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Conversations with Christoph on Karen Gershon, Identity, and Vulnerability

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Introduction

First, I was interested in writing to you because you are Karen Gershon's daughter and live in Israel. Now I find myself being interested in the film [Pett, "Documentary"] and what you write because you are a friend. (Letter from Christoph, henceforth: CH, 30.12.2021)

I believe things happen for a reason, even if often we don't know what that is. The people in our lives cross our paths to light our way, reflecting to us things we need to know about ourselves and our place in the world. Certainly, Christoph was a bright shining light in my life during a very difficult personal time. Although we never actually met, I shall always cherish the lessons I learnt from our long correspondence. His benevolent, witty, caring manner continues to light my way, as a reassuring beacon of hope on the stormy seas of my life.

We met in the pages of a book on *Translated Memories* (Hofmann and Reuter). His chapter (Houswitschka, "Vicarious"), featuring my mother – author and poet Karen Gershon –, came before mine (Shmuel, "Between"), – on how her story has shaped my life. This sparked a correspondence that Christoph later aptly described as "an ongoing conversation accompanying me every day."

Some years earlier I had received an invaluable and yet encumbering gift linking past and present: a box of letters written by my mother to her sister in German, dating from the 1940s to the date of her death in 1993. Invaluable because of the insights contained in these letters, clarifying many gaps in my knowledge of our family history and my mother's life. Encumbering because it enhanced my obligation to write her story, and because the letters were in German.

German was a language taken away from my mother by her exile from her hometown Bielefeld in 1938 when she was sent on the Kindertransport to England. She never saw her parents again; together with other relatives they were amongst the six million people murdered in cold blood by the Nazi regime's attempted genocide. German was the language in which she wrote her first poems, published regularly by the only remaining national Jewish newspaper – the *Jüdische Rundschau* – while she was a teenager. German was the language she disowned when she was cast out at the age of 15. She remained reticent about using it for the rest of her life and discouraged us (her children) from learning it. But it was the only avenue of communication to her last surviving relative, her sister Lise who lived in Italy. It was Lise's children who gave me the letters, she bequeathed them to me on her deathbed. In the book *Translated Memories* (211),

after my chapter, there is a poem by Joseph Swan. I approached both Joseph and Christoph about helping me translate the letters, both responded with friendly agreement; Joseph to translate the handwritten letters and Christoph to delegate a student to translate the typed letters under his supervision. Ellen Sophie Werner has done a brilliant job of completing this task just recently, as has Joe with precious insights in the translation of the handwritten letters. The correspondence with Christoph about the letters soon turned into a long personal exchange of intellectual ideas, curiosity about each other's lives, and eventually a deep and meaningful friendship.

Christoph invited me to teach a course with him at the University of Bamberg in May 2022. Several of our Zoom conversations were devoted to planning this. I was very much looking forward to our meeting. Kindly, Christoph also offered to accompany me to my mother's hometown Bielefeld. Tragically, he died two and a half months before my intended trip to Germany. In our correspondence, Christoph referred to himself as "someone of the second generation of the perpetrators" and was careful to clarify: "I would never compare or confuse the perspective of perpetrators with that of victims, and as a German I totally accept my collective responsibility." It was this open honesty of our exchanges that forged the way to our friendship; by each situating ourselves in context as the products of our specific histories, it became possible to really talk about our points of view, our lives and concerns. Despite our many differences, we forged a connection based on our common humanity, on our worries as parents, on shared values and the hope for a better world for our children. There are several recurrent themes in our correspondence: the importance of the legacy of Karen Gershon, the complexity and potency of identities, the very human state of vulnerability, and the inevitable, irrefutable connection between the academic and the personal. In recounting his own professional and personal story, Christoph concluded one of his letters with this: "these stories of children refugees and John Thelwall's work are connected and interrelated all the way from the 1790s to the present. The people who are connected to these stories one way or the other share the belief that one's work should serve a purpose and that one's work should remain part of one's identity" (CH, 24.1.2021).

Thus, in this article I would like to connect these themes using examples from our correspondence, as both a personal and professional tribute to Christoph's life and work and in appreciation of our brief yet meaningful friendship.

