

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Silence as Social Memory: Collective Frameworks and Narrative Fragmentation in Amir Gutfreund's *Our Holocaust***

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Abstract

The Holocaust occupies a central yet paradoxical position within Israeli cultural memory. While the catastrophe remains foundational to Israeli national identity, everyday discourse often surrounds it with silence, hesitation, and narrative fragmentation. This paper examines how silence functions not as absence but as a structured form of memory in Amir Gutfreund's novel *Our Holocaust*. Written from an Israeli post-Holocaust perspective, the novel portrays the experiences of children growing up among Holocaust survivors in Haifa. Through fragmented stories, withheld narratives, and partial revelations, the text illustrates how Holocaust memory circulates within family and community frameworks while remaining partially inaccessible to younger generations. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, this paper argues that memory in the novel is shaped by social frameworks that regulate who can speak, what can be remembered, and when testimony becomes permissible. The analysis also employs Hayden White's concept of emplotment to demonstrate how national narratives privileging rebirth and heroism struggle to incorporate fragmented experiences of trauma. The Eichmann trial of 1961 emerges as a historical turning point that transforms public discourse while leaving private memory practices relatively unchanged. Judith Butler's concept of grievability further illuminates the paradox in which the Holocaust is publicly commemorated yet privately constrained. Finally, insights from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky regarding institutional shaping of discourse help explain how education, public ritual, and national ideology influence collective remembrance.

Keywords: Holocaust memory, Israeli literature, collective memory, silence, trauma, Amir Gutfreund, cultural memory

Introduction

What does it mean when a historical catastrophe is everywhere in a society's consciousness, yet rarely spoken about directly? More specifically, how can a national literature carry such a visible silence around an event that lies at the center of its cultural and historical identity? These questions are central to understanding the representation of Holocaust memory in contemporary Israeli literature. The Holocaust is not merely one historical episode among others in Israel; it is deeply intertwined with the formation of the Israeli state, the shaping of Jewish identity, and the moral and political narratives that sustain the nation. Yet despite this centrality, the Holocaust frequently appears in Israeli cultural discourse through indirect references, fragmented testimonies, and carefully regulated storytelling.

Amir Gutfreund's novel *Our Holocaust* offers a particularly illuminating exploration of this paradox. Rather than focusing directly on the experiences of survivors during the Holocaust itself, the novel examines

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the everyday lives of children growing up in postwar Israel among communities of survivors. Through the perspectives of the young protagonists Amir and Effi, readers encounter a world in which the Holocaust is simultaneously omnipresent and elusive. Survivors populate the neighborhood, memories linger in gestures and silences, and fragments of stories surface in unexpected moments. Yet the full narrative of what happened “over there” remains withheld from the children, who are repeatedly told that they are “not old enough” to hear the stories.

The novel is set in Haifa, in a neighborhood largely populated by Holocaust survivors who rebuilt their lives after the war. In this environment, the absence of extended family networks leads survivors to develop alternative forms of kinship. Neighbors and acquaintances assume the roles traditionally filled by grandparents, uncles, and aunts. The survivors themselves describe this phenomenon as the “Law of Compression,” a social mechanism through which the shattered structures of prewar Jewish life are compressed into new configurations of communal belonging. Within this compressed social world, memory circulates through indirect communication, partial disclosures, and carefully guarded silences.

The central argument of this paper is that the silence surrounding the Holocaust in *Our Holocaust* should not be interpreted as a form of forgetting. Instead, it functions as a socially structured form of memory. Silence in the novel emerges from the interaction between personal trauma, communal norms, and broader ideological frameworks that shape how the Holocaust can be narrated within Israeli society. The chapter therefore approaches silence as an active social practice rather than as an absence of discourse.

To analyze this phenomenon, the paper draws on several theoretical frameworks. Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how social frameworks structure the production and transmission of memory. Halbwachs argues that memory is never purely individual; it is always embedded within social groups that provide the categories and contexts through which past experiences are interpreted. In the context of *Our Holocaust*, these frameworks include family structures, survivor communities, educational institutions, and national ideologies.

