

Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

Retoryka ciszy - perspektywa amerykańistyczna

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Literary means of expressing trauma: silence and darkness in Dara Horn's novel *The World to Come*

Literackie środki wyrażania traumy: cisza i ciemność w powieści Dary Horn *The World to Come*

Abstract

The article explores Dara Horn's novel *The World to Come* as an expression of the trauma of Jewish-American community related to its experiences of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, in the American army, of communist involvement and threats of modern terrorism. These issues are built into a complex narrative of family relationships, mixing fictional characters with historical figures. The analysis demonstrates how Horn's textual strategies of silence and darkness represent the cultural trauma.

Artykuł omawia powieść Dary Horn *The World to Come* będącą wyrazem traumy społeczności żydowskiej w USA w kontekście antysemityzmu sowieckiego i w armii amerykańskiej, a także związków z komunizmem oraz współczesnego terroryzmu. Zagadnienia te wbudowane są w złożoną narrację o związkach rodzinnych, łączącą postacie fikcyjne z historycznymi. Analiza wskazuje, że wykorzystanie określonych strategii retorycznych związanych z motywami ciszy i ciemności umożliwia Horn przedstawienie traumy zbiorowej.

Key words

Dara Horn, trauma, anti-Semitism, silence, darkness

Dara Horn, trauma, antysemityzm, cisza, ciemność

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1. Introduction

Extensive research linking the personal experience of trauma with memory, history and socio-political environment has indicated the potential and relevance of connection between post-trauma and imaginative literature.¹ Survivor narratives relate trauma powerfully, but works of fiction may focus even better on traumatic experiences of individuals or groups in socio-historical contexts. In the words of Fortunati and Lambert (2010, 130), “Literature, in its diverse expressions, and theoretical studies have played an important role in the representation, the transmission, and the critical (or mystifying) elaboration of traumatic events”. Fictional genres have the power of exceeding the realm of autobiographical accounts as these are largely restricted by the expectation of authenticity characterized by restraint, whereas creative artists can use a broad range of rhetorical tools to achieve the desired impression upon the reader. As Ann Rigney aptly observes, in the case of traumatic events, “the freedoms offered by fictional genres and literary modes of expression may simply provide the only forum available for recalling certain experiences that are difficult to articulate in any other way” (Rigney 2010, 348). Literature, film and other creative media become the storage room of traumatic events which have affected individuals and groups. In consequence, through their artistic power, they shape the collective memory, contributing to channels of communicating trauma to succeeding generations. In this area literature “is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory” (Erl1 2010, 391).

Trauma frequently means more than just a personal drama. It results from powerful external forces, such as racial prejudice or colonialism (Doane 2004, 524). Post-traumatic disorders are caused by exceptionally dangerous or catastrophic

1. Seminal work in the study of trauma, personal experience, memory, in the context of history, politics and arts has been done by scholars such as Dominic LaCapra, Dori Laub, Richard McNally, Shoshana Felman or Cathy Caruth.

stressors as terrorist attacks, abduction, torture, imprisonment in prisoner-of-war or concentration camps, or extreme force natural disasters; traumatic stressors may be multiple, occurring in a sequence and causing long-term trauma, affecting one's "flow of life, sense of identity, self-image and self-esteem" (Gailienė 2015, 12). Trauma remains a highly complex condition since it is simultaneously an internal and an external process in which an individual's experiences often result from their sociocultural position. Similarly to the concept of cultural memory, trauma may be defined as cultural, when it results from dramatic events affecting group consciousness and identity, collective memory and intergenerational transfer. Danutė Gailienė, a Lithuanian scholar, notes how the theory of cultural trauma was developed by studying reflections of critical American historic events in the public consciousness, or negative aspects of social transformations in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe (Gailienė 2015, 13), but examples of cultural trauma affecting large groups of population could be multiplied, to mention the most striking ones, such as those referring to the consequences of the Holocaust and Soviet anti-Semitic purges, or the apartheid rules and practices in South African society. The concept of cultural trauma is also used to refer to the long lasting effects of mass atrocities on social cohesion and democratic stability; notably, the subjects of cultural trauma are those who were victimized, but also those who belong to the group that committed macro-crimes: "representations of their history shuttle between a massive distancing from the macro-criminal past and a notorious denial of it" (Langenohl 2010, 171).

