

Holocaust Picturebooks for Young Readers. Postmemory, Representation, and Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound intersection of visual storytelling, historical memory, and educational impact within Holocaust picturebooks. In investigating the delicate balance between artistic representation and the responsibility to convey historical truth, the analysis delves into the ways in which these unique narratives contribute to shaping collective remembrance. The potential educational efficacy of Holocaust picturebooks, assessing their role in fostering empathy, historical awareness, and critical thinking skills among readers is also discussed. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of Holocaust representation in the literature for children and young readers and lays the groundwork for future studies and research endeavors aimed at expanding our comprehension of Holocaust representation in picturebooks, fostering ongoing dialogue and critical inquiry in this vital field especially in the Italian and Hungarian contexts.

Keywords

Children's literature; Holocaust; illustrations; picturebooks; teaching

1. Picturebooks

In many countries, picturebooks have gained significant popularity over the years, captivating readers of all ages (from infants to adults) with their eye-catching illustrations and – in case of primarily narrative picturebooks – engaging stories. Their visual appeal and ability to convey complex themes through imagery also make them a favorite choice for children and adults alike. Picturebooks containing brief stories complemented by fascinating illustrations and typographic solutions often serve as a child's first intro-



duction to the world of literature, fostering a love for reading from a young age. The popularity of picturebooks is also evident in the extensive variety of genres, topics, and artistic styles that they cover, from classic tales to contemporary themes and diverse cultures (Cf. also Postman 1982, Nodelman, Reimer 2003, Coats 2004, Sipe 2008, Yarova 2021). Many picturebooks are praised for their ability to address significant social and emotional issues (the importance of inclusivity and the acceptance of differences, the power of small acts of kindness, socioeconomic disparities, the process of grieving, understanding, and managing emotions, etc.), making them an excellent tool also for teaching life lessons. They are able to simplify complex concepts and make them accessible to young children who, in this way, may understand and assimilate important values (cf. also Marantz 1983, Moebius 1986, Sipe 1998, Sipe, Pantaleo 2008, Kümmerling-Meibauer 2014, Hamer, Nodelman, Reimer 2017). In addition, discussions about the visual elements and the stories can deepen the impact of the given picturebook, encouraging critical thinking and emotional intelligence in young readers. They also contribute to expanding vocabulary, improving children's language skills, such as grammar and syntax, and improving their comprehension, storytelling, and communication skills. They also contribute to improve their ability to 'read' and interpret images (cf. Debes 1968, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1974 on visual literacy, see also Kiefer 1995, 2008, Nikolajeva 2003).

Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication. (Debes 1969, 25-26)

For the purpose of the present paper, visual literacy is the ability to read and interpret picturebooks' illustrations and communicate information using visual representations.

The global appeal of picturebooks is demonstrated by the growing trend of their translation into numerous languages, thereby ensuring access to a

wide range of readers and enabling stories and illustrations to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Increasingly more children and readers around the world have the possibility to access a diverse range of stories, characters and illustrations and foster a sense of unity and global interconnectedness. Translating picturebooks not only involves language, but also adapting cultural nuances and references to make the story relatable to the target audience. Picturebooks may increase the cultural awareness of young readers, exposing them to different linguistic and cultural contexts and nuances. Translating picturebooks also opens up opportunities for underrepresented cultures and voices to be heard in the global literary landscape.

One of the earliest and most cited definitions of picturebook stems from Barbara Bader (1976) and it fully encapsulates the key elements of a picturebook. It puts an emphasis on the fact that a picturebook is not just about the written words on the page but is also a combination of various components acting in harmony. The concept of 'total design' embraces the overall layout, visual aesthetics, and how the text and illustrations are integrated into the picturebook. It considers features like layout, page composition, typography, choice of fonts, color schemes, and the book's overall visual appeal:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. (Ivi, 1)

A successful picturebook creates a unique, rich, nuanced, and immersive reading experience for both children and adults.

Later, Perry Nodelman, a leading Canadian scholar of children's literature, offered a more detailed definition focusing on the layered nature of picturebooks (multiple levels of meaning), on the interplay between the text and images (pictures) in them and on how these two elements act together to create meaning:

Picture books—books intended for young children which communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all—are unlike any other form of verbal or visual art. Both the

pictures and the texts in these books are different from and communicate differently from pictures and texts in other circumstances [...] The pictures in picture books are literally “illustrations” – images that explain or clarify words and each other. But unlike other illustrations in, for instance, informational books for adults, which support a detailed text with relatively few pictures, the pictures in picture books take up most of the space and bear the burden of conveying most of the information. [...] In picture books that tell stories, the texts are characteristically succinct and undetailed. They are always dependent upon the accompanying pictures for their specific meaning and import; they often sound more like plot summaries than like the actual words of a story. (1988, vii-viii)

In 1999, in the volume *Understanding children's literature* edited by Peter Hunt the essay «Decoding the Images: Illustration and Picture Books» written by Perry Nodelman also appears and is preceded by a short introduction of the editor (69-70) that masterfully summarizes the intrinsic paradox of the genre:

The picture-book genre is a paradox. On the one hand it is seen as children's literature's one truly original contribution to literature in general, a 'polyphonic' form which absorbs and uses many codes, styles, and textual devices, and which frequently pushes at the borders of convention. On the other, it is seen as the province of the young child, and is therefore beneath serious critical notice. Taking this second view, it may seem unlikely that someone can write a 6,000-word chapter on a single picture from a picture-book. But Perry Nodelman's fascinating analysis of the first picture in John Burningham's *Mr Gumpy's Outing* demonstrates not only how much there is to say about a picture, but also how much there is to learn about reading pictures.