Hayden White’s concept of emplotment further illuminates the relationship between narrative form and historical meaning. White argues that historical events acquire coherence through narrative structures that organize them into recognizable story patterns. In the Israeli national context, dominant narratives often emphasize themes of rebirth, heroism, and national renewal. Such narratives play a crucial role in the formation of collective identity but may also marginalize experiences that do not easily fit within these narrative templates.

Judith Butler’s concept of grievability provides an additional perspective on the politics of public mourning and recognition. Butler suggests that societies establish implicit hierarchies that determine which lives and losses are publicly acknowledged and mourned. In the Israeli context, the Holocaust is unquestionably recognized as a foundational trauma. Yet this very recognition can produce a paradox in which the sacred status of the event limits ordinary forms of storytelling and personal expression.

Finally, insights from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky regarding the institutional shaping of

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discourse help explain how collective memory becomes normalized within public culture. Institutions such as schools, museums, commemorative rituals, and national ceremonies play a significant role in shaping how societies remember the past. These institutions do not necessarily impose propaganda; rather, they establish patterns of discourse that define what is considered appropriate, legitimate, and repeatable.

Through these theoretical lenses, this paper argues that *Our Holocaust* reveals silence as a complex social form of memory. The novel does not depict a society that has forgotten the Holocaust. Instead, it portrays a culture in which memory is carefully structured, controlled, and transmitted through indirect forms of communication. By focusing on the experiences of children growing up within survivor communities, Gutfreund highlights the tension between official narratives of national identity and the fragmented personal memories that circulate within everyday life.

Collective Memory and the Social Frameworks of Silence

The concept of collective memory, developed by Maurice Halbwachs, provides a crucial framework for understanding the dynamics of memory and silence in *Our Holocaust*. Halbwachs argues that individual memories do not exist in isolation but are always shaped by the social groups to which individuals belong. Families, religious communities, educational institutions, and national cultures provide interpretive frameworks that determine how the past is remembered and communicated. These frameworks influence not only what is remembered but also how it is narrated, shared, or withheld.

In Gutfreund's novel, the community of Holocaust survivors in Haifa functions as a powerful social framework for memory. The survivors share a common history of loss and displacement, yet their experiences of the Holocaust remain deeply personal and often painful to articulate. As a result, the community develops implicit rules governing the circulation of memory. Certain stories can be told publicly, particularly in formal commemorative contexts, while others remain confined to private conversations or are avoided altogether. The children growing up in this environment encounter memory primarily through fragments. They overhear partial conversations, notice emotional reactions to seemingly ordinary events, and observe rituals of remembrance that they do not fully understand. These fragments create a sense of mystery around the Holocaust, transforming it into a distant yet ever-present reality. The repeated assertion that the children are "not old enough" to hear the stories reflects an attempt by adults to regulate the timing and conditions under which traumatic memories can be transmitted.

Halbwachs's theory suggests that such regulation is not simply a matter of individual choice but reflects broader social patterns. Shared assumptions about responsibility, protection, and emotional readiness structure memory within the survivor community. Adults believe that shielding children from the full horrors of the Holocaust is necessary for their psychological well-being. At the same time, the survivors themselves struggle with the emotional burden of revisiting traumatic experiences.

This dynamic produces a distinctive form of intergenerational communication. Rather than transmitting a coherent narrative of the past, survivors communicate memory through gestures, pauses, and indirect references. The children learn to interpret these signals, gradually piecing together an understanding of what happened. In this sense, silence becomes a form of communication rather than a memory barrier.

The "Law of Compression" described in the novel further illustrates how collective memory adapts to the

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social conditions of postwar Israel. Because many families were destroyed during the Holocaust, survivors formed new networks of kinship that blur the boundaries between relatives and neighbors. These networks create a shared environment in which memory circulates collectively rather than being confined to individual households.

