

## A commentary on Dan Jacobson's Holocaust writings

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Born in 1929 in Johannesburg, South Africa, Dan Jacobson's career as an author and literary critic was already well under way by the time he began writing about the Holocaust. Because Jacobson began his work as an author in 1955 while still living in South Africa, most readers and critics consider him to be predominately a South African author.<sup>1</sup> Many of his works, including *The Trap* (1955), *A Dance in the Sun* (1956), *The Price of Diamonds* (1958), *The Evidence of Love* (1960), *The Electronic Elephant* (1994), and large portions of *Time of Arrival and Other Stories* (1962), *Through the Wilderness* (1963), *Beggar My Neighbour* (1964), *The Beginners* (1966), and *Time and Time Again: Autobiographies* (1985) take place in South Africa and discuss the South African racial situation and questions of colonial identity. However, Jacobson wrote some ten other books and collections which have little or nothing to do directly with South Africa, while several of the books set in

1 For a sampling of more recent work on Jacobson in publications dedicated to Africa, see Sheila Roberts, "Tamar and After: A Glance at Dan Jacobson's Recent Work", in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), 141–6; Martin Rubin, review, "Time and Time Again: Autobiographies, by Dan Jacobson", *Research in African Literatures*, 18, no. 1 (1987): 116–18; Stephen Gray, "The Private Landscape of Hearing: Or, the Public Landscape of Politics: Stephen Gray Interviews Dan Jacobson", *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing and Culture* 11, no. 2 (1989): 75–81; Richard Lansdown, "Dan Jacobson", *Southern African Review of Books*, 37 (1995): 17–20; Sheila Roberts, "On the Doorstep of Africa: Dan Jacobson's *The Electronic Elephant: A Southern African Journey*", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 9, no. 1 (1997): 27–42; Sheila Roberts, "A Way of Seeing: Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 10, no. 1 (1998): 57–73; Sheila Roberts, "In the Cage of Consciousness: Dan Jacobson's Animal Fables and Other Bestial Narratives", in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, ed. Jaqueline Bardolph (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001), 171–82; Paul Gready, *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of Imprisonment, Exile, and Homecoming from Apartheid South Africa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003); Dirk Klopper, "Travel and Transgression: Dan Jacobson's 'Southern African Journey'", *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2005): 461–9; Geoffrey V. Davis, "'A Deeper Silence': Dan Jacobson's Lithuania", in *Africa Writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement*, ed. Maria Olausson and Christina Angelfors (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 39–66.



Plate 1 Dan Jacobson as a boy.  
 Photograph courtesy Jessica Jacobson

South Africa address a multitude of themes besides those relating to life there, including apartheid.

One of the most consistent topics Jacobson addressed over the years, starting as early as 1960, was that of Judaism. Despite this ongoing fascination, Sheila Roberts, the foremost critic of Jacobson's work, has stated: "I would hesitate to emphasize Dan Jacobson's Jewishness as an identity, just as I would hesitate to concentrate on what is arguably his South African-ness when trying to form judgments about the artistic quality of his writing or even when discussing the themes inherent in his plots."<sup>2</sup> Although Roberts claims to treat Jacobson's Jewishness and South African-ness equally, she undeniably focuses on his South African perspective in many, if not all, of her reviews and articles about his works. This essay will therefore follow not only Jacobson's development as a Jewish author, but also many of the reviews of his works by Roberts and others which under-emphasize this Jewish aspect in his books. While in an interview with Richard Lansdown in 1994 Jacobson expressed his own surprise at his "continuing preoccupation" with biblical themes,<sup>3</sup> Paul Gready suggests that Jacobson was drawn to the Tamar story (the subject of his first biblical novel) in part because of his identity as a Jew.<sup>4</sup>

2 Sheila Roberts, *Dan Jacobson* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 2.

3 Richard Lansdown, "Weapons of Vicissitude: An Interview with Dan Jacobson", *Critical Review* 34 (1994): 115.

4 Paul Gready, "Dan Jacobson as Expatriate Writer: South Africa as Private Resource and Half-Code and the Literature of Multiple Exposure", *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 4 (1994): 22.

After that story was published in 1970, Jacobson's work took a marked and well-documented turn away from South African themes, with only *Time and Time Again* and *The Electronic Elephant* written since then about South Africa. Many of Jacobson's later books, including *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), *The Wonder-Worker* (1973), *The Story of Stories* (1982), *Her Story* (1987), *The God-Fearer* (1992), *Heshel's Kingdom* (1998), and parts of *Time and Time Again* deal with religious, especially Jewish, issues. Thus, Jacobson wrote six books in the latter half of his career which more strongly emphasized his Jewish than his South African heritage. Rather than simply dismissing this aspect of his work as many readers and critics, especially South African, sometimes do, this essay seeks to emphasize it and to come to terms with Dan Jacobson as a Jewish writer.<sup>5</sup>

