Book review:

**When we Basked in the Warmth of the Sun**

By Alisa Harth

Published by Yedioth Ahronot Books and Chemed Books: Israel. 2005
271 pages. Hebrew.

Reviewer: Dr. Azila Talit Reisenberger
Hebrew Studies Department
University of Cape Town, South Africa.

This first novel by the Israeli author Alisa Harth is a captivating story that enters the heart of the reader and pulls at its strings from page 1 to the end, 270 pages later.

From the first page when the main protagonist Elisheva hears of her mother’s death and obsessively cleans her home as she tries to order her thoughts, the reader is involved in her life and cannot put the book down. The writing is intelligent and sensitive – the author has a good eye for detail and transmits it in the most able literary way.

Various critics have seen different strengths in the book. David Weinfeld, for example, highlights the power of its honesty; Menachem Ben bewails the low-key publishing campaign since he maintains that it is one of the best Israeli novels written in 2005.¹ I concur with the acclaim regarding its literary merit, as the neat language and elegant style of Harth’s writing remind me of the style of J.M. Coetzee, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003.

Hitherto, reviewers have focused on the themes of divorce and abandonment, which are indeed powerful themes in this novel. However, I would like to review it as a literary response to the Holocaust.

**Literary responses to the Holocaust**

To date, discussion of literary responses to the Holocaust have concentrated on direct depiction of the war or its aftermath. When scholars try to distinguish between various literary reactions to the Holocaust, some are looking at the writer’s population group, the target readership, the way the author raises the issue i.e. depicting the fate of individuals or casting epic light on the subject, etc (Shaked 1985:275). Other scholars suggest that we need to see literary response to the Holocaust as a link in the chain of *Hurban* (destruction) literature which is unfortunately a genre which has been part of Jewish literature for over 2000 years. (Ramras-Rauch 1985:7).

I propose that literary responses to the Holocaust ought to be neither a direct depiction of destruction nor catalogued and analysed according to authorship,

---

¹ In the literary section (Musaf Sifrut U’sfarim) of Maariv. 27.1.2006.
target readership, narratological themes or method of description. I propose a method of analysis emphasising the issue of time-frame.

**Time zones**

One of the most important aspects that impact on a literary response to the Holocaust is the time of its writing. The time context is a crucial factor to the writer; it should also be so to the critics who try to evaluate this literature. The impact of the time applies to all literature which relates to events – in particular, to extraordinary events such as the Holocaust.

I believe that this literature should be divided into four time zones. Evaluating a literary piece, taking into account the time zone in which it was written, will enhance its understanding.

**The four time zones.**

There is a fundamental difference between literature that is written during, immediately following, or a long time after, an event.

I contend that literary response to the Holocaust should be divided into four time zones.\(^2\) The earlier three are more influenced by physical time, while the fourth time zone represents a new era: a zone of 'the time after.'

When one writes literature during an event, in our case it is during the Holocaust – the first time zone – one cannot be expected to have an objective judgement, or a comprehensive view, or a retrospective understanding of the event. The response is thus more topical, anecdotal and emotional. If the event is painful, the expression of emotions may cloud the usual critical ability and shadow the tendency to strive for aesthetic excellence.

The second time zone of Holocaust literature is immediately after the end of the war, when the gates of the camps were flung open and people were saved. At that time survivors felt the urgency to record what had happened to them and what they had seen. This need to bear witness took precedence over all else since the sane world to which they returned could not and did not want to believe their descriptions of what they had seen and experienced as this was out of the normal range of human experience. Therefore people who wrote in that era felt that their role as witness superseded their need to write well. Thus most of the writing of the second time zone is what I call Witness Literature, rich in details but perhaps lacking in literary merit.

The third time zone brought about more meritorious literature. This time zone represents the era when the authors had had time to regain some of their humanity, and they may have carved for themselves a new life. The passage of time and an element of healing allowed them a better perspective on the events and their own emotions; and they became aware of the world's reaction to the Holocaust. A combination of all these elements helped to hone their skills, giving rise to excellent works of literature. Holocaust literature from

\(^2\) These time zones are not exact chronological measures. They vary slightly and may overlap, but they represent eras that follow each other. For a full discussion of this theory with detailed examples from literary responses to the Holocaust see Reisenberger, forthcoming.
the third time zone is powerful as its excellence utilises the power of art to describe the indescribable, so much so that even Theodore Adorno, who initially said that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, rescinded his words, as art with its concurrent multiple voices and multiple meanings may be the only way to describe the indescribable.

Currently we are in the fourth time zone. This zone is not a chronological representation but rather refers to the ending of the other eras. Until now, the victims have been given a voice so that they could share their pain, their anger, their frustration, their religious and social queries like where were God and the world while this colossal event was taking place. The bystanders, and even the perpetrators, tried to alleviate the burden of their own guilt by offering their knowledge as well as their sympathies. Literature written at this time was concomitant with sanity.

Alas, we are in a new era now. In this (forth) time zone taboos are broken: the victims who were afforded blanket pity and understanding before are now depicted in many current books as insane, as mad people. The perpetrators, who previously were allowed no sympathy, now, in the fourth time zone, are depicted as full human beings, some of them described as good family men, and so forth.

Furthermore, in this time zone, the children of the victims – of the ashen shadows who may have come physically alive but are not well, especially mentally – are given voices. These children are also seen as victims, since their lives are clearly shaped by their parents’ and their caregivers’ Holocaust experience. In this time zone also belongs literature written by people whose lives were affected by the Holocaust even if they seem unconnected to it.