Within this compressed social structure, the Holocaust becomes a communal reference point. Yet the very ubiquity of the trauma makes it difficult to discuss openly. Everyone in the neighborhood carries some form of loss, and recounting individual experiences risks reopening wounds that affect the entire community. Silence, therefore, functions as a form of mutual protection, allowing survivors to coexist without constantly confronting the full weight of their past.

Zionism, National Identity, and the Politics of Memory

The silence surrounding the Holocaust in *Our Holocaust* cannot be understood without considering the broader ideological context of early Israeli society. Zionism, the political movement that led to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, promoted a vision of Jewish renewal grounded in strength, productivity, and national sovereignty. This vision sought to transform the image of the Jewish people from one associated with diaspora vulnerability to one defined by independence and resilience.

While the Holocaust reinforced the urgency of establishing a Jewish homeland, it also presented a challenge to the Zionist narrative of strength and renewal. Survivors embodied experiences of extreme vulnerability, loss, and displacement. In the early decades of Israeli statehood, these experiences did not easily fit into the dominant national narrative.

As a result, Holocaust memory occupied a complex position within Israeli culture. On the one hand, the Holocaust was recognized as a defining historical event that justified the necessity of a Jewish state. On the other hand, the emphasis on rebuilding and moving forward sometimes discouraged prolonged engagement with the painful details of the catastrophe.

Gutfreund's novel reflects this tension by depicting a society in which the Holocaust is both central and distant. Public commemorations, educational programs, and national ceremonies acknowledge the significance of the event. At the same time, everyday conversations often avoid direct discussion of survivor experiences.

This dynamic illustrates the interaction between personal memory and national ideology. Survivors carry individual memories that may resist integration into collective narratives of heroism and rebirth. The result is a form of cultural silence in which certain aspects of the past remain difficult to articulate within the framework of national identity.

Narrative Structure and the Problem of Employment

Hayden White's theory of Emplotment provides an important lens for understanding the narrative strategies employed in *Our Holocaust*. White argues that historical events acquire meaning through narrative structures that organize them into recognizable story patterns. Historians and writers inevitably select particular plots—such as tragedy, romance, or comedy—through which events are interpreted and presented. In the Israeli national context, narratives of rebirth and redemption have played a central role in shaping

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collective memory. The establishment of the State of Israel is often framed as a story of survival and renewal following the devastation of the Holocaust. This narrative structure emphasizes continuity between past suffering and present strength.

However, the fragmented experiences depicted in Gutfreund's novel resist such straightforward narrative resolution. The stories that survivors carry are marked by gaps, contradictions, and unresolved emotions. These experiences do not easily fit into the redemptive arc of national history.

By focusing on the perspective of children who gradually discover fragments of these stories, *Our Holocaust* exposes the limitations of conventional narrative frameworks. The novel does not attempt to construct a coherent historical account of the Holocaust. Instead, it presents memory as a series of partial revelations that challenge the possibility of narrative closure.

The Eichmann Trial and the Transformation of Public Memory

A significant turning point in Israeli Holocaust discourse occurred with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. The trial brought extensive survivor testimony into the public sphere, allowing many Israelis to hear detailed accounts of Holocaust experiences for the first time. Broadcast internationally, the proceedings transformed the global understanding of the Holocaust and established survivor testimony as a central component of historical memory.

In the context of *Our Holocaust*, the Eichmann trial represents a moment when the boundaries of public discourse expanded. Stories that had previously remained confined to private conversations suddenly became part of national and international narratives. However, the novel suggests that this transformation did not eliminate silence. While survivors began to speak more openly in formal settings, everyday communication about the Holocaust remained shaped by the same social frameworks that had previously regulated memory.

The trial, therefore, illustrates how public recognition of trauma does not automatically translate into private openness. The gap between official memory and personal experience continues to shape the dynamics of storytelling within survivor communities.

Grievability and the Limits of Public Mourning

Judith Butler's concept of grievability offers further insight into the paradoxical status of Holocaust memory in Israeli society. Butler argues that societies implicitly determine which lives are recognized as worthy of mourning and which losses remain marginalized or invisible.

