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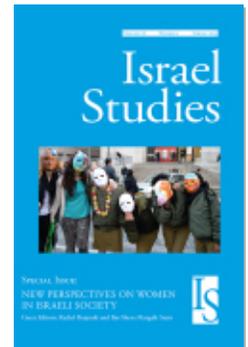
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From a Distance: Orna Ben-Dor's Holocaust Quintet

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# From a Distance: Orna Ben-Dor's Holocaust Quintet

## ABSTRACT

Orna Ben-Dor (1954- ) is one Israel's most prominent filmmakers and television directors. By the 2000s Ben-Dor had directed four films with Holocaust survivors as her main protagonists. The article analyzes the central themes in Ben-Dor's Holocaust-related films and explains how the director maintains a perspective of distance. Because she so often relates in film interviews to her parents' Holocaust and her sensitivity as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, one might have expected her to engage with the topic in her autobiographical documentary, released in 2009. However, as this article will show, Ben-Dor downplays the Holocaust in this film and turns the camera inward to focus on gender rather than on the hallmark themes of her previous films: PTSD of Holocaust survivors, the transgenerational transfer of trauma to the second generation and the absorption of Holocaust survivors in Israel. As a director who has played such an important part in Israel's Holocaust commemoration, Ben-Dor remains strangely reticent about her own personal Holocaust-related story.

*Keywords:* Israeli Cinema; Holocaust Survivors; Second Generation, Gender and Holocaust.

## INTRODUCTION

**O**RNA BEN-DOR (b.1954) IS ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT filmmakers and television directors in Israel. Since the 1980s she has directed numerous documentary films, documentary series, docudramas, and feature films. Her works have won multiple awards both in Israel and abroad. All deal with various aspects of Israeli selfhood, inter alia, Zionism, immigration, refugees (past and present), feminism, sex, identity between

East and West, and the IDF. In four of Ben-Dor's films, "*Because of That War* (1988), *Cloudburst* (1989), *Good Holocaust* (1993), and *A New Land* (1994), the protagonists are Holocaust survivors with PTSD who experience difficulties in their encounters with Israelis and transfer their traumas to their children.

The article analyzes the main themes in Ben-Dor's Holocaust-related films. It also explores how as a second-generation Holocaust survivor Ben-Dor has shifted the perspective of her films from director/narrator or distant observer (by creating fiction films about survivors and documentaries about other families of survivors and their children) to intimate autobiographical documentarist, *Mom, Please Tell Me* (2009), which focuses on her mother and their relationship. As someone who has related so often in film interviews to her family's connection to the Holocaust and her sensitivity as a second-generation survivor, her autobiographical film might have been expected to deal with the PTSD of her parents, the transgenerational transfer of trauma to her, the complex encounter of her parents with Israelis, etc. However, the article claims that by turning her camera inward on her family, she downplays the impact of the Holocaust and focuses on the wider perspective of gender through the lives and beliefs of the four generations of women in her family. In that sense, though her autobiography deals with intimate topics, it shows that she is still unable to address the influence of the Holocaust on her family.

Holocaust survivors have been represented in Israeli cinema since the establishment of the state. In the first decades, films emphasized the Zionist lessons of the Holocaust and centered on the national collective transformation of Holocaust survivors from "ashes to renewal" from "diasporic Jews" to Hebrew "New Jews."<sup>1</sup> Changes in this narrative began to appear in the 1970s, but the massive change in this narrative did not occur until the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980s, the Holocaust was established as a permanent feature of high school curricula and matriculation exams. Organized high school delegations to the former concentration camps in Poland began to travel there in 1988; in the following decades tens of thousands of students took the tour.<sup>3</sup> A growing number of survivors who reached retirement age sought to communicate their stories to the next generations, and members of the second generation began to give expression to the trauma which had affected their own lives and their relationships with their parents.<sup>4</sup>

The international acclaim for Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), prompted a burst of Holocaust documentaries in Israel from the late 1980s onward. These documentaries highlight individual

stories of survivors and show the various ways in which their children were influenced by them, and how the Holocaust was intertwined with their lives as they grew up.<sup>5</sup>

Holocaust-related fiction films changed in a different way. In the Zionist narrative of the 1940s and 1950s cinema, Holocaust survivors were depicted in a negative light at first, and later, as undergoing a glorious transformation through their exposure to Israel, the achievements of Zionism and its people. Israeli feature films from the late 1970s onward are more critical of the erosion of the Zionist ethos. From start to finish, the survivors are shown as breaking down under the burden of the past while native Israelis ignore their distress.<sup>6</sup>

Ben-Dor was a prominent maverick. Her cinematic works since 1988 have contributed to the changing representations of the Holocaust and Holocaust awareness in Israel. One of her earliest documentaries, *Because of That War* (1988) focused on the personal stories of Holocaust survivors and the transgenerational transfer of trauma to their children. *Cloudburst* (1989) was the first documentary to represent the absorption process of Holocaust survivors in Israel as flawed and cruel. She was also the first to challenge the cinematic purpose of survivors as witnesses in *Good Holocaust* (1993) and one of the first directors to criticize the absorption process of survivors and newcomers from North Africa in her fictional film, *A New Land* (1994). It took her two decades to point the camera at her own family and represent her Holocaust survivor mother in *Please Mom, Tell Me* (2009).