I propose that Alisa Harth’s book When we Basked in the Warmth of the Sun should be read with the understanding that it is a literary response to the Holocaust and belongs to the fourth time zone, to the particular category of children of victims. Then this powerful novel will get not only its deserved literary credit but it will enter into the canon of literary responses to the Holocaust.

---

3 Born on September 11, 1903 as Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund, Adorno lived in Frankfurt am Main for the first three decades of his life and the last two. Adorno was expelled by the Nazis, along with other professors of Jewish heritage or on the political left. A few years later he turned his father’s Jewish surname into a middle initial and adopted “Adorno,” the maternal surname by which he is best known. In 1949 he returned to Frankfurt to take up a position in the philosophy department, and quickly established himself as a leading German intellectual and a central figure in the Institute of Social Research. His publications centred on philosophy of literature and music. (see the two volumes of Notes to Literature) and many more. He died unexpectedly of a heart attack on August 6, 1969, one month shy of his sixty-sixth birthday.
Alisa Harth’s novel as a Literary Response to the Holocaust.

Elisheva, the main protagonist in the book, is a child of Holocaust survivors whose families perished. In many ways these survivors are human wrecks. We have glimpses of their gentle characters and their well-educated backgrounds, but they are damaged souls. Their current behaviour has to be seen in the context of their life-experience. They were abandoned, lived in fear, and managed to survive while their beloveds perished – which may have set off guilt and shame. It is no wonder, therefore, that they cannot lead ‘normal lives’ and they cannot provide their children with what is considered a normal upbringing.

There is not a chapter where one does not experience the impact of the Holocaust on the characters. As we get to know them, we learn that their preferred language is German – after all it was their mother tongue (pp. 74-5, 97, 112, 168); many of them have poor mastery of Hebrew. They associate with people like them, from the ‘old-land’, and enter into marriages that even verge on abuse – just because the prospective spouses can speak their mother-tongue and have an understanding of what was it like ‘over there’. There is an unspoken affinity between the people from ‘over-there’. They try to help each other, provide work for other people who came from there … with the blue number … (p.116) Their choice of food (pp.102-3) and clothes has been determined by their childhood, yet after the Holocaust many of them are reluctant to go to Germany or use German products as it reminds them of their dead and of the havoc the war wreaked in their lives.

When Elisheva’s mother Ruth wants to go to a fashion design institute in Berlin, in what she calls ‘the New Germany’, because she says that after ten years one must try to forget what happened, the aunt Gertrud reprimands her, asking how she could go back to where her parents were murdered. For Gertrud, who escaped Germany before the war, Germany “did not exist anymore” (pp.80-81) and she banned all German products.

After the war Gertrud had gone over to Germany to look for her parents and other family members, but found that they had been murdered, in spite of the fact that the father was not Jewish. Since ethnically he was not Jewish, he was given the option to save himself. However, as his wife, who was Jewish by birth, was doomed to destruction, he declined the offer to live and perished with her. There are many stories of the life in Europe, the characters enjoying reminiscing about the years that they were important citizens in Europe – one was Sigmund Freud’s dentist (p.57), for example.

Why should the reader be surprised that Elisheva’s mother deposits her in other people homes as a cuckoo deposits her eggs in other nests? Could it be that because of the upheaval of the Holocaust the mother herself did not have role models to emulate? She might also have had an uncontrollable urge to live with no responsibility, which has been the case with many survivors. When analysed carefully, they were cinders of the Fire in Europe, burnt physically and mentally to various degrees.

The novel reflects the life experience of a child born in the land of Israel which is supposed to provide her with a healthy upbringing in a sovereign state; yet
the people who are supposed to look after her are not capable of doing so, whether for lack of role models or because of their own instability – as in the case of her stepmother Dora who hoards old clothes and observes the world from her balcony (pp.92-3) and prefers to watch movies about European princesses rather than live in the here and now. They try, each within his or her own capability, to love Elisheva. The aunt Gertrud in fact succeeds heroically, yet the readers are constantly aware of her Otherness in the Israeli landscape.

Other characters in the book include Holocaust survivors, who are also like cinders from the big fire. They are the sole remnant of their perished families, trying to make a new life, such as the housekeeper Hadasa, nicknamed Dasi, who lives in an immigrants’ hostel and treasures the solitary photo of her dead family about whom she likes to talk (pp.51, 128-9).

To summarise: Alisa Harth’s When we Basked in the Warmth of the Sun is a well written novel. But I suggest that rather than reading it as just one of the good novels published in Israel in 2005, it should be read as an excellent representative of the fourth time zone in literary responses to the Holocaust.

The impact of the Holocaust is not over yet. One can see it in this novel: Elisheva and her own generation, who have had no normality in their own upbringing, have to be parents in turn (again with no proper role-models). Since Elisheva’s son is a modern Israeli, and a third generation removed from the Holocaust, one would assume that the Holocaust is not part of him and his life. But this is not true. Instinctively he recognises that Elisheva is part of the ‘other world’ and at a time of conflict between them when there is no restraint he shouts: “I hate what you represent” (p.267).

I believe that the fourth time zone is not over – it may be with us for a long time yet – and we may see that it is a part of the national psyche. Consequently, the Hebrew literary canon should recognise this book and others like it and accord them respectable space within the canon.

Reference