In their volume *How Picturebooks Work*, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott identify the same characteristics in their definition:

The unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal. Making use of semiotic terminology we can say that picturebooks communicate by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic and the conventional. (2001, 1)

Lawrence R. Sipe, in his «Revisiting the Relationship Between Text and Pictures» published in 2012 goes further and highlights the intricate and artistic nature of picturebooks – «highly sophisticated aesthetic objects» (4) –, the power of visual storytelling and its contribution to literature and

art as a whole. He emphasizes the important contribution that peritextual elements provide to the overall understanding of picturebooks:

Most of these theoretical constructs seem to have in common the idea that there is a way in which the totality of the picturebook, including words and pictures as well as peritextual elements, is much greater than the sum of its parts. (11)

2. Holocaust picturebooks

In this essay, I focus on Holocaust picturebooks, a category of historical fiction or nonfiction picturebooks, which is a specific genre of children's literature that combines elements of history and narrative within the format of a picturebook. These books are designed to introduce young readers to historical events, figures, or time periods through a narrative that can be fictional (but set in a historically accurate context) or non-fictional (in these cases, they tell a true story or recount real historical events). Usually, they are considered crossover picturebooks as they can be read by children and adults alike.

When dealing with Holocaust picturebooks many questions may arise (cf. Solokoff 2005, and also Walter, March 1993, Sullivan 1999, Kertzer 1999, Sokoloff 2005, Budick 2015, Lang 2017), including children's literature and the Holocaust, accuracy, authenticity, appropriateness, ethical considerations, Holocaust pedagogy, educational value, integration with other educational resources, narrative perspective, authors' and illustrators' background, inclusion (Jews, Romani, disabled individuals, etc.), impact, etc.

If we look at the publication of picturebooks, we note that, since the mid-1980s, in certain literatures there has been an explosion of imaginative writing and picturebooks for young people on the topic of the Holocaust, which is also as a consequence of certain regulations. In the US, Holocaust education has become increasingly widespread since 1985, when California became the first state to mandate it. In 2021, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Massachusetts (the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th states) joined the other states and require schools to provide Holocaust education. At the same time, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Washington encourage and endorse Holocaust education (cf. <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/u-s-states-requiring-holocaust-education-in-schools>> [12/2023]).

In Italy, it is important to consider the statement made and diffused by the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIUR):

Educating respect for differences against all forms of violence and discrimination, preserving the memory of the Shoah in schools and universities. These are the activities dedicated to the world of school, both to students and teachers, which the MIUR promotes and coordinates through the General Directorate for students, integration, and participation.¹

From the school year 2000-2001 on April 16, Hungary (Kovács 2003) observes the *Holokauszt Emléknap* (National Holocaust Memorial Day or Day of Remembrance for the Hungarian Victims of the Holocaust), which was considered the first step to make Holocaust education take root in the Hungarian roots. In 2000, the first Orbán government decided that April 16 should be the day when Hungary pays tribute to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust in Hungary. It was on this day in 1944 that members of the Hungarian administration and the Hungarian police, collaborating with the Nazi occupiers, began to set up the first ghettos and concentration camps. On January 18, 2000, the 55th anniversary of the liberation of the Budapest ghetto, Zoltán Pokorni (Minister of Education between 1998 and 2001), who initiated the commemoration, suggested that schools commemorate the Holocaust on April 16 every year² (cf. also Pokorni 2001, 5). However, still today (December 2023), in Hungary we state the absence of Holocaust picturebooks due to various factors, such as historical and cultural considerations as well as educational policies. Most probably, these picturebooks are not relevant in Hungary compared to other regions because there is much sensitivity around addressing this historical topic, and publishers approach the subject cautiously. In addition, there is also a minor availability

¹ Orig.: «Educare al rispetto delle differenze contro ogni forma di violenza e discriminazione, conservare la memoria della Shoah nelle scuole e nelle università: sono queste le attività dedicate al mondo della scuola, sia agli studenti sia ai docenti, che il Miur promuove e coordina tramite la Direzione generale per lo studente, l'integrazione e la partecipazione». (Cf. <<https://www.miur.gov.it/scuola-e-shoah>> [12/2023]).

² Cf. <https://konyvtar.parlament.hu/archiv/-/asset_publisher/OTYxpZQhAHFt/content/a-holokauszt-magyarorsz%C3%A1gi-%C3%A1ldozatainak-eml%C3%A9knapja-%C3%A1prilis-16.-#:~:text=2001%20%C3%B3ta%20minden%20%C3%A9vben%20%C3%A1prilis,%C3%A9vfordul%C3%B3j%C3%A1n%2C%202000> (12/2023).

of resources and a very poor market demand that impact the decision to publish or translate Holocaust-themed picturebooks. In this overall picture, the translation of Tamar Meir's picturebook – *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* – illustrated by the artist Yael Rafael based in Tel-Aviv represents an important and precious exception. The Hungarian version was published by Infopoly Alapítvány (curator: Gábor Dombi) in 2020, and the translation was carried out by Erzsébet Szilágyi, Ben Mazza, Ráchel Oláh-Grosz, Panna Petróczy, and Benedek Zentai. This editorial release is also accompanied by the publication of an excellent contribution by Dombi (2020) on the picturebook and the life of Tirelli. It is a comprehensive, fully documented reference work for educators and all of those interested in the topic³.

