

Quién no estaría de acuerdo con la idea de que mirar las noticias es un acto de “sodomismo”. Basta con consultar casi cualquier periódico, noticiero o revista de opinión para que nos desborde una cantidad de información fatídica: calentamiento global, hambrunas, pobreza, violencia, guerras, desplazamientos masivos a nivel local y global; y la lista de desastres continúa. Miramos la pantalla y le preguntamos con desespero: “¿cuándo va a acabar todo esto?”. Pero ella, impasible, nos devuelve un silencio que parece decirnos: “todavía no; tal vez mañana”. Nos acostumbramos a este juego y asumimos que “el mundo es así”, que “las cosas continuarán de esta forma”. Somos como aquel cura —podría reemplazarse por un pastor o un rabino— que cayó desde un décimo quinto piso y, mientras caía, en cada nivel repetía: “hasta el momento, ¡todo va bien!”. Sin embargo, como bien lo recuerda Kassovitz, en su película *El odio*, “lo que realmente importa no es la caída, sino el aterrizaje”. Los textos que componen este volumen muestran casos concretos en los que, en diferentes contextos históricos, se ha usado el humor para romper esa inercia que parece conducirnos al desastre. El lector podrá ver cómo, a través de lo cómico, se trasgreden las categorías sociales y las relaciones de poder; de qué manera la sátira o el humor negro pueden ayudar a afrontar situaciones extremas, como la represión, el fascismo o el genocidio; pero también tendrá la oportunidad de indagar de qué forma el humor político es una pieza clave en la construcción de la subjetividad. Así, es una invitación a pensar el acto humorístico como una acción transformadora, que permite tomar distancia de la realidad y reírnos de ella; pero es desde ese mismo lugar que encontramos nuevas formas de entenderla, de interpretarla, aunque la mayor parte del tiempo sintamos que lo único que podemos hacer es repetir con Beckett: *When you're in the shit up to your neck, there's nothing left to do but sing.*



Humor

Humor y política: una perspectiva transcultural

Jacqueline Benavides Delgado / Editora

# Humor y política: una perspectiva transcultural

**Humour and Politics:  
A Transcultural Perspective**

Jacqueline Benavides Delgado  
Editora



Humor y política:  
Una perspectiva transcultural

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(Editora)



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# 11 Laughing Away the Pain: Holocaust Humor in Israeli Popular Culture

Reírse del dolor: el humor del Holocausto en la cultura popular israelí

Liat Steir-Livny

## Abstract

For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous perspective. The perception was that a humorous approach to the Holocaust might threaten the sanctity of its memory, or evoke feelings of disrespect towards the subject, and hurt the survivors' feelings. Official agents of Holocaust memory continue to use this approach, but from the 1990s a new unofficial path of memory began taking shape in tandem with it. It is an alternative and subversive path that seeks to remember - but differently. Texts that combine the Holocaust with humor are a major aspect of this new memory. This chapter will explore the change in Holocaust commemoration and will analyze examples of Holocaust humor in Hebrew. It will focus on humorous texts that discuss the way second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors deal with the transgenerational transfer of the trauma, critique Israeli memory agents of the Holocaust, turn against the instrumentalization and the politicization of the Holocaust, and dismantle Hitler's image. The texts will be analyzed through theories of humor and post-trauma. Contrary to perceptions that Holocaust humor disrespects the Holocaust and its survivors, this chapter will maintain that since Israel is a unique sphere of intense Holocaust awareness, the vast majority of the Holocaust humorous texts in Hebrew do not express a scornful retreat from the trauma, but reflect major functions of humor: a defense mechanism; a vent for frustration; and a mechanism for social cohesion. The chapter will claim that these functions, in fact, prove the great extent to which the Holocaust is a living part of the identity of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors.

**Keywords:** Holocaust Humor, Post-trauma, Israeli culture, Israeli collective memory

## Resumen

Durante muchos años, la cultura israelí rehuyó afrontar el Holocausto desde una perspectiva humorística. La percepción era que un enfoque humorístico del Holocausto podía amenazar la santidad de su memoria o provocar sentimientos de irrespeto hacia el sujeto y herir los sentimientos de los sobrevivientes. Los agentes oficiales de la memoria del Holocausto siguen utilizando este enfoque, pero, a partir de la década de 1990, un nuevo camino no oficial de la memoria comenzó a tomar forma junto con él. Es un camino alternativo y subversivo que busca recordar, pero de manera diferente. Los textos que combinan el Holocausto con el humor son un aspecto importante de esta nueva memoria. En este capítulo se explorará el cambio en la conmemoración del Holocausto y se analizarán ejemplos de humor del Holocausto en hebreo. Se enfocará en textos humorísticos que discuten la forma en que los sobrevivientes del Holocausto de segunda y tercera generación lidian con la transferencia transgeneracional del trauma, critican a los agentes israelíes de la memoria del Holocausto, se oponen a la instrumentalización y la politización del Holocausto y desmantelan la imagen de Hitler. Los textos se analizarán a través de teorías de humor y posttrauma. Contrario a las percepciones de que el humor del Holocausto irrespeto el Holocausto y a sus sobrevivientes, en este capítulo se sostendrá que, dado que Israel es una esfera única de intensa conciencia del Holocausto, la gran mayoría de los textos humorísticos del Holocausto en hebreo no expresan un retiro desdenoso del



trauma, sino que reflejan las principales funciones del humor: un mecanismo de defensa, una descarga para la frustración y un mecanismo para la cohesión social. En el capítulo se afirmará que estas funciones, de hecho, demuestran la gran medida en que el Holocausto es una parte viva de la identidad de los sobrevivientes del Holocausto de segunda y tercera generación.

**Palabras clave:** humor del Holocausto, postrauma, cultura israelí, memoria colectiva israelí

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## Introduction: Israel as a post-traumatic society

The Holocaust was and remains a central trauma in Israel's national consciousness. The memory of the trauma does not fade over the years; on the contrary, Holocaust representations and the public discourse regarding the Holocaust have only grown stronger in recent decades. Studies have shown that Holocaust memory has a very powerful presence, does not have just a one-generational impact, and is a cross-generational defining trait of the Jewish population in Israel. Researchers claim that the Israeli media, educational and cultural fields, and public discourse frame the Holocaust as a current, ongoing local trauma rather than an event that ended decades ago in another place (Steir-Livny, 2014; Meyers, Neiger and Zandberg, 2014).