The following subsections analyze the topics explored in her Holocaust-related films: the personal stories of the survivors, their emotional scars, the survivor as witness, the absorption process of Holocaust survivors in the 1940s and 1950s, and the effect of the trauma on their children. The last subsection is dedicated to the themes of *Please Mom, Tell Me* in which Ben-Dor moved for the first time from the perspective of a distant director/narrator to an autobiographical narrator focused on her family.

## THE PERSONAL STORIES OF THE SURVIVORS, PTSD, AND DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL SCARS

In the 1980s, when Ben-Dor needed funding to produce a documentary film about Holocaust survivors and their children, she encountered many reservations. The probing of emotional scars and their cultural impact was just beginning in Israel at the time. “When we were trying to get funding for the film I was told, ‘The Holocaust is over.’ No one understood that

there was a huge story there.”<sup>7</sup> *Because of That War* was the first documentary in which survivors and their children were the protagonists and spoke on camera about how the trauma had affected their lives.<sup>8</sup>

The film tells the story of two families of Holocaust survivors: Halina Birenbaum and her son Ya’akov Gilad and Jacko Poliker and his son Yehuda Poliker. In the film, Jacko describes his deportation from Thessaloniki to Auschwitz in a cattle car and his futile attempts to save his family. Halina talks about the deportation of Warsaw’s Jews to Treblinka and Auschwitz. They discuss their relationship with their children, two musicians who grew up in the shadow of their parents’ trauma. In 1988 Ya’akov and Yehuda made an album called “Ashes and Dust” which deals with the traumas suffered by their parents and their own experience as second-generation survivors. The making of the album is documented in the film.

The scenes documenting the survivors show their transition from acting out the trauma to working through it and vice versa. Halina is a skilled speaker who frequently addresses high school students. In the auditorium, she performs her life story. She creates a mental barrier between herself in the present and the trauma of the past in order to distance it. For example, sometimes she reenacts herself as the little girl she was while at other times she screams at the Nazi officer,<sup>9</sup> but never cries. However, when Halina returns home, she tells Ben-Dor on camera that the present disappears and the ghetto “swallows” her: “It’s not over and it will never be for me.”

Jacko recounts the tragic fate of the Jews of Greece, particularly the Jews of Thessaloniki who perished in the Holocaust. Jacko is not a professional witness. He is filmed at the dining room table of his modest home. He is not fluent in Hebrew and remembering the tragedy makes it even harder for him to speak. He pauses occasionally to find the right words.<sup>10</sup> Jacko shifts between acting out and working through. He started a new family, worked, and raised his children, but the trauma is acted out through his gestures. For example, when the four interviewees sit together, Jacko talks about the way his past life ruined his son Mordechai’s bar mitzvah. When the bar mitzvah guests arrived, the ghosts of his murdered family took possession of his mind and he began to rant and throw dishes.

The topic of Holocaust survivors starting a new life in Israel, while haunted by the past is the subject of the short film *Good Holocaust*. In the prologue to the film, Gabriel Dagan, an actor, psychologist, and playwright, is seen walking toward the camera and talking about his life in pre-war Czechoslovakia, his life as an inmate in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz and his immigration to Israel in 1949. He invites the viewers to watch the film

based on his short story. In the film, a Holocaust survivor (Gedalia Besser who plays Dagan) travels with his wife on Holocaust Remembrance Day to a kibbutz in northern Israel. He is supposed to speak to the kibbutz audience about his whereabouts in the Holocaust. On the way to the kibbutz his car accidentally hits a dog. They drive the dog to a vet who was imprisoned with him in Auschwitz and the vet saves the dog's life. At the kibbutz, instead of giving his usual talk he starts in on a disjointed monologue in which he explains that episodes from the present get mixed with episodes from the Holocaust in his mind. For example, the dog reminds him of the Nazi dogs in the camp, and the dog he had before the war. The birth of his son and the doctors' attempts to help the baby gets mixed up with the Holocaust because on the difference—in Israel so many people were trying to help a tiny creature live and “over there” the Jews were sent to their deaths en masse.

*Because of That War* tells the survivors' and their children's stories in minimalistic cinematic language. Ben-Dor does not use archival footage or illustrations but focuses on the four interviewees who are filmed mainly inside their homes or at the studio for Ya'akov and Yehuda. Film critics have suggested that the success of the film was due to its ascetic atmosphere. Ben-Dor was able to convey the atrocities of the Holocaust without Hitler's speeches or shots of mass graves filled with corpses, since memory was allowed to speak for itself in the film in a style that was direct and restrained.<sup>11</sup> Nor was Nazi footage used in *Good Holocaust*. To reveal what goes on in the mind of the survivors, she filmed contemporary scenes as reenactments, for example a hospital scene interjected in a sequence about the survivor addressing kibbutz members.

