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"ONCE, THERE WAS A WOMAN WITH THREE CHILDREN…": MALKA LEVINE'S HOLOCAUST SURVIVAL STORY

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This article examines the memoir "A Mother's Courage" (2023) by Holocaust survivor Malka Levine, a Jewish writer, who was born in Volodymyr-Volynskyi, Ukraine (former Polish territory). At the age of three together with her mother and two brothers she experienced multiple tragic events and was saved by a Ukrainian family. The research focuses on the way the author presents a decisive role of her mother in the family's survival during their years of persecution and displacement. The purpose of the study is to explore how Levine's portrayal of her mother reveals an unbending spirit marked by resilience, moral determination, and conscious preservation of identity, playing a critical role in sustaining both physical survival and emotional stability under extreme conditions. The article demonstrates that maternal courage is not merely limited to physical endurance. It is expressed through daily acts of care, decision-making, and moral resolve helping to keep the family together and foster hope even "in the darkest of days." Special attention is paid to the mother's attempts to maintain cultural, religious, and familial identity, which function as resistance to dehumanization. The article argues that the mother's commitment to preserving dignity, memory, and identity create a psychological and ethical foundation enabling the family to survive. By placing Levine's memoir within the context of Holocaust life writing, the study highlights the significance of the maternal role in survival which is understood not only as an individual experience but as a collective, relational process. Ultimately, the article contributes to Holocaust studies and women's life writing by emphasizing maternal moral strength and resilience in shaping survival during the Holocaust and postwar memory.

«БУЛА СОБІ ЖІНКА З ТРЬОМА ДІТЬМИ …»: МЕМУАРНА ІСТОРІЯ ВИЖИВАННЯ МАЛКИ ЛЕВІН ПІД ЧАС ГОЛОКОСТУ

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Ключові слова: *Малка Левін, Голокост, життєстійкість, ідентичність, виживання, автобіографічне письмо.*

У запропонованій статті розглядається мемуар «Материнська відвага» (A Mother's Courage, 2023) Малки Левін, письменниці єврейського походження, яка народилася у Володимир-Волинському та вижила під час Голокосту. У віці трьох років вона разом з мамою і двома братами пережила чимало трагічних подій та була врятована українською родиною. Особлива увага у дослідженні приділяється вирішальній ролі матері авторки у виживанні родини в роки переслідувань і вимушених переміщень. Метою дослідження є з'ясування того, як образ матері, створений Левін, розкриває незламний дух, позначений стійкістю, моральною рішучістю та свідомим збереженням ідентичності, що відіграли ключову роль у підтриманні як фізичного виживання, так і емоційної стабільності в екстремальних умовах війни. У статті показано, що материнська мужність не обмежувалася лише фізичною витривалістю. Вона втілювалася в щоденних проявах турботи, відповідальному виборі і моральній стійкості, які допомагали зберігати єдність родини та підтримувати надію навіть у найтяжчі моменти. Особливу увагу приділено намаганням матері зберегти культурну, релігійну та родинну ідентичність, які функціонували як внутрішня форма опору дегуманізації. У статті стверджується, що прагнення матері зберегти гідність, пам'ять та ідентичність створило психологічне й етичне підґрунтя, яке дало змогу родині пережити Голокост. Розглядаючи мемуар Левін у контексті автобіографічної прози Голокосту, дослідження підкреслює значущість материнської ролі у виживанні, яке розуміється не лише як індивідуальний досвід, а як колективний, реляційний та міжгенераційний процес. Зрештою, стаття робить внесок у дослідження літератури Голокосту та жіночого автобіографічної прози, наголошуючи на материнській моральній силі й стійкості у формуванні як виживання під час Голокосту, так і повоєнної пам'яті.

Introduction. According to Yehuda Bauer, "Holocaust is an extreme form of genocide", and its survivors' testimonies are the most important sources for our knowledge of it (Bauer, 2001: 24; 50) The Holocaust concerns not only individuals who were directly involved, but also those who were not (Simões, 2013: 2). Those testimonies are incorporated in Holocaust literature, which "comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive", whose significant part is "the distinct voice of the survivors" (Roskies & Diamant, 2012: 2). Anine Holc maintains that "testimony can function as a particularly revealing type of autobiography" and that "the testimony of a Holocaust survivor is a type of story that travels its own path" (Holc, 2020:16). Moreover, "[f] irsthand testimony foregrounds personal experience to convey not only the incontestability of events but also their emotional intensity" (Beim & Fine, 2007: 55).