Writing always involves to some extent living a double life: one remains precariously balanced between two worlds – the present real world and the world of the book one is writing. Sometimes this latter can engulf everything, especially when dealing with heavy subjects such as the Holocaust. I believe this happened to my mother as she wrote her books, which often made her inaccessible to her family,

even when her children were small. Similarly, receiving the translated letters often aroused in me many conflicting feelings, uncovering sometimes painful connections between past and present – the ripple effect in history, this almost invisible passage of emotional trauma from one generation to the next (as described by Atlas 17-18). Most of the time when I shared something with Christoph, he had interesting insights to make, including often referring me to books or articles (even attaching these to his emails to aid my research). I think this correspondence helped me to retain perspective, to keep me grounded in the here and now, and not become lost between these two worlds. It was also comforting to know that there was someone waiting for me in Germany, who would accompany me to Bielefeld, who knew what this journey meant to me and would act as a buffer between me and all that Germany stands for because of my family history.

Identity

Our thoughts are embedded in and formed by the contexts in which we live, and our interactions with those around us. As such, Karen Gershon's writing was forged by her emotional reactions as a child survivor orphaned in the Holocaust. Therefore, her ability to write directly about herself and her family only evolved later in life – her initial writing fictionalized the story to make it manageable. Both Christoph (Houswitschka, "What") and Anita Barmettler have written about this. Thus, one must recognize Karen Gershon's complex identity as child survivor, woman, refugee, orphan and exiled Jew in order to understand her life story and literary oeuvre. These identities overlap and intersect with one another in Gershon's life experiences to form interlocking systems of bias and inequality in which she continued to be trapped long after leaving Nazi Germany: "Both writing and an imagined homeland (Jerusalem) offer young Gershon escape from the alienation of her refugee experience. Such alienation relates to gender as well as Jewishness, sexism as well as antisemitism. . . . In England . . . there is hostility towards Gershon as a Jew, a German, a refugee, and a woman" (Lassner and Lawson qtd. in Gershon, *A Tempered* xxiii-xxiv).

The themes of her early fictional novels, war, homelessness, irreversible loss, guilt, repulsion, hate, and helplessness, reflect factors that created insurmountable barriers in her search for identity and a sense of belonging, relegating her forever to be *a stranger in a strange land* (Gershon, "A Stranger"; and the title of the film about Gershon). The only way Gershon could overcome the narrow confines of the multiple identities restricting her was through the written word – by defining herself as a writer against all odds, by becoming the loud coherent voice of her generation, through books such as *We Came as Children* (Gershon) and poems such as "I was not there" (first written in 1961; Gershon, *Collected* 7). Her identity as a writer was her salvation.

My correspondence with Christoph involved a virtual meeting of identities, which sometimes necessitated lengthy explanations to avoid misunderstandings. We each spoke through our own perspectives formed in the context of history and life experiences, crossing both languages and geographic space to share opinions behind which often lurked deep emotions. An example of this is reflected in our discussion of identity:

German Jewish children could not possibly have handled the fact that all of a sudden, they were in the wrong body as Germans. I found it very enlightening to read Vera Gissing's *Kindertransport* autobiography where she emphasises that she felt so much better as a refugee in England because she spoke Czech as her mother tongue (which was rare among Czech Jews) and took pride in the fact that Czech pilots fought against Germans in the Battle of Britain. And then she says, I believe, that she felt sorry for the Jewish children whose mother tongue was German because they were regarded to be enemy aliens (at the beginning of the war). (CH, 27.9.2020)

While this statement made a lot of sense to me, I questioned Christoph's use of the expression "in the wrong body as Germans" and asked him about his concept of identity and its connection to the body. This was his answer:

I find it still very difficult to write about the perspective of those who are descendants of the perpetrators. So, I might have written this with a more general perspective, one that does not distinguish between victims and perpetrators as collective concepts. In this vein, many of us "were in the wrong body as Germans" after the Holocaust. One's identity is quite obviously not in the body (I am a social constructivist). All of us are born into a country, a few of us choose a different one, but usually keep connected with the one that defines a person's identity – in one's own eyes when one lives there long enough, certainly in the eyes of others. I am German, but I have always had the feeling that I was born in the wrong body because of what it means to non-Germans to be a German (after the Shoah). (CH, 29.9.2020)