## THE SURVIVOR AS WITNESS

In *Because of that War*, Halina suggests that the survivors' job is to bear witness. In her narration of the film, Ben-Dor says Halina is “recruited” to the mission of commemorating the Holocaust. She writes about the topic and translates poems of Jewish-Polish poets (like Wladyslaw Szlengel to Hebrew), so that Israelis will not forget them. But in *Good Holocaust*, made soon afterwards, the obligation to talk is questioned from the beginning to the end of the film.<sup>12</sup>

In the opening scenes, as the survivor and his wife are driving towards the lecture venue, his thoughts are heard in the voice-over. Gabriel seems nervous about technical aspects of the venue but what's actually bothering

him is this obligation (“What, again, those old stories on Holocaust Remembrance Eve?”). His wife asks why he feels obliged to do it every year. Gabriel does not reply

The veterinarian who was imprisoned with him in Auschwitz gives no indication that he recognizes Gabriel. The latter tells him about his talk at the kibbutz. “Important—no?” “No,” the vet replies. “It’s kind of a duty,” Gabriel tries again. “After Auschwitz I don’t owe anyone anything,” the vet replies. He says he lost his wife in the Holocaust. “I have nothing to tell. Who does? Maybe you do. I don’t. I’m out of words.” And then he adds that he never turns on the TV or radio on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Such a statement in the late 1980s was almost blasphemous in a society where Holocaust survivors had become culture heroes and an integral part of the commemoration in which personal stories were the heart of the narrative. It took courage to raise questions no one asked at the time: How does this testimony affect the survivors? How do they feel when they’re made to relive their past? As Gabriel tells the kibbutz members how memory acts out in different scenes in his life, the audience looks at him uncomfortably. “I should just stop telling these stories. My wife is right. I think I should stop these trips every Holocaust Remembrance Day, I should stop trying to bring people together. I should just stop.”

However, at the end of the film, a young woman from the kibbutz tells him that his stories about the way the memories blur with the present were really interesting and that she’d never thought about dogs in relation to the Holocaust. Her child starts playing with the dog, and she decides to call the dog “Shoah” [Holocaust in Hebrew]. “Good Shoah,” she says petting her. Calling a dog by that name and using the term “Good Holocaust” is still considered controversial. But this ending suggests that Gabriel did in fact achieve something through his testimony: he had roused the interest of the younger generation.

The use of black humor in a Holocaust-related film was another form of Ben-Dor’s iconoclasm. For many years, a humorous approach to the Holocaust was considered sacrilegious, a sign of disrespect to the subject and to the survivors. Since the 1990s Holocaust humor in Israel has slowly entered Israeli culture, although it is still condemned by some.<sup>13</sup>

Ben-Dor’s film was the first to use Holocaust humor both in its contents and in the title. Besides naming the dog “Shoah” and ending the film with a little girl petting the dog and saying, “Good Shoah,” in the scene where Gabriel and his wife are on the way to the kibbutz discussing Gabriel’s cynical opening remarks his wife says she’s sure he’ll start by saying he’s a graduate of Auschwitz. “True” his thoughts are

heard in voice-over, “I always start my talk like that. I think it’s funny.” His voice-over explains that it’s a defense mechanism. “So, I’m careful, careful not to run over the memories. I’ve built myself little defenses over the years. But the spaces, the spaces in between, that’s where the danger lies.” Although this commentary was meant to help Israelis grasp the importance and power of black humor as a defense mechanism,<sup>14</sup> it was too much for them at that time.

In 1993, Channel 1, the only public television channel in Israel refused to screen the film. The Film Board asked Ben-Dor to rename it. She petitioned the Supreme Court. In 1995, cable channels 3 and 4 agreed to screen it on Holocaust Remembrance Day but the director-general had it removed from the schedule. The fact that the short film was based on a story written by a Holocaust survivor didn’t help change these decisions.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE ABSORPTION PROCESS OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN THE 1940S AND 1950S

*Cloudburst* deals with the absorption of Holocaust survivors in the early years of the state. The film documents survivors who describe the indifference, harsh treatment, and humiliation they experienced. As the narrator Ben-Dor briefly introduces the survivors who appear in the film she determines that the absorption process was a failure: “This is the story of the Holocaust survivors who came here in the hope of finding a home [. . .] No one welcomed them with open arms.”

The film focuses on two types of failure: technical failures and emotional failures. In terms of the technical failures, the survivors compare their living conditions in the immigrant camps in Israel with the Nazi camps. For example, Gabriel Dagan says he was used to harsh conditions because of “the previous camps” where he had been imprisoned. Halina Birenbaum says that in the kibbutz she slept with her shoes on the bed “the way I did in Auschwitz”. There she had been afraid someone would steal them, while in Israel she was afraid they would get wet in the leaky tent. She compares the sound of the gong that woke her up on the kibbutz with the gong for roll call at Auschwitz.