The concept of memory in the focus of Holocaust studies, and literary means significantly contribute to the process of consolidating the public memory of the Holocaust. This phenomenon has been receiving a lot of scholarly attention recently, as part of an attempt at periodization of Holocaust literature.

As a result, four phases have been distinguished: wartime writing – emerged inside the war zone by the time of the Liberation (1938–45); communal memory – covered a postwar landscape (1945–60); provisional memory – transition of survivor witnesses-refugees to landed immigrants (1960–85), and authorized memory – marked by the fall of the Iron Curtain followed by translation of Holocaust writings into English (Roskies & Diamant, 2012: 8–13) or publishing those works written in English (1985–present). Jessie Cartoon asserts that much of Holocaust literature occurs in the form of a memoir or diary. Specifying the concept of a memoir, she states that

A memoir is a mostly un-embellished, often first-person account of a personal story. The categorization of a work as a memoir implies that the account has truth value. Unlike other forms of literature, memoirs ensure that the reader considers an account to be anchored in truth. Memoirs are valuable for Holocaust education, for their narratives are rooted in historical reality (Cartoon, 2021: 8).

In recent years, there have appeared numerous memoirs of Holocaust survivors who "became the sacred vessels of Holocaust memory", and who have been "blessed by longevity, mobility, and the means of production" (Roskies & Diamant, 2012: 157, 166), whose autobiographical writings present "echoes and vivid relivings of the original experience, where the past is mediated through the narrator[s'] perspective" (Bystrov, 2025: 47).

Considering the complex nature of the genre of memoir, Julie Rak asserts that it comprises "private and public, official and unofficial writing, writing as process and writing as product, all at once" (Rak, 2004: 487). Highlighting the idea that a memoir is a bridge between past and present, Suzanne L. Bunkers states that memoirists represent particular experiences of survival in multiple worlds: 1) the historical world of the past; 2) the historical world of the present; 3) the textual world in which memory and imagination interact to produce the crafted narrative; 4) the world in which each reader encounters and responds to the crafted narrative (Bunkers, 2006: 7).

The present study is a part of an ongoing project aimed at analyzing traumatic experiences described in autobiographical writings by Holocaust survivors who were born in the territories of Western Ukraine. Among the works to be discussed in the project are Alicia Appleman-Jurman "Alicia: My Story" (1988), Fanya Gottesfeld Heller's "Love in a World of Sorrow" (2005), Bronia and Joseph Beker's "Joy Runs Deeper" (2014), Anita Ekstein's "Always Remember Who You Are" (2019), Irene Zisblatt's "The Fifth Diamond" (2020), Malka Levine's "A Mother's Courage" (2023), etc. Those life writings present a vast corpus of memoirs that were originally written in English. All the memoirs were written by Holocaust survivors themselves long after the ordeal of World War II. Mervin Butovsky and Kurt Jonassohn (Butovsky & Jonassohn, 1997) explained some of the reasons why survivors finally decided to share their tragic experiences many years after the event. On the one hand, the authors were motivated by their own advancing age. For them the act of writing a memoir functioned as proof that they had lived, a means of preserving their sense of self from being forgotten. At the same time, they felt encouraged to share their experiences as survivors' testimonies started to be taken seriously. It is worth mentioning another reason that encouraged them to speak, which is trauma. Many survivors probably suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and needed time to process their traumatic experiences. Also a new generation of readers has grown up who are willing to read about the horrors they experienced. Very often those women simply had no time to write, they left their homelands, went to a foreign country, had to build new life, raise children. Some survivors' stories urge speaking out against injustice and keeping history alive, and "remember[ing] the Holocaust to make sure it doesn't happen again" (Zisblatt, 2020: 147).

The objective of the present research is to analyse the Holocaust survivor's memoir "A Mother's Courage" (Levine, 2023) and explore the way the author's mother's unbending spirit, resilience and effort to preserve identity contributed to the family's survival.

Methods and Materials. The primary source of the research is Malka Levine's memoir "A Mother's Courage" (Levine, 2023) (hereafter *AMC*). Levine was a Holocaust child survivor. The recurrent theme of the book is threefold: maternal courage, family survival, and identity preservation, fully highlighting traditional expectations of female behavior – a woman's placing her children's survival above her own.