Perhaps at the beginning of our correspondence I conceptualized *talking to a German*, but very soon it became *talking to Christoph*, whose German identity was quite clearly only one aspect of who he was:

On the one hand, I am coming from a very awkward ethnic German¹ background that is full of pain and lies. On the other hand, I have never felt to belong anywhere really, but at the same time I grew up in a very privileged and safe environment which has not made it necessary to look out for the more protective aspects of identity. I am European, ethnic German, German, Italian (my sister has become Italian and I am married to an Italian),

¹ Christoph's explanation of this term: "Some 12-14 million Germans were expelled and relocated from eastern European countries and parts of Germany that were given to Poland after 1945. Among them were 3 million so-called Sudetendeutsche from Czechoslovakia (some 25% of the pre-war population of Czechoslovakia). The first wave were ethnic Germans who were expelled in retaliation. The rest were relocated, i.e. transported in cattle trains or walked to occupied Germany. There they were less than welcome but rather spat at and attacked by local Germans. My mother and my grandmother found a room in bombed-out Frankfurt with the help of a German policeman and an American soldier who carried a gun" (CH, 4.12.2020).

Czech/Austrian (grandparents and cultural background), American (because I lived there for two years), and I feel very close to the countries I have visited and where I have many friends (Israel, the UK, Poland and also in a different way China). Whenever I touch ground in these countries, I feel somehow at home, which is very much related to the people I know in these countries. I have more friends in other countries than in Germany. (CH, 21.3.2021)

This narrative stresses the complex and dynamic nature of identity, as dependent upon context and shaped not only by ancestry but by human interaction and subjectivity. Just as I am not only Israeli, Jewish, British and the daughter of Karen Gershon, but have additional identities as author, anthropologist, mother and grandmother. The more we were able to trust each other as human beings the more this correspondence broke through the boundaries of labels and social categories to deal with issues of *being* and *doing* – how we define ourselves and live our lives. This is a complicated distinction to make, since our multidimensional identities entrap us in a web of meaning that is almost impossible to disentangle. For example, I cannot choose not to belong to the second generation, to be the daughter of a child survivor, a fact that has shaped the course of my life, who I am and what I do.

Christoph said: “My identity is one that is defined by human and civil rights first and then by my nationality. I think a person who is not ready to fight against his/her own people when they turn against humankind cannot claim to have a moral concept of national belonging” (CH, 29.9.2020).

I take from this statement two points: Firstly, that morality must come before loyalty to any pre-defined group, and I would add that being *humane* has to come before being simply *human*. As Bauer (7) has pointed out, the Holocaust was a *human* event, if we want to prevent it from happening again (in whatever place or form) we must be willing to learn from it. Secondly, in this context it is also important to remember that nation states have been formed for the sake of their citizens, and not the other way around. Living in Israel this is not always self-evident; my sons have had to risk their lives for the sake of defending their country, meaning that the identity of the third generation is also a risk factor. Christoph also said:

In my own experience, I would say that the catastrophe of the Nazi years, the total breakdown of civilisation, of what it means to be a human being, made it inevitable for me as someone of the second generation of the perpetrators to develop the feeling that I was born in the wrong body the more I learnt and read about the Shoah. To be shaped as a German in the society I was born into forced me to feel alienated in my own body. This feeling became stronger the more society as a whole started talking about the Shoah openly. (CH, 29.9.2020)

Again, an example of our birth contexts and inherited identities entrapping us even in relation to ourselves – our self-perception and body-image. Christoph continued to explain how he always detested sports as related to a Nazi ideology, stating that his father grew up in the Hitler youth and some of his sports teachers at school were Nazis. Thus, even the mundane choices that we make (such as participating in sports) may be rooted in the contexts of our identities as they have been forged long before our awareness.

