

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

Special Issue: Australia

28/3 2019

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‘Storytelling is an ancient art.’¹ Stories, Maps, Migrants and *Flâneurs* in Arnold Zable’s Selected Texts

Abstract

Nadine Fresco in her research on exiled Holocaust survivors uses the term *diaspora des cendres* (1981) to depict the status of Jewish migrants whose lives are forever marked by their tragic experience as well as a conviction that “the[ir] place of origins has gone up in ashes” (Hirsch 243). As a result, Jewish migrants and their children have frequently resorted to storytelling treated as a means of transferring their memories, postmemories and their condition of exile from the destroyed Eastern Europe into the New World. Since “[l]iterature of Australians of Polish-Jewish descent holds a special place in Australian culture” (Kwapisz Williams 125), the aim of this paper is to look at selected texts by one of the greatest Jewish-Australian storytellers of our time: Arnold Zable and analyse them according to the paradigm of an exiled *flâneur* whose life concentrates on wandering the world, sitting in a Melbourne café, invoking afterimages of the lost homeland as well as positioning one’s status on a map of contemporary Jewish migrants. The analyses of Zable’s *Jewels and Ashes* (1991) and *Café Scheherazade* (2001) would locate Zable as a memoirist as well as his fictional characters within the Australian community of migrants who are immersed in discussing their un/belonging and up/rootedness. The analysis also comprises discussions on mapping the past within the context of the new territory and the value of storytelling.

Born in January 1947 in Wellington, New Zealand, to Polish-Jewish refugee parents, Arnold Zable is currently one of the most significant second-generation writers in Australia. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Australia and he grew up in Carlton, Victoria. Educated at the University of Melbourne and Columbia University, he has become a writer as well as human rights activist and teacher in Australia, Asia, North America and Europe. Zable is the author of eight books so far, including memoirs, short story collections, novels and biographies. His works have been highly praised and awarded both in Australia and abroad. The main themes of his writing are most often focused on migration, loss, the Annihilation, as he prefers to call the Holocaust, and un/belonging among others.

As a son of Polish-Jews, who emigrated from their hometown of Bialystok in the 1930s, born after WWII, the family did not suffer from the Holocaust directly. Yet, many of their relatives, who stayed in Europe, were affected by the mass killings and deportations. They were also very much aware of the annihilation of the European Jewry as well as the demise of the Yiddish culture in Poland and Central-Eastern Europe. As Richard Freadman informs “[Zable’s] home life was deeply steeped in the world of *Yiddishkeit* – his father wrote Yiddish poetry, his mother was a fine amateur performer of Yiddish song – but they were not strictly observant Jews” (119; original emphasis). As a result of Zable’s upbringing and his literary fascinations, he has become one of the most outstanding Australian writers of Polish-Jewish origins to consider the intricacies of exile and migration permeated by the questions of belonging and place. The aim of this paper is therefore to look at two famous books by Arnold Zable: *Jewels and Ashes* (1991) and *Cafe Scheherazade* (2001) and analyse them according to the paradigm of an exiled *flâneur* whose life concentrates on wandering the world, sitting in a Melbourne café, invoking afterimages of the lost homeland, weaving migrant stories and listening to them as well as positioning one’s status on a map of contemporary Polish-Jewish diaspora.

Arnold Zable’s debut text, *Jewels and Ashes*, was published in 1991 and can be classified as a memoir. However, as Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams has suggested, second-generation authors, such as Mark Baker, Arnold Zable or Lily Brett “produce competing narratives built on facts and fiction” (126). Therefore, Zable’s memoir needs to be located within the idea of *faction*² in which, as he claims: “family stories become, in time, ancestral legends” (1991, n.p.). Hence, the book is an autobiographical rendition of his journey to Central-Eastern Europe undertaken in 1986 during which he rediscovers his family’s roots and his parents’ hometown of Bialystok. Critics saw this text as a “ground-breaking book in Australia, one of the first of what has since become a distinct auto/biographical genre” (Varga 23).³