Holocaust picturebooks are often considered among the so-called challenging and controversial picturebooks (cf. Evans 2015, Neraas 2021) that deal with taboo topics, such as death, diseases, the atrocities of war, migration, etc. A couple of examples are John Burningham's *Granpa* (1984), which deals with the death of a beloved person, or Toshi Maruki's *Hiroshima no Pika* (1980), which addresses the bombing of Hiroshima. Correspondingly, *Rose Blanche* (1985), by Christophe Gallaz and Roberto Innocenti, is the first picturebook that focuses on the Holocaust (cf. also Kümmerling-Meibauer 2022, 89). These stories that fall into the category of narrative nonfiction are often emotionally challenging as they transport readers into violent periods of history or represent natural disasters, diseases, death, or events such as 9/11 (see, e.g., Goodenough, Immel 2008, Crawford 2009, Szente 2018, Lampert, Mallan 2020). When dealing with the Holocaust, these stories may focus on the heroic actions of young resisters or on the tragedy of the victims (see also Coats 2018, 291-292).

William Moebius mentions Holocaust picturebooks in the wide context of the contemporary picturebooks:

While bodily nudity is still relatively rare in the American picturebook (Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, or *Pocahontas* [1946] by the D'Aulaires), battle scenes, street violence, violent death, torture, oppressed mothers, belligerent or dismissive fathers, Holocaust victims, and homeless children all figure in the world of

³ The analysis of this picturebook will be promptly addressed in a subsequent paper scheduled for publication in the forthcoming issue (2024) of this Journal.

the contemporary picturebook and draw the reader's attention to worlds of poverty, slavery, and brutality, the immediacy of which remains otherwise unspeakable. (2018, 354-355)

Lawrence L. Langer's⁴ pioneering study *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, published in 1975, is one of the earliest book-length work of what he identifies as the «literature of atrocity» (see also 1995). In particular, in the United States, the first wave of Holocaust studies coincided with the women's and antiwar movements, which recognized psychological trauma as a pressing sociopolitical problem. The idea of trauma has since gone mainstream, with its evolution continued in the medical and psychological disciplines, while becoming the subject of literature and of critical theory too. (Kidd 2011, 182) At this point it is useful to quote Langer's thoughts on the literature of atrocity:

The challenge to the literary imagination is to find a way of making this fundamental truth accessible to the mind and emotions of the reader. The uniqueness of the experience of the Holocaust may be arguable, but beyond dispute is the fact that many writers *perceived* it as unique, [...] The result is a body of writing that forms the subject of this study, what I call the literature of atrocity. Although only a generation has passed since the events of the Holocaust, it is not too soon to begin assessing what this literature has achieved, and especially to call to the attention of readers the significance of the achievement. At a time when technology threatens more and more to silence the rich resources of language, it seems singularly appropriate, and perhaps even urgent, to explore ways in which the writer has devised an idiom and a style for the unspeakable, and particularly the unspeakable horrors at the heart of the Holocaust experience. (1975, xii)

In almost all of the treatises on Holocaust literature Theodor W. Adorno's admonition («[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric»⁵) is mentioned

⁴ An internationally known scholar, Holocaust analyst, and professor emeritus of English and Holocaust education.

⁵ Samuel Weber's English translation (1988, 34). The widely misquoted statement about poetry after Auschwitz comes at the close of «Culture Critique and Society», the opening essay (originally written in 1949) in *Prisms* (a collection of essays published in 1955). The German (1963, 26) reads: «Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.

and Langer's book is no exception either. The U.S. scholar affirms that we should not take Adorno's words literally, but a monition concerning the function of the literature of atrocity. Langer, quoting Adorno's words «[t]he so-called artistic representation of naked bodily pain, of victims felled by rifle butts, contains, however remote, the potentiality of wringing pleasure from it» explains that «Adorno appeals here not to latent sadistic impulses, but to the pleasures inherent in artistic response [...]» (1975, 1-2). Langer quotes from Adorno also the fear that art may imply that «the inconceivable fate of the victims appears to have had some sense after all» (2). Langer draws attention to the fact that in the literature of atrocity

there are two forces at work [...]: historical fact and imaginative truth. The literature of atrocity is never wholly invented; the memory of the literal Holocaust seethes endlessly in its subterranean depths. But such literature is never wholly factual either. [...] Without the Holocaust, such literature would not have been possible; with it, by a curious inversion, literature has taken as its task *making* such reality "possible" for the imagination. (Ivi, 8)

The significance of this literature, according to the scholar is «its ability to evoke the atmosphere of monstrous fantasy that strikes any student of the Holocaust, simultaneously to suggest the exact details of the experience in a way that forces the reader to fuse and reassess the importance of both» (ivi, 30).

Picturebooks on the Holocaust represent the intersection of (post)memory, trauma, and children's and young adult's literature. Their composition is crucial, as the arrangement of text and visual elements determines how the story evolves.