Christoph's last published article (Houswitschka, "We must") was about John Thelwall (1764-1834), who was "one of the most notorious among the radical reformers" (31). In this article, Christoph discusses this dynamic and complex definition of identity as culminating in a freedom of speech and of participation in society. After being excluded as a radical reformer and indicted of high treason in 1794, Thelwall became a prolific writer. Being active was his choice of freedom, but even this basic freedom requires a certain economic and social context. Gershon struggled all her life to make her voice heard by getting published and to survive economically as a writer (a profession that to this day is hardly ever a lucrative means of supporting oneself). These struggles, in addition to her other identities, kept her constantly balanced precariously – both financially and personally – on the edge of society, the eternal outsider. Gershon's identity was forged by the traumatic experience of exile: "Those who arrived in England on the Kindertransport had become strangers to themselves. The feeling of being a stranger to oneself prompts the traumatized survivor to translate his/her experiences. Revisiting the traumatized experiences is in many ways an act of translation or transformation" (Houswitschka, "Vicarious" 185).

The writer's narrative becomes a means of participation in society, an affirmation of the self which has been rejected by social categorisation, creating an identity which both grows out of the ancestral past and the historical context and transcends it – a creative way of sharing a common humanity and giving a voice to the unheard. Thus, Gershon became "a lone voice in the Holocaust poetry of the 1960's" (*The Times* 23) – the voice of her generation. Berger (84) has discussed refugee writing as both an act of witnessing and of penance with no remission, reflecting the far-reaching consequences of the Holocaust across the generations – an expression of permanent exile signifying the diasporic experience across Jewish history.

In Christoph's final article (Houswitschka, "We must"), he argues that personal identity is based on agency, expressed via freedom of speech and of commerce, and that being active and not passive sustains personal welfare. The entitlement of participation is the mark of a true democracy, perhaps only made possible in small units which enable this genuine sharing of knowledge and empower people

to express their diverse and multifaceted identities. Thus, identity becomes a legacy of values not possessions, built on *being* and *doing* rather than labels denoting entitlement to material wealth or social status. It is this identity that provides innovative hardworking people (such as independent farmers) and motivated creative people (such as writers, artists and musicians) with wellbeing through personal achievement and expression. As farmers are dependent on a market for their produce, so creative people are dependent on an audience – in Gershon’s case through the medium of publication. Karen Gershon was an exceptional writer, with a unique ability to unfold harsh truths and insightful perceptions through various creative means: poetry, fiction, collective biography, and autobiography. With great determination and talent, and against the expectations formed by her child refugee background, she succeeded outstandingly in changing languages and forging a place of honour for herself amongst the most highly regarded poets and authors of her time. Although she published six volumes of poetry, eight books (three non-fiction and five fiction) and received numerous prizes, until her death Gershon struggled to find publishers for her work (there were no less than seven unpublished manuscripts in her study when she died). “The children of the Kindertransport experienced the transformation to adulthood in an alien country and had to connect it with a different type of translation, changing languages from German to English. . . . translation allows for language to engage again, for the writing process to resume, to represent or support a healing process coping with trauma” (Houswitschka, “Vicarious” 185).

In lieu of the Holocaust, Gershon could easily have become another Heine, as a child she invented verses to his poems so that her mother and sisters would allow her to join in their singing (these verses were good enough for her mother to look for them in Heine’s books). Before she emigrated to Israel in 1968, Gershon burnt all her old manuscripts, including her poems written in German. Her mastery of the English language followed an immense effort with little guidance or encouragement. Her definition as a stranger, a foreigner, an outsider, all words she used to describe herself in England, was a definitive of a state of exclusion simultaneously linguistically, culturally and spatially apart from others. As Christoph wrote: “In Gershon’s poetry translation is a poetic effect that signifies the lasting alienation caused by trauma, the disruption of word and world” (Houswitschka, “Vicarious” 191).

It could be argued that writing is inevitably a form of translation, in the sense of using words to transcend the inevitable abyss that exists between people – using language to convey something private and internal which, once uttered, becomes public and perhaps communal. In this sense, writing is a journey, the more adept and skilful the author, the farther away it will take us – far from ourselves and

perhaps closer to the proverbial ‘other.’ In the case of the Holocaust, it is a harrowing journey from ignorance, innocence, and bliss to the painful realization of what human beings are capable of doing to one another. It involves transforming numbers to personal stories, gruesome events to the detailed lives of ordinary people, creating a small window in the mind which brings one closer to an understanding of the impossible to grasp.