Jewish Israelis learn about the Holocaust in the Israeli educational system from kindergarten. From a very young age, they take part in commemoration ceremonies on Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day and, in high school, many travel to the concentration camps in Poland on an educational tour organized by high schools or youth movements. Surveys in Israel reveal that there is a massive use in Holocaust rhetoric by politicians, journalists and educators (Segev, 1991; Bar-Tal, 2007; Chaitin, 2007). Among the Jewish-Israeli population in general, since the 1940s, the Holocaust has been assimilated as a central event, and young Jewish Israelis perceive the Holocaust as the historical event that has had the greatest impact on them and their future, even more than the founding of the State (Porat, 2011, Steir-Livny, 2014). Additional research has shown that the knowledge that the second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors in Israel have about the Holocaust, and the way the Holocaust has shaped their identity is similar to those Israelis of the same age who are not biological offspring of Holocaust survivors. This phenomenon is different from other places in the world, in which there is a huge gap in knowledge and perception of the Holocaust between biological offspring of Holocaust survivors and other Jewish people their age (Solomon and Chaitin, 2007).

Moreover, in Israeli collective memory, the trauma of the Holocaust is not focused solely on events that occurred in the past. The politicization of the Holocaust has caused the trauma of the Holocaust to be integrated with the Israeli-Arab conflict. The sensitive relationships between Israel and the Arab nations, the decades-long Israeli-Arab conflict, the threat of annihilation, the continuing terrorist attacks and *intifadas* —civil uprising against the Israeli government in the

Occupied Territories— have all created an atmosphere of constant vigilance and ongoing anxiety (Evron, 2011; Bar-Tal, 2007).

### *Collective Trauma and Intergenerational transfer of trauma*

Examining how groups confront their collective traumas, Dominic LaCapra (2000) claims that the danger inherent in the disintegration of distinctions between different times and the merging of the traumatic past with the present is relevant not only for those who experienced the trauma themselves but also for groups and societies that are linked to those who underwent the trauma. Both groups and societies can become trapped in a situation that commingles past and present and reconstructs the trauma, or certain aspects of it, in different ways. Such post-traumatic symptoms can affect the groups' behavior in societal and political spheres.

Following Freud, LaCapra distinguishes two forms of collective memory of the Holocaust. The first is *acting out*: the past is not construed as a remote event that is long gone or as a distant memory and internalized, but is reborn and experienced as if integral to present-day social and cultural life. The second form is *working through*: clear boundaries are maintained between past and present, and there is an awareness of the differences between “then” and “now.” There is less identification with the assimilation of the traumatic period. While there is also a return to the past in *working through*, it is accompanied by conscious control of the past, a critical distance from it, and a gaze at it from a distant perspective. The way Holocaust memory was shaped in Israel provides evidence for Israeli society being post-traumatic and existing in the condition of *acting out* (Goldberg 2000).

Another term that can be used to describe Holocaust memory of the Jewish Israelis is *Secondary Traumatic Stress*: indirect exposure to the trauma which affects those who were not involved in the traumatic events. Secondary Traumatic Stress can be found in friends and relatives of the traumatized persons as well as in wider circles. Research claims that indirect exposure to a trauma through an intense cultural and media debate —television, radio, journalism, internet, etc.— can affect people who were not involved, and cause stress and anxiety. Post-traumatic stress syndrome symptoms, such as stress and anxiety, can appear in people who suffer from *Secondary Traumatic Stress*, albeit less intensely (Figley, 1995).

There are hundreds of articles discussing the question of intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust trauma, from Holocaust survivors to their children and

grandchildren. Scholars dispute over the question whether the biological offspring of Holocaust survivors have common characteristics of unique mental health problems, unifying them as a group (for example: Solomon and Chaitin, 2007).

Along with the many studies dealing with the questions of intergenerational transference of trauma to children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, other studies were carried out that expanded the definition of the second generation and the third generation beyond the biological issue. Some claim that, in a broad sense, the terms include all those who are alive after the Holocaust. Others expand on the definition within the borders of the Jewish nation: the terms can define people who are not biological offspring of Holocaust survivors but express cognitive and emotional identification with the descendants of Holocaust survivors, arising out of a sense of a shared destiny. Others claim that the second generation and third generation are cultural terms, especially in Israel, where Holocaust awareness is intensive and comprehensive, much more than other places in the world (Milner, 2003). Therefore, in Israel, the terms “second-generation Holocaust survivors” and “third-generation Holocaust survivors” refer not only to the offspring of Holocaust survivors, but can be perceived as cultural terms, representing the Jewish Israelis who were born in and after 1945 in Israel (second generation) and in the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s (third generation), and grew up in an environment that is full of Holocaust awareness, anxiety and stress.

### *Black humor and self-deprecating humor as defense mechanisms*

One way of dealing with post-traumatic symptoms is humor, which can help deal with difficult situations, and avoid or reduce emotional suffering and grief. Freud (1978, 1990, 2002) saw humor as a pivotal defense mechanism. He believed that when people use humor in situations that provoke their fear and anxiety, they gain a new perspective on the situation that helps them avoid experiencing negative emotions.

Later studies address humor as a defense mechanism that helps individuals alleviate stress, cope with negative feelings and tough situations, mitigate suffering, dissipate feelings of anxiety—at least for a certain time—and grant them some sense of power and control in situations of feeling helpless. Humor can help those coping with unpleasant memories and aid trauma victims in reducing their tension and anxiety. It also helps people maintain emotional distance from a trauma, creating a “comfort zone” for the traumatized person (Boskin and Dorinson, 1985; Lewis, 1993; Ziv, 1998; Epstein, 2002; Greenspoon, 2011).

As a defense mechanism, humor has two aspects: self-deprecation humor and black humor. The therapeutic importance of black humor and self-deprecation humor for traumatized individuals has frequently been studied, in a wide range of contexts—among victims of abuse, crime, disasters, and more—and particularly in the context of Jewish humor. Black humor has been presented as an effective tool for an oppressed minority to withstand attacks by their oppressors. In the Jewish context, it constitutes the defense mechanism of an entire people (Ziv, 1996; Berger and Berger, 2011; Davies, 1991; Wisse, 2013; Sover, 2015).

