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Memory Mediation by First- and Second-Generation Survivors: *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War* by Magda Bošan Simin and Nevena Simin

Abstract: The reasons for researching the works of Yugoslav author Magda Bošan Simin are several: (1) her novel *When the Sour Cherries Bloom* (1958) was probably the first literary representation of the Holocaust written by a woman author in Yugoslavia; (2) Bošan Simin represents the Holocaust in multiple formats (documentary prose, memoir, autobiographical novel); (3) the book *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War* (2009, English edition 2015) is a narrative comprised of texts written by both Magda Bošan Simin as a Holocaust survivor and her daughter Nevena Simin as a second-generation Holocaust survivor. The research focuses on Holocaust survivors and their post-Holocaust children, issues of memory in Holocaust representation, types of memory, memory mediation, author's intentionality, gender and identity issues.

Keywords: Holocaust representation, formats of Holocaust representation, role of memory and memory mediation, primary and secondary memory, first- and second-generation survivors as co-authors, gender in Holocaust representation, identity.

Introduction

Magda Simin (b. Bošan) was born in 1922 in Senta, a town in the Vojvodina region of Serbia. Her parents and grandparents were members of an Ashkenazi family that had lived in multi-ethnic Vojvodina from at least the nineteenth century, in Austria-Hungary, and later, from 1918, in Yugoslavia. Simin lived in several Vojvodina towns (Senta, Kikinda,

Čurug) prior to 1941, when Nazi Germany and its allies invaded and dismembered Yugoslavia. Germany occupied one part of Vojvodina (Banat) and Hungary the other section, called Bačka.

That same year the new Hungarian authorities arrested Simin as a member of a larger group that had organized resistance under the leadership of the Federation of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ). She was interrogated, tortured, and finally sentenced to 13 years of prison, while some of the members of this group were executed. In the first period she was treated as a political prisoner and sent to serve her sentence in a prison in Hungary called Maria Nostra (Márianosztra). In March 1944, Jewish women convicts in the Maria Nostra prison (15 of them from Yugoslavia and 50 from Hungary) were separated in “a ghetto within a ghetto,” transferred to the Gyűjtőfőgház and Komárom prisons (also in Hungary), and later handed to the Germans who deported Magda to Dachau-Allah, Bergen-Belsen, Fallersleben,¹ and finally to Salzwedel.² Freedom for Magda came when the Salzwedel camp was liberated by the Americans on 29 April 1945.

On returning to Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the war, Magda married Živko Simin, a Serb from Vojvodina who had survived the Mauthausen camp. These two survivors lived in Novi Sad, the cultural center of Vojvodina. They had two children. Their daughter Nevena was born in 1950. Magda Simin worked as an editor for the main public radio station in Novi Sad in the Hungarian-language department; she was a journalist

¹ In order to carry out the planned V-1 “flying bomb” attacks on the United Kingdom, Germany built a number of military installations including launching sites and depots. Some of the installations were huge concrete fortifications. The unpiloted aircraft was assembled at the KdF-Stadt *Volkswagenwerke* (described as “the largest pressed-steel works in Germany”) near Fallersleben, at Cham/Brunns Werke, and at the Mittelwerk underground factory in central Germany. See “V-1 Flying Bomb Facilities,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V-1_flying_bomb_facilities [retrieved: 25 Dec. 2017].

² In 1943, the Neuengamme concentration camp built a female subcamp in Salzwedel, capable of holding more than 1,000 female prisoners. Eventually more than 3,000 women were held there, both Jews and non-Jews. The guard staff at the camp included sixty SS men and women. On 29 April 1945, the U.S. Army liberated the Salzwedel women’s subcamp, and also a nearby men’s camp for male non-German political prisoners. They were shocked to find more than ninety corpses of women who had died of typhus, dysentery and malaria. At the beginning of 1945, prior to the arrival of American ground forces, Allied war planes attacked the main train station of Salzwedel, killing 300 people. The U.S. Army eventually turned over the control of the city to the Soviet Red Army, causing Salzwedel to become part of the German Democratic Republic. See “Salzwedel,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salzwedel> [retrieved: 25 Dec. 2017].

and also a writer. She received several important decorations and awards³ and died in Novi Sad in 2006.

Among Simin's books are novels, a memoir, a travelogue (on Israel), and documentary publications. We will deal with several of her works that were published in Serbian in the following chronological order: *Dok višnje procvetaju* [When the Sour Cherries Bloom, 1958; Hungarian-language edition 1959], *San mladosti* [The Dream of Youth, 1983], *Bačvanke političke osuđenice u ratu 1941–1945* [Women from Bačka: Political Prisoners in the War 1941–1945, published in 2003]. Our special focus is on a book co-authored by Simin and her daughter Nevena: *Zašto su ćutale? Majka i ćerka o istom ratu* [2009; English-language edition: *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War*, 2015].⁴ What is common to these books and what separates them from the rest of Simin's works is their autobiographical character.

The Dream of Youth deals with the pre-war era and consists of Simin's memories of her parents and grandparents, their family life, school and friends, remembrances of childhood and adolescence, including the years 1939–1940 when the situation in Europe was changing radically (with the partition of Poland, invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the introduction of antisemitic legislation in Yugoslavia).

Twenty-five years prior to this memoir Simin wrote her most important novel, *When the Sour Cherries Bloom* (1958). Her experiences of war and the Holocaust from 1941–1945 were central themes in her life as well as in her writing. Her first book, the most important one, was complemented forty-five years later (in 2003) by a documentary narrative, *Women from Bačka: Political Prisoners in the War 1941–1945*, based not only on her own memories but on a variety of additional sources: testimonies of other participants, letters and diaries of her prison mates, and scholarly studies on topics written by professional historians and published in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and mostly in the 1980s.