Soon after Gershon’s arrival in England, she was sent to Whittingham, Lord Balfour’s estate in Scotland, which became a Zionist training camp for refugees on their way to the land of Israel. A few months later her sister Lise was sent on the last legal ship to Palestine, another devastating separation for young Gershon. It was a time when she sought solace in her Jewish identity. When Whittingham closed, she was one of an Orthodox group of refugees who created a home and yeshiva in Wales. But she was not to stay with them. Only 17 years old, she left the group to fend for herself. Having lost her family, language, and homeland, she no longer felt connected to Jewish life and culture, it was almost as if she had been cast out entirely, losing her faith as she had lost all other possessions. The few attempts she made to seek comfort amongst Jews only enhanced this feeling: “On Friday night I went to the synagogue, not to pray but just to feel at home among Jews. All the melodies were different, so that I could not join in the singing, and it was worse feeling an outsider because I hadn’t expected it. . . . no one spoke to me or invited me home as Jews are supposed to do with strangers” (Gershon, *A Tempered* 100).

Like many child survivors, Gershon struggled with her Jewish identity for many years, writing about her mother in one of her early poems: “her hands once hesitant and white touched me with the Jewish plague, she is my enemy because I am burdened with her fate” (Gershon, *Collected* 30). Initially she refrained from passing on her Jewishness to her children.

It is in the autobiographical book *A Lesser Child* that she explains the deep roots of her ambivalence about her Jewishness, forged in her as a child in Nazi Germany. Christoph used this book in his courses: “In terms of *A Lesser Child* contributing something to an understanding of what impact a government-supported racist society has on a persecuted child, I found that your mother was a very good observer with an astonishing memory. Her narrative is distanced and close at the same time. Whenever I read it with my students, they really liked it” (CH, 23.11.2020).

In the 1930’s, the popular newspaper *Stürmer* was displayed in glass cases in the street, where even children at tram stations could read Nazi propaganda about the Jews: “Of course Lise and Kate did not believe what they read. But they did not totally disbelieve it either, and the memory of what they had read remained” (Gershon, *A Lesser* 115).

Christoph said: “I use this episode to talk with students about the specific problems children encountered who wanted to belong like all children do and at the same time felt utterly rejected and despised. Therefore, in the early years of Nazism, many Jewish children lived in a terrible state of self-denial” (CH, 24.9.2020).

When the three sisters were expelled from school, Anne, at 15, found work in an internationally famous spa (Bad Nauheim), while Lise, at 14, became an apprentice dressmaker. Gershon (then Kate, 13) received a scholarship for Herrlingen, the only remaining Jewish boarding school in Germany in 1936. The headmaster was Hugo Rosenthal.² She was only there for a year, but it was a formative experience in her life, instilling in her a pride for her Jewishness: “she had not known that she felt at all positive about being a Jew, it had surprised her. In a Jewish environment, this feeling rose to the surface. On the one hand, it let her fill one of her strongest and most constant ambitions, which was to belong; on the other, it supplemented her grandfather’s and the Zionist youth movement’s teachings” (Gershon, *A Lesser* 144).

Hugo Rosenthal was an exceptional educator, who saw education as a means of connection between the generations. In the troubling context of Germany in the 1930s, in which the children arriving at his school had been persecuted into seeing themselves as inferior, he forged an innovative path of Jewish education as a gift for life (Schachne 49-57). It was important to Hugo to avoid educating for Jewish nationalism as a reaction against Nazi nationalism. With the influence of Martin Buber, his attitude towards the children was holistic, to enable them to build a positive self-image of themselves as the children of Israel. But his aim was to go beyond Zionism to the spiritual heritage and overall moral education of the children. The school was run as a community celebrating Jewish cultural traditions and learning Hebrew as a living language connecting to Jewish roots. Hugo strove to develop the children not only intellectually, but to impart in them life skills and coping mechanisms. The boarding school was situated in a rural area, the children were encouraged to take responsibility in establishing and maintaining community life around a Jewish calendar. They *lived* Judaism, participating in manual work and outdoor activities (sports, games, gardening), keeping order and being punctual, because they wanted to feel part of the community, not because they were coerced to do so. Hugo realized that the children in his care were all desperately in need of a sense of security and stability, a sense of belonging. Thus, relations between staff and students were informal, in effect, the school was run as one big family (61-76).