Cafe Scheherazade, published in 2001, a decade after Zable’s debut, is a novel which comprises facts and fiction, history and story. It tells a story of a young journalist, Martin Davis, who spots in Acland Street, St. Kilda, the suburb of Melbourne, the eponymous Cafe Scheherazade and is intrigued by its name. Martin enters the place to inquire about the origins of its name. He meets its owners: Masha and Avram who invite him to their table at the back of the café and promise: “This you will understand once you hear the full story” (2001, 4). Martin, Zable’s alter ego (Watts), who is a busy journalist and has deadlines to be met, gradually becomes immersed in their stories as well as their guests: Yossel Bartnowski’s, Laizer’s and Zalman’s, and it is their storytelling that compels Martin to narrate the text. Thus, the journalist is pulled to this café by its atmosphere of the Old World as well as the stories of the Old Places such as “Vilna, Vilnius. The Jerusalem of Lithuania” (5), Warsaw, Pinsk, Odessa, Tulchin

and Kiev, among others, evoked by the group of storytellers exiled from Eastern Europe to the New World speaking in a mix of languages such as English, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish.

1. Stories

"Storytelling is an ancient art" (Zable 2001, 220) claims the narrator of *Cafe Scheherazade* at the end of the book evoking images of ancient storytellers gathered around the fire enchanting audiences with their tales. Throughout the whole text, he also refers to the mythical Scheherazade weaving stories to postpone her death. In both texts by Zable, storytelling plays a central role in preserving the memories of the Old World even though its witnesses frequently struggle with painful remembrances. Both in *Jewels and Ashes*, in which Zable depicts his own family and their fates, as well as in fictionalized *Cafe Scheherazade*, the author pays "a homage to the power of storytelling" (2001, 222). Storytelling saves the Old World from oblivion and helps conjure up images of it in the New World environment.

The story of Zable's parents, which serves as a basis for his own trip to Poland in 1986, is a dramatic one despite the fact the his mother left Poland in the 1930s. Throughout their lives the parents were struggling with the haunting images of their parents, Zable's grandparents, and many other relatives and friends, who stayed in Bialystok and did not survive the Second World War. His own impressions from the journey across Poland are intertwined with his parents' stories of the past. Zable had been exposed to many stories for years, but never received a coherent version of his parents' lives as: "Mother tells stories in fragments. Over the years she has retold the same anecdotes many times. Her experiences flow through her, always liable to leap out unexpectedly in moments of unguarded reflection" (1991, 8). Given her age, tricks that memory plays and conflicting processes of forgetting and remembering, Zable is aware of the inability to get the full view of what it was like to leave one's homeland behind, to fight to get a permit to stay in the New World, and to bring up children who would not be infected with the postmemory of the Holocaust of the closest relatives. It is, however, impossible to avoid being affected by what his family went through and what his parents who were spared the grimmest fate lived through. Referring to the fragmented stories he has received and explaining the meaning of the memoir's title, Zable asks: "What was it they were trying to convey, our elders, when they told us their stories? 'Kadimah' means 'future'; yet they talked endlessly about the past, sometimes lovingly, sometimes with great venom. [...] They left a legacy of fragments, a jumble of jewels and ashes, and forests of severed family trees which their children now explore and try somehow to restore" (23–24).

This process of restoration of the family history is never a simple one since some facts are silenced, others have to be extracted at scarce moments of honesty, still others must be just intuitively reclaimed. When his mother muses on her past in Grodek and in Białystok – this “enticing mirage” (193), she never reveals the whole story, her narrative comes in ebb and flow and Zable’s task is to extract the fragments and put them together all by himself. He resembles many second-generation writers who try to grasp the Holocaust stories of their ancestors across the world.⁴ Zable depicts his task in the following way: “And as I recreate the story, I must make do with snippets of information gathered from kitchen conversations in which the silences grow longer, and mother seems increasingly lost in an inaccessible world of her own” (73). It is a result of the fact that: “We are talking of events that took place over eighty years ago. At such a distance memories streak like fireflies that flash brightly for a moment in the mind of my mother, before receding back into the darkness. The son is hungry for information, for any spark that might illuminate the beginning of things” (59).

