for those who had earlier been victims. The couple had been pushed back into their previous role, so they again feel they must escape, that is why their "steps gave the impression of flight".

The newly built house becomes a metaphor of what it means to live in the grip of trauma despite changed circumstances, how deeply rooted the beliefs surrounding trauma are, and how difficult they are to change. The new house is a testimony to the fact that the world has returned to normal after the war, that people are back to doing ordinary things like making a home. Yet, this change seems to have taken place only on the surface. What did not change is that the shelter was made only for those who had already been persecuted. The trauma of war, of hiding, of persecution, becomes a permanent, relevant part of reality – it is normalised. "Sentenced to a hiding-place, sentenced to death once again?",⁶⁴ asks the woman on the train. The couple's experience perpetuated their trauma of being discriminated and persecuted, cast in concrete in the strictest sense of the word: "There, in that house, it was as if I were kneeling above my own grave",⁶⁵ says the man.

The key element in this story is that the host family never for a moment thought that they could be persecuted as well. People tend to think about their future with a positive bias and they push away the possibility of any unfortunate turn, so that they can function successfully in everyday life. Trauma happens when such basic, positive assumptions are shattered, according to Janoff-Bulman's shattered assumptions theory.⁶⁶ Bias pervades the mindset of the rural couple, preventing the acknowledgement of the complexity of victimisation. They did not build the shelter for themselves, but for others. They re-create the separate groups of "us" and "them". They accept the persecution of "them" as normal, natural, something that can happen again, in the same way – and always to others. This obviousness is probably why we could read this story as a metaphor for Polish-Jewish relations;⁶⁷ it can be read also as the representation of oppression and trauma based on human relations.

This attitude re-creates the persecution dynamics as a structural normality. No historical trauma can be processed in this way, without the acceptance and acknowledgement of the possibility that there is a likelihood of being persecuted for all, not only for one select victim group.

Re-living the trauma of others emotionally via empathy could help in trauma processing, on the collective level as well. This is what Jörn Rüsen calls "retraumatisation", the mourning process by later generations, as opposed to the many strategies of denial, and to detraumatization.⁶⁸ According to Rüsen, there are three different types of historical experiences, the normal, the critical, and the traumatic/catastrophical, which destroys the capacity to create a coherent historical narrative. The

64 Ibid., 134.

65 Ibid., 134.

66 Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 18.

67 Aranzazu Calderón Puerta, "Doświadczenie wykluczenia ...", 77.

68 Jörn Rüsen, "Trauma and Mourning in Historical Thinking", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology* 1, no.1 (Summer 2004), 18.

Holocaust belongs to this last type. Normally, narratives are created about historical events. In the case of the catastrophic, individuals are not able to make sense of the traumatic experience, so they use some strategies to reframe and thus detraumatise them, in order to be able to include them in narratives. Rüsen describes several detraumatization strategies, including historicisation (the historical event becomes part of historical thinking), moralisation (the traumatic event is presented as a source of a moral lesson), and aesthetisation (stylisation through art and film, making the trauma accessible). Other types are normalisation (the traumatic event explained as related to human nature, finding its place in a historical narrative), relativisation (the significance of the traumatic event is lost by comparing it to other similar events), and anonymisation (not naming perpetrators but talking about processes and trends, often metaphorically). He also adds categorisation (taking away the uniqueness of the event, talking about it on a theoretical level), teleologisation (putting the trauma into a historical sequence of meaningful events, setting up causal relationships between events), metahistorical reflection (which takes away the pain of the memories via abstraction), and specialisation (an academic method that results in the trauma being broken into smaller elements and losing the totality of its horror on the way).

As opposed to practices of detraumatization, retraumatization needs emotional labour. Rüsen considers retraumatization by later generations to be necessary for working through catastrophic historical traumas. Retraumatization is a process of remembrance and grief that implies emotional involvement. On the other hand, detraumatization is often built on denial and on a fear of pain. Denial and the fear of pain, as we have seen it through the works of Ida Fink, leads to the avoidance of acknowledging the trauma of others, causing secondary traumatization to the victims and, in the end, results in freezing the collective trauma via societal forgetting. In *The Shelter*, the Polish couple build a hiding place for the traumatised other, which means that they themselves hide from the trauma of others. They encapsulate it, build a place for it, in their own house. They sympathise but do not empathise critically, they do not help in the process of working through the trauma.

It seems, at first glance, as if Ida Fink wanted to spare the reader, showing how those around the survivors of war and persecution use normalisation strategies to relativise the suffering of the victims. Yet, in fact, revealing and making visible their normalisation strategies can bring to light the depth of the traumas of the victims. The strength of Fink's short stories lies in the way she presents the severity and extent of the trauma of one person through the responses of others.

Despite their shortness, Fink's stories incorporate the time that passes in a trauma situation and show the reader that, by the time the protagonists have understood a situation, they are already subject to a next threat. The stories mirror the pace through which trauma dawns on people. People are not fast as a rule – it is not by accident that the so-called first responders are specifically trained to be able to react fast during disasters, as very few people are able to do that. In one of my earlier studies, in an essay about Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless*,⁶⁹ I showed how dictatorship takes advantage of this kind of slowness, drawing on its step-by-step strategy, making use of the time people need to get accustomed to new rules and phenomena before they can react and attempt to process trauma.

The characters in Fink's short stories – the observers, bystanders, witnesses, the people around trauma victims, and even the victims themselves on occasion – create

⁶⁹ Menyhért, "The Acknowledgement of Helplessness", 67–94.

detraumatising situations, hindering trauma processing. Yet, this is, on another level, retraumatisation in the Rüsenian sense – for the reader. When the short stories show how people are unable to listen to the trauma of others, and how this inability keeps a community in a state of collective trauma, they offer the reader an opportunity for understanding which can, in turn, lead to trauma processing via retraumatisation.

Reading testimonial texts such as Fink's short stories makes it almost impossible for the reader to shelter from the historical trauma which these texts represent. This is how Ida Fink's short stories – through their careful, measured portioning of trauma, through counteracting denial by their slowness, by describing seemingly insignificant gestures, landscapes, dialogues by which she allows the time the reader needs for accepting the reality of the trauma they are reading about – contribute to the processing of the collective, historical, intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust.

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