The survivors also speak about the emotional failures of the process, the alienation and indifference and the accusations towards them (“Why did you go like lambs to the slaughter?”), the horrible nicknames they were given (“Soaps”), the contempt, the lack of empathy of the Israelis. Dagan says they were received without joy, Birenbaum says nobody on the kibbutz

really cared about the survivors, David Shitz talks about being cruelly and unthinkingly separated from his brother. Moshe Zenber claims he and other survivors were sent off to fight in the War of 1948 like cannon fodder. Writer Yehudit Hendel confirms this sense of estrangement and contempt, and speaks of the two races in the early days of the State—"the gods:" i.e., the veteran Israelis and "the inferior race," the survivors.

Ben-Dor, who uses clips from Zionist films in *Cloudburst* to highlight the atmosphere of the late 1940s juxtaposes a long scene from a fundraising film made in 1950. In it, a doctor arrives at a transit camp in Israel and finds that the sick child he was treating has died. The child's father tries to murder him saying, "you [the Israelis] are worse than the Nazis. At least they did it [kill the Jews] fast." Ben-Dor also inserts shots of the protective barbed wire fences around the transit camps which reinforces the perception of the absorbing Israelis as Nazis.

Critics called the film superficial and tendentious<sup>16</sup> but a minority accepted Ben-Dor's accusations.<sup>17</sup> She stood by her film and claimed it was only part of the testimonies—that several scenes had to be cut before the screening because they portrayed the Israelis in such a harsh light.<sup>18</sup> Her own parents, she claimed, had also been ostracized.<sup>19</sup> The film, in fact, as critics claimed, does not present historical facts, but rather a specific, critical perspective of the nascent Israeli state. This particular view paints early Israelis as behaving cruelly and viciously towards the newcomers. It fails to mention that this is a subjective view that clashes with other perspectives that highlight the fact that 600,000 citizens had managed to integrate 600,000 refugees in just three years, despite a fragile economy and endless shortages of food and housing.<sup>20</sup>

The same one-sided stance is represented in Ben-Dor's feature film *A New Land* (1994). In the film, two young survivors, a brother and sister named Yan and Anna are sent to a temporary absorption camp. As in *Cloudburst*, scenes of their arrival in the "new country" Israel, are indirectly compared with well-known images of concentration camps. As for example, when the camera focuses on the loudspeaker that alerts the newcomers to stand in line. The refugees cluster in tight groups; they look scared and lost. Maryushka, a Christian woman who slept with a German officer during the Holocaust to save her Jewish husband Pinhas, is now pushed into a seemingly similar situation in Israel: her husband is sick, nobody cares, and there is no medicine. The only person who can obtain the medicine through the black market is Bardugo, a pimp who controls the transit camp, but in return, Bardugo demands sex from her. When Pinhas finds out that his wife has gone to Bardugo to

get the medicine, he realizes what this means and commits suicide. It is ironic that this film, while seeking to cast a dark shadow on the Israeli observers, winds up reinforcing the negative stereotyping of Holocaust survivors in Israeli culture and cinema. Here they are depicted as a dysfunctional in various ways, exploited women succumbing to sexual bribery in order to survive.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the early Zionist films, there is no “happy end” in total assimilation. Yan tries to assimilate but the process takes him away from Anna, his sister, his only surviving relative. At the end of the film, when the transit camp closes down, they go to the dumpster where the Israelis have cruelly thrown their old clothes and Anna’s teddy bear, her only souvenir from her mother. The children put on their old clothes and regain their diasporic identity. The children ask the teddy bear to take them to “a new land” and in response, he takes them to the moon. It is unclear whether Ben-Dor intended this scene to be a dream or wanted to imply that Anna’s mental state had deteriorated to the point of hallucination. Either way, the fanciful ending adds to the view of Israel as a dystopia.<sup>22</sup>

## THE SECOND GENERATION: TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF TRAUMA

The term “second generation” was coined by Canadian psychoanalysts as a clinical concept,<sup>23</sup> and today is commonly used to denote the children of Holocaust survivors. In the 1960s, it seemed apparent that the second generation shared certain unique mental health problems that unified them as a group. However, over the past four decades, the perception that they are a separate group has been questioned: Do “second-generation” individuals in fact comprise a distinct group and does this group evince unique and/or more substantial psychological disorders compared with other populations?<sup>24</sup>

While some researchers believe that second-generation individuals possess unique characteristics that distinguish them from other groups,<sup>25</sup> others claim that the second-generation has no significant psychological disorders, and that the Holocaust had no long-term consequences on the offspring of survivors.<sup>26</sup> A third school of thought acknowledges a form of interaction between parents and children that is unique to the relationship between Holocaust survivors and their offspring, but which is expressed in many different ways, and varies from family to family and among survivors who were rescued in different ways.<sup>27</sup>