Storytelling is therefore inextricably linked with memory. As Pierre Nora claims: “[...] we speak so much of memory because there is so little left of it” (7). The memories that fuel stories come unexpectedly: in dreams or due to some traumatic experiences. Zable’s father has recurrent dreams: of a fire in the forest which through its light exposes himself and his brother hiding among the trees, or of the Old World left behind, when he sailed to the New World from Gdynia. Moreover, he frequently sees his own parents in these dreams:

They come to him often, Bishke and Sheine. They stand by the bed and ask him how he is, while father asks them: “Where are you now?” And in the mornings his sense of disorientation is overwhelming. “This is why I must deny my dreams,” father insists. “Otherwise I would suffocate. A father. A mother. Bathed in blood. A beloved city. A community of friends caught in an ocean of flames. And I was so far away.” (1991, 162)

Being haunted and visited by spectral figures of the closest relatives coincides with the feeling of guilt connected to the fact that they (Zable’s parents) decided to leave their homeland before the war. The post-Holocaust generation, who either escaped the persecution or did not participate in it, is the haunted generation always prone to be visited by spectral figures, sites of memory, images and spaces forever transformed into mass cemeteries.⁵

Additionally, there are sudden moments of remembering when memories can be accessed for a limited period of time. When Zable’s mother fell down on a Melbourne street once, this opened a kind of rift in her memories otherwise kept hidden in her heart:

Her eyes are blackened, her nose bruised, perhaps broken; and she shields herself from any suggestion of pity. I have known her as a tough person at most times,

hiding any sign of pain. She seemed always buried in work, as she brought up three sons in the New World. Memories of that other world she had known in her childhood were restricted; while those more painful were kept at bay, and only revealed themselves unexpectedly, triggered by something that would throw her off guard. (1991, 88–89)

Such memories that linger in the minds and hearts of Jews who escaped before the Annihilation are the most painful ones as they expose their passivity and inability to reverse the past.

Among the obvious references to Scheherazade's weaving stories in Zable's 2001 book, the focal theme is definitely the one connected to the ancient queen's ability to postpone death by storytelling. The people coming to the bar are compared to the polyphonic choir singing their song, which spares them from forgetting, losing their identity and, thus, dying:

Like a magnet Scheherazade draws them, cynics and idealists, ageing schemers and dreamers. [...] Listen, and you will hear four, five, six voices at a time. Perhaps you think this impolite, lacking in manners, in style. But for those who participate this is a weekly *simkhe*, a celebration, a communal gathering. The babble of voices is an aria to their ears. [...] They are like a chorus in a Greek drama, those who frequent Scheherazade on this winter morning. They fill in the gaps. They echo the central text. Each one has a story aching to be told: tales of townlets and cities now vanished from the earth, of journeys in search of refuge, a shelter from curse. (22)

Martin, the narrator of the book, is faced with the Babel tower of languages, as the trio of friends and the café's owners use English, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish interchangeably. Moreover, they offer versions of the same story as well as gaps to be filled in. This "full story" which Masha promises at the beginning is never realized as Martin understands this task is impossible to achieve. Avram and Masha, who have spent many years and travelled the world together, sometimes offer competing stories until Masha exclaims: "Avramel, let me tell *my* story" (49; original emphasis). If storytelling is supposed to save them from death, each of them wants to dominate the conversation and bring back the most compelling images from the period before the destruction as well as from the years of the War. As Freedman claims, Martin "learns to honor the survivor stories he hears not just for the sake of memory, but because telling is an aspect of surviving" (124). Others also see this forceful task in a similar way. Laizer, who was forced to stay for years in Siberia before making it to Australia after the War, reminiscences how he spent hours of hard work dreaming of the moment in which he "would tell [his] unbelievable tales" (Zable 2001, 85). He says: "I did lie awake at night, beside my snoring workmates, and conjure the picture of my triumphant return. I saw myself walking the final steps to the door. I would tell my story, and my life would not have been wasted" (86). Even though this triumphant return

was never realized as there was no place, no *milieu de mémoire* to come back to, storytelling is seen as the only factor sustaining the sense of existence. This phenomenon can be seen through an analogy to Derridean concept of cinders that “there are” [*il y a là cendre*] (3). In his *Cinders*, Jacques Derrida comments on the idea of place and placeness in the following way:

If a place is itself surrounded by fire (falls finally to ash, into a cinder tomb), it no longer is. Cinder remains, cinder there is, which we can translate: the cinder is not, is not what is. It remains *from* what is not, in order to recall at the delicate, charred bottom of itself only nonbeing and nonpresence. Being without presence has not been and will no longer be there where there is cinder and this other memory would speak. (21–22; original emphasis)

This mixture of languages, stories, places, and memories that Zable’s texts offer is, therefore, supposed to bring back the impossible, to give voice to the cinder “that remains” and to reclaim the sites of memory from the lost, reduced to cinders, milieus of Central and Eastern Europe, home to the world of Yiddish and people speaking it.