² Later to emigrate to Israel and become Yoseph Yashuvi.

I think that Christoph was also a great educator. Certainly, like myself, he believed in education to move forward, to negate and overcome prejudices and discrimination:

The sixties and seventies were decades full of hope and the feeling that a new generation had the right to question the old world with all its failures. I still believe in education and Aufklärung (enlightenment, in spite of everything Adorno has said about it. He was right. We should never feel safe and never believe that we could not become part of the next step to another catastrophe in humanity), but critical understanding, making things public and education are the only ways to make some fragile progress. (CH, 24.10.2020)

Christoph made efforts to bring together students from different cultures and countries through international programmes in which he held open and candid discussions on many volatile topics: “I teach classes on antisemitism and Holocaust literature that are attended by Christians and Muslims and Jews, students from all walks of life. They take a strong and authentic interest in these topics as human beings. These experiences give me hope” (CH, 10.6.2020).

We had many discussions about such endeavors, sharing our teaching experiences. For three years I participated in the DEMO project (funded by the European Commission) comprising eleven academic institutions in Israel and Europe to advance innovative teaching about migrants’ lives in Israeli higher education institutions, with the aim of improving the skills of professionals in the applied social sciences (teachers, social workers, etc.) so that they could better meet the needs of migrants and asylum seekers (Shmuel, *Exploring*).

Hugo’s school Herrlingen, Christoph’s academic courses, and the DEMO project, are all examples of (different) small-group collaborations in line with Thelwall’s teachings, in which partakers are encouraged to be active participants – to grow and develop in communal settings which are inclusive, supportive, empowering and respectful of diversity. In a lecture on Zoom,³ which I invited Christoph to join, I talked about the Ethiopian concept of family, and the idea that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Christoph responded:

The way you have presented the stories of your family has really fascinated me. Firstly, because you conveyed a lot of values and beliefs I also share, such as the uniqueness of every individual in his/her diversity when it comes to our various belongings as individuals. Secondly, I found it fascinating that Ethiopian culture seems to have been socialist long before socialism. Some aspects of their culture also reminded me of Zionist ideas of collectivity. What you told about the village community and the concept of family reminded me of environments that are different from my own Western German upbringing. My two sons grew up in a small Saxon village in the former socialist part of Germany. They were really brought up by so many people in the village who all used to

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZeP6xyp51g>

belong to the collective village farm, actually something like the kibbutz. (CH, 16.11.2020)

Recently, after some drastic changes in my life, I have come to live in such a setting on kibbutz Bet HaEmek in the Western Galilee. Not only is this extremely pleasant and conducive to my wellbeing, but it is the first time in my life that I feel at one with my surroundings. This is a very special kibbutz, whose members made a conscious decision to maintain their communal structure and spirit despite privatization (which most of the kibbutzim have undertaken in the last twenty years). I am learning that building and maintaining a community is an active effort, to which people contribute in diverse ways; the most important ingredient seems to be a lot of goodwill.

One of the interesting things about cooperative societies (as opposed to individualistic societies) is this very sense of self embedded in community. In my conversations with elders of the Ethiopian immigrant community in Israel (Shmuel, *Children's*), I came to understand that the community was part of who they were, a part that to a large extent has been lost after immigration together with communal living. Modern Western individualistic societies tend to encourage dichotomous analytical thinking, often leading to a choice between two opposing alternatives. Thus, the needs of one are assumed to come at the expense of another, self-consideration is assumed to be instead of the consideration of others, and so on. However, in collectivistic societies, considering others coexists internally with considering oneself – self-perception contains the perception of others. This goes well with a fluid, dynamic view of identity, as changing and adapting throughout our lives, so that in different contexts different parts of our identities are paramount. Under such circumstances multiple narratives can coexist, life stories can overlap, perhaps one could more easily choose common humanity over pre-defined national or religious groups.