Within this identity as a Jewish writer, Jacobson revealed himself to be even more specifically interested in a certain aspect of the Jewish experience, namely, the Holocaust. There exists a gap in the scholarship written about Jacobson regarding this feature of his work. Roberts comes close to pointing this out when she says, "At a time when both fictional and non-fictional literature of the Holocaust is receiving renewed attention in American universities, it seems to me that researchers would do well to examine the responses to that central catastrophe of our century as presented in *The Beginners*."<sup>6</sup> While this essay will examine the reactions presented in that novel, it seeks, moreover, to examine Jacobson's reactions throughout his life as displayed in a multitude of his works. To say that the author came to this theme only later in his career coinciding with his shift away from South African themes is also to speak falsely, as *The Beginners* was published in 1966. Altogether, Jacobson wrote three books and one short story which discuss the Holocaust either solely or at length. These works also talk about the Holocaust in two entirely different ways. *The Beginners* and *Heshel's Kingdom* discuss the Holocaust from a naturalistic perspective, while *The God-Fearer* and the story "Fair Seed-Time" from

5 Jacobson's work has also been covered, though less extensively, in the Jewish press, although even there his Holocaust themes are often underplayed. He is included in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, vol. 1, s.v. "Dan Jacobson" and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, s.v. "Dan Jacobson"; his story "The Zulu and the Zeide" is included in the *Oxford Book of Jewish Stories*, ed. Ilan Stavans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 252–63; Renee Winegarten, "The Novels of Dan Jacobson", *Midstream* 12, no. 2 (1966): 17–18; Louise Sylvester, review, "All for Love, by Dan Jacobson", *Jewish Chronicle* online, 2 April 2005; reviews of the majority of Jacobson's books appeared in *Commentary*; an obituary appeared in the *South African Jewish Report* online, 20 June 2014.

6 Roberts, *Jacobson*, 60.

*Time and Time Again* discuss the Holocaust in a more philosophical way through the use of fable-like stories. These stories never name the event, yet they describe chillingly the types of human behaviour involved in the atrocity. While these books make up a shorter list than his South African body of work, they demonstrate through their complexity, passion, and continuity of purpose, a notable contribution to the world of Holocaust literature. If one accepts Alvin Rosenfeld's postulation of Holocaust literature as "an attempt to express a new order of consciousness, a recognizable shift in being," characterized by "some form of fictional realism, in which the charge will be to re-create what life and death were like in almost naturalistic terms, or some form of surrealism, in which the Holocaust is transmuted into more abstract visions of agony, absurdity, or mythic suffering",<sup>7</sup> then Jacobson's works certainly apply. *The Beginners* in particular, through the emplotment of several of its characters, suggests the idea that after the Holocaust, perceptions about life must change. Furthermore, though not seeking to re-create the Holocaust experience itself, *The Beginners* and Heshel's *Kingdom* naturalistically address its after-effects, while *The God-Fearer* uses a type of "surrealism" to speak abstractly about the event.

#### "Fair Seed-Time"

"Fair Seed-Time" comes from Jacobson's collection of autobiographies, *Time and Time Again*. A short story of less than fifteen pages, it addresses the issue of group mentality discussed at length in histories about the Holocaust such as Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*.<sup>8</sup> The narrative concerns a brief period in the author's childhood during which he suddenly became the focus of his entire school class's contempt. Because he arrived to class one morning with dirty legs after an incident before school with a rubbish bin, his teacher, known for turning students against other individual students, unexpectedly did this to him by publicly ridiculing him for his dirty legs. Jacobson explains how his expulsion from school life suddenly happened: "by the end of the day an entirely new school experience had begun for me . . . Nobody was to talk to me or to have anything else to do with me.

7 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 13, 71.

8 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).



Plate 2 Dan Jacobson. Photograph by Murdo Macleod

Everyone was to turn his back whenever I approached.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the next six weeks at school, his isolation became complete and, aside from several furtive glances from fellow students who obviously felt bad about his treatment, no one in his class was brave enough to break the barrier. The author suffered alone until the holidays came and the time away from school gave his classmates reason to forget about his excommunication.

His reactions to the situation mirror many of the reactions to their suffering described by Holocaust survivors. Jacobson remarks: “Since I was being treated like a criminal, in other words, I began to behave like a criminal; I became furtive, secretive, a holder back of the truth . . . I also turned into something resembling an invalid . . . I could take none of my movements for granted; carrying out the most trivial tasks; everything I did exhausted me.”<sup>10</sup> Holocaust victims and survivors often encountered a similar phenomenon. As Michael Berkowitz has written, “The Nazis were always eager to demonstrate that the ghettos were awash in crime. Jews were accused of hiding valuables that they were supposed to have turned over to Nazi authorities, thereby making possession of these goods a crime. They were required to give almost anything useful or movable

<sup>9</sup> Dan Jacobson, *Time and Time Again* (Boston, MA: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1985), 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–8.

to the Nazis.”<sup>11</sup> This example suggests that the Nazis created situations in the ghettos in which their stereotypes about Jews as criminals would necessarily come to fruition. Indeed, giving up anything useful or movable was tantamount to a death sentence so, in order to survive, Jews in the ghettos (and camps) did often turn to what the Nazis had defined as criminal behaviour. This type of behaviour, usually involving black marketeering, continued in the immediate postwar period.<sup>12</sup> In part because of the habits formed during the Holocaust, and in part because of the continued struggle for survival afterwards, many survivors found themselves involved, consciously or unwittingly, in illegal activities. The inversion of the common perception about criminals, that criminal activity engenders treatment as a criminal rather than the other way round, was shared by both Jacobson in this relatively minor incident and many Jews during and after the Second World War.