The last book of our focus—and from our point of view the most interesting one—is *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One*

³ The City of Novi Sad October Award (1971), the Decoration of Work with a Golden Wreath (1975), the Charter of Novi Sad (1984), and the Award for Life's Work of the Writers' Association of Vojvodina (1999).

⁴ *Dok višnje procvetaju*, Novi Sad, 1958 (Hungarian edition, Novi Sad, 1959; second Serbian edition published in Zagreb, 1980); *San mladosti*, Novi Sad, 1983 (Hungarian edition published in Novi Sad, 1988); *Bačvanke političke osuđenice u ratu 1941–1945*, Novi Sad, 2003; *Zašto su ćutale? Majka i ćerka o istom ratu*, Novi Sad, 2009 (English edition: *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War*, Novi Sad, 2015).

and the Same War (2009). The co-authorship needs to be explained. Magda Simin's part of the book consists of the documentary text *Women from Bačka: Political Prisoners in the War 1941–1945*, reprinted three years after her death. Nevena Simin's part is a commentary on her mother's text, a meta-text.

We consider this book unique in Yugoslav/Serbian Holocaust literature for multiple reasons: (1) it combines, complements, and confronts first- and second-generation survivors' narratives; (2) the co-authors are in the closest kinship relation; (3) they are both women; (4) it intersects Holocaust and post-Holocaust experiences in a specific Yugoslav/Serbian historical context; (5) it opens the complex issue of identity and its multiple aspects—ethnic, social, cultural, ideological, gender, and generational.

Second-Generation Survivors: Mediation, Communicative and Public Memory, Meta-Memory, Yugoslav Contextualization

The term “Holocaust survivors” usually refers to members of the age group that actively participated in or experienced the impact of the Holocaust as members of several generations (the elderly, adults, adolescents, children). They should be distinguished from children of survivors born in post-Holocaust times who therefore have no personal memories of the Holocaust. The children's memory regarding the Holocaust is mediated by definition, due to which Eva Hoffman introduces the notion of “post-ness.” This notion is not only chronological, but emotional, and existential: “Our relationship to them [parents] has been defined by our very ‘post-ness’ and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it.”⁵

The defining factor providing coherence to this group are the psychological and emotional consequences of the traumas caused by the Holocaust in their parents' lives and the indirect effects of these traumas in their own.⁶ Members of the second generation are more involved with the past (as the source of these effects) than generations chronologically more removed from the Holocaust. That is why mediated memory—transferred by parents to children—plays a more important role in the second generation's own worldview and their self-perception.

⁵ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York, 2004), 25, 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

Mediated memory involves intergenerational transmission as well as two types of memory: primary and secondary or meta-memory. The former is associated with the first generation (Holocaust survivors) and the latter with the second generation (post-Holocaust children of survivors). Secondary memory is what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.⁷

All memory is mediated by recall. The distinguishing feature of secondary memory or postmemory is its *meta* character: it is how children of Holocaust survivors remember the memories of their parents. They cannot remember the events they did not experience, but they remember how their parents presented the events *they* experienced, how they talked about them, how they enacted their traumas. The main distinction lies in the fact that primary memory moves from reality/experience to image (memory), while secondary memory moves from image to image, which is why it would be more precise to call it secondary or meta-memory rather than postmemory. The articulation of memory in general, including meta-memory, involves imagination, projection, and interpretation because personal, generational, psychological, social, cultural, and other aspects of the individual influence it. Secondary memory can never be simply a copy of primary memory. It is always something else and something more.

What are the forms of transmitting primary memory? The most direct form is what Assmann calls communicative memory, involving personal interaction through the means of verbal communication.⁸ In addition,

⁷ Marianne Hirsch indicates the following: “I first used the term ‘postmemory’ in an article on Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in the early 1990’s. Since then I’ve been trying to define and refine it, on the basis of personal experience and my reading and viewing of the work of writers and artists of the postgenerations. A number of my essays over the last two decades, several co-edited volumes, as well as the three books . . . have been devoted to this project. Much of this work has been done in collaboration with Leo Spitzer.” See Marianne Hirsch, “Postmemory.net,” <http://www.postmemory.net/> [retrieved: 25 Dec. 2017].

⁸ See Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge, 2011), 117. Assmann defines communicative memory as shared and conveyed within a social group defined by common memories of personal interaction through the means of verbal communication over a time span of only 80 to 100 years.

communication can be non-verbal, consisting of body language: gestures, gaze, weeping, fits of anger, and expressions of fear, nightmares, or sweating. Personal interaction is possible between closely related individuals or groups such as family members and close friends. This form of communication is extremely important because “it is only among family, or among intimates that the intimate symptoms of psychic injury are evident.”⁹ Other rather indirect forms of transmission belong to the public domain. Such forms are published texts such as testimonies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and autobiographical novels. They are complemented by historical studies of general scope or on specific topics. In addition, the post-Holocaust generation grew up on both fictional and documentary TV series and feature films dealing with the Holocaust, complemented by representations of the Holocaust at art exhibitions, museums, monuments, and memorials.

While the main emphasis of the historians of the Holocaust was on documenting and studying the actions of the perpetrators, the rise of Holocaust literature, art, TV productions and film—such as versions of *The Diary of Anne Frank* or Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*—re-oriented attention to the victims. This in turn opened a new field of interest focused on the subjective world of Holocaust victims. The Holocaust thus became a new field of study for disciplines such as psychology, the social sciences, cultural studies, and gender studies.

Helen Epstein’s book *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* opened the theme of second-generation survivors in 1979. However, the rise of second-generation awareness in the West was not mirrored in Eastern Europe or Yugoslavia, where Nevena Simin’s postwar generation was considered especially “lucky” because the dominant belief or hope was that it would be a generation exempt from the experience of war. Nevena would have been perceived as a member of the *first* postwar generation rather than a *second*-generation survivor. This new generation was to mark a discontinuity rather than continuity with their parents’ generation. “Brotherhood and Unity” sought to erase the differences between the various ethnic groups and their very different destinies during the war. Public policy swept wartime wounds and traumas under the carpet, but the differences remained latent and were remembered if not publicly, then in personal and family memories.