Researchers who engaged with Holocaust humor in the ghettos and concentration camps (for example, Lipman, 1993, Cohen, 1994, Kaplan, 2003, Levin, 2004, Ostrower, 2009) see Holocaust humor as an important survival mechanism, and describe humor as one of the higher and most efficient psychological mechanisms in the hierarchy of defense mechanisms. In the horrifying conditions of the ghettos and concentration camps, laughter was a spiritual rebellion against reality. Their works reinforce the assertion that when dealing with trauma, humor is no less effective and perhaps, for some, even more so than grief-filled discussions because, as opposed to tragedy, humor rejects the existing, the given, and refuses to affirm it.

### *The Development of Holocaust humor in Israel*

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, very few films were produced in the Western world that dared touch on the theme in a humorous manner. The worldwide debate about combining the Holocaust with humor first began in the 1980s. Disagreements on the subject broke out over Art Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), and *Maus: Here My Troubles Began* (1991) in which Spiegelman rendered his Polish-born father's biography in the Second World War into a world of cats versus mice. The novel achieved tremendous success, and Spiegelman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in a Special Citation for Letters (Huyssen 2001). From then on, the combination of the Holocaust with humor was discussed more and more freely in Western research and popular culture (Kaplan 2003; Morreall 2011; Lipman 2008). The film *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni 1997) spearheaded the way towards a deeper debate on the theme (Niv 2000; Zand 2002; Bartov 2008). In the last decades, artists in the Western world have dismantled the sanctity of the theme, and have introduced Holocaust memory into mundane comic situations, in a way aimed at protesting against the untouchable nature of the theme,

by secularizing it in movies, stand-up appearances, TV sitcoms, YouTube videos, and more (Steir-Livny 2014).

In Israel the development was similar but slower. From the aftermath of World War II until the 1990s, Holocaust humor was almost a taboo in Israel. The prevalent position was that the combination of humor and the Holocaust disparages the Holocaust's status and decreases the magnitude of the trauma and suffering.

As of the 1980s, second-generation Holocaust survivors joined the circles of art and creation in Israel. They brought to the forefront the stories of their parents and their own experiences as second-generation Holocaust survivors in a variety of cultural arenas: literature, cinema, poetry, theater, and other arts (Ofer, 2013, Steir-Livny, 2014). Ways for jointly featuring humor and the Holocaust were first broached in Israel from the 1990s. The change is credited mainly to members of the second- and third- generation Holocaust survivors and their different needs in commemoration, and the different ways they deal with the trauma.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the publishing of comprehensive books in Israel, dealing with the importance of humor for Jews under the Nazi regime (Cohen, 1994; Levin, 2004; Ostrower, 2009). From the 1990s, Holocaust humor can be found in films, theatre, TV sitcoms and satire, stand-up appearances, alternative ceremonies, internet sites, etc. (Gertz, 2004; Steir-Livny, 2009; Ofer, 2013; Ne'eman Arad, 2013).

Many times, public debate as well as academic debate in the Western world regarding Holocaust humor, satire or parody claim that Holocaust humor is part of a dangerous historical, social and cultural process that normalizes Nazism and Hitler (for example, Rosenfeld, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2015). In Israel too, Holocaust humor often provokes anger and is considered as cheapening the trauma and degrading the pain of the survivors. Satirists who use Holocaust humor frequently receive complaints and are subjected to invectives because of what is considered, by many, an inappropriate approach to the memorialization of the Holocaust (for examples see, Steir-Livny, 2014).

As opposed to these notions, this chapter claims that even if the perception of Holocaust humor as dangerous is an arguable point when dealing with Holocaust remembrance in the Western world, since Israel is a unique sphere of Holocaust awareness, Holocaust humor in Hebrew has particular legitimate functions. It serves as an important defense mechanism for the young generation who grew up and live in a society soaked in Holocaust awareness. Holocaust humor also helps them criticize Holocaust collective memory agents, who insist on blending the traumatic past with the present. Furthermore, Holocaust humor

assists to create social cohesion among the groups who oppose the way Israeli collective memory agents use the memory of the Holocaust. Israeli humor dealing with the Holocaust should not be perceived as a disturbing process that could damage Holocaust memory, but rather as a healthy development. It is an attempt of the young generations to move from acting out to working through.

### **Discussion: Holocaust Humor in Israeli popular culture**

This short chapter cannot address all the humoristic, satiric and parodic texts that have appeared in Hebrew since the 1990s. Therefore, the chapter will present examples of this phenomenon that emphasize the various ways Holocaust humor is being used. The examples show how the young generations use humor in order to deal with the transgenerational transfer of the trauma, fight collective memory agents who insist on re-living the trauma in the present, ridicule the instrumentalization and the politicization of the Holocaust, and dismantle Hitler's image.

#### *Dealing with the transgenerational trauma through humor*

From the 1990s, biological second-generation Holocaust survivors and, later on, third-generation Holocaust survivors started to express the way they deal with the transgenerational transfer of the trauma through serious texts and also through humor. The different texts express the transgenerational transfer of the trauma from the Holocaust survivors to their offspring and the offspring's attempts to use humor as defense mechanism.

For example, The film *Pizza in Auschwitz* [*Pizza beAuschwitz*] (Moshe Zimerman, 2008), displays the use of black humor as a cross-generational defense mechanism, which is used both by the first generation of survivors and the second-generation Holocaust survivors. The film follows Holocaust survivor, Danny Chanoch, and his two children, Shraga and Miri, during a six-day visit to Poland. The film reveals how Danny and Miri use black humor to cope with the horrors of the past. Danny, who states that he stopped crying as a child in Birkenau, describes himself as having a BA (Bachelor of Auschwitz) degree, tells everyone he had a private doctor (Mengele), and refers to the days surrounding the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day as the *high season*. "I've spoken to Birkenau" he tells Zimerman, the director, at the airport, "the bunks are orthopedic. We can sleep there."