Furthermore, Jacobson speaks several times about feelings of shame, another important Holocaust theme. He describes how he could not tell his family of the trouble he was having in school because of the shame he felt at being a “miserable pariah and failure”.<sup>13</sup> Although he had done nothing wrong, the treatment he received determined the way that he felt. Because the other students treated him as if he should have been ashamed of having dirty legs, he became so. In an essay entitled “Shame”, from his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi discusses this emotion as experienced by Holocaust survivors. Here, he specifically points to the sense of shame felt by survivors simply because of the conditions in which they had lived during their imprisonment. They felt ashamed of themselves because of how their persecutors had treated them and because they had “lived for months and years at an animal level” through no fault of their own.<sup>14</sup> Jacobson similarly felt embarrassed because of the arbitrary behaviour of his classmates engendered by no conscious mistake of his own. The Jews during the Holocaust became convinced of their own animal natures and Jacobson became convinced of his own filth and failure. In both cases, the person being treated like a culprit never actually committed an original crime (as judged by the usual standards) yet was treated as if he/she had. The

11 Michael Berkowitz, *The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 55.

12 For a discussion of the complexities of postwar definitions of Jewish criminality, see *ibid.*, 145–219.

13 Jacobson, *Time*, 39.

14 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 75.

person then internalized that treatment and felt as if he/she had actually committed the offence in the first place. In this twisted way, Jacobson experienced a taste of the type of shame felt by the Jews who were suddenly persecuted for seemingly no reason during the war.

The second way Jacobson deals with the Holocaust in this story is by drawing a direct parallel between the behaviours he witnessed in his own persecutors and the behaviours demonstrated by people in Nazi Germany, both active Nazis and bystanders. He states: "The episode often came into my mind in later years when I speculated about how it could have been possible for incomparably greater horrors to take place; about the ever-repeated psychological manoeuvres which had to be gone through in innumerable, individual minds before the Nazis could put into effect their intention to slaughter the Jews of Europe ... and about why the Jews reacted as they did to what was happening to them; and about why those who were neither Nazis nor Jews reacted, or failed to react, as they did."<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, as an adult with an understanding of the events which occurred during the Holocaust, Jacobson immediately recognized the parallel between that event and his own experience. The psychologies of followers and leaders, insiders and outsiders, and masses in general, which all play a role in the Holocaust, became real to Jacobson through this incident. He further expands some of the lessons first learned here at the end of *Heshel's Kingdom* with his discussion of "oppugnance", to which this essay will return.<sup>16</sup> This theme followed him throughout his career, as his awareness of it followed him starting from this very early experience.

Jacobson draws one last comparison between his situation and that of the European Jews, namely, the arbitrariness of it all. His persecution ceased randomly at the start of the next school term. Just as it had started suddenly and for no good reason, it ended. The link between this aspect of his experience and the Holocaust is made most clear when Jacobson writes: "A recollection of the blank, anti-climactic arbitrariness of it was to return to me when I set foot on the continent of Europe for the first time, at the age of twenty, knowing that had I been in that very place five years previously I would have been a hunted man, someone condemned to death."<sup>17</sup> Although ostensibly about one set of events that happened to

15 Jacobson, *Time*, 36.

16 Dan Jacobson, *Heshel's Kingdom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 228.

17 *Ibid.*, 41.

the author as a child, this anecdote discusses many truths also about the Holocaust.

### *The God-Fearer*

Jacobson deals similarly with the Holocaust in his novel, *The God-Fearer*. This book belongs to the group of works starting with the 1970 publication of *The Rape of Tamar* which he described as “fantastical”.<sup>18</sup> The book unfolds like a mystery in stages whereby the reader learns new pieces of information slowly throughout the novel. At the beginning, the main character, Kobus, is described as an old bookbinder. Following an accident, he can no longer remember names and the past and needs a servant to help him live his daily life. Jacobson draws a sympathetic image of this elderly, learned, family man. The first plot twist comes when the man begins seeing the ghosts of two children in his house. He is bewildered by their presence and has no idea who they are, except to note that they resemble the Christer people in their attire. However, he soon recognizes them as the would-be children of a Christer girl from his past, Sannie. At this point, the story turns into a flashback and, through a description of Kobus’s past as a young man, the nature of the Christer and thus the premise of the book become apparent. Jacobson describes the Christer as: “a little group of people . . . who were permitted by their religion . . . to eat absolutely anything; and what was more, to eat their anythings and everythings in whatever promiscuous order and fashion they fancied; cooked, raw, in their shells and outside them, boiled in their own blood or milk, in any kind of vessel and from any kind of plate . . . and on the other hand these same omnivores actually made the eating of their God’s flesh and the drinking of his blood the culminating moment in their act of worship!”<sup>19</sup>

Based on this description, the Christer are very obviously meant to be Catholics or some denomination of Christians but, what is more, they are here described from a Jewish perspective. Thus, the reader with any knowledge of Judaism and Christianity immediately understands that the Jews in this book (known as the God-fearers) and the Christians (known as the Christer) have switched places. Here, the Jews form the majority religious population while the Christians make up the minority who are scorned by their neighbours. The situation clearly parallels shtetl

<sup>18</sup> Dan Jacobson, personal interview, July 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Jacobson, *The God-Fearer* (London: Sceptre, 1992), 61.



life in almost all pre-Second World War communities. Almost half of the second chapter of this book is concerned with making clear to the reader the inversion between Jew and Christian to the point that it must be understood. The reader feels almost bombarded by the descriptions, by the way Jacobson describes in minute detail the characteristics of the Christer and how they are viewed condescendingly by the God-fearers. The relationship between the God-fearers and the Christer becomes so allegorical that the reader can predict the outcome of the story.