Thus the “lucky” post-Holocaust generation in Yugoslavia realized their lives were controlled both by internal domestic policies and external factors

⁹ Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 37.

of the Cold War. Yugoslavia made a break with the Soviet Union in 1948, introducing “socialism with a human face.” In 1961 Yugoslavia became the leader of the non-aligned countries, boosting its international standing and developing good political and economic relations with African, Asian, and Latin American countries. However, when West Germany began importing foreign workers due to economic need, the work force came from Spain, Turkey, and also Yugoslavia. West Germany denied Yugoslavia war reparations because it was a socialist country, while no reparations were demanded from East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria because these were ideologically friendly socialist countries. Thus victims like Magda Simin never sought or received any kind of apology or reparation.

While the Yugoslav war narrative insisted on the heroic saga of the Partisans, Simin’s novel offered insights into the world of prisoners and camp inmates. Furthermore, while most attention was dedicated to men, Magda was an author presenting an insider’s view of women. The fact that she wrote her autobiographical novel at a time when her memory of these events was not yet substantially mediated by postwar experiences contributes to the authenticity of her narrative. Simin was in fact one of the first women authors to cope with this theme in Yugoslav literature.

Magda Simin wrote about her war experiences in two formats—documentary prose, *Women from Bačka: Political Prisoners in the War 1941–1945*, and the autobiographical novel *When the Sour Cherries Bloom*. Both deal with referential truth. However, while documentary prose tends to reduce the narrative to a chronological report of events based on impersonal facts, the autobiographical novel expands the narrative to include subjective, personal responses to these facts.

While, for example, only a few pages are dedicated to the Maria Nostra prison in *Women from Bačka*, the description of Magda Simin’s almost three-year-long internment in this prison is described in fifty-five pages in *When the Sour Cherries Bloom*. This latter description includes not only more details, some of them perhaps not significant for the purposes of a testimony, but necessary and functional in a novel. These details appear in numerous dialogues, flashbacks, and interpretations integrated into a narrative about the specific destiny of a Yugoslav Jewish woman of exceptional courage, strong communist convictions, and a profound sense of solidarity with victims—of social, political, and racial discrimination.

Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War

Magda did not write a book together with her daughter Nevena. It was Nevena who wrote a book with her mother Magda. Magda's part in *Why They Said Nothing* consists of the documentary narrative *Women from Bačka*, segmented thematically in such a way as to allow Nevena's narrative to be inserted as commentaries for each segment. The two narratives present several important differences:

(1) Magda's text holds a primary position, while Nevena's is a secondary meta-text.

(2) The text is intentionally documentary, while the meta-text is the opposite: facts are a point of departure for reflections, memories, subjective responses, personal observations, and expressions of emotional states. In this respect, the two texts are both contrasting and complementary.

(3) The first- versus second-generation time difference is emphasized. Magda's objective factual account deals with events that took place during the war/Holocaust, while Nevena's includes wartime experiences transferred to her by her parents and other sources (e.g., books and films), extending the timeline to the experiences of a second-generation survivor living in postwar Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslavia.

(4) There is a difference in the narrative approach to time. In Magda's narrative, time evolves as a linear succession of events connected by cause-effect, while her daughter's narration moves back and forth and consists of fragments connected by association in dispersed time.

(5) Magda's narration (text) refers to the realities she experienced, while Nevena's narration (meta-text) makes direct reference to her mother's text included in the book, and indirect reference to her mother's novel and memoir (subtext).

Despite the differences, the text and meta-text share a common spatial frame. This is the personal geography of Magda's confinement in prison / concentration camp / forced labor factory leading from Vojvodina, to Hungary and Germany, then back to Yugoslavia. Magda's writing and her memories communicated to Nevena in personal interactions between mother and daughter created in Nevena's mind images of these places. In 2005 Nevena set out on a journey to visit the places of her mother's wartime confinement. These were sites of memory she wanted to exteriorize by confronting them with the physical buildings that survived their

wartime past, assuming new roles in the present. Nevena's journey is like a pilgrimage stripped of the latter's religious substance. It is a secular but very personal and emotional pilgrimage to prisons and camps, the "monstrous" places that have haunted her imagination.

The very first encounter with such a place, the Yellow House in Subotica where Magda was tortured, highlights a basic and recurrent discrepancy: "the Yellow House I am looking at in 2005 seems to me like a pale caricature of that invisible monster that had overshadowed my childhood and adolescence with suffering."¹⁰ The emotionally packed image was "a constant companion in the train of my life," wrote Nevena. This subjective fact overshadows her perception of the same building many decades later. The confrontation of the material structure and Nevena's pre-existing image of it results in the contrast between two time frames—past (Holocaust) and present (post Holocaust). The first one is packed with emotion and meaning, while the second is stripped of both. At first it seems like a tangible stage with no traces of the human drama "performed" there long ago.

Nonetheless, a new drama will take place on such a stage when Nevena visits the Maria Nostra prison in Hungary. On reaching Maria Nostra, Nevena exclaims "Oh my God, it exists!" It is real, but only a building and a yard. Nonetheless, the physical contact with the convent/prison was like "a slap in the face"¹¹ marking the inception of a new drama whose main protagonist is Nevena rather than Magda. Here it is important to distinguish the text of the Holocaust survivor (Magda), which proceeds from reality via memory to image, from the meta-text of the second-generation survivor (Nevena), proceeding from image via memory to reality. In relation to the reality of the Holocaust, Magda's memory is primary, Nevena's is secondary. However, in relation to the present-day reality, Nevena's memory is primary: she interprets Magda's experiences from the point of view of a second-generation survivor confronting the reality of her own generation. The new drama begins with "a slap in the face," a disruption marking Nevena's stepping out of the world of secondary memories and stepping into the here and now. At this point Nevena's meta-text moves away from her mother's past in order to focus on her own present. While Magda proceeds from reality to image, Nevena proceeds