Christoph talked about a similar idea he taught in class:

I tried to explain to them that the idea that the signifier and the signified keep changing depending on the context and that we find the signified in the intertextual web of our reading. I explained to them that this makes us free to analyze our identity as something that is not defined by others, but a creative act of pinning down the signifiers and how they help to construct our identity as signified. (CH, 17.12.2020)

For example, consider the following verse from the poem “songs in exile” (Gershon, *Collected* 9):

I who have no other home
love my native town with shame
driven by my memories

riven between loyalties
I love the town my exile built
a replica without the guilt

A sense of belonging is definitive, there is an irksome dissonance between Gershon's emotions for her birth town and the post-Holocaust context. Being a *Bielefelder* was always to remain a part of her identity but cast out at 15 and her family murdered denied legitimacy to these feelings. Home becomes a concept she can only ever fantasize about. Even the various homes she invested in creating for her children were fragile, precarious constructs lacking roots and that illusive substance passed between the generations to forge both family and identity.

Another poem, "After Auschwitz" (12) begins with this verse:

I who am descendent from
those who wept in Babylon
and would not sing their songs to be
comforted in captivity
shall be an instrument to sing
of any human suffering
because in times of genocide
survival must be justified

Gershon's poems are full of signifiers that pin her identity to the heritage of Jewish suffering, they are powerful wedges inserted helplessly in a crumbling wall – the very fabric of her sense of self. They are words with which she clung to remnants of her Jewish identity, trying to rebuild a lost and wounded heritage, which outside her books – in family life in England – she was unable to pass on to her children.

Gershon's sense of being 'reconciled' to England accords with a diasporic literary tradition. Her verse expresses a tension – common to Anglo-Jewish poetry and poetics – between 'social' exile and an 'imaginary homeland'. Gershon mined the Hebrew bible to impose a stabilizing narrative on disorienting Jewish experience under Nazism. (Lawson, 139-40).

In contrast, in Israel, Gershon experienced a different sense of homecoming; she was at once more at one with her surroundings, less self-conscious of her thick German accent because it was so common and suddenly rooted as never before. She felt a deep, almost mystical connection to the people and the land, and very much wanted her children to fit in. The details of the family's *Aliyah* experience (and return to England after six years) are not relevant here, but I would like to make two points: firstly, that being in Israel enabled her to not only *accept* but *rejoice* in her Jewish identity. In the poem "Kaddish" (Gershon, *Collected* 14-17) she states: "a grief like mine is only stilled by the inborn need to celebrate."

Secondly, that being amongst other survivors made her continued grief and its various expressions legitimate: she was not expected, in an Israeli context, to put

the past behind her. As Kidron (324) noted, in the Israeli cultural context, strong inter-generational bonds and national commemoration ceremonies make it legitimate and expected to mark one's losses (because of the Holocaust, wars and terrorism) whilst living one's life. Furthermore, Israeli culture provides Holocaust survivors and their families with the validity of continued connection to the dead. I would say that an essential powerful part of Israeli Jewish tradition is to mourn our dead and yet celebrate life without ever forgetting them. It is true that in Israel there have always been hierarchies of Holocaust suffering (Kidron 325); I remember people's disapproving expressions whenever my mother called herself a Holocaust survivor and they discovered she had not herself been in a concentration camp. Then (the early 1970's) the common terminology for people like her was unaccompanied children, war orphans, or war damaged children – nobody called them *child survivors* (Clifford 2). But despite this, and all the other problems she had in Israel, it was a place where her complex identity could come together to feel whole – her sister Lise said as much about herself (in the film: Pett, 1989).

Vulnerability

In January 2001, I joined a series of Yad Vashem Zoom lectures on mental health and the Holocaust. The first speaker was child survivor professor Shlomo Berznitz, who said in his concluding remarks that it is human vulnerability that creates all the problems in the world – that people get hurt and offended and then blame others – a group of pre-defined others – and this causes animosity and violence against other human beings. I shared this with Christoph, who answered: “I could also not agree more with Shlomo Bereznitz. This vulnerability causes all the problems in the world. It is like a curse and the tragedy about this is that we all sit in the same boat because this vulnerability causes a never-ending chain effect of breeding frustration and violence” (CH, 28.2.2021).