Miri, his daughter, who narrates the film in her voice-over, deals with the transgenerational transmission of the trauma in the same way. She does not hesitate to voice her discontent with the journey and the manner in which it is proceeding. She complains: “I’m trapped in a week-long reality show about the Holocaust.” During the long drives, she declares that the family has decided to open a new baguette café which is to be called “Baghetto” —meaning, “in the Ghetto” and is a play on words in Hebrew—, and she and Danny explain, chuckling, the family’s version of the alphabet game: “A is Auschwitz, B is Birkenau, C is for gas chambers, D for Dachau.” The film suggests that Miri’s intensive use of black humor is her way of preventing herself from wallowing in her father’s trauma, which she says has been part of their lives since childhood and throughout their maturation because of their father’s stories.

*Pizza in Auschwitz* reveals just how fragile this defense mechanism is: while in Auschwitz, visiting the barracks in which Danny was a prisoner, and after having heard difficult stories about his life there, Miri breaks into a harsh, piercing monologue, in which she demands, screaming, that they leave the place, as she can no longer handle the amounts of horrors “injected straight into the vein” throughout the trip and throughout their lifetime in general.

Like most documentaries of that time, *Pizza in Auschwitz* does not portray a process of redemption. At the end of the film, the relationship between Danny and his children is similar to its first state: black humor mixed with a great deal of sarcasm, and pain. “We really don’t get you and we will never get you,” states Miri. The memories of the Holocaust will not fade, and will continue to haunt the family that will continue to use humor as a defense mechanism.

The biological offspring of Holocaust survivors are not the only ones who refer in a humoristic way to the transgenerational transfer of the trauma. In recent years, second and third generation culturally have also been expressing through black humor, the influence of the Holocaust on their identity. For example, the skit called *The Berlin Museum [Museon Berlin]* (2008) by the comedy group *Tross Brothers* focuses on a young Israeli woman visiting a museum in Berlin. The explanations are given by the German museum guide Franz, who is very kind to her, but she understands his innocent explanations as being submerged in Nazism. So, when he says “Hi,” the woman hears “Heil”; when he points to a painting which is hung up high on the wall, she sees his hand gesture as the Nazi salute; when he explains abstract paintings, he briefly blurts out, as if barking, expressions such as “the supreme race”; he requests her to leave her camera at the entrance, “next to the pile

of glasses and shoes.” The Israeli woman feels very uncomfortable around him. “I have a problem,” she says. “Every problem has a solution. A final solution,” he replies. In order to calm her down, he promises to tell her a knock knock joke – “Knock knock,” he starts, “Who’s there?” she replies, “The Gestapo!” he shrieks. She turns out to be a Mossad agent and conducts a search on him — “What are you searching for?” “Antisemitism!”—. She eventually finds a mobile phone, “Third generation,” he exclaims. This softens her, “I’m third generation too,” and the two reconcile on these grounds. Through this skit, third-generation survivors deal with the way in which the Holocaust has been engraved into their identity and, with self-deprecating humor, criticize themselves for being unable to adopt a different outlook on Germany, due to the memory of the Holocaust, regardless if they are biological offspring of Holocaust survivors. The Holocaust dominates their perspective in every aspect, maintaining their apprehension toward German figures of authority, and preventing them from normalizing their relationship with Germany. The skit criticizes the manner in which the memory of the Holocaust has been forced into the consciousness of young generations, not allowing for a new, different outlook on Germans and Germany. The past blends in with the present and the results of this are acted out in every aspect of daily life. Black humor and self-deprecating humor are defense mechanisms in order to cope with this integration, try to create a mental wall between the past and present, and to deal with the memories of the atrocities.

Artists of recent decades not only reflect, through self-deprecating humor, the manner in which the Holocaust is engraved into their persona, but also make use of those insights to fight for their right to use humor as a defense mechanism. In the reflexive skit, *Crusader Sketch-Writers (Kotvei Maarchonim Zalbanim)* (2012), three crusaders meet in order to discuss “the plague.” They are in a distant field, a remote fortress is seen in the background. “You cannot do such things,” the leader reprimands the other two. His two friends vehemently reply, “No, no, it’s not like we’re laughing at the plague, we’re not saying it’s a good thing or that it didn’t happen; on the contrary, we’re condemning society’s stereotypical and simplistic attitude toward the plague.” The leader refuses to accept their views, pointing at the remote fortress: “Do you know how many people in the fortress lost their relatives in the plague?” he reproachfully asks the two, “Entire families!” His subordinates are not satisfied with his argument. “I would like to tell you,” says one of them, “that I actually do know a lot of people who are second-generation plague survivors, and they are coping with the disease through humor.” “But I don’t

understand what you're trying to say," the leader becomes angry, "That's open to interpretation," they reply. "Had we wanted to dictate a message, we would have written it on a piece of paper." They decide to resolve the problematic situation with a compromise: instead of writing a skit on the plague, they are to write an historical skit which will be a parable on the plague, "say about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in Pompeii."

In this skit, the third generation protests the way the pathos ridden canonic memory is the mainstream (the fortress) while those seeking to address the trauma with humor are marginalized, sent outside the borders of the fortress, even though it is a basic tool for struggling with trauma. The young writers wish to cross over the consensus, which is not willing to accept a humorous discussion of the Holocaust, forcing them into the arms of the parable, against their will. The skit mirrors the current debate on the commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel, and the attempts made by the second and third generations to cope with the postmemories which shaped their identity (Hirsch, 1996) through humor, while giving this alternative form of remembrance a legitimate place inside the consensus, and opening Israeli society to another way of dealing with the trauma.

### *The humoristic protest against the instrumentalization of the Holocaust*

Freud (1928) argued that in the same way that dreams compensate for unresolved affective states which occurred in reality, and treats them or repairs them, jokes are also a tool through which people can touch issues around which they are blocked or inhibited, such as sexuality and aggression. The joke, claims Freud, is a tool which can bypass the censor, a kind of manmade mask, which can circumvent the prohibitions and touch the hot potato without getting burned. The joke is like a defensive shield, allowing people to manifest their aggressive impulses without being criticized or punished for them by society. Since Western society critiques physical aggressiveness, people invented another way to release the aggression: through humor. This conversion is a result of education, cultural developments and cultural prohibitions.