¹⁰ Magda Simin, Nevena Simin, *Zašto su ćutale? Majka i ćerka o istom ratu* (Novi Sad, 2009), 31. The quoted excerpts are translated by the author of this article.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

from mediated image to reality and further to new images, concepts, and approaches typical of the culture of second-generation survivors. In Nevena's case they include the drawing of analogies between racism and ecology, the linkage between Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the pilgrimage to death camps through TV programs and Holocaust "tourism," gender issues, elements of postwar youth culture,¹² psychological issues,¹³ children of victims versus children of perpetrators, postwar international politics, travel to non-Holocaust places, and post-Yugoslavia.¹⁴

Maria Nostra as a Complex Disciplinary Structure

Nevena's commentaries offer insights into how her mother's Holocaust life affected her, how her own generational and personal experiences influenced her interpretation of the former, what changes in her self-perception (identity) occurred, and what the Holocaust meant to a second-generation survivor in Yugoslavia sixty years after the war and in the context of events leading to post-Yugoslavia. Last but not least, her meta-text elucidates the generation gap between parental and peer cultures.

Since the segment on Maria Nostra holds a central position in Magda's narration as well as in the commentaries of her daughter, we have selected it for close analysis. Among Magda's prisons and camps, Maria Nostra also stands out as the place of her longest confinement and as a microworld that is clearly gender marked although originally it was a male convent to which a prison was added in the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Located in northern Hungary, Maria Nostra was an example of "Siamese twins," as Nevena called it: a female Catholic convent combined with a prison for female convicts. The nuns served God, but at the same time operated the

¹² "There was probably no gulf wider than that between the ethos of postwar youth culture in America and the mental world of survivors" (Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 89). This gulf was narrower in socialist Yugoslavia.

¹³ "The children of survivors, in contrast to their parents, did belong to a psychologically oriented generation" (*ibid.*, 63).

¹⁴ Simin, Simin, *Zašto su ćutale?*, 70, 131–133, 97, 112–116, 133.

¹⁵ The male convent was established in the fourteenth century. In 1858 a prison was built next to it. Magda describes the entrance with a big iron gate. On top of it was a specific ornamental detail: a triangle with an eye in the center, from which sunbeams radiate in all directions. The nuns, "clean, very pure, supernatural beings," made a point of avoiding contact of their robes with the incoming dirty prisoners. Passing through the convent, the convicts reached the prison, where the corridors were lined with cells for solitary confinement. See Magda Simin, *Dok višnje procvetaju* (Novi Sad, 1958), 56–61.

prison entrusted to them by the secular authorities. Both as a convent and a prison, it was isolated from society at large, but ultimately controlled by official institutions—the church and government bodies. The convicts consisted of two groups: criminals and political convicts such as communists (who fought against Nazism and fascism) and members of the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group (who were against war). Among them were Hungarian, Serbian, and Jewish women, but until 1944 the Jewish were not segregated.

Disciplinary institutions are designed to punish, reform, and produce conformity. Michel Foucault, who introduced the concept of disciplinary institution in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), viewed such institutions as individual manifestations of a vast network that included prisons, schools, military institutions, hospitals, and factories. We might add convents as they too are isolated and closed settings operating under the control and imposition of strict regulations. The Maria Nostra convent-prison was a specific institution of this kind. In its case, two originally distinct disciplinary institutions merged into a single, more complex structure. Although a convent is a religious institution one joins voluntarily, albeit in some cases under pressure (of social and economic factors), it had the same kind of the rigorous regulation of space and time as a prison. Noticing this analogy, Magda wrote that the nuns were also prisoners, but of a different kind: “Yes, these nuns, exerting power over hundreds of miserable women, gripping the keys to solitary confinement cells in their hands, are also confined here, but for life and with no hope of freedom.”¹⁶ From her point of view, the nuns had power over the prisoners, but they too were prisoners, powerless to ever retrieve freedom.

In this case, the convent was a primary religious disciplinary institution, the prison a secondary and secular one. There was an internal hierarchy among the nuns (descending from the abbess and her deputy to the youngest nun) within the convent and an external hierarchy in which the nuns controlled the prisoners. A capo was selected from among the criminal convicts (in this case it was a woman convicted for multiple murders who had already served 12 years in Maria Nostra), who mediated between the nuns and the prisoners, but only in certain situations.

There were three reasons why this complex power structure was flexible and porous. First, nuns rather than professional administrators ran the

¹⁶ Ibid., 66.

prison. Second, both administrators and inmates were women. Third, the prison was not a concentration or death camp designed to kill the inmates, but rather to punish and reform them. Although Maria Nostra was a punitive institution, the nuns placed a high priority on “curing” the inmates of their criminal behavior perceived as an illness. In this sense the prison assumed the function of a hospital for women with “criminal” disorders. The second priority, especially regarding political prisoners, was to isolate and re-educate them. In this sense the prison assumed the function of a school. In addition, the Catholic nuns sought to involve the inmates in religious education promoting conversion to the “true [Catholic] faith,” with special reference to inmates of the Christian Orthodox denomination, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and atheists. Thus, Serbian women were regularly taken to Catholic Sunday mass, while a “reform” (Protestant) priest was assigned to deal with Jewish inmates.¹⁷ The prison/hospital/school thus had a flexible power system allowing for some degree of negotiation between the nuns and the political inmates, who were distinguished from criminal inmates by their higher degree of education, social status, and culture. One example was the situation when the nuns were planning to stage a Nativity play in which the convicts would participate by performing various roles. Although religious in its essence, the play had obvious albeit naïve political overtones as well as references to current events. This is illustrated by the introduction of a new character to be played by one of the communist inmates: it was a captured Soviet soldier who was reformed in captivity to the extent that he renounced communism and in addition embraced the “true” faith.¹⁸ This character was the model the nuns hoped to promote by education rather than force. Other results of negotiation were compromises such as allowing the inmates to sing, work in the orchard, stage their own plays, receive books and enjoy the use of paper and pencils, receive packages (three annually for Jewish inmates, six for everyone else). The initial solitary confinement was replaced by allowing two inmates to share a cell.

