Forgetting the Holocaust
by Ron Charach

Reviewed by Michael Greenstein

One of Yehuda Amichai’s ambivalent poems serves as a fitting epigraph to Ron Charach’s latest collection of poetry, Forgetting the Holocaust:

A man needs to live and to hate at the same moment . . .
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history takes years and years to do.

(“A Man in his Life” from Selected Poems)

Aside from echoing Ecclesiastes, Amichai’s lines forge the simultaneity of opposites, where remembering and forgetting are opposite sides of the same coin. Charach’s provocative title targets Holocaust deniers as well as those who fixate exclusively on the Holocaust. On the one hand, Emil Fackenheim insisted that the Eleventh Commandment is to remember the Holocaust, thereby denying Hitler any posthumous victory; on the other hand, Robert Alter has criticized this position, arguing instead that Jews must face the future and not dwell on past horrors indefinitely.

Charach’s first poem, “How to Forget the Holocaust,” deviates from Fackenheim’s and Alter’s positions. He situates his poem in his Winnipeg parochial school and creates a partial dramatic monologue with Mr. Bandler, a Holocaust survivor and janitor of the school. Reminiscent of some of Jack Ludwig’s fictional portraits, the first stanza introduces Bandler:

In the words of Mr. Bandler,
janitor of our parochial school,
as our learned, portly principal,
Rabbi Théodore Gorlick, strode by,
half-crescent glasses on a cord,
“It’s ezy to forget Da Holocaust
if you’re a Yeuro-peaan intee-lektual
who’s never been beat up! (9)

The poet recaptures the past through his own adolescent memories, and beyond those, through the memories of Bandler. With shifting perspectives and voices, the poet empathizes with his working-class characters, and layers his verse with sardonic irony.

And Gorlick, raised in Paris after the War,
master of the art of showing no sign of having heard,
ignored his proletarian critic, now paused in mid-sentence
to let the ”Da Learn’ld Rabbit” pass. (9)
The poet deftly retrieves history through lengthening lines, pausing with caesura, and criticizing class distinctions.

Onomatopoeia in the next stanza reinforces the dramatic immediacy of the situation, in contrast to the historical past: “Bandler smacked a bristling fist / into his bear-trap of a hand / and whispered invectives” (9). Ironically, he whispers into the ear of his beloved German shepherd, Blackie, “who sniffed the schoolyard for / anti-Semites and self-contented Jews” (9).

The poet continues to explore questions of identity in the next stanza: “What could I know of Mr. Bandler’s Lager” (9). The adult reflects on his own innocent childhood and invokes other mediators and meditators such as Primo Levi, Améry, or Celan, who committed suicide:

. . . and other Jewish writers who struggled
their names into anagrams of their old identities
to fit among a people who don’t
have pogroms and The Shoah behind them.(9)

Charach then inserts himself in *italics* to identify personal suffering with universal suffering (instead of anagram, palindrome, and another “character” among dramatis personae):

*This night brings a vision of Mother,*
*alevah hashalom, truncated by depression,*
*half alive / half dead – horrified*
*at her slipping grip on life,*
*with a ‘doctor-for-a son’*
*unable to save her.* (9)

The onomatopoeic “slipping grip” and the “thinning thighs” of the doctor-son contrast sharply with Bandler’s “bristling fist” and “bear-trap” hand.

What did the janitor gain from his experience in the concentration camp? “He could tell you which of all / the possible sad ends of any story / would be the one to come true” (11). So, the janitor-turned-prophet predicts the outcome of the Vietnam War for the “Yoonited States”: they will come back “Without da pants!”(11) The “sad ends of any story” raises the question of the endings of Charach’s poems – are they punch lines or epiphanies? Charach blurs the distinction between the two forms because his punch lines, which are so appropriate to his witty character studies, may end in epiphanies. Epiphany would be a higher aesthetic form with a subtler revelation through mood or metaphor than the punch line. In his fine character sketches of Bandler, Rabbi Gorlick, the student-poet, and his dying mother, Bandler’s punch line broadens the context from parochial school to wider horizons. Forgetting the Holocaust is inevitably remembering the Holocaust.

“For the Polish Poets” offers another study of how to remember the Holocaust by examining the words of Adam Zagajewski, Zbigniew Herbert, Milosz, and Szymborska. Embedded in Zagajewski’s name is the monosyllable “jew,” which causes Charach to speculate on identities and endings once again. In one of his poems, Zagajewski turns a Jewish child into Persephone, who then goes underground, like the Polish Resistance that went underground to condemn Poland’s “dance with Hitler” (13). Charach plays with names and inserts his own among acronyms: “My own, Charach, may stand for ‘Chossin Rebbe Chayim’, / ‘the son-in-law of Rabbi Chayim’” (13). By the middle of the poem, Charach offers an inconclusive conclusion that once again questions endings: “If history isn’t over until its effects are gone, / God knows this story isn’t done.”(13) This near-rhyme for a near-ending underscores the balance between punch line and epiphany, as Charach creates a
dialogue with Polish poets and Jewish ancestors. Persephone becomes a metaphor and metamorphosis, not only for the underground, but also within the psychic realm, an analogue for the subconscious, in this case the collective unconscious in the poet’s historical identity.

Visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, the poet “would like to stop visiting this topic” (14). In the final stanza he invokes Rabbi Akiva’s holy prayer when tortured by the Romans, and contrasts his modern self with the ancient rabbi who cried out, “We are all one” (14). The sceptical, modern poet is incapable of such devotion, either in his relationship to God, or to his fellow poets.

Portraits of Joe Bendit, the Turkish Jew in “Istanbul,” “Ludochka,” “Synagogue,” and “Passover” round out the “Diaspora” section of this book. “Prairie Water,” the second section, includes “Hecla Island, Lake Winnipeg,” where the poet ranges from his trivial killing of a mosquito to the more profound questioning of identity at the end of the poem. Looking into the shadowy lake, he wonders, “Could it be Hopkins or Hardy / or Dickinson, / whipping white light / out of the cold grey waters?” (32) In the midst of those strong precursors, the poet settles “To swim alongside them, / struggling – / even for a moment” (32). The struggle for momentary immortality remains one of the goals of Forgetting the Holocaust. Similarly, “The Dock Spider” focuses on insects, while “On a Winter Walk” invokes Eliot and Frost before turning to the Holocaust.

“Working Life” contains a number of poems devoted to the medical profession, demonstrating that the poet is both an insider and an outsider. “S.O.A.P.” is the first of several medical poems: “To document the progress of patients / today’s intern uses the format / Subjective, Objective, Assessment, Plan: S.O.A.P.” (44). The poem offers the example of a long-haired, bespectacled man brought in to Emergency at midnight, and concludes that the medical system, for all it pretends to know, is far from omniscient. Similarly, “Cancer of the Vulva” and “The Adjudicator of Pain” paint cynical pictures of medicine’s limitations, while “Trans-rectal Ultrasound of the Prostate (TRUS) – with Biopsy” exposes not only the medical profession and procedure, but also the poet’s personal anatomy.

“Working Life” also explores the work of artists such as Betty Goodwin and Cindy Sherman. “Mylar” opens with: “Betty, what images you keep adding, / layer by diaphanous layer,” (56) then shifts to the aesthetics of Cindy Sherman and Diane Arbus before posing the rhetorical question: “. . . The surface / is never enough, is it? Even / for photographers”(56). Another poem, “The Jewish Problem,” concludes with “to the depths”(60), and therein lies a clue to Charach’s poetics between surface and depths. Each poem probes and moves from the surface, layer by layer, toward depths – the Orphic experience in search of Eurydice and Persephone. As a poet, Charach works between surface and depth; as a psychiatrist, he works like an x-ray of the psyche and soul, traversing the space between his own ego and other characters.

The final section, “Holy Land,” complements the first, “Diaspora,” with both sections overlapping and intersecting at various points. Yet, only two poems in this final section are set in Israel: “Seeking Jacques in Caesarea” and “I’m Drawn to the Feltzners.” Stanzas begin in the first-person singular to establish an “I-Thou” relationship with the subject: “I keep returning to Jacques in Caesarea,” “I am seeking Jacques in Caesarea,” and “I identify a faint French lilt to his voice” (90). A survivor of Auschwitz, Jacques has remade himself near the wind-swept jetty at Caesarea. From the “soft sweep of broken sand” (91) at Caesarea, Charach expands his historic scope, “where Romans declared order before mapping / their gentile empire by marching across it back home” (91). Where the Roman Empire and Hippodrome have disappeared, Jacques remakes himself and succeeds in the sweeping words of the poem.

Dov Feltzner is Israeli, his wife Daouda, Palestinian, “both as secular as an all-you-can-eat buffet” (92). This all-inclusiveness would run afoul of such Establishment writers as Cynthia Ozick, who has been critical of “alleg samee” philosophies within Judaism, arguing instead that for the
shofar or ram’s horn to sound, it must originate from the narrow end of particularism before ending in universalism. Charach’s leftist polemics has its appeal, nonetheless: the generous Feltzners would give you the shoes off their feet, Dov presents the poet’s daughter with two legs of lamb from his restaurant for her Holocaust assignment, and they always hope for peace. Husband and wife embrace each other as if “the two of them could re-shape the world” (92). Charach’s pacifist idealism seeks to re-shape a hostile reality: the pen is mightier than the sword, the epiphany more lasting than the punch line – in the best of all possible worlds. Forgetting the Holocaust reminds us of the pitfalls of too much or too little memory: Charach’s memorable characters and moral vision counter amnesia. ✠

Michael Greenstein has taught at several universities in Canada and abroad. He is the author of Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature and the editor of Contemporary Jewish writing in Canada: An Anthology.

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