Later studies also claim that aggression is one of the instinctive impulses of humankind, but most societies know that allowing the expression of aggression might lead to destruction. Therefore, the society employs a set of rules prohibiting manifestations of aggression. At the same time, most societies know that it is

advisable to find methods to express the impulse of aggression. Thus, the society designs its own mechanisms to unleash aggression, so-called “pressure relief valves” (Ziv, 1996). Humor is a tool for venting aggressions in a way that does not threaten the structure of social relations. For a short while, humor can make feelings of anger, depression and anxiety disappear (Oring, 2003; Sover, 2009; Ostrower, 2009).

Satiric discourse usually combines three major functions of humor and carries them out simultaneously: the aggressive function and the intellectual function that give the satirists a feeling of (temporary) freedom and superiority, and a social function that helps reinforce intra- and inter-group bounds, and strengthen the cohesiveness of interpersonal relationships—which is very important especially for opposition groups— (Simpon, 2003).

Holocaust satire as a response to frustration regarding the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory in Israel can be found in the last three decades in many cultural fields. Television, which is a dominant arena in the battle over Holocaust memory between different groups in Israel (Yuran, 2001) is one of them. Television’s status as a guardian of the hegemony, on the one hand, and as a presenter of certain subversive content, on the other, becomes more complex where humorous skits are concerned, due to humor’s polysemic nature and the multiple meanings it intrinsically possesses. With the help of humor, the hegemony can preserve the narrative it seeks to promote, yet it has the subversive potential to present positions contradicting the hegemonic ones, and to deconstruct those positions (Meyer, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Shifman, 2008). On the one hand, humorous skits are generally perceived as a tool for representing superficial, reproduced stereotypes, and they strengthen hegemonic control. Yet, on the other, the comic dimension may leave room for criticism by creating a carnivalesque situation, which enables a temporary release from inflexible hierarchies: by building antithetical frameworks of context between the possible and the unfeasible; by generating conflicts between different meanings; or by exaggerating and vulgarizing stereotypes to the point where they are diminished or shattered (Brook, 2001; Shifman, 2008; Lubin, 2006).

Diverging from the argument that satirical skits addressing the Holocaust disrespect the Holocaust and its survivors, or trivialize the Holocaust and Nazism, this chapter maintains that they instead articulate the powerful position the Holocaust holds as a constituting event in the consciousness and identity of second and third generation Holocaust survivors in Israel. The satirists do not diminish the Holocaust. The bulk of the skits do not engage at all with the Holocaust, but

rather with its commemoration in Israel. Satire is used as a rhetorical strategy for venting frustration, and improving society by criticizing the instrumentalization of the Holocaust. Many times, the satirists use intellectual humor in order to ridicule the carriers of these phenomena and feel superior even for few minutes. By doing so, they reveal a new intellectual, ideological, and an aesthetic point of view on the collective memory of the cataclysm.

*The Chamber Quintet* (*Hahamishia Hakamerit*; Matar Productions, Channel 2-Tela'ad, Channel 1, 1993-1997) was the first Israeli TV show that dared to address the Holocaust satirically. The sixty-nine episodes were broadcast throughout the 1990s on Channels 1 and 2 and cable stations over the course of five seasons. *The Chamber Quintet* became a touchstone for Israeli culture, and its subject matter can be seen as signifiers of the changes and new trajectories of the Israeli collective memory regarding various issues, including that of the Holocaust.

A renowned skit by *the Chamber Quintet*, "Feldermaus at the Olympic" is set in Stuttgart, Germany, during the Olympic Games. Two Jewish-Israeli wheeler-dealers have managed to enter the area alongside the running track and, in broken English spiked with Hebrew and Yiddish, they demand that the starter, who is poised with his starting pistol, give the Israeli runner an advantage over the other athletes to reduce the "historic injustice" and "to reduce the humiliation." The athlete, Zion Cohen, is the antithesis of the Zionist model of "muscular Judaism": short and scrawny, he has "legs like ice-cream sticks." Since the Israeli runner seems incapable of competing with the other participants (non-Jews) through physical strength, the wheeler-dealers operate in the tradition of the Jewish *schnorrer* (freeloader), which is here accompanied by the quintessentially Israeli quality of *chutzpah* (cheekiness). They burst onto the running track to demand benefits for the Israeli runner, not as a favor but because of the rights accruing to the Israeli as a result of the historic injustice of the Holocaust. Ultimately, they manage to convince the starter to do their bidding.

The skit emphasizes Israeli instrumentalization of Holocaust commemoration to gain advantage. It is significant for its critique of the exploitation of Jewish suffering to achieve gains in the international sphere. Uzi Weil, a screenwriter for *the Chamber Quintet*, asserts that such manipulations of the Holocaust have intensified and swollen into unpleasant and disproportional dimensions: "Someone says 'Holocaust' and everyone shuts up." He believes the Holocaust has become a mechanism for forcing people's consciousness to stand at attention whenever the word is spoken; he links this phenomenon to that of the "Holocaust industry,"

which includes the *de rigueur* school journeys to Poland, the selling of right-wing politics in the guise of sensitivity to the Holocaust, and so on. Weil says that using humor to highlight the Holocaust's instrumentalization is a way to counter hypocrisy, and to close the gap between people's words and their genuine emotions (Shifman, 2008). Confronting the pathos-ridden, exploitation of the Holocaust, the satirists of the "Feldermaus at the Olympics" skit hold up a mirror to emphasize, through satire, how ridiculous and wrong it is.

### *Satirizing the Politicization of the Holocaust*

In Jewish-Israeli culture, the complex story of the Arab- Jewish-Israeli dispute that accompanied Zionist settlement in Israel as early as the late nineteenth century was often phrased simplistically after the Holocaust. From the late 1940s until the late 1970s, when the left-wing ruled in Israel, a distinct parallel between Arabs and Nazis was discernible in Israeli culture. Wars against Arab nations were termed wars to prevent a "second Holocaust" that could strike Israel at any moment, and Arab leaders were described as Nazi successors. Demonizing the Arabs and forging links between past and present helped unite the ranks in Israel, and create immediate empathy for Zionism in the Western world. If, in the past, the Allied forces fought the Nazis, today it became their duty to subjugate the Arabs (Zuckermann, 1993; Zertal, 1993; Bar-Tal, 2007; Evron, 2011).