¹⁷ Ibid., 69, 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84–88.

Text, Meta-Text and Subtext

Magda's novel *When the Sour Cherries Bloom* includes many dialogues, among them three of particular interest. One was Magda's discussion with a Jehovah's Witnesses inmate on religion and communist ideology. Another was her conversation with the deputy abbess, who was willing to hear Magda's communist views, if not to accept them. The third dialogue is of special importance because it was conducted between Magda and her mother, whom she would never see again. Magda mentions only one visit of her mother to Maria Nostra, which took place in early 1944. "It will end soon,' she began to console me. – 'I hope by spring. . . . When the sour cherries bloom,' she added."¹⁹ Magda commented that both she and her mother had no idea how far away the Soviets were and how long it would take them to reach Hungary. "Spring arrived, the sour cherry flowers came and went, the fruit ripened, but not for her. In April 1944, when Hitler formally occupied Hungary, they deported her together with the family and my two brothers to a camp."²⁰ They were deported as Jews and precisely in this segment Magda recalls the late 1930s, when Jewish refugees were coming to Yugoslavia hoping to move on to other, safer places. She also described this situation in her memoir *The Dream of Youth*, but in the latter she includes an important detail associated with her father and her own Jewish identity, which generally is not given much attention in her narrative. Her father put "an old-fashioned Jewish sign" on their gate, a miniature Torah, so the refugees would know that they could find shelter and food in the Bošan home. At that time Magda's mother, unable to see the writing on the wall, believed there would be no war,²¹ just as in early 1944 she believed the war would end in a few months. Magda stresses the irony of her mother's *naïveté* by highlighting two events. In April 1944 Magda was finally identified as a Jew, in addition to being a communist: Jews in Maria Nostra were separated and placed in solitary confinement, and after that the nuns were ordered to transfer them to the Germans, who deported them to death camps.²² At the same time, in April 1944, her mother and siblings were deported to Auschwitz. The title *When the Sour Cherries*

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 112.

²² Magda describes how the nuns earnestly wept as did all the remaining inmates, who bid them farewell by singing "The East and West Wake Up." Ibid., 113.

Bloom is strongly associated with her Jewish identity because it was in the spring of 1944 that the Jews from Hungary, including Magda from the Maria Nostra prison and her mother and siblings from the occupied Yugoslav town of Čurug, were sent to death camps. Magda survived, but her family, including mother, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and their children, never came back from Auschwitz. The “blooming of the sour cherries” is a metaphor of Magda’s realization that Nazism was not only an ideological issue, but also a racial policy implementing the Final Solution.

When the Sour Cherries Bloom and *The Dream of Youth* both function as a subtext in *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War*. These two books highlight the Holocaust as part of the war narrative, compensating the lack of Holocaust themes in Magda’s documentary *Women from Bačka*. The subtext is very important because Nevena’s meta-text refers not only to the theme of women political prisoners, but also to Holocaust themes and associated topics elaborated in Magda’s novel and memoir. Nevena’s narration structured on the principle of association moves with ease between Magda’s documentary functioning as text and Magda’s novel and memoir functioning as subtext. This is also manifested in Nevena’s symbolic itinerary: Nevena visits Auschwitz, where most of Magda’s family and cousins were murdered, in addition to the places associated with Magda’s individual ordeal. Without the subtext Nevena could not expand her narrative with the elaboration of the central Holocaust theme and its ramifications.

On the level of real space Nevena “followed” her mother as well as other members of the family. On the level of semantic structuring, Nevena proceeded in the opposite direction. We will explain this on the example of Maria Nostra. Namely, Maria Nostra was real for Magda and everything derived from her imprisonment there was also real—sensory impressions, emotional responses, reflections, relations with other inmates and prison administrators, etc. After the war these were stored in her memory. Subsequently they were retrieved from memory and integrated into a narrative from which a complex image of Maria Nostra emerges. Nevena proceeded in the *opposite* direction: her point of departure is Magda’s complex image of Maria Nostra which is elaborated further in Nevena’s own imagination. However, the original image was transferred to her not only by her mother’s texts, both novelistic and documentary, but also by her mother’s *enactments* of certain details.

One such example is the following: in her meta-text Nevena describes how her mother imitated the never-ending prayers of the nuns. However, Magda's vocal enactment continues with auditive and visual images from Nevena's own imagination, leading her to one of the essential questions of Holocaust literature:

Whenever Magda mentioned those prayers, she would start singing to the Virgin Mary and I can retrieve those tones from memory very clearly. I would always imagine that scene: political convicts huddled in their cells where they could hear the prayers of the nuns, who were at the same time merciless prison guards. Even now, when I close my eyes, I hear them, those voices coming from the church, getting louder as they reflect off the thick walls, continue into the yard, creeping into the cells and solitary confinement on the upper floors, humming, humming, humming. . . . While the girls and women, most of whom didn't understand Hungarian, thought of their own God, asking him why he had thrown them into this locked, cold and stinky hole.²³

Carrying this mental and emotional baggage—Magda's primary images as well as her own secondary images—Nevena finally makes the journey and comes face to face with the present-day, tangible Maria Nostra, the building of the convent-prison. Prior to arriving she wondered: "Can any kind of building overshadow the memories of events in which I didn't participate, but which have definitely impacted me by burdening my back with a heavy cross?"²⁴ In both text and meta-text memory plays a mediating role, but the realities associated with the Holocaust survivor and the second-generation survivor are very different. Nevena observes the convent-prison exhibiting fluttering flags of Hungary and the European Union. There is no trace of the war or the Holocaust, so the initial encounter with Maria Nostra means nothing to her. Nevena therefore decides "to return" to her "memories," both her mother's and her own of her mother.²⁵ Since all memory is selective, it is interesting to see which memories Nevena chooses to comment on and what their source is. Although Magda's contribution to the joint book is the text *Women from Bačka*, the memories Nevena refers to in the segment on Maria Nostra are mostly provided by the subtext (*When the Sour Cherries Bloom*) and her mother's remembrances transmitted orally or enacted in the form of communicative memory. One such example is the above-mentioned sound of the nun's prayers filling the

²³ Simin, Simin, *Zašto su ćutale?*, 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

whole space of confinement. In Nevena's commentary this sound image leads to a question: why has my God punished me, why didn't he prevent the dehumanization and murder of innocent people?