The Jews of Europe were persecuted throughout history. Their descendants are affected by the lasting impact of these persecutions: ghettoization, lack of civil rights, hostility, beatings, pogroms, Stalinist purges and, most of all, the Shoah. The collective memory of Central and Eastern Europe as recorded in creative fiction by Jewish writers, throughout the world, is dark and post-traumatic. The unimaginably inhuman concept of the *Endlösung der Judenfrage* and the scale of the destruction of the Jewish life during the Holocaust has, understandably, somewhat dwarfed other forms of Jewish suffering represented in American literary imagination. The list of fiction (and other art forms) inspired by the crimes of the Holocaust is impressive, including such major works of American literature as Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, or equally powerful *Pawnbroker* by Edward Lewis Wallant, Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews*, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*. Many other, mostly Jewish-American authors, have created fiction in which the trauma of the Holocaust appears as an element of the experience of historical or contemporary American protagonists, second and third generation survivors. Dara Horn's novel *The World to Come*, in which she focuses on the grim legacy of

Soviet anti-Semitism, and also shows anti-Semitism within the American military, is a rare turn towards other painful experiences and memories.

Dara Horn, born in 1977 in New Jersey, is one of the most talented writers of her generation. She has been successful as an author of fiction as well as a scholar specializing in Hebrew and Yiddish languages and literature, and an expert in the Yiddish literature of Eastern Europe and Yiddish culture in Russia. Horn's first novel, *In the Image*, appeared when she was 25, and it began her career of critical recognition, numerous prestigious awards and popularity with readers. Her most recent novel, *Eternal Life*, dates from 2018. Like plenty of American writers nowadays, Dara Horn teaches courses at universities, at Sarah Lawrence College and City University of New York, but serves also as a visiting professor at other places, including Israel and Australia. She continues to live in New Jersey, now with her husband and four children.

The World to Come, published in 2006, was Horn's second novel. The title has several layers of meaning, of which the main refers to the concept of afterlife, *Olam ha-ba* in Judaism (Horn 2006b, 478). *The World to Come* deals with the traumas of anti-Semitism, most of all Soviet anti-Semitism, its consequences for the culture of Yiddish, as well as for the second and third generation American Jews. The focal point in the novel is a true event, transformed by Horn to suit her imaginative needs. In June 2001 Marc Chagall's painting "Study for over Vitebsk" was stolen from the Jewish Museum in New York where it had been on loan from a museum in St Petersburg. A group, calling itself the International Committee for Art and Peace, delivered a note saying the painting would not be returned until there was peace in the Middle East, but eventually, quite unexpectedly, it was found in the post office in Kansas ("Stolen Chagall returns to Russia" 2002). Marc Chagall serves as one of the key historical characters in Horn's novel, along with a Yiddish writer Der Nister (Pinchus Kahanovich), once Chagall's housemate when they both worked at the Malakhovka orphanage near Moscow, in 1920. Der Nister's life was filled with extreme poverty and political oppression, culminating in his death in a gulag in 1950. The majority of fictional characters in *The World to Come* are refugees from the Soviet Union or their descendants, or Soviet Jews who are victims of anti-Semitic persecutions.

In *The World to Come* Horn focused on a neglected topic in Jewish-American fiction – the persecution of Jews by the Stalinist regime. The suffering of the victims of the Soviet anti-Semitism has been marginalized due to the already mentioned enormity of the Holocaust, but possibly also in connection with the Jewish complicity in the communist regime, and directly in the Soviet destruction of the Yiddish culture through the activity of the Yevseksiya, the Jewish Sections of the Communist Party, created in 1918 in order to control the Jewish life in the Soviet