*Because of that War*, like the vast majority of Israeli documentaries about the second generation which were produced in the ensuing years, tended to consider the children of survivors as a distinct group suffering from secondary traumatic stress. These films, which also address the parents' trauma and the various coping mechanisms they developed, depict the ways in which children were affected by their parents' experiences. Trauma was incorporated in their very identities, and they were forced to develop their own individual coping mechanisms. Jaco Poliker and Halina Birenbaum come from different places and cultures, but their trauma is echoed in the lives of their children in a similarly intense way. According to Ben-Dor, in the early 1980s the idea of telling the story of second-generation Holocaust survivors seemed strange and pointless. But she thought otherwise: "When I heard the first takes of the songs from 'Ash and Dust' I realized that here was the story."<sup>28</sup> This film was revolutionary: the voice of the second generation was heard for the first time, in the filmed interviews and through the songs on the album. "The audience remained in their seats after the screening and were unable to get up," Ben-Dor recalls.<sup>29</sup>

Contrary to the assumption that most Holocaust survivors chose to remain silent, *Because of That War* depicts two survivors who are compulsive talkers, bursting with tales to tell. Both continually expose their children to Holocaust stories without considering the ability of the children listening to comprehend, understand, or contain these stories. Survivor Birenbaum and her son Gilad talk to the camera about the ways in which her traumatic experiences became part of her motherhood: she would sing songs from the ghetto to him, and made him a rag doll like the one she had, and when he got bad grades in school, she yelled at him, "Is this why I survived Auschwitz? To see you come home with these grades?" Gilad says that in their home the dead were no less alive than the living, and Birenbaum confesses that the fear that her son would turn out "like them" (the Nazis) had an impact on her mothering.

Studies show that some survivors who were overly preoccupied with the loss and painful separation from their own parents, were unable to respond to developmental processes of separation and differentiation with their own children.<sup>30</sup> Yehuda Poliker comments that he lived with his parents until the age of 30 and was unable to free himself from their suffocating grip, knowing that if he left home they would be filled with anxiety. When he finally left, he felt guilty. As an adult, he talks to them every day and visits them often. He blames his stutter on his father and the Holocaust. Jacko used to bite off huge chunks of bread and

bolt them down the way he did during the Holocaust, until one day he almost choked to death. Yehuda says he has stuttered ever since except when he sings.

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY: FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO UNIVERSAL TOPICS

After *Because of that War*, Ben-Dor stated in interviews she did not want to film her parents and herself and preferred to maintain “an aesthetic distance,” though she identified with Gilad and Poliker as she filmed their stories.<sup>31</sup> In many interviews she has stated that her mother’s Holocaust trauma is the most painful wound she has and that she built her life around her parents’ memories.<sup>32</sup> Thus the autobiographical *Mom, Please Tell Me* was expected to deal with her mother’s stories and the influence of the trauma on Ben-Dor. The film is indeed very personal and intimate but completely marginalizes the Holocaust. Instead, Ben-Dor focuses on universal themes—the mother-daughter relationship, the four generations of women in her family, betrayal, shattered hearts, cancer, and broken homes.

The film opens as her mother sings a song to the camera about a false lover. She dominates the frame. Ben-Dor is behind her smoking. The fact that the film is not about the Holocaust manifests in Ben-Dor’s description of the women in her family: she speaks about a dynasty of sullen women who were abandoned by their husbands and died of a broken heart (“which the doctors referred to as cancer”). This grief is not attributed to the Holocaust but began much earlier with her great grandmother and continued over the generations. Later scenes show Ben-Dor’s complex relationship with her mother and with her daughter Avigail; in other scenes, she interviews her psychologist about her problematic relationship with her mother.

Ben-Dor describes her mother as another link in an unfortunate chain—her husband left her when Ben-Dor was three years old. She remarried twice but never recovered from the initial broken heart. She too had had cancer but modern medicine “mended her broken heart” and enabled her to survive. Ben-Dor herself did not escape that destiny and is also divorced. She does not say her heart was broken but hints at this when she says that after her divorce, her mother raised her children, implying that she had been unable to function. Ben-Dor also had cancer and like her mother, survived.

Ben-Dor accompanies this film with her voiceover. In contrast to *Because of That War*, in this film there is barely any mention of the transgenerational transfer of Holocaust trauma, the way it affected her own life, or the description she has given of herself in many interviews as drowning in Holocaust awareness. These topics surface indirectly only in several scenes composed of fragmented reenactments in which she discusses her dreams. For example, she describes a dream that takes place in a train where she sees a happy blond five-year-old dancing in a meadow. She hears a couple sitting next to her on the train say, "You can't kill a five-year-old and get away with it." The train is a Holocaust icon, and she is the five-year-old. It refers to the period when her mother's second husband used to beat them. Ben-Dor says in the film, her mother knew and saw it happen and did nothing to stop him. In the dream, the person who kills her and deserves to be punished is her mother.

Several scenes represent Ben-Dor's conversations with her psychologist in which she openly discusses her anger and hatred of her mother and her simultaneous need to protect her and her inability to let go. The psychologist advises her to put on her director's hat and talk to her mother because the mechanism of distancing might enable her to ask questions she has always avoided.