In 1977, the right-wing Likud party ascended to power for the first time. Since then, with the exception of a few years, a right-wing government has been in power in Israel. As right-wing attitudes spread throughout the Israeli public and new militant groups have sprung up from the nationalist religious right, the left lost its ability to influence the political establishment. Instead, it rose to dominance in the country's intellectual life, art, literature, and academia. The Lebanon War in June 1982, the start of the first *intifada* (1987), the second *intifada* (2000), the second Lebanon war (2006), the military operations in Gaza, and the new studies of the post-colonial and post-Zionist researchers from the 1980s onward who opposed the Zionist narrative regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict further entrenched this critical tendency. Culture became the mouthpiece of the disappointed left-wing and radical left-wing circles who used it to voice their critique over Israel's condition (Gertz, 1994, Steir-Livny, 2014).

From the late 1970s on, as part of a narrative that seeks to reevaluate the way in which the collective memory of the Holocaust was endowed to the Israeli

public, left-wing scholars and intellectuals claim that Holocaust memory was and is politically manipulated in order to present Israel as an eternal victim. This victimization causes constant fear and paranoia, and allegedly was and is used in order to justify violent policies against the Arabs in Israel and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories as well as blocking any opportunity for a peace treaty with the Palestinians. (Elkana, 1988; Bar-Tal, 2007; Evron, 2011 Zuckermann, 1993; Zertal, 1993; Kimmerling, 2006).

Left-wingers fight this victimization in serious texts and in satire. Humor, in a way, is a preservative of social interaction: it promotes social processes, such as increasing group cohesion, relieving stress within the group and creating a positive atmosphere. It boosts the group's morale and strengthens the bonds between its members, helps obtain consensus within the group, and minimizes the distance between its members. Humor also contributes to social cohesion by creating a common language, a milieu which emphasizes the group's uniqueness. In addition, aggressive humor mocking other groups emphasizes the superiority of the group using it (Ziv, 1996). In every social group—family, neighbors, classmates, traveling partners and colleagues—there is a channel of humor in which each member of the group participates. When the individual laughs along with the group, it means that he/she agrees with the group's state of mind and manner of thought. While laughing, the individual is reinforced by the laughter of the other members, and the individual's own laughter reinforces the other members of the group (Sover, 2009).

Since the 1990s, in television satire, much of it written by members of the political left-wing, the creators critique the right-wing, and its attempts to relive the Holocaust in the present in order to create constant fear and anxiety that will never enable a dialog between Jewish-Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians. As the right-wing tries to widen the gap between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, and Jews and Muslims, left-wingers use Holocaust satire in order to protest against this dichotomy, and unveil its manipulation. The skits are part of a wider political protest, a way of venting frustration, and a type of cultural rebellion which tries to influence and change public opinion. In the political satire and parody of the left-wing, humor is used not only to vent frustration but also to create social cohesion. The satire gives the defeated left-wing a sense of power. Humor as a social cohesion helps people who belong to the political opposition to feel encouraged and to be part of a larger group, and not alone against the system. The satire enables them, in addition to venting frustration and criticizing the

politicization, to also create social cohesion between left-wingers who have been marginalized in Israeli society.

A dominant vilified politician in the skits that satirize the politicization of the Holocaust is Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. This emphasis is the result of Netanyahu's constant use of the Holocaust when he discusses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Jewish-Muslim conflict. In the past decade, he has stressed many times the parallels between Arabs, Palestinians, Muslims and Nazis, and the nuclear threats of Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with Hitler's goal of exterminating the Jewish people. Netanyahu often promotes the impression that Iran would be responsible for a second Holocaust and left-wing Israelis often ridicule his attempts to conjure up atavistic fears.

For example, *Purim* is a Jewish holiday. Jews celebrate the story of Haman, the wicked, who lived in ancient Persia (nowadays – Iran), worked for the king Ahasuerus—the ancient Persian Ruler—and plotted to kill all the Jews. The Jews eventually succeeded to persuade the king not to take a part in his plan, and the evil Haman and his sons were hanged. In *Purim* the Jews tell the story of *Megilat Esther*, a scroll of the biblical Book of Esther, which relates how the ancient Persians had set out to exterminate the Jews and how their plans were ultimately foiled. During the 2012 *Purim* holiday, Netanyahu held a series of meetings with President Barack Obama in the United States to discuss, among other things, the nuclear threat from Iran and whether Iran should be preemptively attacked. Netanyahu found it appropriate to bring Obama a gift: a *Megilat Esther*. In his speech to Obama, Netanyahu also produced an historical document, dating from World War II, in which Jewish-American representatives requested that the American government bomb Auschwitz. Netanyahu hinted that this time the Jewish-Israelis would not wait for a US refusal of such a request but would handle matters themselves.

Israeli satirists responded immediately. For example, a skit of *It's a Wonderful Country* (*Eretz Nehederet*; Keshet Productions, Channel 2-Keshet, 2003-present) television satire was aired on *Purim*. The skit depicted employees at a nuclear reactor in Iran in the midst of marking "Remembrance Day for Shushan and Heroism" (Shushan was the capital city of ancient Persia). In this skit, the ceremonial hallmarks of Israel's *Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day* (*Yom ha'Zikaron la'Shoa vela'Gvura*) are reproduced and turned upside down: in Israel's first decades, Holocaust survivors were sometimes criticized for having gone like "sheep to the slaughter" during the Holocaust. But here, the master of ceremonies speaks of the downtrodden Persians who, under the rule of Ahasuerus

—the ancient Persian ruler—, went like “sheep to the slaughter.” The phrase, “and these are the names of the fallen,” which is intoned during observances of Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in Israel, is used in the skit in tribute to Haman’s murdered sons. The two-minute siren that is sounded throughout Israel on Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day is here replaced by shaking a type of rattle—a *gragger*, or noisemaker, which is used during the reading of the Book of Esther on Purim—.