As the mystery unfolds, the reader learns the tragic truth. In a witch-hunt-like trial years before, Sannie, the Christer from Kobus's past, had been arrested on charges of bewitching Kobus's former best friend Malachi, who had gone mad. Kobus was brought in by Sannie to testify on her behalf because of a bond that they had shared one summer's evening, yet Kobus refused. The public nature of the trial and the hatred unleashed upon the Christer made Kobus afraid to defend Sannie lest he be seen as her accomplice. In an attempt to save himself and his future, he betrayed Sannie. Late in the book, he relives the questioning that torments him:

You are Kobus the Apprentice?

Yes, I am.

You are Kobus the Bookbinder?

Yes, I will be.

Why are you not telling the truth about Sannie?

Because it will not help her.

Is that the only reason?

Because I am afraid to do it.

Afraid of what?

Of what others will think of me.

You are not afraid of Sannie's thoughts?

Silence.

You are not afraid of what you are doing to her?

Silence.

Of what you are doing to yourself?

Silence.

You believe you will get away with it?

Others have got away with worse! Incomparably worse! They do it every day!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 133.

Now old and near death, Kobus realizes that the ghost children who haunt him are Sannie's unborn children sent to remind him that his sins can never be forgotten or forgiven. Again, the issues of group mentality become paramount. Kobus represents the typical Holocaust bystander, cowed into committing terror through fear of his neighbour.

More than just a story outlining the unfortunate acts of the fictional Kobus, this book clearly allegorizes the Holocaust. It speaks of a leader called "the Amar Yotam" who resembles Hitler in his cruel, violent, and dictatorial nature, and who blames the Christer for all the evils suffered by his make-believe country during a time in their history (the Ten Turmoils) which resembles both Weimar and Nazi Germany. The Amar Yotam explains to his people, "The Christer were to blame . . . If we did not wipe them out, they would do it to us."<sup>21</sup> This refers to a genocidal event committed against the Christer by the majority population, the God-fearers, using the same language employed against the Jews by leaders of Germany's Third Reich.

Although the book is fantastical in that it involves ghosts, takes place in a fictional world, and exchanges the places of the two most important religious groups involved in the Holocaust, it is also realistic. The attitudes it describes are easily recognizable to any intelligent reader of history or literature, and the basic events of the Holocaust are so well-known that the majority of readers will understand the parallels to real life found here. Inverting the roles of Christian and Jew in this novel serves many purposes. In an article discussing the impetus for this novel, Jacobson revealed that the original idea for this story, long before it was written and rewritten, stemmed from one rumination: if Judaism had seized its chance to be the religion of the Roman empire, "then in all likelihood Christianity would have remained what it was . . . the religion of a feared and despised minority. And if the Christians had subsequently stuck as stubbornly to their beliefs as the actual, historical Jews were to stick to theirs? Would something like the tragedies that befell the Jews of Europe have been their lot too?"<sup>22</sup> The moral to the story could therefore perhaps be summed up with the suggestion that history has many possible outcomes and is based most of all on opportunity. In this alternative world, Jews, by dint of making up the majority, would have become the aggressors and Christians the victims of the Holocaust.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Jacobson, "About 'The God-Fearer,'" *London Review of Books* 14, no. 13 (1992): 22.

Another look at the book, however, suggests something entirely different. Jacobson stated in the same article, "By this time the story had revealed itself to be, at a remove, about the Holocaust, as I had always known it would."<sup>23</sup> These words suggest that Jacobson sought, rather than to examine the vicissitudes of history, to look at the story of the Holocaust from another angle. The story in this novel is so symmetrical that it closes in, making a perfect whole; its precision and predictability make it an ideal teaching tool. This book, through its inversion, creates a new perspective. This is exactly the way in which literature has the ability, even more than historical work, to keep fresh moral situations and problems which slowly fade into the past. Readers of this book, instead of hearing again the age-old accusations against the Jews, can see what would have been the accusations had they been reversed. An obvious description of Jesus (who has the same name in the novel) – "This deity . . . was humanised, though still divine; divided and yet mystically reunited with himself; tortured but all-powerful; ineffable but nevertheless pictured over and over again in their places of worship, along with his broodingly tender young mother, as infant, child, man in torment, God in majesty"<sup>24</sup> – is proposed in this novel as a source of contempt by the majority religion. This sounds almost inconceivable to Western ears, making it possible for Western readers of this book to understand, perhaps for the first time, how ludicrous were Nazi claims against the Jews. Jacobson's book finally presents a perspective different from the normal survivor memoirs, accounts of righteous Gentiles, and realistic fictionalized views such as those presented in *Schindler's List* or *The Pianist*. This book represents an important milestone in the world of Holocaust literature created by an accomplished author in a relatively unknown book.