The promise to tell the whole story is not fully possible, but there is a longing to grasp even the overwhelming part. When the café’s owners – Masha and Avram talk about their past and describe their idea of a café vibrant with stories, they mention the moments they spent in Paris, their love and happiness, their escape from Shoah and the birth of their first son, but they also refer to the darkness the World entered with the Nazi rule. Their inspiration for a café called Scheherazade comes from a Parisian bistro Scheherazade depicted in E. M. Remarque’s novel *The Arch of Triumph* which discusses the fates of stateless people who flee the Nazi terror. Together with vivid memories of Wolfke’s cafeteria in Vilnius that Zalman, Laizer and Yossel used to visit, the idea of a safe place for the homeless refugees behind St. Kilda’s café becomes obvious. Storytelling is deeply embedded in this very idea, it animates the place and offers shelter from forgetting as well as helps survive when dark memories beset. When they enter “the Kingdom of the Night” (Zable 2001, 157), it is on the one hand the moment of ordeal to recount stories of pogroms, escapes, Siberia, but on the other one it is Scheherazade’s moment of prolonging one’s life, of sustaining till dawn. Therefore the task of telling tales is seen as “a sacred duty” and Avram “is [such] an avid guardian of the past” and the story “with each telling [...] retains its power to astonish” (157).

In both texts, storytelling organizes the narration in a formal and more figurative way. It is the *spiritus movens* of the characters’ existence and well as Zable’s and his narrator Martin’s guide. In one of the interviews Zable compared his position on the text to “a conveyor, or a medium” of the characters’ tales. His narrator becomes “a second-generation witness, an alter ego” (Watts). The urge to tell stories and the impulse to write them down reveals the power of stories

that can save both the storytellers as well as the narrators and readers, those who “cannot understand, yet [they] must” those who “should not delve in too deeply, yet they should” (Zable 1991, 163).

2. Maps

Being a narrator in *Café Scheherazade* for a journalist whose craft requires reliability and truthfulness is not an easy endeavour for Martin. He is most often challenged by the polyphony of voices, different versions of the stories he is entrusted with. His task is thus not only to write the stories down but to rearrange the fragments as he admits: “it is for me to reconstruct the map and the chronology. A scribe, a no-good scribbler, I cannot turn back. What had begun as a simple newspaper story has exploded beyond my grasp. I listen. And I record. Driven by the knowledge that the old men are moving on, nearing the ends of their tumultuous lives; driven by a sense that it would be a tragic betrayal if their stories disappeared without trace” (Zable 2001, 59). Apparently, the stories are fragmented maps that need rearrangement and reconstruction. Storytelling becomes mapping the exiles’ experiences and fates. Laizer, whose story goes back to Vilnius, gives a detailed description of his escape to Ukraine, where he was captured by the Red Army patrols and ended up in Lvov prison first and then was sent by train and on foot into the Urals and labour camp in Vorkuta. Yet, despite the abundance of details, he frequently loses track of his narrative, “cannot see any continuity [...] only broken lines” (59). In order to see the landscape and feel the fatigue of the journey, Laizer describes, Martin has to visualize these “broken lines and maps” (64). He consults atlases in libraries, looks at the maps to feel the vastness of this Siberian experience. He says: “I am plotting lines that form ancestral maps, that unify fractured journeys across continents and oceans; lines that convey ancient melodies and longings, and twist and curve and break off into unexpected detours [...]” (64–65).