The term 'postmemory' was coined by Marianne Hirsch during the 1990s (cf. 1992-1993⁶, 1997) to «describe the relationship of the second generation

Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzte und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation».

⁶ Marianne Hirsch developed her influential concept of 'postmemory' to elucidate the transmission of traumatic memories across generations drawing inspiration from Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking graphic novel *Maus*. In *Maus*, Spiegelman navigates the complex interplay between memory and history, offering a poignant exploration of the Holocaust's enduring impact on subsequent generations. Hirsch's engagement with *Maus* underscores the significance of visual narratives in shaping collective memory and understanding of historical trauma. In

with powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right» (2008, 103). For Hirsch (ivi, 105-106), there is the possibility that «the descendants of survivors (of victims as well as perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory». Therefore, as she points out, «in certain extreme circumstances, memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event» (106). So, Hirsch is interested in defining how memories are formed and transmitted outside of personal experience.

Post-memory, in my reading, has certainly not taken us beyond memory, but is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination. (1992-1993, 8-9)

Postmemory explores how people inherit memories of traumatic events, as the Holocaust, other traumatic historical events, natural disasters etc., from the previous generation (cf. e.g. Bal, Crewe, Spitzer 1999, Hirsch 2012, Howorus-Czajka 2016, Alfandary, Baumel-Schwartz 2022). In particular, Holocaust postmemory explores the emotional and psychological impact on the descendants of survivors or those directly affected by the event. In this context, picturebooks represent powerful tools for transmitting Holocaust postmemories to younger generations through visual narratives. Accurate and purposeful placement of images and portions of text may strengthen the emotional resonance of the narrative, fostering a deeper connection between the reader and the historical events. Given the sensitive nature of the Holocaust and often the (very) young age of the readers who the book is addressed to, respectful and careful composition is essential. Therefore, Holocaust picturebooks allow for the use of symbolism and metaphor (butterflies, seeds, light

particular, she was inspired by the moving photographs featured within Spiegelman's narrative, including the photograph of Art with his mother (in the first volume, cf. Spiegelman 2003, 102), the haunting photograph of Richieu (Artie's dead brother, at the beginning of the second volume, 165) and finally that of Artie (at the end of the second volume, cf. 165, 294).

and darkness, torn teddy bears/broken dolls, specific colors are employed metaphorically to depict the before and after effects of the Holocaust, symbolic animals, etc.). Metaphors and symbolism often aim to strike a balance between the harsh realities of the events and the resilience of the human spirit. Their intentional incorporation in Holocaust picturebooks serves a dual purpose: to educate young readers about this dark chapter in history and to instill a sense of empathy, resilience, and hope for a better future.

The strong interplay between textual/verbal and visual elements in these picturebooks makes it possible to have a nuanced exploration of complex emotions aroused (grief, survivor guilt, anguish, identity struggles, empathy for the victims and survivors, sense of fear for the potential recurrence of such horrors in the world, hope for a better future, sense of resilience, responsibility to honor and preserve the memory of the Holocaust) and being tied to Holocaust postmemory. These publications often aim to assist and engage young readers in understanding historical events and evoking strong emotional responses create and promote empathy for those affected. Metaphors and symbolism in these picturebooks also aim to facilitate age-appropriate conversations about 'difficult' historical topics, encouraging dialogue about the enduring legacy of the Holocaust and reflection on the responsibility of preserving and passing on historical narratives, ensuring remembrance for future generations.

Analyzing *Rose Blanche* Cech (1987, 205) also focuses on «narrative credibility» that, in some cases, may diminish but gives priority to the purpose of the book that he glosses as «to convey a story of moral awakening, bravery, and self-sacrifice in largely visual, textually simplified terms. Despite its problems, it does so with grace and great feeling».

Holocaust picturebooks contribute shaping the collective consciousness, to developing of moral values and encourage reflection and discussion on and positive practices in human rights and social justice. By highlighting the consequences of prejudice and discrimination, these books may contribute to cultivating a culture of tolerance and acceptance. They challenge indifference and may inspire activism.

Elizabeth R. Baer (2000, 380), a scholar interested in children's literature about the Holocaust, affirms that if we accept Langer's interpretation of Adorno, then «“the literature of atrocity” should instruct but not delight».

One of the tasks that she set herself was «to propose a set of criteria by which to measure the usefulness and effectiveness of children's texts in confronting the Holocaust sufficiently». According to Baer, there are four requirements for children's books on the topic:

- 1) «The book must grapple directly with the evil of the Holocaust»;
- 2) «The book [...] should present the Holocaust in its proper context of complexity»;
- 3) «The book must convey — through the use of facts, emotions, and/or memory — a warning about the dangers of racism and anti-Semitism, and of complacency»; and
- 4) «the book should give the reader “a framework for response,” that is, to create in the child reader a consciousness, a “memory,” and a sense of personal responsibility regarding prejudice, hatred, and racial discrimination» (ivi, 384-385).