In the case of the Holocaust, the loss of Jewish lives is unquestionably recognized as a profound tragedy. Public memorials, commemorative ceremonies, and educational programs reinforce the centrality of this loss within Israeli national identity.

Yet the very sanctity of the Holocaust can create constraints on how individuals express their grief. When an event is elevated to the level of sacred national memory, personal narratives may feel inadequate or inappropriate in comparison to the collective significance of the catastrophe.

In *Our Holocaust*, this dynamic manifests in the hesitation of survivors to share their stories with children. The weight of the event makes it difficult to translate individual experiences into everyday language. Silence thus becomes a way of preserving the dignity and gravity of the past.

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The shaping of Holocaust memory in Israeli society also involves institutional processes that influence how the past is represented and understood. Educational systems, museums, memorial sites, and national ceremonies all contribute to the formation of collective memory. Insights from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky regarding the role of institutions in shaping public discourse can help illuminate this process. While their work primarily focuses on media and political communication, their broader argument—that institutional structures shape what becomes normal and repeatable in public discourse—can be applied to cultural memory. In Israel, Holocaust remembrance is embedded within a network of institutions that promote specific forms of commemoration and historical interpretation. School curricula introduce students to the history of the Holocaust through carefully structured narratives. Memorial days and ceremonies provide formal occasions for collective mourning.

These institutional frameworks play an important role in preserving historical memory. At the same time, they establish boundaries that shape how the Holocaust can be discussed in everyday life. The result is a form of disciplined remembrance in which certain narratives become widely accepted while others remain less visible.

Gutfreund's novel subtly highlights this tension by contrasting official commemorative practices with the fragmented memories circulating within the survivor community. The children in the story learn about the Holocaust both through institutional education and through the indirect experiences of living among survivors. The contrast between these forms of knowledge reveals the complexity of collective memory.

Silence as Social Memory

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that silence in *Our Holocaust* functions as a socially structured form of memory rather than as an absence of remembrance. The survivors in the novel do not forget the Holocaust; they carry its memories in their daily lives. However, how these memories are communicated are shaped by a combination of personal trauma, communal norms, national narratives, and institutional frameworks.

Silence becomes a means of managing the tension between these different levels of memory. It allows survivors to maintain social relationships without constantly reliving traumatic experiences. It protects children from premature exposure to the horrors of the past. It also reflects the broader cultural context in which the Holocaust occupies a sacred yet difficult position within national identity.

By presenting memory through fragments, pauses, and indirect references, Gutfreund's novel challenges conventional expectations about historical storytelling. Rather than providing a comprehensive narrative of the Holocaust, the text invites readers to experience the complexities of living within a culture shaped by traumatic memory.

Conclusion

Amir Gutfreund's *Our Holocaust* offers a powerful exploration of the paradox that emerges when a historical catastrophe is both central to national identity and surrounded by silence in everyday life. Through the perspectives of children growing up among Holocaust survivors, the novel reveals how memory circulates within social frameworks that regulate storytelling and emotional expression.

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Drawing on theoretical insights from Maurice Halbwachs, Hayden White, Judith Butler, and the work of Herman and Chomsky, this paper has argued that silence in the novel should be understood as a structured form of collective memory. Rather than indicating forgetting or denial, silence reflects the complex interaction between personal trauma, communal norms, national ideology, and institutional practices.

The Holocaust in Israeli culture is simultaneously remembered and restrained, publicly commemorated and privately negotiated. Gutfreund's narrative captures this tension by depicting memory as fragmented, partial, and mediated through everyday interactions. In doing so, the novel exposes the gap between official narratives of national history and the lived experiences of individuals whose lives continue to be shaped by the legacy of the Holocaust.

Ultimately, *Our Holocaust* demonstrates that memory does not always speak loudly. Sometimes it survives in pauses, fragments, and silences that reveal as much about the past as any explicit narrative. By foregrounding these silences, Gutfreund invites readers to reconsider the relationship between trauma, storytelling, and collective identity in post-Holocaust societies.

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