Ultimately, Martin becomes not only the reader of the physical maps who has to locate all the places the Café group has been wandering through, from Vilnius to Paris, from Lvov to Kobe and Shanghai, which he analyses from the perspective of a Melbourne based young and secure journalist. He also turns out to be a storywriter who has to catch the threads and arrange them according to the colours of the map, creatively reconstructing the pattern of journeys, and retracing the traumatic experiences and miraculous rescues of the group of refugees. He has to abandon his down-to-earth strategies in order to enter and comprehend this “world of sojourners and itinerants, unhinged and unearthed” (149) and he admits near the end of the text: “I too have become a walker, a café dweller. I too have become unhinged, so taken by Laizer, Zalman and Yossel’s stories that all I see about me seems like a parade, a play of chance” (149). When

Martin consults this idea of being unhinged, Yossel aptly responds: “We are *luftmenschen* [...] People of air. We do not belong to any one place. The whole world is ours. Yet, despite all our running about, nothing is truly ours.” (149; original emphasis).

Such refugees, who have lived for over fifty years in Australia, when Martin meets them, once exiled from the homeland, can never anchor in any place. They dwell in stories, the Café being a physical shelter from the tormenting unbelonging felt as a never-ending ordeal. The city of Melbourne becomes just a space they try to tame but every day they trace the routes of beauty from the past as well as maps of horror.

3. Migrants

The question of unbelonging pervades both texts. Zable’s characters are the eternal wanderers who have never stopped being migrants even though they settle down in Australia. In *Jewels and Ashes* he explains that his parents considered leaving their hometown of Bialystok all the time. Despite the fact that they did not encounter any violent anti-Semitism before the War, they felt they had been successors of the Biblical Israelites. Though never voiced in this way they must have realized their condition of migrants. Very early in the book, Zable writes: “They lived on the edge of time and space, my ancestors, always on the verge of moving on, continually faced with the decision: do we stay, persist, take root within this kingdom, or do we take to the road again?” (1991, 11) His parents as well as the characters from *Cafe Scheherazade*: Masha, Avram, Yossel, Laizer and Zalman are the 20th century nomads, exiled from their homes. Being members of the *diaspora des cendres* (Hirsch 143) they can never reclaim their places of origins as the Bialystok, the Vilnius and the Warsaw of their times no longer exist and have “gone up in ashes” (Hirsch 243). Yet, following Derrida’s question: “*If the all-burning destroys up to its letter and its body, how can it guard the trace of itself and breach/broach a history where it preserves itself in losing itself?*” (26), Zable, the author, and Martin, the narrator, undertake the task of preserving the cinders as “*the all-burning must pass into its contrary, guard itself, guard its own monument of loss, appear as what it is in its very disappearance*” (26; original emphasis). To place Zable’s texts within the paradigm of *diaspora des cendres*, diasporic writing of/about cinders, it has to be remembered that Zable has always been exposed to the stories of exile. That is why when he recalls his earliest memories he says: “When, as a child, I had my first intimations of these ancestral wanderings, I saw them initially as a romance. I imagined myself the descendant of Gypsies and nomads. I tried to retrace their steps. I would catch glimpses of footprints and hooves etched in mud and dust within the pages of Yiddish novels that I read voraciously” (1991, 12). As a result, as an adult person

he undertakes the journey back to retrace these steps and to visit the sites of his parents' memory.

The condition of Cafe's migrants is closely linked with the paradigmatic exiled Jew, a wandering Jew. All storytellers in the novels who entrust Martin with their lives escaped from their lands, went through camps, wandered through the Siberian Taiga, and spent some time as stateless refugees in Paris, Shanghai or the Japanese town of Kobe before reaching Australia. Such journeys would today require maps or navigation systems, but as Martin writes, all of them roamed without aims and final destinations which can only be reconstructed from the perspective of their settlement. Therefore, when Martin writes what kind of story his is, he says: "This is a tale of maps, both old and new. Maps with shifting borders, obsolete before the ink could dry. Maps that created bands of nomads, stateless refugees. Maps criss-crossed by trains shunting their cargoes of uprooted wanderers thousands of kilometres [...]" (2001, 50). Zable sees the exiles as nomads whose uprootedness will never be soothed because the wound is too deep and the world's rift cannot be covered up.