The study employs literary analysis in order to examine narrative structure, characterization, and storytelling techniques, highlighting how the mother's resilience and determination are portrayed. The research combines biographical and historical methods to contextualize the family's experiences within the historical framework of the Holocaust. Thematic analysis is used to identify and explore central motifs, including unbending spirit, preservation of identity, and family survival. A psychological and humanistic perspective emphasizes the role of adaptive strategies and personal strength in overcoming extreme challenges.

Discussion and Results. The life story discussed in the memoir in question is centered in Western

Ukraine (formerly a Polish territory) during the Nazi occupation, and simultaneously presents a combination of Malka Levine's memory and postmemory. This combination of documented memories can be explained by the fact that she herself was a Holocaust child survivor and daughter of a Holocaust survivor whose stories filled gaps in her own memories.

Malka Levine was born in the town of Ludmir, which is the Yiddish name of Volodymyr-Volynskyi. She describes her family's tragic experience against a historical background, on the one hand, making her life story not merely a recapitulation of past events, but rather creating a personal narrative identity (Vasvári, 2020: 76). On the other hand, she provides evidence that personal memory is inseparable from collective memory and social frameworks (Halbwachs, 1992: 38-40). According to Jan Assmann's (2008) contention, collective memory comprises two components: communicative and cultural memory. The scholar states that communicative memory is limited to the oral tradition of the previous three generations, which amounts to around 80 years. It is closely linked to everyday life and tied to specific groups. Cultural memory, on the other hand, encompasses the archaeological and written legacy of humanity. It is passed on orally, in writing, normatively, and narratively. Compared to communicative memory, it is characterized by a greater degree of formality and structure. Central concepts of cultural memory are tradition and repetition.

Thus, Levine acquaints the reader with the history of her home town, highlighting its multinational landscape, cultural and religious diversity, mentioning events which happened in Ukraine from the tenth-century to the present day (e.g., during the Soviet regime, the Holodomor). Describing the years of the German invasion, the author draws a parallel with the ongoing war against Ukraine which was unleashed by Russia killing civilians "with chilling indifference" (*AMC*, 4).

Dwelling upon the fate that befell the Jewish population of Volodymyr-Volynskyi and her own large family during the German occupation, Levine provides shocking statistics. Out of 6 million Jews, 1.5 million perished in Ukraine. Out of 25,000 Jews (more than half of her home town's residents) only twenty-one adults and nine children survived, among them Malka and her two brothers; out of her extended seventy-eight-member family, there were hardly any survivors. That was the result of brutally implemented fascist Nazi policy reflected in the words of Hitler cited by Levine in the memoir: "If we killed just a few Jews, the world will be aghast. If we killed millions, nobody would believe it" (*AMC*, 213).

Describing the tragic events she experienced, such as starvation, exhaustion, relocation, and despair, as well as the atrocities she and her family witnessed, Levine does not present herself as the central figure of the memoir. Conversely, she lays emphasis on those people who helped to save her life (her mother and the Yakymchuks, a Ukrainian peasant family, Stacha, a Polish dressmaker, and a number of other people). Focusing attention on her mother, the author pays tribute to this remarkable woman whose unbending spirit significantly contributed to their survival, as "even in the darkest of days, the human spirit can triumph over despair and courage will conquer fear" (*AMC*, 2). The chronology of the linear structure of the narrative is sometimes disrupted, and the author resorts to flashbacks (Mintsys, 2024), predominantly related to historical facts, her beliefs and her family stories. Alexander Kratochvil (2019) defines this phenomenon as "post-traumatic narrating." In his theory, the trauma falls out of a meaningful narrative; the missing memory of the event cannot be seamlessly integrated into the narrative whole. Missing from the flow of the narrative, the story stalls. Therefore, elements of post-traumatic narrative appear in the text – whether it is a broken chronology, a fragmented and incoherent narrative, the presence of ghosts and proxy phenomena.