Union. Zvi Gitelman (2010) notes that the Evseksiia² activists were not numerous (up to 15,000 in 70 units), but their charge against synagogues and traditional Jewish education created an image of antireligious fanatics determined “to destroy Jewish culture in all but its Bolshevik forms.” The Evseksiia encouraged modernization of the Soviet Jewry and some maintenance of ethnic identity, but were ruthless in their contribution to the destruction of traditional Jewish life. Yet Zvi Gitelman (2015, 513-514) sees their political careers in the perspective of human tragedy and “daily struggle for life itself.” Horn, however, expresses her opinion on Yevseksiya more bluntly, writing of “cool Jews persecuting the uncool ones” and stressing the activity of the Yevseksiya that destroyed not only culture, but also human beings: “In the course of not being anti-Semitic and being simply anti-Zionist, the Yevseksiya managed to persecute, imprison, torture, and murder thousands of Jews, until their leaders were themselves purged” (Horn 2019). The Yevseksiya were disbanded in 1929; many members and the leaders were murdered in the Stalinist Great Purges of the 1930s or died in camps several years later. The anti-Jewish purges, diminished by the later heinousness of the Holocaust and by the embarrassment of the Yevseksiya, remain a traumatic burden for American Jews, hidden in the communal memory. The perception of this European past is further complicated by the fact that deportations or flights of Polish Jews to the Soviet Union during WWII meant survival from the Holocaust.

Limited attention to communist crimes is not something for which the Jewish American community should be singled out, but is part of a larger problem of the Western disregard of the crimes of the Soviet system. This indifference has been noted by Eastern European scholars and artists. Danutė Gailienė observed:

Unlike National Socialism, communist ideology was not recognized as a criminal system in the Western world after the collapse of communism, so the attention given to its criminal consequences is disproportionately low. With respect to the crimes of communism and communist ideology, the prevailing attitude in Western countries is at best ambivalence, while in Russia any crimes of communism are categorically denied. In the field of scientific research, this denial and ambivalence creates a considerable imbalance: though research on Holocaust trauma, victims of World War II and participants in the resistance against Nazi occupation is abundant, there is still shortage of reliable and representative research on the consequences of political repression in post-communist countries, especially in the former republics of the Soviet Union.

[...]

In academic research on historical memory and historical traumas, comparison of these two dictatorships [the Nazis and the Communists] is still taboo. (Gailienė 2015, 18-19)

Agnieszka Holland (2019, 28), a Polish film director of international renown, expressed similar views, focusing more on popular culture:

2. Different spellings of the word Yevseksiya/ Evseksiia are used by different authors.

I am deeply convinced that the crimes of communism have not been sufficiently described and have not entered humanity's awareness as an important component shaping recent history.

The Holocaust has found its vehicles, even if they simplify, such as the miniseries *Holocaust* or *Shindler's List*, and made its presence in popular culture. As far as communism is concerned, this is absent. [translation mine]

Dara Horn has, to some extent, filled this gap by writing a novel which, even if designed for an ambitious reader, still meets the expectations of popular fiction. *The World to Come* has a romance, a criminal plot and a multi-layered family saga – all these belonging to the realm of popular fiction.

The difficult themes Horn has decided to handle are not only those connected with the Stalinist purges, but also American anti-Semitism in the military and the horror of the war in Vietnam. The novel stresses the significance of family bonds in Jewish tradition and develops the vision of afterlife drawn from Judaism. Various other themes could be listed, so not without a reason Frank Cottrell Boyce, *The Guardian's* reviewer, commented on the massive contents of *The World to Come* making it read “less like a novel and more like one of those plaques on the sides of deep-space probes that are supposed to summarize Humanity. It's all here: Vietnam, Chernobyl, Stalin, quiz shows, folklore, art and – without wanting to give the game away – eternity” (Cottrell Boyce 2006). The very beginning of the novel indicates the author's intention to create an artistic representation of traumatized memory, as in the second paragraph the main protagonist, Benjamin Ziskind, is shown as if he were “a citizen of a necropolis”, obsessively seeing his dead parents “in the streets, always from behind, or turning a corner” (Horn 2006a, 9). The plot narrating his life, specifically the adventures connected with the twice stolen painting of Marc Chagall, begins on the very next page.