The film focuses on complex relationships between mothers and daughters, women and men. Ben-Dor's mother speaks laconically, distancing herself from the event even when she talks about her shattered heart, her first husband's betrayal ("Your father ruined my life") and about her second husband's abusiveness towards her and Ben-Dor. She maintains her emotional distance even during diatribes like "I love Uri and Avigail (Ben-Dor's children) more than I love you" or when she says she knows Ben-Dor hates her and that Ben-Dor's children hate Ben-Dor. Ben-Dor also bravely filmed and interjected scenes in which she bickers with her daughter Avigail, and in which Avigail tells her that their house isn't "homey", that their family is "broken" and that she's not sure she'll be homesick when she's drafted into the army.

However, the film also shows that there's more than anger and resentment to these complex relationships. Ben-Dor films herself caring for her cancer-ridden mother and a moment when her mother tries to pay her a compliment. They discuss her mother's attempted suicide. Her mother claims that the trauma was reactivated because Ben-Dor had divorced her husband and at first tries to deny that her husband ever abused Ben-Dor. "I made a mistake," she finally says, "and I'm sorry. I only ask that you forgive me." This is the first time she has admitted her culpability.

Lawrence Langer<sup>33</sup> distinguishes between redemptive and unredemptive Holocaust memory: Without redemptive memory, we leave ourselves exposed “to the anguish that is buried beneath the ashes of extermination. No wonder so many members of succeeding generations search for a spark of hope to flare up and assuage their pain” [. . .] whereas redemptive memory tends to focus on themes like ‘the triumph of the human spirit’ to avoid an encounter with the unfathomable” but the result is a shallow representation of the Holocaust.<sup>34</sup> However, “If we ever hope to absorb the full unsettling complexity of the Holocaust, we need to give unredemptive memory a chance too.”

Ben-Dor was one of the first to reject the redemptive narrative. In her Holocaust-related films, living in Israel does not altogether heal the emotional scars which continue to affect the survivors and their relationship with their children. By contrast, in *Mom, Please Tell Me*, which does not focus on the Holocaust Ben-Dor allowed herself to portray a type of redemption. Unlike her former works, this is her autobiography, and she needs to find a kind of redemption for herself. At the end of the film, she says she spends more time with her mother now and eats meals in her home (something she never did before). The scenes show the three generations—Ben-Dor, her mother, and Avigail—enjoying what looks like a “normal” family dinner. In her voiceover, she says that when she became ill, she understood that “mother’ is a place, a space that can’t be filled. No one can really satisfy the hopes children pin on their mother. Only then did I understand that I could love her again. My mother. And then for the first time, I felt I was part of a family.” The camera zooms out through the bars of the windows. “This is my family, and that is enough,” she says. This is her prison in a way, but she has learned to love it.

It is surprising that in Ben-Dor’s most personal film, the Holocaust and its influence on the survivors and their children are completely marginalized. Aside from the fact that Ben-Dor is a prominent director of Israeli Holocaust-related films, she has, in many interviews, repeatedly pointed to the Holocaust, to postmemory, and her identity as a second-generation survivor as her most prominent identifying characteristics. When discussing *Because of that War* in various interviews, Ben-Dor stated that she did not want to film her parents and herself, preferring instead to maintain “an aesthetic distance.” She chose to film the families of Gilad and Poliker rather than her own and identified with their stories and their pain.<sup>35</sup> “The scream inside me grew louder as I listened to the stories of Yehuda and Ya’acov and their parents. Without them, I would

never have dug into the suppressed black holes of my subconscious.” She relates how Halina Birenbaum once read her a poem about separation and death, and when she finished reading, Ben-Dor burst into tears. “Tears of grief for Halina’s mother, for Halina herself, for Ya’acov and tears for my own mother and the tears of my grandfather [. . .] and his mother who was left to die in the snow [. . .].”<sup>36</sup> In another interview related to *Because of that War*, Ben-Dor says, “It’s the story of my own mother and father.” She claims that children of survivors are also victims of the Holocaust. “They weren’t there, but the Holocaust was transmitted to them [. . .] It leaves scars [. . .] I don’t believe it’s possible to grow up in the house of Holocaust survivors without having nightmares at night.”<sup>37</sup> The biographies of Gilad and Poliker “are my biography” she says in another interview.<sup>38</sup> Several years later, Ben-Dor talked about how frantic and obsessed she was during the production of *Because of that War*, only later realizing that her identification with the subject matter had affected her behavior. After years of denying it, she finally realized that “These are my colors. This is where I’m coming from. This is what shapes me and my relationship with my parents and my children.”<sup>39</sup> When interviewed about *Cloudburst*, in trying to defend the film from criticism that it was one-sided, she discussed her parents’ stories, (which did not appear in the film), as another example of how society had mistreated the survivors.<sup>40</sup> “I grew up with the Holocaust at home,” she said in interviews regarding *Good Holocaust*. “All this (the Holocaust, and the way the survivors were absorbed into Israeli society) is who I am.” She also described her focus on the Holocaust in her various films as a healing process.<sup>41</sup> She claims that “this wound is the strongest element in my personality,” and also that she constantly feels like a refugee. “The Holocaust is my thing; I was conceived from my parents’ memories.” She has referred to Holocaust memory as a giant commemoration that shaped her entire being “like the genetic code.”<sup>42</sup>