4. *Flâneurs*

Arnold Zable, during his 1986 journey to Poland, visited Bialystok, Warsaw, Cracow, among other important places in which he tried to trace his ancestors' past. He himself immerses in Baudelairean strolling to explore the city space, *les lieux de memoire* as Nora puts it. There are no longer the exact *millieux de memoire*, therefore Zable the *flâneur* wanders around the former Jewish districts to reconstruct as much as he can. The same happens to his characters in *Cafe Scheherazade*, who were scattered around Europe during the War and resumed their *flânerie* lifestyle in Melbourne. What Walter Benjamin discovered about Baudelaire and his wandering around Paris, can be compared to Masha and Avram who discovered themselves and their love in a Parisian café which they visited while on exile, stateless and abandoned, unable to find an aim in the devastated Europe of the Second World War. They ended up in St. Kilda and found a goal when they transformed a milk bar into a café which would be a safe place in this "sanctuary" of Melbourne hidden between "two peninsulas that sweep towards each other like hands reaching out to complete an embrace" (2001, 214). Nowadays, this is a vibrant place full of small bars and cafés and Martin, who depicts the area, walks around quite often becoming a *flâneur* himself. Although he wanders with an aim in his mind, he realizes that it is a floating one, as he might not ever fully grasp the multiplicity of stories he listens to. When he "stroll[s] past this maze of cafés, and makes [his] way to Scheherazade" he hears Masha saying: "Each café begets another [...] and for every coffee shop on Acland street I imagine a precursor, a café of the mind. Such as Wolfke's, which once stood in

the city of Vilna, on the corner of Niemecka and Zydowska streets” (36). Their Cafe Scheherazade is therefore another place in the long line of similar cafés that gave shelter to the city wanderers such as the classical example of Baudelaire, or other Jewish exiles-turned-strollers from Ravvin’s *Café des Westens* modelled on the famous Berlin place. While Pinsker describes “the ultimate Jewish flâneur” (62) and the “coffeehouse Jew” (57) in the 1920s Vienna and their literary renditions, certain similarities can be drawn to analyse the group of Jews visiting St. Kilda’s café.

Apparently, the café offers shelter and a place to meet other strollers. However, the Jewish exiles come there in order to recall memories and to bring the stories of the past back. In this way their accounts are evocations of the darkness of the past and the place is not really a healing sanctuary but rather a place which helps them conjure up ghosts of the War. For example, “Yossel still stalks the streets of Warsaw. He still hovers in its shadows. He remains obsessed by a world of hoodlums and fear” (2001, 25),⁶ “Laizer walks these streets as if they do not exist. He moves in and out of his parallel universes, pursued by the whispers of obstinate ghosts. He wanders a world of mirages” (83). This spectral haunting which they all experience, this almost tangible presence of ghosts from the past makes this *flânerie* a grim one. All of them, though living in the beautiful sanctuary of Melbourne and strolling its streets every day, enter the Cafe, and, while weaving stories, are transplanted into the other world of the bygone days. Martin becomes aware of this when he says:

We are descending, Avram and I, in the back room of the café. We are moving together. Step by step. Each step is another realm. A step closer to an unfathomable darkness. [...] The café walls close in around us. Those seated at nearby tables evaporate into ghosts. Neon-lit Acland Street recedes. The city we inhabit whirls about us. And again we are elsewhere, by the gates of the ghetto, in the Jerusalem of eastern Europe. (162)

Near the end of the novel, Zalman, the most poetic of the group concludes that they are all trapped in the past as this is the way memory works. What they can cling to are just brief moments of salvation from the past, from the grim and dark history. As the most sensitive of the group, he realizes that there is always a dream to “remain poised, fixed in time” (218) but it is always a fleeting moment. There is, however, a chance to find some consolation as he says: “This is what all my wanderings have taught me: that the moment itself is the haven, the true sanctuary. If only we could hold on to that. And savour it. Perhaps then we would not be so inclined to tear each other to pieces” (218). Unfortunately, these are just brief moments that probably cannot be caught in time. The characters, like Zalman, feel uprooted and cannot find a centre which would “hold.” He compares the feeling to living on a beautiful bridge, it is enchanting, but never stable, never rooted, never fully belonging (101).