The novel revolves around several generations of Jewish families, originally from Russia or the Soviet Union, with some younger members born in the United States. The main characters are twins Benjamin and Sara Ziskind, but the stories of their parents, grandparents and the other loved ones are equally important for a broad panorama of Jewish lives in the Soviet Union and the United States in the 20th century. Cultural trauma which affected Russian Jewish migrants and the next generations is symbolically represented by a steel brace, resembling a cage, which Benjamin has to wear for six years during his school life. The cage, called “the Milwaukee Model Orthotic Brace” (Horn 2006a, 51) is needed to support his bones in proper growth, but causes extreme physical discomfort. This physical condition turns him into a person intellectually superior than his peers. Physically disabled, Benjamin learns how to survive with the help of his intellect. The cage shows one of the diverse strategies Dara Horn uses in her novel to represent the trauma her subjects feel, restricted by the past and the present of their uneasy American life. It exemplifies Horn's inventiveness in connecting the narrative of American lives

with the symbolism of the complex Jewish-American culture, building the strength of the novel. *The New York Times* reviewer of *The World to Come*, Susann Cokal noted how the novel “succeeds in part because Horn gracefully plays off certain words and images, using them as touchstones and leitmotifs: the title phrase and the Chagall painting; the recurring references to wombs, caves, bridges and the dents that angels supposedly leave beneath our noses” (Cokal 2006). Such a leitmotif, potentially a paradoxical notion in the novel so abundant in words, is silence, shown by Horn as one of the main strategies in dealing with repressed memories and extreme situations. The other leitmotif is that of enclosed, small, dark spaces, such as wombs or caves. Both silence and darkness reappear throughout the novel, reflecting the trauma of the characters and of the community.

2. Silence

The protagonist Benjamin Ziskind inherits silence from both of his parents. His mother, Rosalind, witnessed the arrest of her father and, as a child in the Soviet Union, learnt that speech is dangerous. Benjamin’s father, Daniel, was unable to communicate with his own father, a fanatic communist, and later discovered that only silence could protect him from his military colleagues’ anti-Semitic verbal cruelty.

Thus the value of silence was instilled into Benjamin. It becomes his frequent tactic in dealing with emotionally charged moments or socially awkward situations, with both kin and strangers. He is first shown as overcome by desire to be silent at the exhibition in the Museum of Hebraic Art. He is accosted for trivial social purposes by three women, including Erica Frank, whom he immediately perceives as attractive, yet Benjamin (additionally, at this point in his life wounded by divorce) destroys the attempted conversation by snapping his answers, muttering or producing brief statements causing embarrassment and silence, described by Horn (2006a, 13) as “a wide, blank space of empty canvas”. When Benjamin learns of his sister’s pregnancy, he lacks words to express his emotions: “Ben stammered his congratulations and then fell silent, sensing the presence of the new person, the not-yet person within her” (Horn 2006a, 49). The retrospective chapters narrating the arrival in the United States of Leonid Shcharansky from the Soviet Union, as a school boy and first an enemy of Benjamin, though later a friend and eventually Sara’s husband, reveal a peculiar letter writing: Benjamin wrote lengthy letters to Leonid which were never answered, yet he did not mind the lack of response. Sending his letters to a silent addressee clearly did not bother Benjamin, in some peculiar way this lack of response was welcome, as it meant being absolved from real communicating.

In the historical sections of the novel, taking place in Soviet Russia, characters are often shown as resorting to silence. In *Malakhovka*, the orphanage for children who were victims of war and pogroms, Boris Kulbak, traumatized by the violent death of his parents in a pogrom and his own near-escape from death, is such a silent character: “He didn’t know how to talk to the other boys, and so he was silent, but no-one seemed to make fun of him for it; there were a number of silent boys there, and no one seemed to mind” (Horn 2006a, 20). He is unable to talk of his family, of the loss of his baby brother due to illness and then his other unborn sibling in the atrocity of the pogrom, so when asked by other boys in the orphanage, “he told them that he had never had brothers or sisters, that he had always been an only child” (Horn 2006a, 19). The silence over his lost family is a safer option than recalling their dramatic deaths. Boris will again become tragically mute in the last stage of his life, when secret police come to arrest him in the apartment where he is staying with his little daughter, and he knows he will never see her again.

Boris tried to speak. “Raisya, I –“ But the man next to him slowly raised his hand, and Boris fell silent, because even though his daughter could see everything, that was one thing he could not let her see.

[...]

“Daddy, don’t go!” Raisya screamed.

What do you say to a child that you will never see again? That there is an abyss? [...] Boris could think of nothing; his imagination failed him. He looked at Raisya and said only what he saw.