The fact that Ben-Dor’s mother is a Holocaust survivor is not even mentioned in the first half of the film. Only in minute 38, does the director makes the only reference to it, describing her mother as a child survivor. As someone who has so often expressed her personal connection to the Holocaust, and her sensitivity as a second-generation survivor, one might have expected Ben-Dor’s autobiographical film to address the themes of her previous films: PTSD, the transgenerational transfer of trauma, the complex encounter with Israelis, etc. yet in the single instance when the camera turns to her own family, she chooses to downplay the effect of the Holocaust and focus instead on the issue of gender as she

examines the lives and beliefs of the four generations of women in her family. In this sense, Ben-Dor intimates that she is still unable to address the influence of the Holocaust on her family and continues to view the consequences from a distance.

In conclusion, the article follows the spiraling movement of Ben-Dor's Holocaust-related films, from the outside to the inside. Ben-Dor's various perspectives on Holocaust survivors in Israel and their children develop by situating herself as the narrator or a distant observer. Only after years of directing, did she decide it was time to deal courageously with her mother. But in doing so she sidelined the Holocaust, a topic so meaningful to her, a trauma that is a part of her, a part of what happened to her family and what she feels as a second-generation survivor. When she aimed the camera at her mother and herself, the Holocaust vanished, and the focus turned to universal topics. Ben-Dor had the courage to deal very openly with her complex family in scenes that are hard to digest, yet she could not touch upon the personal Holocaust story. In that sense, all her Holocaust-related works maintain a distance, both when she turns the camera on other families and their stories (as a spectator) and when dealing with her own family (and focusing on other themes). In the career of a director who has played such an important role in Israel's Holocaust commemoration, Orna Ben-Dor's personal Holocaust-related story remains unknown.

## NOTES

1. Liat Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror* (Jerusalem, 2009) [Hebrew].
2. There is an ongoing debate on the historical, political, and social events that altered Holocaust consciousness in Israel. See Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993); Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel-Aviv, 1997) [Hebrew]; Hanna Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War* (New York, 1999); *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann* (New York, 2004); Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge, 2005); Dina Porat, *Smoke-Smelling Morning Coffee, Essays on the Encounters of the Yishuv and Israeli Society with the Holocaust and its Survivors* (Tel-Aviv, 2011) [Hebrew].
3. Jackie Feldman, *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity* (New York, 2008), xv.
4. For more on these issues, see for example Porat, *Smoke-Smelling Morning Coffee*, 357–78; Iris Milner, *A Torn Past* (Tel-Aviv, 2004), 19–35 [Hebrew]; Dalia Ofer, “The Past That Does Not Pass: Israelis and Holocaust Memory,” *Israel Studies*

4.1 (2009): 1–35; Gulie Ne’eman Arad, “Israel and the Shoah: A Tale of Multifarious Taboos,” *New German Critique* 90 (2003): 5–26.

5. See Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin, TX, 2002), 32–71; Nurith Gertz, *A Different Choir: Holocaust Survivors, Aliens, and Others in Israeli Cinema and Literature* (Tel-Aviv and Raanana, 2004); Moshe Zimmermann, *Don’t Touch My Holocaust* (Haifa, 2002) [both in Hebrew]; Michal Friedman, “The Double Legacy of Arbeit Macht Frei,” *Prooftexts* 22.1–2 (2002): 200–20; Régine-Mihal Friedman, “Witnessing for the Witness: ‘Choice and Destiny’ by Tsipi Reibenbach,” *Shofar* 24.1 (2005), 81–93; Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 96–127, 150–65.

6. Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 96–204.

7. Shira Kadari, “A Kvetch of a Human Being,” *Hamusaf*, April 7, 2013 [Hebrew] <https://bit.ly/3CCllqw>

8. The documentary *Memories from the Eichmann Trial* (David Perlov, 1979) was the first to dedicate a lengthy segment to interviews with survivor Henryk Ross, the photographer of the Łódź Ghetto who testified in the trial, and second-generation Holocaust survivors who discussed the effects of the trial on their parents and on them. The film was screened once on what was then the only Israeli TV channel. *Because of That War* was the first documentary dedicated to the survivors and their children’s stories. The film garnered national and international success and was screened in cinemas, on TV, and at festivals.

9. Zimmermann, *Don’t Touch*, 257.

10. *Ibid.*, 259–60, Gertz, *A Different Choir*, 93.

11. Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 124.

12. On the film see Ilan Avisar, “The Holocaust in Israeli Cinema as a Conflict between Survival and Morality,” *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, eds., Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin TX, 2011), 151–67; Zimmermann, *Don’t Touch My Holocaust*, Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen*, 32–71.

13. Liat Steir-Livny, *Is It O.K to Laugh about It? Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israel Culture* (London, 2017).