Arnold Zable, following in the footsteps of the grim *flâneur*, goes on the journey across Asia to visit Poland and rediscover the sites of memory which once were his parents' familiar routes. In Warsaw he meets Nathan Berman, a Polish Jew born in Warsaw, and a retired mathematics professor, who lived for decades in Palestine and New York and moved to Poland to wander with his girlfriend around Polish cities. He astonished Zable with his vibrancy and his decision to live in Poland. He took Zable around Warsaw and declared: "It's madness. Yet somehow, in Poland I feel most at ease. It has the smell of my childhood and a distant remembrance of the womb" (1991, 36). For Zable this behaviour is not understandable as the names of Warsaw streets bring back stories which he heard, pictures he saw, and the images of the destroyed Warsaw resurface in his mind. Like in *The Winter Vault* by Anne Michaels, the *flâneurs* automatically recreate the visions of their lost city, Zable in *Jewels and Ashes* conjures images he has never seen and which have been handed down in the form of postmemory.

In a climactic moment, he wonders if this journeying through the contaminated landscapes (Pollack) makes sense and whether he would ever be able to move beyond this postmemorial heritage:

The country is littered with reminders: stones, plaques, monuments; in forest clearings, within open fields, on busy city streets, in village squares, by roadside shrines, and in provincial museums. [...] And beyond the physical borders, the echoes of what happened just one generation ago, on this soil, reverberate in the dreams of survivors scattered throughout the world; and the children of survivors, they also have been drawn into this landscape of darkness with its aborted stories and its collective memory of suffering.

There must be a way beyond this grim inheritance. It is as if, having come this far, I have no choice but to continue the journey, completing tales half told and half imagined, as I follow my forebears on their final trek, whether it may have taken them, and beyond, far beyond, so that I will never have to return. (1991, 102)

There is no easy answer to these doubts. Zable is a hostage of memory and stories. Consequently, he may never move beyond the grim *flânerie* as he is immersed in his ancestors' stories and memories. They have formed his life and served as guidelines for the journey. He wanders through Białystok and discusses the idea of rebuilding the city after the War.⁷ When Zable informs his father he wants to visit Białystok, as he says: "the Białystok I had dreamed of for so many years; the city my parents had never ceased dreaming of, even as they had wanted to forget" (207), Białystok which is also called a "siren's song," "a spell" and a "lost dream" (207) by his parents, his father insists:

"Give my regards to the town clock," were the last words my father had said to me when I left Melbourne. But he doubted whether it was still standing. And in a sense he was right. The clock-tower that overlooks the central square is a replica, erected after the War on the site where the celebrated original had stood. In fact the entire

central enclave is a replica, recreated brick by brick in a land where memories cling tenaciously and demand to be honoured. (1991, 44–45)

Nevertheless, Zable tries to trace his parents' routes in the 1930s when they were young, sat in cafes, and went to the cinema like many other similar Jewish couples living their lives in cities. He reconstructs his mother's voice who subconsciously becomes aware of the fact that they are "bound to a common fate" (Zable 1991, 124) and insists on emigration to Australia. He cannot fully restore the words that were said and emotions between his parents but he aptly offers an insight into his feeling of having been given a life of his own to walk the streets of Białystok, Warsaw and Cracow.

When he visits Cracow and wanders along its streets, and especially the streets of Kazimierz, the Jewish district, he visits synagogues and cemeteries. Zable as the "ultimate Jewish flâneur" shows the perspective of an Australian stroller, which becomes a universal perspective of a child of exiled Jews. During his visit to a Jewish cemetery in Cracow, the caretaker says: "The memory fades and is transformed into history. In time the history is distorted, denied, impossible to believe, and we are reduced to absolutely nothing, zero, not even a figment of the imagination" (1991, 171). That is why, Zable weaves autobiographical stories of his ancestors in *Jewels and Ashes* and fictional tales in *Cafe Scheherazade*. He walks through the cemetery of Europe, through the contaminated landscapes, through the "kingdom of darkness" (Freadman 122)⁸ and "a museum of the impossible" (Zable 1991, 180)⁹ in order to save some of the sites of memory. Like the ancient Scheherazade, he wants to survive the night of death, to salvage the world from oblivion and silence.