“Baby,” he whispered. And walked out the door. (Horn 2006a, 270-271)

Faced with the arrest and the finality of the separation with his daughter, Boris has neither language nor voice. Conversation and speech are the medium to establish one’s position, a “social glue” (Glenn 2004, 5). Yet Boris Kulbak has just been deprived of his human rights, there is nothing he can say. Horn uses silence as a strategy to express both his ultimate despair and the dehumanization of the system in which the secret police holds total control.

The family relationship between Daniel Ziskind and his father, a hard-core communist, is one in which silence replaces communication. Senior Ziskind “was and had always been a member of the Communist Party who insisted on sending Daniel to Yiddish afternoon schools run by his comrades at the Workmen’s Circle in Newark while he hung framed pictures of Stalin on his walls” (Horn 2006a, 140). When Daniel told him that his fiancée’s father was killed by Soviet secret police, the father “flew into an unprecedented rage” (Horn 2006a, 144), claiming that Rosalie’s father must have been a criminal or she was a liar, and then demanded that Daniel should stop seeing her. As Daniel refuses, this makes any contact between them impossible, even when Daniel serves in Vietnam. The father refuses to communicate:

Three weeks after Daniel's arrival in Da Nang, he received a large envelope in the mail containing five of his own letters, unopened, and a short typewritten note from his father claiming that he would rather rot in prison like Daniel's dead criminal soon-to-be-father-in-law than read a single letter Daniel sent from Vietnam, or write to him again. (Horn 2006a, 145)

Senior Ziskind rejects his son's marriage, as acceptance would require a revision of his faith in the communist ideology. For him anyone ever arrested by Soviet authorities must have been a criminal and he is unable to part with such convictions. His identity is based on the faith in the superiority of the communist ideology, though Horn fails to give the reader clues why this faith would be stronger than family ties. The silence that Ziskind chooses in relations with his son stands in contrast to his passion for words. His attributes are "daily harangues about the plight of the workers, and his angry letters to the editor, and his endless tirades (Daniel was forbidden to repeat them in public, since his uncle had lost his job) against the neighbors, and the schools, and the corporations, and the doctors, and the banks, and the television studios, and the hospitals, and the government, and the country, and his good-for-nothing twelve-year-old son, instead of against the illness that had debilitated his wife" (Horn 2006a, 140). With the framed pictures of Stalin on the wall of his house the old Ziskind kept giving speeches strengthening his own position. Political fanaticism replaced what should have been the most sacred Jewish value – family ties. Ziskind's behavior recalls devoted Jewish communists in the early Soviet era, who rejected their own communities for the sake of communist ideologies. To protect himself against cognitive dissonance of recognizing Stalinist crimes against the Jews Ziskind decides to sever the link with his son. This personal end of communication between father and son represents also historical silence over Stalinist crimes for the Ziskind senior generation, represented by "his comrades at the Workmen's Circle in Newark" (Horn 2006a, 140). Horn breaks the historical silence through the structure and content of her novel, by showing the repressive Soviet apparatus in both the fictional story of Boris Kulbak and the historical one of Der Nister.

Nearly all of the other Yiddish writers had vanished, Der Nister knew. Since 1948, the Soviet secret police had begun collecting them one by one as if trying to assemble a living encyclopedia of Yiddish literature, arranging them alphabetically in their prison cells and then lining them up by library catalogue number in front of the firing squad. (Horn 2006a, 225)

This was yet another procedure of silencing, this time literal, directed at a whole community of artists. In contemporary America none of the victims are remembered. Rosalie manages to save some of their art, but only by an act of plagiarism. Out of that generation of Soviet Jewish artists, only Marc Chagall's work functions as the object of adoration and desire.

Yet another silence has to be employed by Daniel Ziskind during his duty in Vietnam. He quickly finds out that nothing else but avoiding conversation may protect him from his fellow soldiers' cruelty, vulgarity and anti-Semitism. Daniel realizes his only emotional escape is to pretend these fellow soldiers do not exist and he avoids their company. The consequences of his isolation are tragic for the whole unit. Desperately lonely, Daniel converses with the only friendly person, the Vietnamese interpreter assigned to their unit, "the first person who had smiled at him since he saw Rosalie for the last time" (Horn 2006a, 153). The two get involved in a lengthy conversation. It turns out later, however, that the Vietnamese interpreter is a traitor. The information passed between them is used to set a trap in which the other American soldiers from Daniel's unit are all killed and Daniel himself loses his leg.