### *The Beginners*

After studying the more allegorical of these works, this essay continues with a look at Jacobson's more realistic and traditional books. This involves a jump back in time to 1966 with the publication of his novel, *The Beginners*. While the book deals with many issues throughout, the Holocaust plays a role as an important and recurring theme. Here again, Roberts has dealt well with this novel in her synopsis of it in the Twayne's World Authors Series, but she leaves the linkage between this and Jacobson's other

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobson, *God-Fearer*, 61.

Holocaust-related works to future scholars. She devotes more than two pages to the issue of the Holocaust in this book, out of her eleven-page treatment of the novel.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, no other critic has taken the time to discuss this issue in this novel at length and none has attempted to draw from it a steady and growing trend of Holocaust themes in Jacobson's work. To use part of Roberts's synopsis of the novel, "*The Beginners* traces the fortunes of Benjamin Glickman, his wife Sarah, and their three children, Joel, Rachel, and David. It is a long novel, of nearly five hundred pages, and over forty characters. These minor characters and supernumeraries are friends and acquaintances of the Glickmans and we come to know them in these capacities."<sup>26</sup> The book tells the story of Benjamin and Sarah's separate arrivals in South Africa from Eastern Europe. It then jumps ahead to the period in which the book takes place, directly after the war. It starts to characterize the three children and their parents. It discusses issues of religion before beginning a long discourse on Zionism. Not long after the opening of the book and the obvious concentration on a Jewish family and Jewish topics, the novel turns toward South African race-relations. In this way, the book bridges the gap between Jacobson's earlier and later works. It deals with the South African situation as do his earlier books, but it also addresses more Jewish and specifically Holocaust concerns, as do his later books. The most autobiographical of his works aside from *Time and Time Again* and *Heshel's Kingdom*, *The Beginners* reveals many of Jacobson's literary, political, and religious attitudes.

Near the start of the book, the first major Holocaust event occurs. The setting is a party given by Rachel, the daughter in the family. After the guests have arrived, and a good way into the party, Rachel produces a swastika armband from Joel's (who has just returned from military service in the war) collection of mementos as a prize for a game. Joel storms in and rips the band from the arm of the winner.<sup>27</sup> The scene begins a discussion about the different reactions of non-European Jews to the Holocaust that inundates the rest of the book. The many writings and rewritings of this scene, and the numerous changes it underwent prior to publication apparent in Jacobson's manuscripts, show how delicate the situation is in the book and for Jacobson as an author.<sup>28</sup> This is the

25 Roberts, *Jacobson*, 60–62.

26 *Ibid.*, 55.

27 Dan Jacobson, *The Beginners* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 83.

28 University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, Dan Jacobson Collection, Box I, Folder II.

first time that Jacobson addresses the issue of the Holocaust directly in any of his works, apart from a short anecdote in the first chapter of *The Evidence of Love*. In general, Jacobson claimed that he tried to avoid writing about the Holocaust because of a perceived inability to know how best to do so, but that it occurred in his books nevertheless as a “recurring ache”.<sup>29</sup> From here, the novel deals almost constantly with issues of Jewish identity after the war, in South Africa, in the Diaspora writ large, and in Israel. Many of these issues have little to do directly with the Holocaust, but the pervasiveness of that event appears time and again within these discussions. While the young people dance in the next room, the adults in this story, spurred by Uncle Samuel, argue about the idea of Jewish identity. He ends his argument: “Can’t you see how right, how appropriate, it was for the Nazis to kill the Jews? They were people without laws, without minds, hating anything rational, anything moderate – so of course they had to kill the Jews, they had to try to kill everything the Jews stood for. And the Nazis won! That’s why you are nothing but survivors, why there’s no hope for you in the future. You think people will ever forget how much more exciting losses can be than profits? That’s the great lesson they’ve learned.”<sup>30</sup>

The conversation turns on Zionism and Jewish identity, but this exclamation is its most salient part. Many of the guests hearing Samuel’s expostulation, including Benjamin, disagree severely with it, but others agree with some of its points. This viewpoint represents one of the many held by Jews living during and after the war. They believed that something inherent in the Jewish character caused the Holocaust to happen to the Jews. Rather than viewing it as an illogical event that came about unexpectedly, they blamed the Jews for somehow inciting it, even if in the convoluted way suggested by Samuel. Spoken by a Jewish character or person, this view of the Holocaust proves dangerous, as it induces guilt and calls into question any positive identity with the Jewish people.