The second example refers to a visual impression. Magda mentions small windows placed very high up in the cells. From there the inmates could now and then catch a glimpse of the Danube. Nevena narrates how she wandered around the Maria Nostra buildings in search of a view of the Danube, but she could only see guard towers and barbed wire. Suddenly a prison van passed by, triggering a typical second-generation response:

Only then did I realize that I was in the outer prison yard, and as the prison van passed, suddenly, right in front of me, the iron gate was being shut. I won't have time to pass through! It happened again. I cannot precisely say "what," but I had a similar feeling when in December of 1994 I passed through the gates of Auschwitz. I felt as I was not there for the first time, but now they can do me no harm! "I will get out!", I repeated the same sentence to the gate in Maria Nostra.²⁶

Nevena can partially identify with her mother as a Holocaust survivor, but she is at the same time aware that such an identification is possible only in her imagination. It is like waking up from horrifying nightmare and realizing it was not real. This segment also shows how Nevena's narrative proceeds along the line of association, moving from Magda's image of the prison window to the Danube, to the prison yard, the real prison van and gate, back to the image of the Holocaust survivor, ending in reality and the consoling feeling that she can always wake up from the Holocaust nightmare.

The third example is Nevena's narration of Magda's enactment of the sensation of solitary confinement in a tiny cell. In *When the Sour Cherries Bloom* Magda describes how the very limited space of isolation affects the mind of the prisoner:

Four steps long, two steps wide. Four gray walls and high up under the ceiling a window with bars. This is the prisoner's world. At the beginning it seems the four walls are not a big deal, that within them you could place the whole world you have experienced with its richness of impressions, feelings, sensations. Soon you notice—or perhaps you don't—how that world shrinks, narrows, until it is finally reduced to those four walls. In some rare moments, however, you manage to move the walls away again, as if they were curtains on the scene of a theater behind which the performance of life is underway, but only for a short, very short while. Then the walls move in again, they harden, press on your chest, suffocate you, and

²⁶ Ibid., 44.

then you turn from human being into a prisoner again, someone wasting days and not counting them.²⁷

This description functions as a subtext. Nevena, however, complements it by describing how Magda enacted the physical image of her cell fifty years later in Nevena's kitchen. Nevena's friend Miroslav Mandić, a Serbian poet of her own age, was sitting in her kitchen. This man was a passionate walker and would walk with a pedometer twenty kilometers every day because "he planned to inundate Europe entirely, to walk across all the states from one monument to the next, to pay his respect to all the great European writers."²⁸ But it was the nineties and the conflicts leading to the destruction of Yugoslavia and international sanctions (including visa restrictions) limited his route to Vojvodina and Serbia. Miroslav had spent a brief time in jail after he had said or written something critical of the government. Magda asked him how large his cell had been and then began pacing the kitchen to show how many steps her cell in Maria Nostra was long and wide, where the bed was, the window, the loo.²⁹ This segment shows how Magda, a political prisoner during the war, is associated with Miroslav, a postwar poet jailed because he had made politically incorrect statements. This leads Nevena to reflect and generalize on the theme of freedom of thought and expression, but also on the secret bond between prisoners from different times punished for ideological transgressions.

The fourth example has to do with this bond. Nevena's narrative in this case is not based on any of Magda's written sources, but on a scene that took place in their home where Magda's prison-mates would often get together. When they discussed and remembered Maria Nostra, they would stop speaking only in Serbian and start switching back and forth between Hungarian and German. At one point one of the ladies commented on what "a good time" they had in Maria Nostra. Nevena was shocked and confused, so her mother explained that what was good was the fact that they were part of a *ženski kolektiv*, a feminine collective, community, organization.³⁰ Magda mentions the *kolektiv* throughout her narratives on the prisons and the camps. The *kolektiv* was designed for survival: every scrap of food was equally divided, all the women helped each other if they were ill or could not endure the hardships, together they shared

²⁷ Simin, *Dok višnje procvetaju*, 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁹ Simin, Simin, *Zašto su ćutale?*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47–52.

information and organized resistance, established communication channels to distribute news about the front, the Partisans, events in the camp, all kinds of information. The *kolektiv* provided a feeling of equality, support, solace, and most importantly, a strong sense of belonging to a group, a family, albeit non-biological, a social structure protecting them through persistent solidarity. The female *kolektiv* continued functioning for years after the war, providing a support network in any adverse circumstance, including the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. It was “a perfect machine for survival,”³¹ a manifestation of genuine solidarity that Nevena interprets as being strongly gender marked. Maria Nostra became for Nevena “a mine of incredible knowledge about human nature,”³² especially regarding generational differences.