A tragedy of twenty-first century dimension is evoked by Horn in the description of a terrorist attack. A truck packed with explosives blasts at the entrance to the Museum of Hebraic Art. Here she also uses silence to strengthen the vision: "There was silence for a moment, a hard, leaden silence, before people started screaming. [...] the room went dark. The air stood still" (Horn 2006a, 277). The commotion and escape from the site begins after this moment of silence.

Another type of silence evoked in the novel involves artists. As Stalinism progressed the Yiddish writer Der Nister was not allowed to create in the way he wanted, artistic freedom was replaced by socialist realism only, the style of writing completely alien to him. His published work was denounced "as decadent and absurd [and even] the children's books he had written with Chagall were gathered up and destroyed." (Horn 2006a, 138) As a result for ten years Der Nister lost his creative voice, "he wrote almost nothing, struggled to find odd jobs, nearly starved." (Horn 2006a, 138) He then began to write a realistic novel (called in Horn's book *The Family Crisis*), but he was unable to finish even that.

Rosalie Ziskind creates stories for children, as it turns out, using stories by forgotten Yiddish authors, nearly plagiarizing them. Still, her son Benjamin believes that what appears as plagiarizing is rather motivated by her desire to save them from oblivion. But her creating and publishing is also a curious exercise in silence, as she never admits where she found her inspiration. Possibly she believes that being silent about the Yiddish source of the stories, which her contemporary American audience find attractive, is a more certain option in order to have them published. She seems to be taking her justification for using these stories to the grave, so silence shrouds her creative process as it does her motifs behind using the work of Yiddish writers.

3. Darkness

Silence goes hand in hand with darkness, another emblematic motif in Dara Horn's *The World to Come*. Diverse dark spaces created by Horn in her novel serve the function of hideouts, falling into the category of places, as such assuming the role of "prime importance for the construction of cultural memory" (Assmann 2011, 282). Dark spaces appear throughout Dara Horn's novel, across experiences of generations of her characters and in various contexts. As in the Jewish history of expulsion there could be no attachment to a family mansion or a patch of land, they are replaced by dark spaces.

Boris (originally Benjamin) Kulbak, the maternal grandfather of the Ziskind twins, killed by the Soviet secret police, as a child lost his family in a pogrom. A lone survivor, he joined a gang of boys, but bullied by them, in desperation he decided to run away. The only place which he found that offered a promise of safety was an empty grave at the Jewish cemetery:

Boris lay down inside it, covered his arms and legs with dirt until he managed to stop shivering, and closed his eyes against the falling snow. At dawn he was discovered, half frozen, by someone from the burial society. The burial society paid his passage to Malakhovka. (Horn 2006a, 20)

From the darkness, literal and metaphorical, Boris Kulbak is saved. This peculiar resurrection of one of the ancestors of the American Ziskinds becomes a foundation myth, recreated in some other ways later in the family narrative. Daniel's (the beloved of Kulbak's daughter) saving from nearly certain death in a Vietnamese death-trap pit becomes a similar semi-resurrection.

In Malakhovka orphanage, a safe haven after his earlier ordeal, Boris participates in the art classes taught by Marc Chagall. Encouraged by the great artist, Boris creates a painting of a womb, a recollection of his mother and her tragic death together with the baby she was carrying.

The womb Boris painted was dark inside, cavelike, with painted stalactites dripping down from its sides, and illuminated only by a single ray of narrow painted light. But inside it was a treasure house, like the one he had once heard about that explorers had found in Egypt, an underground hideaway filled with everything necessary for the next world. (Horn 2006a, 27)