The very title of Malka Levin's memoir "A Mother's Courage" implies that it was owing to the author's mother that she survived the Holocaust. On the one hand, her mother's character fully proves the assertion of Jewish studies researchers (e.g., Shkitska, 2021) that a Jewish woman who, together with her people, has for centuries been deprived of a homeland and has frequently been subjected to persecution, is characterized by remarkable strength of spirit. She is distinguished by a profound vitality, optimism, commitment to the continuation of the family line, and the power of love through which she inspires her children to survive and live happily and with dignity. On the other hand, unlike traditional Jewish women, her mother, Rivka Akin, choosing her spouse, went against the tradition of an arranged marriage which was common in Jewish communities. She displayed "a strength of character unusual amongst her female peers" (*AMC*, 12). Despite her father's "initial objection to the marriage" (*AMC*, 13) and his threat to deprive her of a dowry, she stood her ground, "went through hell with her father over it" (*AMC*, 11), and married her selected partner. Describing her parents' relationships and emphasizing her mother's practical skills, industriousness, and unconventionality, Malka Levin says:

My mother also worked closely with my father. They were not the traditional Jewish shtetl couple where the man goes off to work and the wife stays at home to look after the many children and make chopped liver and bless the candles on the Sabbath.

They were partners both in marriage and at work, and together they built a life for themselves and their children (*AMC*, 13).

From an early age, Rivka Akin was smart and hardworking. As the oldest of her siblings, she helped her father on the farm doing manual jobs: harnessed horses, filled sacks with wheat, etc. She also gave her father practical advice to concentrate more on barley, which turned out quite profitable. She did not shy away from any work on the farm or in the bicycle shop her husband owned. When he had to leave the shop to go on an errand, she replaced him and skillfully mended punctures.

Malka's mother was brought up in a Chassidic tradition and was observant of Jewish cultural and religious laws. For instance, she strictly separated pots and pans for meat products from those for dairy products. The author brings examples of Rivka's religiousness and devotion to her national culture and traditions which serve as additional evidence of her strong character and adherence to her identity.

The family's life was happy and quiet until the Soviet and German occupation. The worst occurred in 1942, when German Nazis began the "implementation of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question – the euphemistic term for the deliberate mass murder of Europe Jews" (*AMC*, 29). Malka's family together with the rest of the town's Jews were relocated to a ghetto where they hid under floorboards. To save his family from being discovered and killed by the approaching police, Malka's father urged his wife to save the children, left their hiding place and shut the trapdoor behind himself. That was the end of his life. No matter how tragic the events were and how deteriorating their existence in the ghetto was, Rivka's strength of spirit and her husband's last words kept her functioning. When they were starving in the ghetto, she fearlessly crawled out at night to gather what she could in the nearby field – some onions, maize, beetroots and green tomatoes – in order to feed her children.

Later, they were relocated to a second ghetto, the so-called "ghetto for the dead" (*AMC*, 39), in which conditions were still more horrendous. Their existence there resembled walking on a razor's edge: anyone without a blue work permit (a special document which ensured temporary relative safety), was considered illegal and could be shot any time. The advantage of having the permit was that it was a shield which protected not only its holder but also the people sharing the same room with him/her. Therefore, to obtain that life-saving work permit, Malka's mother went to extreme lengths. Bracing herself, she went to the head of the Jewish Council. Being "the unstoppable force", she used all possible arguments, persisting in her demands for the document until she was issued one. Thus, her courage provided temporary safety not only for her remaining family but also other people living under the same roof with her.

The only time when Rivka Akin's resolve weakened and she began to lose hope was when, after the Nazis' second 'Aktsion', the Jews from the ghetto were to be taken by trucks to the village of Piatydni to be shot and left in a mass grave. Waiting for their turn to be loaded on the truck bound for the place of death, the three-and-a-half-year-old Malka was freezing. She tried to button up her coat but failed, and when she asked her Mum for help, the latter thought, "What does it matter if my child catches a cold?" (*AMC*, 48). That loss of hope was not typical of her strong character, and the memory of that episode was so painful that it gnawed at her heart for the rest of her life.

Describing her mother's frame of mind, Malka Levine mentions that although the woman had "nerves of steel", she was "in a state of utter despair", "constantly in a terrible state of fear", "grief-stricken, tormented by the past and fighting against the surrounding bleakness" (*AMC*, 54-55). However, being purposeful and determined, she was eager to be faithful to the vow she had given to her husband to "save the children", and was sure that if she failed, her "life wouldn't be worth living" and she "would never forgive [herself]" (*AMC*, 55). Through the grapevine, she managed to find a Ukrainian family, the Yakymchuks, who owing to her power of persuasion agreed to take her and three children in, no matter how risky it was. It took all her resilience to survive eighteen months living on the frozen earthen floor of a pit behind the barn, starving, attacked by mice and lice, and inspiring her children with hope for survival. Despite the inhuman living conditions, Rivka tried hard to keep the pit in order. She made a little broom from twigs and swept the floor with it every day. She told her children stories about their past life, the games they played in the orchard, about their relatives to keep them quiet and in check, and to raise their spirits. To distract them, she taught her children to knit. They got interested in the activity and welcomed the new hobby. She even sacrificed her only cardigan for them to have yarn.