Other characters in the book demonstrate different reactions to the Holocaust. Many of the young people represent the Zionist ideal, prompted by the destruction of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Leon, Joel, and Natalie all uphold the belief in a Jewish state in Palestine, and part of the book takes place on a kibbutz in Israel. The reader begins to understand their perception of Zionism from a speech given by a

29 Jacobson, personal interview, July 2004.

30 Jacobson, *Beginners*, 89–90.

Zionist orator in the book who states that, “only in a Jewish Palestine can [the Jews’] endeavour be truly collective. Elsewhere society offers to individuals in our position only atomization and alienation, a self-defeating hunt for material goods, cynicism, apathy and despair. That is the choice before us, *chaverim* [friends]; there is no other.”<sup>31</sup> Probably the most important and moving show of this dedication to Zionism comes with Benjamin’s wish to move to Israel. Even though his first visit to the country is replete with disappointment and outrage at the actual place, a lifetime of social involvement in favour of Zionism and the ideals behind it make him decide that the only way for him to continue living is to do so in Israel. This characterizes Benjamin’s attitude not just towards the Holocaust but his Jewishness more generally. Sarah, however, maintains an opposite reaction to the Holocaust. Similarly to Samuel, she makes no secret of the fact that she does not put much faith or interest into Jews or her own Jewishness. This theme becomes explicit after Joel tells her of his pending departure for Israel. She says, “And don’t tell me about Hitler and the killing of the Jews. I know what he did. And I say that you can’t allow the Hitlers of the world to tell you what should be important to you in your life. Hitler could kill me, he wanted to kill me, and I’d still say to him that being Jewish today is an unimportant affair.”<sup>32</sup> While her husband and son take up Zionism as a rally against Hitler and an affirmation of Jewish life, Sarah rejects it all. She cannot comprehend a world in which being Jewish should tear a family apart, and she upholds this opinion until the end of her life. Her reaction to the Holocaust resembles that of many others who rejected Judaism and a belief in God after the Holocaust, as well as those who felt that the Holocaust should not provide the impetus to the rest of their lives.

The most important way in which Jacobson deals with the Holocaust in this novel, however, is through his discussion of survivors. This does not involve Samuel’s definition of survivor, which includes anyone Jewish anywhere in the world after the Holocaust but, rather, direct survivors of Hitler’s Holocaust in Europe. Jacobson deals with this issue in two ways. In a relatively minor but telling event, he describes a Holocaust survivor who shares a hospital room with Joel in Israel. The man “sat on the edge of his bed, with one leg lifted in front of him and crossed over the other. The pajama trouser of the leg in front of him had been rolled up to the knee,

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–8.

and with the tips of his fingers, his eyes fixed upon his hand as it moved up and down, he was gently stroking the length of his fleshless, hairless, yellow shin.”<sup>33</sup> This represents one reaction to the Holocaust as interpreted by Jacobson – one in which even many of those who physically survived the trauma never fully recovered. It is an extreme case of someone who was actually driven mentally insane, but many less obvious examples occurred for an overwhelming number of survivors even many years after the event. As stated by Lawrence Langer in his book *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, “The Holocaust threatens to be a permanent hole in the ozone layer of history, through which infiltrate the memories of a potentially crippling past. These testimonies remind us how overwhelming, and perhaps insurmountable, is the task of reversing its legacy.”<sup>34</sup>

The *Beginners* also deals at length and in a different way with the story of another Holocaust survivor in the person of Yitzchak, a cousin of the Glickman family. While in Israel, Joel has the opportunity to meet this long-lost cousin. This is another section of the book which underwent many rewrites (thirty-four pages' worth) before publication.<sup>35</sup> The scene takes up all of chapters five through eight of the book, comprising nearly twelve pages. Its effects, moreover, become essential to the remainder of Joel's story. The meeting between Joel and Yitzchak explores many post-Holocaust problems. First, Joel tells Yitzchak of his and his family's life in Israel and South Africa. He has a hard time knowing what to say to Yitzchak until he finally asks the important question of what had happened to Yitzchak during the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup> Here, Yitzchak goes into a lengthy description of his escape and eventual survival, which parallels the journey of the main character in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965). While this story takes up the majority of their encounter, it is the final part of their conversation that most affects Joel. He asks Yitzchak if he has plans for the future, to which Yitzchak replies, “Now? Yes, I think I have plans now . . . To learn a trade, to get a flat, to get a wife. I want everything you want.”<sup>37</sup> From this statement stem the different reactions to the Holocaust of the two men. Yitzchak, after losing everything and suffering

33 Ibid., 327.

34 Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), xv.

35 University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, Dan Jacobson Collection, Box 2, Folder 1.

36 Jacobson, *Beginners*, 265.

37 Ibid., 273.

terrible experiences, wants no more or less than what Joel, having had only advantages in life, supposedly wants. Like many survivors directly after the war, especially many of those caught in displaced persons camps, he feels the need to rebuild and move on – to continue life.<sup>38</sup> But for Joel, this is not enough. He is disappointed with Yitzchak's plans and knows that he must "remind himself that it was foolish to expect the survivors of the holocaust in Europe to have come out of the abyss with revelations, understandings, wisdoms".<sup>39</sup> This says as much about Joel's character, who continues to search for meaning in life throughout the novel, as it does about Holocaust survivors. It demonstrates the feeling of the pointlessness of it all felt by many after the Holocaust.

This dejection over the meaninglessness and futility of the Holocaust brings about Joel's crisis of faith in the value of life, and of his life in particular. The meeting with Yitzchak and his following contemplation about the implications of the Holocaust lead Joel to do something foolish that eventually ends in his move to England where he finally finds a modicum of peace with his life.

The thrust of this novel deals with the individual characters and the ways in which they seek to deal with the lives given them. Each of these lives, however, has been touched, influenced, and sometimes even reformed by the Holocaust. Jacobson's depth of perception in revealing many different responses to the event and the complexity with which he weaves it into the history of forty characters throughout this monumental novel leave the reader without a doubt that *The Beginners* should be read as a novel about family, identity, South Africa, but also, importantly, the Holocaust.