The combination of darkness and richness amazed Chagall who exchanged Boris's painting for his own, the painting that became later so essential for the sensational plot of *The World to Come*. The concept of the darkness of the cave, which recalls the womb and the grave at the same time, is repeated later in the novel, in the author's efforts to prove that darkness of the past brought life to the future. The idea of the womb as the space for new life combined with the space for the dead returns when Boris's American-born granddaughter Sara is pregnant. Benjamin, her twin

brother, has a vision of the womb as the space of both the new life and the dead: “Tiny secret blueprints of their parents were floating within her, growing, invisible and silent, engineering a soul. Every pregnant woman was carrying the dead” (Horn 2006a, 178). Daniel Ziskind almost miraculously survives his service in Vietnam. The crucial moment in his survival takes place when he runs from the enemies and hides in a cave, resembling “the inside of a womb. The floor of the cave was thick, soft mud, and just a few feet past the mouth, the darkness was total. Inside, it was silent, a sealed silence unlike any he had ever heard” (Horn 2006a, 166). The cave turns out to cover a tiger trap into which Daniel falls and goes through an excruciating experience of losing his right leg, which three sharp spikes go straight into. Heavy rain and an avalanche of stones bring him to a point when he feels that he “was buried alive” (Horn 2006a, 168). The cave is a witness to horrible suffering, but it also allows Daniel to hide from the Vietnamese who would have executed him. Finally he is found and saved by American soldiers.

Daniel returns home to be married to his beloved Rosalind. He dies when his children, Sara and Ben, are eleven. Sara is overcome with the sense that her father’s mourning rituals are inadequate to the needs of a person to embark on his journey to the underworld. Hence she decides to build her father a proper tomb, choosing for this purpose a small room at the back of the house. She takes maps, toy cars, her father’s clothes, some food and does the murals, which are a series of paintings recreating her father’s life as she could remember it, and their family. She also copies on the walls a story entitled “The Dead Town”. The room becomes what she considers a proper tomb, modeled on the ones Sara had seen in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Creating this small space for her dead father Sara performs a symbolic mourning ritual not only for him, but other anonymous ancestors who, in Eastern European conditions of repressions, could not have been mourned properly.

The place in New York where Rosalie Ziskind meets Sergei Popov, Russian art dealer and KGB agent responsible for her father’s arrest and death, also seems like a tomb: “The rooms were small and dark, and crammed with all sorts of things, weird furniture and fancy tables and chairs, but mostly they were filled, like the tomb, with sculptures and paintings” (Horn 2006a, 125). Rosalie recognizes who Sergei Popov is which puts her into a state of extreme shock. Unable to talk properly, she only manages to say to Sara in Yiddish that they have to get away. Yet the memory of the childhood trauma is so powerful that she passes out. On the way back home she refuses to say anything: “on the way home, she was silent, a silence so polished and strong that Sara was afraid even to open her mouth” (Horn 2006a, 130). Silence covers Rosalie’s behavior at New York’s art dealer’s, which Sara could not understand, and it is the only response to the dark past.

Tragic months of Der Nister's life in 1942, when he is left by his wife, and cannot write as he wants, take place in a cramped place, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan: "a tiny room in a concrete hovel outside of the clanging gongs of the bazaar" (Horn 2006a, 194). In this room, which he fills with paper, he learns of the death of his beloved daughter Hodele, and sits for a week "in silence in the paper forest, with his shoes removed and his shirt torn" (Horn 2006a, 197). In his mourning he writes letters to angels, to the King of Babylonia, to those who would not respond, and his place becomes "a dark tomb which he filled with an entire world of memory" (Horn 2006a, 200).

Erica, the curator from the Museum of Hebraic Art, with whom Benjamin Ziskind enters an emotional relationship, has her office underground, in the basement part of the museum. She describes it using a cemetery term: "I'm buried down here Sunday through Thursday, every week" (Horn 2006a, 216). The moment of closeness between Erica and Benjamin happens in complete darkness, they sink down and are seated "on the floor in the cave of the underground room" (Horn 2006a, 219). After the terrorist attack on the Museum Benjamin attempts to save Erica who, he believes, is in her basement office. Again the same rhetoric of cave and darkness is used: "The basement was a dark cave of burning ash. The bomb had blown a crater in the main floor clear through to the basement" (Horn 2006a, 280). Benjamin's quest, reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, is completed in strangely quiet darkness of the rubble, on the waste-flooded floor. Horn ends Benjamin's search with a Chagallesque vision of his hovering over the city, "looking down and seeing every possibility" (Horn 2006a, 282), reminiscent of the great artist's recreations of the world of the *shtetl*. Erica's unclear, but likely tragic end in contemporary New York, reminds the reader of the tragic Jewish fates throughout history. On the other hand, the last chapter of the novel is a lengthy fantasy tale of the not-yet born Daniel, son of Sara and Leonid, and his ancestors, various "the already-weres and the not-yets of our world, the mortals and the natals" (Horn 2006a, 283). Expanding the novel to the not-yets, drawing upon the strength of the have-beens, conceptualizes Jewish survival and intergenerational transmission.