She also focuses on the main characteristics that children's literature covering atrocity should have:

Thus, the creation of a literature of atrocity for children, and the presentation of that literature, calls upon us to recognize and convey the evil that is new in the post-Holocaust world. It calls upon us to make judicious choices in sharing the horrors of the Shoah with young readers. It calls for a consciousness on our part of the crucial need to confront the evil, to contextualize it, to warn children, and to provide them with a framework for consciousness, for making moral choices and for taking personal responsibility. Finally, it calls upon us to recognize the seeming paradox of the Holocaust being at once “unspeakable” and yet something that must be spoken about, not necessarily to make it meaningful but to make its reality imaginatively possible so that the next generation is vigilant about the hatred inside all of us. (Ivi, 391)

In the early 2000s, among others, three scholars made notable contributions to the theoretical studies of children's Holocaust literature introducing new dimensions to these studies: Hamida Bosmajian (2001), Adrienne Kertzer (2002) and Lydia Kokkola (2002). In her *Sparing the Child. Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust*, Bosmajian also deals with children's picturebooks and affirms that

[a] picture book about the Holocaust, a world far removed from the child's experience, seems a contradiction of the genre's values. Nevertheless, for the

sake of memory and witnessing, the medium of the picture books has been used to introduce and instruct the child about this difficult subject. (2001, 216)

In her influential book she dedicates a chapter to Maurice Sendak's *Dear Mili* (chapter 9. «Hidden Grief: Maurice Sendak's *Dear Mili* and the Limitations of Holocaust Picture Books», 215-239) emphasizing the fact that «[V]isual representation of the Holocaust in picturebooks, however, usually attempts to teach as it displaces and obscures the horror through archetypal conventions and Holocaust images that have become iconically acceptable» (220). In this chapter in particular, she provides us a very meticulous and insightful analysis of Sendak's illustrations. We shouldn't forget that Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (winner of the 1964 Caldecott Medal) is one of the most successful picturebooks of all time.

For her part, Lydia Kokkola (2002, 3) emphasizes that

Holocaust literature for children can be conceived as having a greater moral obligation to be historically accurate than historical fiction dealing with less catastrophic events. Although the basic issues and techniques involved are not different from any other kind of historical fiction, when the Holocaust is represented in literature for young readers, they are accorded a greater enormity.

Kokkola (ivi, 64-66) also focuses on modality in picturebooks from two points of view: i) from the point of view of the historical accuracy and ii) after Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, from the point of view of «the dynamic relation that happens between the picture and the text». Kokkola agrees that «visual images alone are unable to convey historicity». The reader needs to possess prior background knowledge and awareness of certain conventions to be able to understand the main characteristics and conventions within the illustrations, elsewhere won't be able to evaluate and categorize them (real, unreal, a wish, a fear...). She also focuses on the important question that concerns the readers or «mixed audience». She remarks that «[w]hile all modern children will require explanations of the kinds of specific historical details discussed so far, some children may also need additional assistance in understanding practices and terms which are not historical, but cultural. Gentile readers may need background information on common Jewish practices. Jewish children, on the other hand, may find such explanations unnecessary impositions» (ivi, 74).

Indeed, the cultural knowledge of the target audience should always be taken into account.

In 2009 Eva Lezzi's «Representations of the Shoah in Picture Books for Young Children: an Intercultural Comparison» appeared in which she reflects (35-38) on the concept of «secondary traumatization» and raises several questions:

- 1) «What must be communicated through the text when the child is in the company of a trusted person while reading the book»;
- 2) «What does the child formulate for itself when it looks at the picture book on its own?»;
- 3) «What can be autonomously provided for a child to discover in the illustrations of picture books when the illustrations concern the Shoah?»;
- 4) Should these book «convey hope and have a happy ending in order not to overburden the children reading them?»
- 5) «What the paratexts [...] actually convey. How are these paratexts positioned in relation to the illustrative, aesthetic and narrative levels of children's books? What are the pedagogic intentions and the historiographic models of explanation behind them?».

The use of paratexts in Holocaust picturebooks for children acquires an important role and explicitly represents the presence of an adult voice that offers useful details to the young readers for the interpretation of the Holocaust. In addition, non-fictional historical picturebooks use factual information and events, often accompanied by authentic photographs or illustrations, to educate young readers about a specific historical period or event. The primary aim is to provide accurate information in an engaging and visually appealing way, making it suitable for educational purposes (Coats 2018, 100).

3. Typology of Holocaust picturebooks

Eric A Kimmel in his «Confronting the Ovens: The Holocaust and Juvenile Fiction» (1977, 85) – based on the intensity of setting as well as the characters who are involved – compares the categories of the Holocaust literature for children to Dante's *Inferno*. «The smoking chimneys of Birkenau are at the center with the lesser hells ringed around it in ascending order. The position

of any one book on the spiral depends on what compromise is reached with the demands of subject, of audience, and of self». According to Kimmel the outermost ring consists of the so-called «Resistance novels». These books deal with «young people taking an active role in the underground movements of their homelands» and the Jews in them are usually passive and minor characters. The second ring consists of the «Refugee novels», mainly written by Jewish authors. These books «deal with the experiences of families fleeing the Nazis» (ivi, 86). The Jews in these books organize their own escapes, are faced with challenges to overcome, and build a new life at a new home. They often do not return to where they fled. The third ring consists of the Occupation novels and the fourth represents the Jewish resistance. The fifth and last ring or category leads us «to the bottom, to the eerie, silent world of gas, ashes, and flames. Lower than this we cannot go, for this is the world of the camps» (ivi, 90).