As is the case during the Israeli Holocaust memorial ceremonies, soulful vocalists sing with pathos in this imaginary Iran. On Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in Israel, the TV schedule is altered to broadcast programs dealing only with the Holocaust and its memory, and sad, quiet songs are played throughout the day on Israeli radio. In the skit, we learn that the TV program schedule in Iran has also been changed, and the radio plays sad, quiet songs of “good old Iran” while the “Zionists” who in the skit stick to their usual schedules that day are slandered as “Purim-deniers” —a satirical play on the phrase “Holocaust deniers”—. The skit also depicts a well-known phenomenon in Israel: when people find it difficult to stifle their laughter during the two-minute siren. Here, an Iranian reactor employee cannot keep himself from laughing during the ceremony.

Memorial ceremonies are important “memory sites” in the process of constructing a national identity; through them, the main socio-political-ideological perceptions of a group are endorsed (Nora, 1993; Azaryahu, 1995; Ohana & Wistrich, 1996). The ceremonies, with their repetitive narrative, are used to structure the society’s worldview and convince people of the correctness of that worldview. They structure the national memory of events, people, and processes with the aim of uniting the group around collective narratives. To that end, they propose a subjective interpretation of history, emphasizing some themes and sidelining others, to accord with the society’s ideology and the guiding models with which it seeks to shape and define itself (Halbwachs, 1992; Young, 1993; Alexander, 2009).

By deconstructing the behavioral patterns of Holocaust Remembrance Day, the writers showed the ease with which memory can be manipulated. Furthermore, by transferring the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day ceremonial conventions to Iran, the *It’s a Wonderful Country* satirists unveil the way the Holocaust has become a political “master paradigm,” as Tobias Ebbrecht (2010) terms it: a series of well-known, repetitive Holocaust narratives and visuals that have appeared so often in Western popular culture that they have almost become clichés. These

familiar historic images from the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath are continuously dissociated from their original historical background and sources. They migrate into popular culture as emblematic signs to convey contemporary themes. By revealing the Holocaust as a “master paradigm,” the satirists hope to expose Holocaust memory as a political tool and, as such, dismantle its power to frighten the Israelis in regard to present life.

### *Mocking Hitler*

Jokes about Hitler were already told underground during the Nazi regime (Herzog, 2014; Levin, 2004; Ostrower, 2009). Charlie Chaplin portrayed him in a ridiculous manner during WWII in *The Great Dictator* (1940); Mel Brooks made a caricature out of his image in *The Producers* (1968). Since the 1990s, Hitler is mocked in films, literature, sitcoms and stand-up routines in the Western world (Steir-Livny, 2014). In the last two decades, the internet has become a wide cultural field for ridiculing Hitler. Although using Hitler as a humorous object is not a phenomenon that is unique to the internet, the internet has intensified the trend of mocking Hitler and opened it to the masses, allowing them to take part (Rosenfeld, 2015).

Internet memes are a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (Shifman, 2013). One of the most successful video memes is the *Downfall parodies*, also known as *Hitler Rants* or *Hitler Reacts* memes. These memes are a part of a group called “egalitarian memes”: memes that are based on a certain formula or genre. Surfers relate to a certain formula and modify the text (Shifman, 2013).

The phenomenon started in August 2006. A Spanish web surfer took a scene from the dramatic German feature film *Downfall* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004) showing Hitler ranting at his staff as the end of the WWII approaches, and added parodic subtitles in Spanish, as if Hitler was criticizing Microsoft’s flight-simulator. An English speaking surfer uploaded the English subtitles version of this parody, making the joke accessible in English to the many other flight simulator fans on YouTube. From that time on, more and more surfers created parodies, and today there are hundreds of parodies in English, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and many other languages (Ben-Ari, 2014).

The *Hitler Rants* memes are a combination between parody and satire. Parody imitates the style of someone or something else in an amusing way, creates a

distorted imitation of something real in a funny way. Satire reflects the evils of society in a humoristic way in order to change them (Gilbert, 2013). These parodies discuss various subjects: politics, the economy, sports, technology and gaming, culture and every day trivialities, topical events and trivial news or gossip. The parodies in English, that have attracted the highest number of viewers, present Hitler ranting when he gets banned from Xbox live, when he is furious that Usain Bolt Breaks 100m World Record and when he cannot stand the vuvuzela at the 2010 Fifa World Cup. In a world in which memes appear and disappear very quickly, the Hitler Rants memes are an unusual phenomenon: they have been online for more than a decade now, with new videos continuously emerging (Kotler, 2015).

*Hitler Rants* parodies started appearing in Hebrew in 2009, and have become hugely popular. In Israel, the parodies are used to protest against political issues, Israeli wars, military service, religious coercion, cultural phenomena, etc. They also engage in the irritating little details of daily life in Israel. In addition, they are very popular for inside jokes: high school classes make *Hitler Rants* parodies for their end-of-school parties; IDF units create them to mark course graduations; high-tech employees send each other such parodies, highlighting their specific companies' internal work issues, and so on.

The parody that became the greatest success in Israel —according to view numbers on February 2017— was “Hitler is looking for a parking space in Tel Aviv” (more than 222,000 views). In this parody, Hitler rants about the infamous city's traffic problems: he is angry that his colleagues could not find a parking place anywhere in Tel Aviv and had to park in a bikers' parking area. They therefore got a parking ticket of \$65. He throws out of the room those who live in Tel Aviv and have private parking places, or don't have a car, and in a crazed monologue begins complaining about his parking problems. He yells that the parking inspectors are vicious thieves: “They are all one big Mafia! What are they thinking???? They don't have a shred of humanity!! A shred of humanity!! They are worse than the SS!! And all the money goes to the corrupt municipality. They have been renovating the same tile near city hall for seven years!”. When a Nazi officer explains that the Tel Aviv municipality has good intentions, and is now planning to add a third traffic lane, Hitler cuts in brutally. “Why the hell do I need a third lane??? They should build a public parking place!!” The Nazi officer tries again: “But Sir, they built a public parking lot...,” but it doesn't help. Hitler goes wild, screaming that in this new parking lot, one can park only from 18:30 pm until

6 am, and when he got there, ten minutes after 6 am, he had already got a parking ticket. “And all the money goes to the fucking mayor! He has been the mayor for ten years!! Who does he think he is??? He is worse than Stalin!!” Hitler continues to complain about the public transportation: “Two hours! Two hours I was waiting at the bus station! I hate those buses! And then two buses arrive at the station together! What am I supposed to do?? Ride them both??” Finally, defeated, with his head down, he thinks out loud about selling his car and moving to Petah Tikva—a small town in Israel—.