4. Conclusion

By retrieving the painful past of the Soviet repressions against Jews and the Yiddish culture Dara Horn puts herself in the position of a cultural therapist who understands that the silence over Stalin's and Yevsektziya crimes stands in the way of restoring a healthy and realistic identity to the Jewish American community. Particularly the contradictions of Yevsektziya's activity need to be brought out

from the realm of repressed memories for a better understanding of one's own cultural uniqueness, symbolically represented in the novel by Rosalie Ziskind's picture books based on Yiddish tales by forgotten Jewish authors. As Danutė Gailienė (2015, 15) notes, "Cultural trauma is the most threatening because, like all cultural phenomena, it has the *strongest inertia*; it persists and lingers much longer than other traumas – sometimes over several generations". Horn demonstrates the lingering of this cultural trauma by narrating her novel over several generations, repetitively using in her narrative emblematic tropes of silence and darkness. She suggests that communal silence may turn into personal silence affecting the ways individuals enter and sustain relationships (or fail to do so).

Among historical characters in Horn's novel the most prominent one is Marc Chagall, who not only escaped Soviet persecutions, but was also hugely successful in the West. Not only did he manage to exploit the Jewish *shtetl* themes in a way that was attractive to the Western eyes, but he also contributed his talents to non-Jewish places such as churches. Horn notes his lack of response to the destruction of Yiddish culture and his former colleagues, displayed against his world fame:

The ear listened to Chagall's hundreds of interviews with magazines and newspapers around the world, his dozens of lectures in the world's most prestigious auditoriums, his endless greetings to every Matisse and Picasso who graced his path. And then, as each of the Yiddish writers and artists he had known in Russia disappeared one by one – Shloyme Mikhoels, Itsik Fefer, Dovid Hofshsteyn, Peretz Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Leyb Kvitko, and nearly every person who had taught at the Jewish Boys' Colony in Malakhovka – the book recorded his silence. Only sometimes, on sleepless nights, did the artist notice. (Horn 2006a, 224-5)

When Horn notes the great Chagall's silence over the fate of his fellow artists she still suggests that he might have felt some of the trauma the Jewish community carried from eastern Europe as part of its legacy – hence the suggestion of "sleepless nights". Yet the long list of the absentees set against his silence sounds accusatory. In the novel Horn juxtaposes his fame – symbolized by the centrality of the enormous value of his small sketch – with the silence over the work of his fellow artists, killed in Stalinist purges and never remembered, even in the free world.

The ending of the New York plot of *The World to Come* – with Benjamin trying to find Erica in the rubble of the aftermath of the terrorist attack, while the reader only learns of his approaching the basement door of her office – is Dara Horn's ultimate use of silence over the fate of her protagonists, reminiscent of the silence over the unknown fates of the endless numbers of Jewish victims of European anti-Semitism. They disappeared in prisons, camps, forests, ghetto city rubbles spread throughout Europe. The visual script of small dark spaces used in the novel cannot fail to bring to mind the hiding places of Jews during the Holocaust: burrows,

basements, attics, sewers, wardrobes, graves. The memory of these places is sustained in American culture through Jewish-American literature. The Holocaust survivor living in New York, from Saul Bellow's novel *Mr Sammler's Planet* had his wartime hideout in a tomb in a Polish cemetery. In Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*, in Kansas City one of the protagonists, fascinated by a pre-Holocaust Warsaw telephone directory, dies having locked himself in a small room in the basement, turned into an underground shelter. Dara Horn's novel, even though focused on other than the Holocaust aspects of the tragic legacy of Jewish European memory, explores the same painful images.

The function of textual strategies of silence and darkness relates to cultural trauma of the Jewish community which inherited the burden of the tragic European past. These literary tools help in representation and transmission of traumatic events of anti-Semitic violence. Dara Horn's rhetoric of silence helps explain why intergenerational transmission may be incomplete, yet instil a sense of post-traumatic pain.

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