Deborah Wooten and Heather Matthews applied these categories to the Holocaust picturebooks with the following outcome:

<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 4</i>	<i>Level 5</i>
Resistance (Passive Jews)	Refugee	Occupation	Jewish Resistance	Concentration Camps
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Benno and the Night of Broken Glass</i>• <i>Whispering Town</i>• <i>Jars of Hope</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The Journey that Saved Curious George</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The Cat Who Lived with Anne Frank</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The Cats of Krasinski Square</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen</i>

Table 1 – Modified levels in Wooten and Matthews (2022, 230, Table 12.1)

Wooten and Matthews also developed Kimmel’s scheme and propose the following «Inhumane meter» with 8 levels according to which to categorize the books:

	<i>Inhumane meter taxonomy</i>	<i>Text(s)</i>	<i>Support</i>
Level 8	Death		
Level 7	Jews are sent to ghettos and concentration camps		
Level 6	Jews flee their countries for safety		
Level 5	Jewish families are separated		
Level 4	Jews go into hiding in their communities		
Level 3	Jews are arrested		
Level 2	Destruction of personal belongings, synagogues, and businesses		
Level 1	Non Jewish people are no longer friendly to Jews	<i>Benno and the Night of Broken Glass</i>	No one would speak to Inge at school

Table 2 – Inhumane meter (ivi, 243, Table 12.2)

4. Adultification of childhood and infantilization of the adult world

In his classic work *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), cultural critic Neil Postman sustains that the «dividing line between childhood and adulthood is rapidly eroding» and describes «where the idea of childhood came from, why it flourished for 350 years, and why it is rapidly disappearing» (1994, e-book). Postman tries to answer the question of why it is disappearing and affirms that the printing press created childhood, while the electronic media is making it disappear. The printing press kept children away from the adult world of violence, etc. because books have created a world apart for them. «The printing press created a new definition of adulthood *based on reading competence*, and, correspondingly, a new conception of childhood *based on reading incompetence*». Children and adults no longer shared the same information environment. Postman asserts that

Like many other social artifacts, childhood became obsolete at the same time that it was perceived as a permanent fixture. [...] It is in television, therefore, that we can see most clearly how and why the historic basis for a dividing line between childhood and adulthood is being unmistakably eroded.

In addition, we can agree with Cech when he affirms that the medium of television exposes children to adult matters at ever earlier ages and that

[w]hat Postman, Ariel Dorfman, and others have referred to as the “adultification” (or adulteration) of childhood is balanced by a corresponding infantilization of the adult world, in which the most difficult issues are reduced to the simplest levels of literacy and conceptualization. To follow this logic, a picture book treatment of the nuclear holocaust might be the right form for an adult audience that takes its news in two-minute bits and derives its political ideas from a few highly visible public symbols or rhetorical platitudes. The blurring of the audience boundaries in the contemporary picture book may indeed fill a cultural need for reduction and simplification. (1987, 198)

Respect to the medium of television, in the last 15-20 years the pervasive presence of electronic media and screens in contemporary society has further led to a concerning overexposure of children to age-inappropriate content. With easy access to various forms of media, including the internet and social media platforms, children are frequently exposed to adult themes and images at increasingly younger ages. Unlike the regulated environment fostered by the printing press, where books created a distinct world for children, today’s digital landscape blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, inundating young minds with content often beyond their cognitive and emotional capacity to comprehend. This overexposure raises profound questions about the impact on children’s (cognitive) development, emotional well-being, mental health, and understanding of the world around them, necessitating critical examination and preemptive measures to safeguard their well-being in an increasingly digitalized world. The lack of effective regulation and parental supervision exacerbates the risks associated with this phenomenon, raising significant concerns about the long-term impact on the next generation’s psychological and societal development. The observation made by John Cech regarding «the blurring of audience boundaries in the contemporary picture books», which may cater to a cultural demand for reduction and simplification, intersects with the discussion on children’s overexposure to electronic media. In an era where children are increasingly exposed to adult themes through various media channels, including picturebooks, there exists a societal inclination towards simplifying and streamlining

complex narratives and imagery. This trend can inadvertently contribute to the adultification of children by presenting them with content that may exceed their developmental readiness. When considering Holocaust picturebooks in this context, the simplification and reduction of complex historical events may seem appealing as a means to introduce children to difficult subject matter without overwhelming them. However, it is essential to recognize also the possible consequences of this approach: its potential benefits of accessibility and the inherent risks of distortion. While simplified narratives may make challenging topics more accessible to young readers, providing them with an initial understanding of historical events that may otherwise be too complex or overwhelming, they also run the risk of glossing over or sanitizing the historical reality of the Holocaust. By omitting or downplaying certain aspects of history, such as the systematic persecution, violence, and mass genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, these books risk presenting a distorted or incomplete portrayal of the Holocaust. This can lead to a superficial understanding of the events and their profound implications, potentially perpetuating misconceptions or trivializing the suffering of Holocaust victims and survivors. Therefore, while Holocaust picturebooks may seem like a viable option for introducing children to the topic, educators and caregivers must approach their selection and presentation with careful consideration. They should prioritize books that strike a balance between accessibility and historical accuracy, offering age-appropriate content that neither oversimplifies nor overwhelms them with distressing details. Furthermore, educators should be mindful of the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students, recognizing that individual reactions to Holocaust literature may vary greatly. Sensitivity to trauma, cultural sensitivity, and developmental readiness are crucial factors to consider when introducing such complex and sensitive topics in the classroom or at home. By fostering an environment of open dialogue, empathy, and critical inquiry, educators can help young readers navigate the complexities of Holocaust literature in a meaningful and responsible manner, ensuring that the lessons of history are neither forgotten nor misrepresented. Additionally, it is essential to supplement the reading experience with discussions, activities, and supplementary materials that provide context and encourage critical