“Hitler is looking for a parking space in Tel Aviv” was so successful because it related to large audiences. *Hitler Rants* parodies that had appeared previously mostly addressed narrow subjects that interested specific audiences. They were original, but not every Israeli could relate to them because of the very specific topics and insider jokes—such as, the rivalry between football teams in Israel—. The parking problems in Tel Aviv is a subject every Israeli knows, understands and can relate to. The clever script is funny because it is also so accurate. The creators of the video worked carefully on matches between the original dialogue of the scene and the Hebrew script—such as, using the reference to Stalin at the exact moment Hitler says “Stalin” in the original scene, or translating words from German that most of the Israeli audience doesn’t understand to curses in Hebrew that sound the same—. These adjustments increased the amusing feeling that Hitler was indeed ranting and raving about the parking problems in Tel Aviv. Since then, the *Hitler Rants* memes in Hebrew have spread like wildfire.

Hitler’s most known visual images were portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl’s film, *Triumph of the Will* (1934). In this film, he was presented as a type of god, photographed from a low angle, in front of hundreds of admirers, as if he had immense, even mystic, powers (Avisar, 1998; Bartov, 2008). In the *Hitler Rants* parodies, this “god” becomes a niggling, even pathetic individual who is stressed out by the irritating details of everyday life. *Hitler Rants* deconstruct any power that the Nazis might still hold over the present as a malevolent force, knock Hitler from a pedestal, and take away his power to frighten. These parodies neutralize Hitler’s menacing identity and allow viewers to feel superior to the Nazi leader (Reimer, 2015).

Culture researchers who were asked to explain this phenomenon in Israel have different opinions: some claim that in today’s world of mass media which floods us with text and visual images, one has to shout as strong as one can in order to be heard, otherwise the protest gets lost in the sea of other protests. Others claim that there is a built-in comic potential in the real historical image of the Führer, which

explains why Hitler is made into a laughing stock much more than other dictators. Some claim that this is an opportunity to gloat about Hitler, to show him in an inferior situation, in which he falls apart in the face of trivial problems. Others see the parodies as a sign of maturity: the ability to face the Holocaust in a different way than the canonic memory. Some see it as a sign of normalization: the young generation wants to abandon the perception of the Holocaust as taboo, as untouchable, and this is one way to achieve it (Ben-Ari, 2014; Caril, Shif and Shavit, 2014).

Rosenfeld (2015) recognizes that the *Hitler Rants* memes reflect the prominent humor theories of superiority, relief and incongruity between the visual and the text. But he does not see them as legitimate representations, and claims that they promote the universalization of the Nazi past. In his opinion, normality threatens to undermine morality. The more that people become accustomed to laughing at the subject of Nazism, the more the danger that, in due time, no one will take it seriously anymore. He doubts that web users can address the serious representations of the subject and the humoristic representations, and claims that the humoristic representations will cloud the serious ones.

In my opinion, these explanations—and worries—might be relevant for the influence of *Hitler Rants* parodies in the world, but Israel, by its nature, is a separate space regarding Holocaust commemoration and awareness. As mentioned, *Hitler Rants* parodies are not unique to Israeli culture, but in Israel the memes are created in Hebrew and consumed in a capacity and intensity that exceeds any other place in the world. Examining the number of *Hitler Rants* videos that were made and viewed per speakers in the four main languages the memes were made—Hebrew, English, Spanish and Polish—reveals that the highest number of *Hitler Rants* videos that were made and viewed—per native speaker—is in Israel. For Polish speakers, one of each 6.7 Polish speakers viewed a *Hitler Rants* parody; for Spanish native speakers, one of 7.5; for English speakers, one of each 4.84, while one of 4.14 Hebrew speakers viewed a *Hitler Rants* parody. The numbers also show a huge difference between Hebrew speakers who created the *Hitler Rants* videos and Polish, English and Spanish speakers who created these videos. The number of Hebrew speakers who created *Hitler Rants* videos is 10 times higher than Polish speakers, 24 times higher than English speakers and 40 times higher than Spanish speakers.

The memes' extraordinary success in Israel reinforces the perception that Israel is a unique place regarding Holocaust awareness, in which the need to dismantle Hitler's image is stronger than in other places. Jewish Israelis are drenched in the

memories of the Holocaust that are maintained by collective memory agents who act out the Holocaust in the present. For many of them, the need to break Hitler's mythical demonic image is a defense mechanism against collective memory agents who insist on reliving Hitler as a threat in the Israeli present. These types of humor can help release fear and anxiety, and are a much-needed tool in trying to move from acting out the memories to working through them.

The memes' creators silence —symbolically and actually as one— the original soundtrack that deals with Hitler, the third Reich and the behavior of the absolute evil and, by doing so, silence the traumatic events. They replace the soundtrack of the trauma with daily life in Israel. The incompatibilities between the visual, the screaming in German and the “translation” in English or Hebrew creates a humoristic text which is a provocation against the canonic memory of the Holocaust and a defense mechanism against the anxiety it creates.

## Conclusions

Through the texts that were analyzed, which are only few examples of a much broader humoristic debate in Hebrew regarding the Holocaust, this chapter claims that humoristic, satirical and parodic texts regarding the Holocaust that appear in Hebrew in Israeli culture since the 1990s are healthy and necessary developments of collective memory. Expressions of Holocaust humor, satire and parody mostly do not constitute a cheapening mechanism. Most of them are created by the young generation of Jewish Israelis as a reaction to the “acting out” of Holocaust memory in Israel. They use black humor in order to create emotional distance between Jewish Israelis and the Holocaust, detach them a little from the trauma, vent frustration, increase social cohesion amongst the young generation that opposes the canonic memory agents, and lessen collective post-traumatic reactions of tension and anxiety to the Holocaust.

As opposed to the new memory's objectors in Israel, the chapter claims that these new texts do not “cheapen” or “degrade” the Holocaust. The young generations do not ridicule the Holocaust or condemn it; on the contrary, they express how Holocaust memory is an integral part of their identity. It is tattooed in their souls and the anxiety it triggers pushes them to use black humor, not because they have detached themselves from the memory, but because they cannot detach themselves from the trauma.

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