### Heshel's Kingdom

The crowning success in Dan Jacobson's Holocaust canon, nevertheless, is one of his last books, *Heshel's Kingdom*. Of all Jacobson's books that deal to some degree with the Holocaust, this is the one that is clearly and obviously Holocaust literature. Rather than being situated with his other novels on the shelves, this book often sits with other Holocaust-related works, commonly with others dealing with Lithuania and the Holocaust.

38 For a discussion of this reaction, see Ze'ev Mankowitz, *Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

39 Jacobson, *Beginners*, 274.



Thus, just looking into a library catalogue alerts the reader to the uniqueness of this book. One of the most extensive writings to address this book was Sheila Roberts's 1998 article in *Current Writing*, "A Way of Seeing: Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*".<sup>40</sup> Here one can see most clearly the gap in scholarship on the Holocaust aspects of Jacobson's works. In this article, Roberts gives a clear and concise overview of the book, discussing its issues of identity, autobiography, style, and Holocaust history. She also chooses to focus on parallels between Jacobson's experiences as an expatriate and his grandfather's venture to the United States, and the areas of the book in which Jacobson discusses South Africa. In fact, the "way of seeing" of the article's title refers to using South African "ways of seeing" to reexamine South Africa in the light of Lithuanian history.<sup>41</sup> Here, Roberts reveals her own ways of seeing, which incline her to a South African focus, while the ways of seeing most important to this essay are ways of seeing Jacobson as a Holocaust writer. Although it does raise questions of the South African relationship to Nazism and describes part of Jacobson's childhood in Kimberley, *Heshel's Kingdom* is undoubtedly a Holocaust book, as Jacobson himself has admitted.<sup>42</sup> Immediately, on the first page of the first chapter, Jacobson informs the reader, "In fact, if [Rabbi Heshel Melamed] had not died prematurely, I would never have been born. No doubt many grandchildren could say the same about their grandfathers . . . In his case and mine, however, there lies between us the gulf of an unspeakable history."<sup>43</sup> Thus, from the beginning, the reader understands that Jacobson's primary interest lies in his grandfather's story made fascinating by some unusual tragedy that has occurred. It is not long before the reader learns that the tragedy in question is the Holocaust.

The first section of this book, a literary retelling of a true story rather than a novel or autobiography, deals with the life lived by Jacobson's family in Lithuania. He uses old documents, stories passed down from family members, and photographs to reconstruct the kind of life his grandmother, grandfather, and their nine children would have had until they emigrated in 1919. He discusses their religion, his grandfather's trip to the United States, their flight from the German army during the First World War, and the daily life of different members of the family. This section sets up the background for what follows, especially focusing on

40 Roberts, "A Way of Seeing".

41 *Ibid.*, 69.

42 Jacobson, personal interview, July 2004.

43 Jacobson, *Heshel*, 3.

Melamed's voyage to the United States in 1912. What strikes Jacobson most profoundly here is his grandfather's experience of American secularism, which convinces him to reject the idea of moving himself and his family to that country. For Jacobson, this serves to add to the mystique surrounding the Holocaust and his family's narrow escape from it. Based on this, Melamed's rejected opportunity to avoid the coming massacre, Jacobson has no doubt that his family would have remained in Lithuania until the bloody end. His grandfather's strict religious rules would have sentenced the family to almost certain death.

The second section deals with South Africa and is the most classically autobiographical, as it discusses the author and his life. He talks about his family's emigration to South Africa and again refers back to one of his motivating forces in writing the book. In speaking of his grandparents' children, he says, "Nine escapees from the rifles and machine guns of the German *Einsatzkommandos* and from their Lithuanian hirelings; from the burial pits and pyres that would have consumed their bodies in their natal land. Nine young people spared as a result of their father's early death".<sup>44</sup> From here, Jacobson moves into personal history, describing his own childhood in Kimberley and writing at length about his personal understanding of the Holocaust as a child. Here he makes an important distinction. He explains, "This is not an autobiography. Of the many threads that run through my earliest years, I intend to follow only one: that of the connection I had, or did not have, to the distant part of the world my parents had come from."<sup>45</sup> This confirms the fact that the main goal of his book is to investigate Jacobson's grandfather's life and death in Lithuania, which eventually become overshadowed by the events of the Holocaust. Whatever parallels this theme has with South African issues play only a secondary role to this underlying agenda.

The third part of the book is entitled "Lithuania" and discusses Jacobson's visit to his family's original homeland. This section makes up the largest part of the book and can best be described as travelogue. Here, Jacobson and his son Simon visit the major cities of Kaunas and Vilnius, but also the smaller places from which his family comes. He describes his original impressions of the country, the places he visits, and the people he encounters. He mixes in historical facts as they pertain to the places he sees. This section conveys to the reader not only the mood and emotions

44 Ibid., 65.

45 Ibid., 73.

of Jacobson himself, but imparts much of Holocaust history as it relates to Lithuania. Factual accounts of the period, such as “Only 5 per cent of the Jews living there at the time of the German invasion were alive four years later. That is to say: one in twenty survived . . . The Germans invaded Lithuania on 22 June 1941”,<sup>46</sup> pervade this section as Jacobson tries to weave his personal story with the history of the country and its Jewish population. He also particularly and powerfully outlines his experiences with remaining Jews in the small towns where his family and ancestors had resided. The places Jacobson visits are Holocaust sites, major execution sites turned into museums such as Fort IX, as well as numerous “mass massacre” sites. The entirety of this section finds the author trying to deal with the places he is seeing for the first time and their significance in both world history and his own.

