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American Imago 59.3 (2002) 249-252

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Preface

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In 1991, *American Imago* published two special issues under the editorship of Cathy Caruth devoted to interdisciplinary approaches in the study of trauma; their contents were collected and published by Caruth in 1995 as *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The seeming ubiquity of "trauma" as a topic in both scholarly and clinical writing in the past decade can in no small measure be traced to these landmark issues. No less inescapable during the same period have been studies of the Shoah, the exemplary atrocity of the twentieth century. Impelled by the dying out of those who survived the concentration and extermination camps—this last silencing of those whose presence bespeaks the unspeakable—and undeterred by the backlash reflected in such labels as "false memory syndrome" (Crews 1995) and "Holocaust industry" (Finkelstein 2000), the present special issue of *American Imago* on "Postmemories of the Holocaust" seeks to articulate the emerging convergence between these two fields of inquiry.

A generation passes on. Is their witness passed on as well? The double meaning of "passing on" lies at the heart of both trauma and Holocaust studies, just as understanding the necessary connection between death or loss and the often unconscious transmission of a heritage is no less fundamental to history than it is to psychoanalysis. If truth is contingent upon personal experience, and if truth—as opposed to falsehood—is the *desideratum* of both disciplines, how can either be practiced when its subjects are absent? Freud, writing on the eve of the Holocaust in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), speculated about how the experiences of the generations in the wilderness and at Qades came to reinscribe themselves in the religion of the prophets some 600 years later. He drew an analogy between the workings of tradition and his model of individual trauma ("Early trauma—defense—latency—outbreak of neurotic illness—partial return of the repressed"). More **[End Page 249]** recently, Marianne Hirsch (1997) has derived from research on children of Holocaust survivors—as well as on the survivors of other traumas—the notion of "postmemories." By postmemories, she means the deferred effects of the traumatic experiences of both individual parents and entire communities—often transmitted in the form of seemingly strange behavior and fragmentary narratives—upon subsequent generations, which can never fully understand or appropriate these memories as their own.

In this issue, Hirsch, together with her husband Leo Spitzer, pursues her

investigation into how the memories of the first generation become the postmemories of the second. In a personal memoir, they describe accompanying Hirsch's parents on a return trip to Czernowitz, their birthplace and the site where a snap decision in 1941 to turn in one direction rather than another saved them from becoming two of the millions who died in the Shoah. Hirsch and Spitzer discover that actually revisiting the places of those wartime experiences threw into doubt, if it did not belie, some of Hirsch's parents' memories and the familiar narratives that had formed her understanding of her origins and identity. They also explore how the competing pulls of nostalgic recollections and negative memories, which find an emblem in the crossroads in Czernowitz where her parents made their fateful turn, are felt differently by everyone concerned.

Reflecting theoretically on what it means to have witnessed the Holocaust, Susan Suleiman revises traditional categories by introducing the concept of the "1.5 generation." Its members are children who were born during the Holocaust and who survived its horrors, but were too young at the time to have had the cognitive capacity to understand the experiences to which they were subjected. These individuals, whose stories were long ignored (whether due to skepticism about their veracity or the misguided assumption that silence would lead to forgetting), are now finding their voices and a receptive audience. Suleiman thinks through questions of definition. What constitutes a generation? Can we speak of a generational consciousness if the formative experiences occurred in early childhood? And can there be a group *mentalité* if, until recently, **[End Page 250]** the individuals concerned did not think of themselves as collectively belonging to a generation? Suleiman highlights the role played not only by cognitive factors but also by the vagaries of geography and history. While "family resemblances" (Suleiman borrows the notion from Wittgenstein) are not neglected, she exhorts her readers to attend to the "personal subjective expression" and the literary merits of the writings produced by the 1.5 generation.

Nancy Chodorow expands Suleiman's theoretical notion to encompass not just children who survived the Holocaust but everyone (including herself) who was born into a world at war. She takes as her sample the Harvard-Radcliffe class of 1965, almost all of whose members were born in either 1943 or 1944. Drawing inspiration chiefly from Erik Erikson, Chodorow listens psychoanalytically to her classmates' stories in order to elucidate the relations between the "ineluctable individuality of historical experience" and the "consequences of belonging to a particular generation or age cohort." In particular, she lays bare the affective dimensions of parents' conscious and unconscious communications to their children about the catastrophes they have endured.

Like Hirsch and Spitzer, Michael Levine takes up the burdens inherited by second-generation children from parents who have survived the Holocaust. In a fascinating reading of *MAUS* (1991), Levine finds Art Spiegelman's "comix" to be necessarily stained with postmemories, haunted by the silences his parents could share neither with him nor with one another. Levine shows how Spiegelman's graphic artistry employs juxtapositions, substitutions ("smoke screens"), ruptured frames, and metaphors of birth to represent the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experience. Through deferred action, even those born belatedly can become witnesses to cataclysmic events that have passed into the narratives of their families and societies.

My own contribution returns to the theme of the 1.5 generation by addressing the strange case of the individual who for a short time became its best-known spokesperson. In *Fragments* (1995), Benjamin Wilkomirski claimed to be the Latvian-born child survivor of Maidanek and Auschwitz; but **[End Page 251]** this "false memoir" (Suleiman 2000) proved to have actually been written by the Swiss-born Bruno Doessekker. I ask whether Wilkomirski-Doessekker's folly should be regarded as a conscious fraud or as the expression of an amorphous yearning that cloaked itself in the memories of others. I analyze the responses to both the work and its author before and after its veracity was put in doubt. The enigma of Wilkomirski-Doessekker became a stage upon which conflicting beliefs about the nature of memory, identity, and institutional responsibility could be contested.

The issue concludes with an incisive review essay by Murray Schwartz on Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy*, a book that, together with those of Ian Hacking (1995) and Allan Young (1995), has led the counteroffensive against the ubiquity and seeming universalization of trauma discourse. Taken together, the essays demonstrate, more than a half century after the Holocaust, that examination of the accounts of survivors (or would-be survivors) and their descendants continues to yield insights into how the distorted transmission of fragmented experiences shapes the identities not only of those *by* whom but also of those *to* whom they have been passed on.

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