

The hollow cost of survival

The Shawl — Cynthia Ozick
Alfred A. Knopf Publishers
70 pp.

by David Deaton

No event has more dramatically enacted the "problem of pain" — to use C.S. Lewis' quaint phrase — than the attempted genocide of European Jewry. If human suffering and inhuman evil have ever plumbed greater

depths, it has not yet made its way into modern memory.

Even now, the Holocaust evokes eschatological questions. (Consider the recent study, *Why Did The Heavens Not Darken?*) To consider such overwhelming barbarity, as some philosophers and theologians have suggested, is to wonder whether there and then humanity forfeited its right to continue.

What daring must any writer possess to take on so mighty a subject as the Holocaust! But to recreate that event from imagination rather than memory may appear as little short of *chutzpah*.

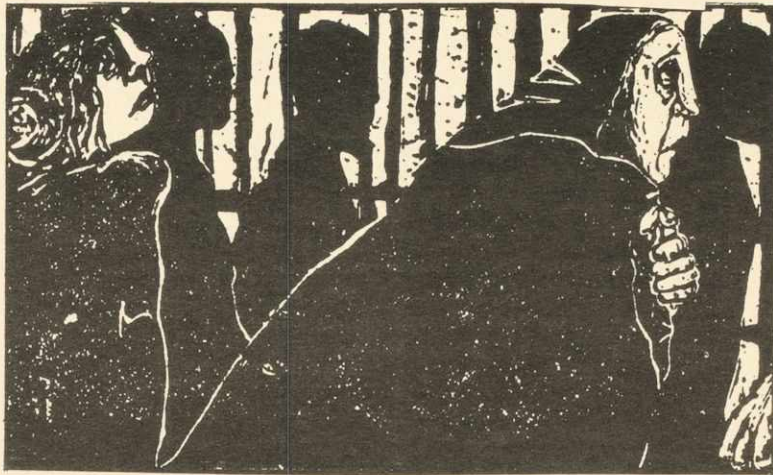
American writer Cynthia Ozick has done just that and she has done it with breathtaking success. No one who reads the two remarkable stories which make up *The Shawl* will forget them in a hurry — although some may wish to.

These are heart-rending tales, rendered doubly poignant by the suspicion that they *happened* to someone. In both, the horror and the magnitude of the Holocaust is conveyed through the experience of a single human being, a Polish woman named Rosa Lublin.

The title story is eight pages long, but they are the eight longest pages one may ever read. "The Shawl" is a vividly remembered nightmare, a story to be lived through, not read. To state flatly what happens would divest the narrative of its spell and risk compounding its brutality.

Suffice it to say that Rosa must witness the death of her infant daughter:

She only stood, because if she



The Holocaust: When a fallen world turned into hell

ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot.

The second story picks up Rosa's life thirty years later, when she has finally released some of her agony. It begins:

Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and a scavenger, gave up her store — she smashed it up herself — and moved to Miami.

The hollow cost of survival. This novella, along with its predecessor, is largely filtered through Rosa's consciousness. We are party to Rosa's pain and to her even more pathetic happiness.

Rosa cannot let go of the memory of her murdered daughter. She summons Magda's presence with the aid of her daughter's swaddling shawl — the same shawl that precipitated her death and stifled Rosa's scream. It has now become an object of worship.

Ozick does not wink at her heroine's idolatry. Even Rosa knows that to carry on so will not bring the dead back to life and only mortifies the living.

But, as Rosa explains, her real life ended at the same time that her daughter's did: "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie."

Moving among the geriatric refugees of Miami — cast-off Jewish pensioners like herself —

Rosa sees the world as only a milder inferno of internment:

The whole peninsula of Florida seemed weighted down with regret. Everybody had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing. They were all scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty rib cages.

Did humanity forfeit its right to continue?

Rosa lives out her days in a filthy S.R.O. "hotel", subsisting on crackers and the stale crumbs of fantasy. Here she writes letters in excellent literary Polish to her imaginary daughter.

But even Rosa acknowledges, "Where I put myself is in hell. Once I thought the worst was the worst, and after that nothing could be the worst. But now I see, even after the worst there's still more."

Rosa's prediction turns out to be ironic. The "still more" that becomes the novella's focus are the gentle attentions of a retired button manufacturer named Persky.

Persky, as his name suggests, will not leave Rosa alone. Though cognizant of her sorrow, he will not allow it to blot out their friendship:

"Your name?" her companion said.

"Lublin, Rosa."

"A pleasure," he said.

"Only why backwards? I'm an application form? Very good. You apply, I accept."

The rest of the story rides on the tension of whether Rosa will indeed accept. To Ozick's enduring credit, we are not offered some cheaply hopeful ending, the stuff of Hollywood.

"Rosa" ends ambiguously, with our protagonist left to decide between the shawl and a telephone receiver — with Persky on the other end.

However Rosa decides, we are not made to feel that all has been resolved in her life. Too much suffering has elapsed. Part of Rosa will always be a traumatized 19-year-old mother, robbed of faith, hope, and love.

The ending yields a note of cautious optimism. Without any promise that Rosa will henceforth "live her life", there is a suggestion she may no longer curse it so deeply. Connection has been made.

These stories are already well known. Separately published in the New Yorker, "Rosa" and "The Shawl" have received every

honour that can be paid to a short story. The dust jacket does not lie when it claims that, "Together they form a masterpiece — small in size yet immeasurably large in impact."

What that impact is, exactly, is no better expressed than by Rosa herself:

What a curiosity it was to hold a pen — nothing but a small pointed stick, after all, oozing its hieroglyphic puddles: a pen that speaks, miraculously, Polish. A lock removed from the tongue. Otherwise the tongue is chained to the teeth and the palate. An immersion into the living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve, to reprieve!

Cynthia Ozick makes us grateful to receive. In one slim volume of fiction she has articulated more than could have been thought possible about so ineffable an experience. *The Shawl* is not simply a masterpiece, it is a triumph of the light over darkness.

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