Jacobson continues his book under the heading “Now”. This section reveals some of his thoughts on his experience in Lithuania and shows its impact on his opinions about his family, most importantly his grandfather. Again Jacobson points to his continual source of fascination in the story: “On one side of the ocean, death. On the other, life. The gulf between those swallowed by the catastrophe in Europe and those who escaped it is unbridgeable. A commensurate gulf yawns between the catastrophe itself and the words I have to use in speaking of it.”<sup>47</sup> He meditates on the outcomes of the nine children who survived the Holocaust because of their grandfather's untimely death, the fate of Nazi criminals after the war, and finally, presents his theory of “opugnancy”. Simply put, this is the theory whereby “people feel the need to belong to identifiable groups . . . which define themselves as much by the exclusion of others as they do by the cherishing of internal bonds between the members of each group.”<sup>48</sup> This idea applies not only to Nazis before and after the Second World War but also to all people at any place and any time. It resonates with the experience Jacobson had first-hand in “Fair Seed-Time” with the schoolboys who ridiculed him in order to follow the group and to “belong”, as well as with the situation central to *The God-Fearer*, in which Kobus could not defend Sannie because of his fear of facing the derision of his group. Jacobson also applies this idea aptly to his native South Africa. He finishes this section on a South African note, never forgetting his heritage, yet placing it within the greater context of the book, the Holocaust.

46 Ibid., 124.

47 Ibid., 219.

48 Ibid., 228.

Finally, the last part of this book, entitled “Never”, ends with a dream about his mother. It deals with the Holocaust and memory, emotion, and, of course, Heshel Melamed. In the dream, Jacobson encounters a house full of children in his mother’s native Varniai. He writes:

I found myself looking directly at a woman in early middle age who had joined the others as effortlessly and invisibly as they had gathered themselves around me. I could not tell if she was my mother or their mother or what the difference would be. She looked so young, so unlike any memory I had of either, I felt my heart would break. Someone was missing, though. I did not know how to speak of him and did not dare to ask where he was . . . There was no Hitler, no years, no Holocaust, no migration, no sorrow, everything was as it had been and always would be.<sup>49</sup>

As it began, this book ends not only with Heshel Melamed but also with the unavoidable cognizance of the Holocaust, also vividly depicted in Joel’s dreams after meeting Yitzchak in Israel in *The Beginners*. A book deeply concerned with the Holocaust from start to finish, *Heshel’s Kingdom* gives the reader a greater understanding of the nature of Jacobson’s interest in the Holocaust, his emotional response to it, and the way he found to deal with it as an author over last forty-four years of his career.

### Conclusion

This essay has sought to follow the thematic thread of the Holocaust throughout Dan Jacobson’s career in the hopes of highlighting and bringing to the fore his contribution to the canon of Holocaust literature. Many scholars recognize him as an important author of South African issues, and many others appreciate his work on the Holocaust as written in *Heshel’s Kingdom*. None, however, has valued the continuity between these two areas of Jacobson’s life and literature. While some authors write about the same themes throughout their careers and can therefore be categorized easily as a certain type of author, Jacobson’s range of interests do not allow such a simple classification. As a young author writing in South Africa, Jacobson wrote most about his home country and the complexities of life there. As a recent expatriate to the metropole, he wrote coming-of-age novels focused on themes of colonialism and identity. As his career progressed, he became more and more interested in religious and Jewish subjects including the Holocaust, culminating in his work on *Heshel’s*

49 Ibid., 234–5.

*Kingdom*. As Martin Rubin succinctly observed, “As a purveyor of the South African Jewish experience as he knows it – and, more important, as he has ruminated on it and reinterpreted it in various forms through the decades of his exile – he has no peer.”<sup>50</sup> The relevant adjectives here are South African and Jewish, suggesting that one cannot pull apart these strands of Jacobson’s authorial voice. Throughout his life and works, he strove to come to terms with both these aspects of his experience. Living through the Second World War, and being the child of Latvian and Lithuanian Jewish immigrants to South Africa, Jacobson had a natural interest in the Holocaust. The autobiographical aspects of his writings from the 1960s demonstrated this ongoing concern; *Heshel’s Kingdom* demonstrated his wish finally to face the topic head-on as a mature author. Writing in that book, Jacobson described his need to encounter his family’s difficult past: “Like the deserts to the north of Kimberley, [Lithuania] too had always been a part of my consciousness. A different part. A darker and more sinister *terra incognita*. One that was lightless, unmoving, at the centre of everything else.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, in concluding his career, Jacobson set out to explore parts of his existence previously found only on the periphery of his awareness. At the heart of that awareness, perhaps serving as the impetus for all else, Jacobson found the “unspeakable history” of the Holocaust.

50 Rubin, review of *Time and Time Again*, 118.

51 Jacobson, *Heshel*, 96.