thinking. Ensuring that children have a foundational understanding of historical context and providing appropriate support and guidance during the reading process are crucial steps in mitigating the potential risks of exposing children to sensitive subject matter prematurely. By choosing high-quality, well-researched, carefully crafted Holocaust picturebooks educators and caregivers can ensure that children are presented with accurate, nuanced portrayals of historical events. These books may be accompanied by thoughtful supplementary materials, such as author's notes, glossaries, and discussion guides, which enrich the reading experience and facilitate meaningful conversations. Moreover, by selecting reputable publishers and consulting with experts in Holocaust education, educators and caregivers can confidently navigate the vast array of available titles, ensuring that the books chosen meet the highest standards of accuracy, authenticity, and sensitivity. Ultimately, the careful selection of high-quality Holocaust picturebooks not only cultivates empathy, critical thinking, and historical understanding in young readers but also honors the memory of the Holocaust's victims and survivors by preserving the truth of their experiences for future generations.

Many Holocaust picturebooks (e.g. Jennifer Elvgren's *The Whispering Town* with the illustrations by Fabio Santomauro; Roberto Innocenti's *Rose Blanche*; Irène Cohen-Janca's *Le dernier voyage* con le illustrazioni di Maurizio A.C. Quarello, etc.), underlining the power of compassion and bravery in the face of adversity, emphasize the stories of individuals who risked their lives to help others (to shelter, protect and save Jews and other persecuted groups), the so-called hidden heroes or «Righteous Among the Nations» characterized by acts of bravery and selflessness (e.g. Tamar Meir's *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* with the illustrations by Yael Albert; *Il cavaliere delle stelle. La storia di Giorgio Perlasca* by Luca Cognolato and Silvia Del Francia with the illustrations by Fabio Sardo, Lia Levi's *La portinaia Apollonia* illustrated by Emanuela Orciari, etc.). These are narrative nonfictions that can be read like novels, but the stories are true. These child-friendly books address real-life events, facts, or figures, and introduce children to history and its impact on the world (e.g. Jennifer Elvgren's *The Edelweiss Pirates* with the illustrations by Daniela Stamatia-di). Through Holocaust picturebooks children are able to learn a lot about

the world, history and social issues. Portraying the hidden heroes to the readers, these books bring to light and put an emphasis on the efforts of the ordinary people who risked their lives to protect others. Holocaust picturebooks also focus on humanitarian efforts, concern complex moral dilemmas, profound ethical challenges, and choices in the face of extreme adversity (e.g. Ruth Vander Zee's *Erika's Story* with the illustrations by Roberto Innocenti, etc.). Hidden heroes had to keep their activities secret, lie about the identity of the persons they were hiding, and faced the constant threat of discovery, arrest, and even death for themselves and their loved ones. They often had to make difficult choices about whom to protect, considering circumstances such as available resources, the capacity of their hiding places, and the probability of discovery. While they knew they were living in a society that was complicit in the persecution and genocide of certain groups, they also had to make decisions about whether to collaborate with the occupying forces.

Other Holocaust picturebooks focus on the stories of persons who survived the Holocaust demonstrating remarkable resilience and strength despite trauma (e.g. Marci Stillerman's *Nine Spoons. A Chanukah Story* illustrated by Pesach Gerber; Michelle Bisson's *Hedy's Journey. The True Story of a Hungarian Girl Fleeing the Holocaust* illustrated by El primo Ramón; Gabriele Clima's *Storia di Vera*, etc.). Others focus on profound losses, family separation, children's perspectives, friendships (e.g. Lorenza Farina's *Il ciliegio di Isaac* illustrated by Anna Pedron, etc.) and acts of solidarity, the roots of prejudice and discrimination, hope and redemption, etc.

5. The layered nature of Holocaust picturebooks

The illustrations that are likely to be visually engaging and suitable for children play a significant role in effectively conveying the emotions, atmosphere, and historical context of the story. They complement the narrative and help young readers engage with the characters and settings.

The characters in the books are portrayed with expressive and relatable features. The illustrators communicate through facial expressions, body language, and gestures of the characters, who are rather expressive making it easy for readers to connect with the emotions of the characters.