Despite constant exhaustion, starvation, and trauma, Rivka tried to preserve their cultural and religious identity. On Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Light, she managed to light a flame and give her children hope. When Passover was approaching, with tears of nostalgia, she told her children how their extended family used to celebrate this Festival of Freedom, preserving ancient Jewish traditions. Holidays before the war had been joyous and festive. Grandpa had worn a new satin robe fastened by a shiny cord with tassels, a new white shirt, "an

outsized hat made from shiny satin and trimmed with fur" (*AMC*, 144). Their celebration of Passover had begun with the Seder table set with a gilded dinner set, silver cutlery, and everything done according to the rules of Jewish culture. The children listened to their Mum's story with bated breath. Her story lifted their spirits and was life-affirming, because "it was confirmation that there had been another life, before the ghetto and the pit, and that raised the possibility that what had once been there might come again" (*AMC*, 146).

Malka's mother was a skillful negotiator who possessed a remarkable power of persuasion, and she could speak Yiddish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian, which benefitted her while speaking with various categories of people, be it a Jewish Council member, a German or Russian officer, or a Ukrainian peasant. Owing to those skills she managed to achieve her goal and get what she needed for her own and her children's survival. After the Liberation, they returned to their hometown, and the most important thing for Rivka was to send her children to school. Although Malka was only four, her mother persuaded the headmaster to let the girl study together with her elder brothers in order to fill in the gap in her education. Knowing that the Yakymchuks' daughter was seriously ill, she arranged an appointment with a doctor in Lutsk, a city seventy-five kilometers away from Ludmir, who had X-ray equipment. But finding out that there was no oil to start the equipment, she fearlessly stopped a Russian army lorry and traded some tobacco for a can of oil. She also saved the Ukrainian who had persuaded the Yakymchuks to rescue Rivka and her three children from execution or exile to Siberia. She went to the commissariat to mention the man's part in saving them, then to court to give evidence on the man's behalf. Consequently, the man was set free.

Since there was no longer a Jewish community to support Rivka Akin and her children in Ludmir, the woman decided to leave Volodymyr-Volynskyi. Their journey started in 1946 when they went to Lviv, then to Bytom and Katowice (Poland), after that to Bratislava (Czechoslovakia), and Vienna (Austria). From there they were sent to displaced persons' camps in Salzburg (Austria), in Rome and Milan (Italy). In 1948, the family arrived in Haifa (Israel). When they settled in Israel, the mother did everything possible for her children to feel happy and cared for. She cooked a lot and always bought twice as much as she needed in order to make up to them for the years of hunger and starvation.

Malka's Mum's decisiveness, strong will power, a sense of obligation to her family and all European Jewry made her go to Germany and give evidence in court against two Nazi war criminals who "had been officially accused of complicity in the murders of 9,000 Jews in the Volodymyr-Volynskyi ghetto between 1941 and 1943" (*AMC*, 208). It was an act of "resilience and brave response to brutality and violence" (Bystrov, 2025: 50). Deciding to go to the trial and speak was not easy. She explained her desire to speak in court in the following way: there were very few survivors, and she considered it her duty to tell the story, and to have the war criminals be brought to justice.

Rivka Akin was a remarkable woman, "unbreakable and fearless." She remained resilient and self-reliant till the end of her life. Living her sunset years on her own, she agreed to go into a care home only a few months before her death.

Conclusions. The memoir "A Mother's Courage" serves as a powerful example of an act of remembrance of Holocaust and simultaneously an act of honouring family memory, at the heart of it the author's mother Rivka Akin. The woman is a symbol of resilience, moral determination and conscious preservation of identity. Her endeavors to keep her family alive displays an active response to demoralization, starvation, and dehumanization during the Holocaust. Despite the complexity of her family's rescue, and all the events which caused trauma, Malka Levine's mother never lost her courage and fearlessness. Because the author was a child survivor, a witness of the events, and a daughter of a Holocaust survivor, her memoir presents a combination of memory and postmemory. Owing to the way she creates her mother's image, the reader can perceive Holocaust memory as history seen through emotions. In the future, it would be relevant to investigate the concept of SURVIVAL and ways of presenting it in the memoir.

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