14. *Ibid.*

15. Eran Hadas, “A Dog Named Shoah,” March 22, 1993, *Good Holocaust*, TCLC (Tel-Aviv Cinematheque library collection) [Hebrew].

16. Amiram Cohen, “This is the Story,” *Hotam Al Hamishmar*, July 14, 1989, Cloudburst, TCLC [Hebrew].

17. See Ron Miberg, “Ben-Dor Returns to the Wound] *Hadashot*, June 16, 1989, Cloudburst, TCLC [Hebrew].

18. Shlomo Papirblat “People Don’t Talk About it,” June 20, 1989, *Cloudburst*, TCLC [Hebrew].

19. Cohen, “This is the Story.”

20. Examples of this radical school of thought can be found in Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (Hebrew, 1984, English, 1998); *The Seventh Million*; Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust*; Yosef Grodzinsky, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Struggle*

*Between Jews and Zionists in the Aftermath of World War II* (Monroe, ME, 2004). Examples of the more ambivalent school can be found in Shapira, *New Jews*; Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust*; Porat, *Smoke-Smelling Morning Coffee*. Be-Dor herself says in an interview that she did thorough research, was tremendously influenced by Tom Segev's book *1949* and did not intend to create a historical document, but a film. See "This is the story," *Al Hamishmar Hotam*, July 14, 1989 [Hebrew].

21. Gertz, *A Different Choir*, 42–77; Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 96–204.

22. Gertz, *A Different Choir*, 42–77.

23. Vivian Rakoff, "A Long-Term Effect of the Concentration-camp Experience," *Viewpoints* 1 (1966):17–21; Bernard Trossman, "Adolescent Children of Concentration Camp Survivors," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 13.2 (1968), 121–3.

24. See Natan Kellerman, "Ha'avarah shel traumot hashoah," *Childhood in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Survivor Children and Second Generation*, eds., Zahava Solomon and Julia Chaitin (Tel-Aviv, 2007), 286–303 [Hebrew].

25. Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem, 1990), 14; Carol Kidron, "The Social Construction of Second-Generation Survivors: Support Group Narratives of Wounded Carriers of Memory," in Solomon and Chaitin *Childhood in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, 261–85; Julia Chaitin, "Children and Grandchildren of Survivors Cope with the Shoah", *ibid.*, 418–35.

26. Yoram Hazan, "Second Generation to the Holocaust—A Problematic Term," in *Sihot—Israeli Journal of Psychotherapy* 1.2 (1987): 104–7; Hillel Klein, "Holocaust Survivors' Search for Identity and Meaning," in *Nazi Concentration Camps*, eds., Israel Gutman and Rachel Manber (Jerusalem, 1980), 425–34 [both in Hebrew]; Abraham Sagi-Schwartz, Marinus H. van Izendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Does Intergenerational Transference of Trauma Skip a Generation? No Meta-Analytic Evidence for Tertiary Traumatization with Third Generation Holocaust Survivors," *Attachment and Human Development* 10.2 (2008): 105–21.

27. Iris Milner, *A Torn Past: Children of Holocaust Survivors* (Tel-Aviv, 2003), 19–35 [Hebrew]; Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: A Mediation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (London, 2004), 28; Dan Bar-On, *Between Fear and Hope: Life Stories of Five Families of Holocaust Survivors, Three Generations in a Family* (Tel-Aviv, 1994) [Hebrew]; Yael Aviad and Diana Cuhenca, "The Effects of Gender and Survival Situation of the Parent Holocaust Survivor on Their Offspring: An Attachment Perspective," *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 55.2 (2018): 15–22.

28. Kadri, "A Kvetch of a Human Being."

29. *Ibid.*

30. Bar-On et al. 1998.

31. Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 123–4.

32. For example, Cohen, "This is the Story;" Amit Reicher, "I grew up with the Holocaust at Home," March 22, 1993, *Good Holocaust*; Ran Bin-Noon, "Always a Refugee," April 2, 1993, *Good Holocaust*; "Interview with Orna Ben-Dor Niv," *Because of That War*; Ilan Shaul, "Because of that War," *Pnaiy Plus*, December 1988, *Because of That War* [all TCLC, Hebrew].

33. Lawrence Langer, "Redemptive and Unredemptive Holocaust Memory," in *The Afterdeath of the Holocaust* (Cham, 2021), 37–61.

34. *Ibid.*, 38–44.

35. Steir-Livny, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, 123–4.

36. Interview with Orna Ben-Dor, no name, n.d., "Because of that War," TCLC.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Sarit Ishay Levi, "In Spite of that Anger," *Hadashot*, July 5, 1991, "Because of That War," TCLC.

39. Amit Reicher, "A Dog Name Holocaust," March 22, 1993, "Good Holocaust," TCLC.

40. "This is the Story," *Al Hamishmar Hotam*, July 14, 1989, "Cloud Burst," TCLC.

41. Amit Reicher, "A Dog Named Holocaust," March 22, 1993, "Good Holocaust," TCLC.

42. Ran Bin-Noon, "Always a Refugee," *Yediot Aharonot*, April 2, 1993, "Good Holocaust," TCLC.

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