Holocaust and Gender

The idea of combining in a single book segments written by Magda and her daughter Nevena came from the publisher *Ženske studije* (Women’s Studies), located in Novi Sad. Here is how Nevena described her decision to write commentaries on her mother’s testimony:

They [the publisher] said it would be very interesting to complement that text with commentaries written by me, Magda’s daughter, giving the same importance to the fact that I was a second-generation survivor of World War II. Mother and daughter, first- and second-generation survivors, dealing with the same topic from two perspectives. I accepted. We easily agreed on how to proceed: I would tread the same path across Europe along which the Nazis and their allies arrested, beat, tortured and abused Magda and hundreds of her wartime friends, political convicts, women, and transported them as if they were inhuman objects. Following in Magda’s wartime footsteps and occasionally also the wartime path of my father Živko, I kept delving into my own inner labyrinth, wrenching the words I present to the reader from my wounded soul, that of a second-generation Holocaust survivor. Although most of my life I believed that a person that had experienced evil would be better off forgetting it, I do not regret having agreed to reopen that door of evil within me.³³

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² Ibid., 46.

³³ Ibid., 5. This is a reference to “*Ženske studije i istraživanja*” (Women’s Studies and Research), an NGO active in Novi Sad since 1997, whose goals are education in Women’s and Gender Studies, organization of public talks, seminars and conferences, research and documentation, as well as publishing. Nevena Simin does not mention the names of persons she discussed the project with. Women’s Studies and Research was the co-publisher

The project, designed and suggested by a publisher specializing in gender studies, took into consideration not only Nevena's wish to draw attention to her mother's wartime memories, but also her double awareness of gender issues and her own status as postwar child of Holocaust survivors.

Gender studies had been developing in Yugoslavia since the mid-nineties, when the first feminist journal, *ProFemina*, began publication (1994), while the Center for Women's Studies began publishing its journal *Women's Studies* in 1995. Both journals contributed significantly to the development of awareness regarding gender issues. Since 2011 there has been a third journal, *Knjiženstvo: časopis za studije književnosti, roda i kulture*.³⁴ During the conflicts of the 1990s, the journal lent itself to politicization, but nevertheless contributed significantly to the development of awareness regarding gender issues. In the specific post-Yugoslav framework, Nevena Simin introduced a new perspective in gender studies by linking the latter to the domain of Holocaust topics. The view of the Holocaust from women's perspectives was first introduced into the academia and public discourse in 1983, when university professors Esther Katz and Joan Ringelheim organized a conference at Yeshiva University's Stern College about women's experiences in the Holocaust. The groundbreaking work of Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman, and Joan Ringelheim³⁵ was followed by other excellent studies, memoirs, testimonies, and narratives on women and the Holocaust.

The project proposed by Women's Studies was new because it introduced this linkage into post-Yugoslav literature and did so in a specific way, by combining three themes: gender, Holocaust, and second-generation survivors. The mother–daughter co-authorship manifested as text and

of Magda and Nevena Simin's book. This organization should not be confused with the Center for Women's Studies in Belgrade, publisher of the journal *Women's Studies* (in 2002 renamed *Genero: Journal of Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies*).

³⁴ *ProFemina: časopis za žensku književnost i kulturu* (*ProFemina: Journal for Women's Literature and Culture*) was a quarterly published in Belgrade by B92 since 1994; *Women's Studies / Genero* was published in Belgrade by the Center for Women's Studies since 1995; *Knjiženstvo: časopis za studije književnosti, roda i kulture* (*Knjiženstvo: Journal for Studies in Literature, Gender and Culture*) has been published since 2011 by the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. *Knjiženstvo* is a combination of two Serbian words: literature (*književnost*) and *ženstvo* (pertaining to women).

³⁵ Carol Rittner, John K. Roth (eds.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993); Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, 1998); Joan Ringelheim, "Women in the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Signs* 10 (1985), 4:741–761.

meta-text stresses the gender aspect. The Holocaust aspect does not hold a central place, which is already suggested in a paratextual element, the title: *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War*. The Holocaust is implied in the word *war*, but is not highlighted. This can be interpreted as a reminiscence of the early postwar period when the Holocaust was not yet distinguished from the war in general and its many variations of horrors and atrocities. It is, however, more intrinsically connected to the essence of the narrative. Namely, for the most part of the war, Magda was targeted as a political/ideological enemy (a communist) and only in 1944–1945 as a Jew. The fate of Magda's husband, a survivor of Mauthausen, was not considered part of the Holocaust because he was Serbian. However, the death of Magda's family members, all deported to Auschwitz as Jews, was directly part of the Holocaust. Therefore, the story of Nevena's parents and other family members brings together the Nazi persecution of Jews and Serbs as well as of political-ideological adversaries, so it had to be presented in the general war context rather than the Holocaust.

As mother and daughter refer to the same war, there is an obvious difference between the two with regard to their perception of gender roles. Born in 1922, Magda internalized the heritage of the first sexual revolution. The status of women changed after World War I. Due to the reduction of the male population in the aftermath of the war, women were more intensively included in the work force. The suffragist movement, advocating equal rights in the voting process and the social domain, provided women with more opportunities for education and integration into the public, including political life. Quite expectedly, the dominant figure in Magda's self-perception was her father, an advocate of social justice and equal rights, rather than her mother, who was relegated to the traditional gender role typical of her generation. Magda felt she was equal to men and her fervent leftist political involvement and solidarity with "the damned of the world" projected an ideal world cleansed of discrimination, be it social-, ethnic- or gender-based.

In contrast to Magda, the dominant figure in Nevena's self-perception was her mother. It is obvious that she appreciated her mother as a representative of the most progressive women of the previous generation, a person willing to sacrifice for her political and personal convictions, and a personality strong enough to endure the tribulations imposed on her during the war and the Holocaust. Nevena, however, internalized

the benefits of the second sexual revolution of the sixties, so her worldview is imbued with a different kind of gender awareness: while Magda's generation struggled to be equal to men by being *like* them, Nevena's sought equality in conjunction with stressing sexual/gender difference and specificity. The generation gap manifested in the different ways mother and daughter approached the gender issue is a central theme of *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War*.