The illustrations may contain light and dark imagery and their juxtaposition is a powerful and symbolic way to convey a wide range of emotions, experiences, and moral dimensions (e.g. *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop, Nine Spoons, The Whispering Town*, etc.). Usually, light symbolizes hope, resilience, and the human spirit in the midst of darkness. Dark represents the despair, suffering, fear, persecution, violence, loss, and the brutality of the Holocaust. Furthermore, light may symbolize moments of safety and concealment, particularly in the context of hidden heroes and the efforts to protect persecuted individuals. On the other hand, dark may also represent exposure, vulnerability, and the constant threat of discovery. Darkness may be used by the illustrators to depict the dangerous and extreme conditions faced by those targeted by the Nazis. Light is often associated with innocence, childhood, and pre-war life. Light imagery may be used to contrast the innocence that was lost during the Holocaust, while dark symbolizes the loss of innocence, the destruction of families, and the profound impact of the Holocaust on the lives of children and families. Light can also represent the kindness and compassion of hidden heroes, rescuers, and those who resisted the Nazis. Dark represents the evil of the Nazi regime, the perpetrators of atrocities, and the moral darkness that descended upon Europe during this period. Light indicates moments of resilience, survival, and strength. It may highlight acts of kindness and resistance. Dark represents the destructive forces of war, genocide, and the physical and emotional toll on individuals and communities. Light is often associated with the importance of remembering the Holocaust, preserving the memory of the victims, and learning from history. Dark may symbolize the dangers of forgetting, denial, and the potential for history to repeat itself if the lessons of the Holocaust are not remembered.

The illustrations may use symbolism to convey deeper meanings and themes of the story. For example, everyday objects or ice-cream (cf. the story of Francesco Tirelli) etc. might represent moments of joy and normalcy amidst the turmoil of war.

Holocaust picturebooks may contain cultural representations introducing readers to different cultures. The streets, buildings, and the landscape might be shown with attention to detail, conveying the historical setting of the story. Illustrators might have paid attention to historical accuracy

to depict the clothing, architecture, and visual elements of the 1940s era in the places where their stories are set.

As already pointed out, these books serve as an educational tool for introducing children to the sensitive topic Holocaust and promoting discussions about empathy, tolerance, and all the above-mentioned dilemmas and ethical challenges providing an adequate amount of information for them to grasp the gravity of the events while avoiding graphic or overwhelming details. A child-centric approach (intentional focus on understanding and catering to the needs, interests, and developmental stages of young readers) recognizes the emotional world of children and seeks to create an emotional connection with readers. This approach recognizes that children have unique perspectives, and their engagement with a story or artwork is different from that of adults. It starts with a deep understanding of how children perceive the world. It takes into account their cognitive, emotional, and social development, ensuring that the content and illustrations are age-appropriate and relatable. Authors and illustrators who adopt this approach immerse themselves in the minds of children, allowing them to create narratives and visuals that align with a child's sense of wonder, curiosity, and imagination. The stories and illustrations often explore emotions that children can relate to, such as friendship, fear, love, and empathy. By tapping into these emotions, the content becomes more meaningful and impactful, leaving a lasting impression on young minds. The emotions conveyed in the illustrations will complement the narrative and enhance the readers' understanding of the story.

The themes, language, and complexity of the story are carefully considered to match the developmental stage and reading abilities of the target audience. Usually, the content is designed to engage and challenge young readers without overwhelming them.

Illustrations are crafted to spark children's imaginations and encourage them to visualize the story's elements beyond the text. Authors and illustrators might leave room for interpretation, allowing children to add their own ideas and interpretations to the narrative.

The child-centric approach in children's literature and illustrations places children at the center of the creative process and emphasizes active engagement with the material. It respects the developmental stages

of young readers and aims to create content that is age-appropriate and stimulating. Whether through interactive illustrations, engaging characters, or immersive storytelling, the content invites children to participate in the reading experience actively. This interactivity fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, making children feel like they are part of the story.

6. Conclusion

Holocaust picturebooks possess significant potential for educational efficacy and, therefore, are a powerful educational tool that helps teach children and young learners about this dark and violent period of complex and sensitive history through imaginative reconstruction. By interweaving compelling narratives with touching visuals, these books have the capacity to foster empathy and cultivate a nuanced understanding of historical events. At the same time, writers and illustrators must carefully balance the imaginative aspects with a commitment to historical accuracy and respect for the historical truth (realistic representation of history), especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as the Holocaust. Moreover, carefully crafted narratives enable educators to introduce historical complexities in age-appropriate ways, encouraging critical thinking and discussions on morality, tolerance, and the consequences of prejudice. Through the emotional resonance of storytelling and the power of visual representation, Holocaust picturebooks serve as valuable educational tools, facilitating meaningful conversations about the past. The potential impact of these books lies not only in imparting historical knowledge, but also a sense of responsibility toward promoting a more compassionate and informed future. By presenting complex themes in a format accessible to children and adolescents, these picturebooks contribute to shaping a generation with a heightened awareness of the consequences of prejudice and the importance of tolerance.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the complex and multifaceted nature of Holocaust representation in children's literature, underscoring the importance of critically engaging with these narratives to deepen our understanding of historical events and their impact on young readers. Moving forward, the next phase of this research will involve a comprehensive analysis of a selection of Holocaust picturebooks underlining the

importance of critically assessing the narrative techniques utilized. By delving into specific texts, I aim to bolster this theoretical framework with concrete textual examinations, elucidating how authors employ narrative strategies to transmit history to younger generations, evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies in engaging readers and conveying complex historical narratives considering factors such as narrative coherence, emotional resonance, and the level of engagement they elicit from readers. Furthermore, attention will be given to the distribution and reception of these picturebooks, investigating how they are disseminated within educational contexts and received by diverse audiences. By undertaking this detailed examination, I aim to deepen our understanding of how Holocaust representation in children's literature can shape perceptions, foster empathy, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding this critical aspect of human history and I aspire to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to inform educators, parents, editors and policymakers about the potential of children's literature as a tool for historical education and commemoration.

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