Zable's texts contribute to the universal body of migrant literature in which storytellers try to grasp the autobiographical experience of immigration through the narrative process which involves mixing facts with the imagined and fictionalized. Apart from various routes Australian migrants took in the first half of the 20th century, some via Siberia, India, and Persia, and others through Displaced Persons camps in Germany and France, their stories of displacement are parallel. They are all descendants of European Jewry looking for a 'sanctuary' and living forever in the inherited postmemory. Notwithstanding their different stories, Jewish immigrants in Australia most frequently dwell on their diasporas *des cendres* – diasporas blown up in ashes – and reclaim them in the literary output of the generation of postmemory.

Notes

- 1 Zable, Arnold. 2001. *Cafe Scheherazade*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 220.
- 2 Kamboureli uses the term faction to delineate "the interplay of faction and fiction" (2000, 135) and thus it is understood here as a process of mixing or

fusing the autobiographical immigrant experience with a certain element of fictionalizing through the change of names or fallible memory for instance (Zable also mentions this in the Author's Note in *Jewels*, n.p.).

- 3 Quite unsurprisingly, a similar phenomenon can be noticed while analysing Canadian migrant literature of the same period. Even while looking merely at the titles of books published in the last decades of the 20th century in both countries and devoted to the common themes of immigration and journeying back, striking similarities are apparent. Zable's texts can be juxtaposed with such Canadian titles as *Honey and Ashes A Family Story* by Janice Kulyk Keefer depicting the emigration from Ukraine and Poland to Canada in the 1930s and *Ashes and Miracles. A Journey through Poland* by Irena F. Karafilly, a travelogue in which a journey back in search of the remnants of the Jewish-Polish legacy is depicted. Furthermore, Norman Ravvin's *Café des Westens*, describing a Calgary coffee shop for "old-timers" (Kulyk Keefer 1996, 85) resonates with the St. Kilda's Café Scheherazade as well. As far as Australian literature is concerned, Zable also claims that his *Jewels and Ashes* was "one of the very first books in [the country]" written by "the sons and daughters of survivors or near survivors" (Wechselblatt and Zable 2001, 90). The late 1980s and early 1990s also mark the appearance of such texts in Canada.
- 4 Repeatedly, certain resemblances can be spotted in Canadian literature as well. Zable's approach corresponds with Lisa Appignanesi's descriptions of her struggle with her oblivious father in *Losing the Dead. Family Memoir* and her novel *The Memory Man*, texts in which forgetting due to diabetes delirium and Alzheimer's disease competes with remembering.
- 5 The same kind of haunting appears in many Holocaust texts in Canadian literature such as Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault*, in Norman Ravvin's *Café des Westens*. Ravvin's characters, and especially the generation of grandparents, who left Mława in the 1930s, constantly visualise the destruction of their *shtetl*, however, the word Holocaust does not appear in this book at all. As varied as all of these texts are, they all touch upon ghostly presence of the relatives who stayed behind in the Nazi-occupied Poland and died in concentration camps and mass killings.
- 6 Yossel would also reminisce on walking other cities: "Of all the cities I have known, Shanghai was the best, the most beautiful. My beloved Warsaw was burning. Krochmalna Street was circled by barbed walls. My loved ones were in *gehennim*, and in Shanghai I had a good life. A Yiddish life. With Yiddish theatre. First-class. With the best actors. From Warsaw and Vilna. From Odessa and Harbin. And Yiddish clubs. Yiddish radio. Yiddish newspapers [...]. Of course [...] after Pearl Harbor, it all changed. Of course we were squashed into Hongkew. [...] Hundreds died of starvation. Of typhus, Of cholera. Of malaria and *meshugas*" (*Café* 141; original emphasis). Chakraborty in her

analysis of the text, situates Yossel at the crossroads of global, cosmopolitan worlds, whose diasporic consciousness helps him survive and preserve his Jewish/Yiddish identity. She views Zalman on the other hand as a person who is able to acculturate and adapt (Chakraborty 2013, 4–5).

- 7 Similar motifs are visible in Canadian texts as well. For instance, Anne Michaels in *The Winter Vault* examined the question of replicating the soul of Warsaw after the Second World War or Eva Stachniak debated over the double image of Wrocław/Breslau in *Necessary Lies*.
- 8 This is an expression Freadman uses in reference to Auschwitz.
- 9 Again, this phrase is used by Zable upon his visit to Auschwitz.

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