Another speaker in the series was Professor Yuval Pelgi, who spoke of his research with survivors' families. He explained that child survivors who had to look after themselves during the war without supporting adults became very vulnerable adults themselves. I thought about my mother. Then he added that this excess vulnerability was often passed on to the second generation, but that the third generation tends to be more resilient. This made me think about my own vulnerability, and my sons' resilience, which to me seems to be forged in them as part of their Israeli identity.

In December 2021 (during the Covid pandemic) I arrived at Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg for a brief teaching visit arranged through the Erasmus exchange program with the Hebrew University. I had an exhibition of my books in International Diversity week for students in teacher education and taught a course on diversity in the classroom and antibias education. My hosts were very kind and

pleasant, the students friendly and cooperative with my innovative teaching methods (Shmuel, *Exploring*). Nevertheless, visiting Germany is always an emotionally loaded experience for me, which I inevitably approach with a certain ambivalence: a mixture of deep curiosity and reticence, a desire for connection and an inhibition about it. Germany awakens in me an uncomfortable feeling, one might call this an impossible vulnerability based on my family history. Christoph seemed to understand this without needing an explanation. With him being in Italy at this time, we were unable to meet, but he made a point of being encouraging, humorous and supportive from a distance via WhatsApp. Positive, compassionate human connection is the best cure for vulnerability; in a world which often feels uncaring and hostile, it is an affirmation of our worth as human beings – regardless of identity labels. This was the greatest help to child survivors in new, unfamiliar environments, often not what the children of the Kindertransport encountered in England when considered as *enemy aliens* (at the beginning of the war).

This brings me back to what I started with when discussing identity: Gershon's need to distance herself from her own experiences by fictionalizing the written narrative about them in her earlier works. This was a mechanism to avoid her own vulnerability, forged by her exile, enhanced by her inability to part from her parents at the train station in Bielefeld. She carried with her this *non-parting* all her life, making all separations painfully impossible. She used to say that she was *putting people on ice*, creating an invisible distance between herself and her own emotions as a form of self-protection. It was a barrier to love forged to shelter her from the abyss of her own vulnerability as child survivor.

At the station barrier
my mother would not let me go
I thought that I had outgrown her
I did no longer want her love
I was relieved to leave her there
it was her life that paid my fare
to recollect my childhood now
is the only scourge I have. (Gershon, *Collected* 27)

Cast out as a child, through no fault of her own, she blamed herself for surviving and took responsibility for the death of her parents (Barmettler 237-38). Her punishment was a constant intrinsic disconnection with her children, whom she felt she did not deserve as much as they did not deserve her as a mother. She struggled all her life to be worthy – worthy of the life she had been given where so many others had not, worthy of the family she had created which could never match up to her family of origin, worthy of possessing her poems and writing in a language she had adopted in a country not hers.

To Sum Up

It is sadly ironic that I initially approached Christoph about translating my mother's letters, and now I am going through *his* letters to write this article, which I have based on our conversations, transcending boundaries of identity as well as time and space, indicating the significance of both a humane attitude and of context. I have presented writing itself as the ultimate freedom expressing human agency and providing not only a personal but at times a collective voice. This especially in relation to human suffering, and the condition of refugees and other 'outsiders' who experience alienation as both internal and external – alienation from self and society. My mother Karen Gershon, child survivor, was one example, having lost family, language, and home, to later become a prolific writer and renowned poet often described as the voice of her generation. Karen Gershon's legacy remains with us today as a beacon of both hope and warning for generations to come (see Shmuel, *Child*).

I believe Christoph's legacy will be continued both by teachers and students, inspiring humanism, empathy, supportiveness, and goodwill amongst all people. Let us recognize the potency and fluidity of our identities, their contribution to our vulnerability – for who we are or what we are presumed to represent in differing contexts – and the power of human connection to highlight the value and uniqueness of each and every individual and enhance their intrinsic resilience.

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