Research on women in the Holocaust has highlighted many new themes: the sexual vulnerability of women, sexual violence and rape, forced prostitution and sexual slavery, forced abortion and sterilization, medical experiments on women and children in the camps, the status of pregnant women, childbearing in camp conditions, and so on. In general terms, a central theme is the different impact of camp conditions on women and the different way women coped with camp reality. We have already mentioned the importance Magda attached to the *ženski kolektiv* in her own experience of prisons and camps. Magda's women's collective is analogous to what is known as "camp sisters," a gender-specific survival strategy relying on traditional women's skills (mothering, nurturing, homemaking, caretaking). *Ženski kolektiv* created a cross-generational bond among biologically unrelated women who behaved as members of a tight-knit family of surrogate mothers, daughters, and sisters. The "camp sister" mentality continued even under very different circumstances in the postwar period, which impressed Nevena. In her self-perception there is an echo of this mentality: the dominant figures in her own homage to the Holocaust/war victims in her family were her mother and her grandmother Paula.

The most egregious sex-based atrocities against women in the Holocaust were the most difficult to research. Male researchers neglected this aspect of the Holocaust, while scholars were confronted with difficulties on the part of victims to discuss such experiences openly. This is reflected in the titles of some articles such as Helene Sinnreich's "And It Was Something We Didn't Talk About': Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust."³⁶ The title *Why They Said Nothing: Mother and Daughter on One and the Same War* is an allusion to this situation. However, in this case the muteness refers to a less drastic event—the disruption of menstruation. The conditions of incarceration—severe malnutrition, exhausting forced labor, psychological factors, and sometimes bromide added to

³⁶ Helene Sinnreich, "And It Was Something We Didn't Talk About': Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies* 14 (2008), 2:1–22.

their food—caused either excessive bleeding or amenorrhea. The lack of basic hygiene was both unhealthy and humiliating, while amenorrhea led to fear of sterility. Magda and her friends from the prisons and camps discussed all details of their experiences, *except* this one. The realization of this shook Nevena “from head to toe.” On one occasion in the late 1960s, when Magda’s friends were visiting, they discussed how they put a lot of effort into cleaning the barracks and getting rid of lice. Nevena asked them how they coped with hygiene during their periods. “We were lucky,” they answered, “we were spared that.”³⁷ She asked her mother why she had never mentioned this before:

The reason for this deliberate silence shocked me: she was ashamed of writing that “feminine” word. That courageous woman capable of enduring brutal beatings without betraying anyone, who had with several other courageous twenty-year-old women practically taken care of several hundred women living in unbearable conditions, who had figured out how to turn the collective into an organized survival machine—that same Magda was “ashamed” to utter the word “menstruation” in front of men.³⁸

This was a generational issue. Magda’s generation was making inroads into the male-dominated domain of public and social life, suffrage, political activism, and education. For her generation this was a part of the general issue of equality versus all kinds of discrimination. Her role model was her father, and Magda was showing, in contrast to her mother who was limited by the traditional gender roles assigned to her generation, that *she* could continue her father’s work and in doing so assume a gender role different from that of her mother. In all of Magda’s writing, it is obvious that despite her love for her mother, the latter had never been her role model. The courage expected of Magda was comparable to that of a man: she was expected to endure torture like a man, she was expected to fight for her ideals like a man. In other words, she was expected to act as a man in order to fight the discrimination of women.

This version of feminism, typical of that generation, is subtly elaborated in a traditional ballad known as “The Damsel Warrior”: a family with only daughters is required to send a son to the king’s army, so the youngest daughter volunteers to assume the role of the missing son, so she hides her female body traits (hair and breasts), exhibits exceptional courage as a warrior, intelligently passes all tests designed to uncover

³⁷ Simin, Simin, *Zašto su ćutale?*, 113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

her sexual identity (including her period as *the* sign of the former), but ultimately her female body can no longer be hidden under a male mask. Her true identity is revealed, so she ends up marrying the king's son and living happily ever after. In Magda's generation, it was the body that reminded women of their sexual identity. Although in the 1920s and 1930s it was fashionable for women to wear trousers and dress like men, this was only a matter of dress code; it covered or masked the female body. As in the ballad, the *period* was the ultimate and most intimate sign of sexual identity. For Magda's generation, this was a topic to avoid in public discussion: they were ashamed because it seemed equivalent to showing their nude bodies in public. In addition, it is interesting how Magda's friends describe the disruption of menstruation in prison/camp conditions: they say they were *spared* it, because in these conditions their sexual identity *was* in fact a burden, an additional vulnerability. Having the period, being pregnant, delivering a child, or taking care of a baby in these conditions was undesirable because it radically lowered the chances of survival.

Conclusion

The issue of memory and memory mediation can and sometimes must be considered in various frameworks. In the case of Magda Bošan Simin, the first framework is connected to the diverse genres of her writing: documentary text, memoir, and autobiographical novel. In this instance, memory mediation is affected by the author's intentionality: her choice of genre. This, in turn, influences the relationship between factual/documentary discourse and autofictional narrative. The second framework is established by the connection between first- and second-generation survivors as co-authors of a narrative comprised of text, subtext, and meta-text. Memory mediation in this instance implies an interactive relationship between primary and secondary memory (meta-memory, postmemory). The distinction between primary and secondary memory of the Holocaust is discerned in the two-way process connecting experienced reality and image, which ultimately confronts two images and two realities, one the Holocaust and the other post-Holocaust, as well as two generations, one of Holocaust survivors and the other of second-generation "survivors." The historical perspective opens the question of how both experienced and imagined reality is contextualized in a narrative moving from autobiography and

memoir toward a hybrid genre combining autobiography, personal documentary, history, essay, and confession.

As shown, a specific and distinguishing aspect of the narrative co-authored by Magda Bošan Simin and her daughter Nevena Simin is related to gender. Ultimately, however, ethnicity and race, religion and ideology, gender and social status, ideology and politics all play a role in the self-perception of personal identity articulated in images changing with the age of the individual, the impact of real-life experience, and the interpretation of personal, family, social, and gender memory.

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