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**BOOKS  
BLOG**

## Is this the end of Holocaust literature?

65 years after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, should the Holocaust's place in Jewish literature change?



Miep Gies, guardian of Anne Frank's diary, who died in January at the age of 100.  
Photograph: Steve North/AP

A quick look at the programme for [Jewish Book Week](#) shows a diverse range of topics, from cookery to sport, mathematics to Hebrew, the global economic crisis to the one in Israel-Palestine. And then, of course, there's the [Holocaust](#): as embedded in contemporary Jewish literary culture as riffs on overbearing mothers and diasporic angst.

For how much longer? I do not pose this question flippantly, and I don't mean to imply that the Holocaust won't always have its prominent place in the ongoing narrative of Jewish experience. But things are beginning to change. Over 65 years after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, primary sources are vanishing; there are now only around 5,000 Holocaust survivors alive in the UK. And with books about Hitler's Europe having accumulated to a dizzying degree, there's a sense that writers of the second and third generation are beginning to tire of the Shoah. Indeed, the Holocaust element at Jewish Book Week is relatively slight: a chronicle about life in [Theresienstadt](#); a talk or two about the Kindertransport; a book about the wartime Pyrenees.

The notion of Holocaust fatigue was broached during a recent talk at the wonderful [Joseph's bookstore](#) in north London. [Alison Leslie Gold](#) was the speaker, reading from [Lost and Found](#), her autobiographical contribution to the [Cahiers](#) series (Dan Gunn's modestly sumptuous publishing project dedicated to fine writing, translation and illustration in pamphlet form). Gold was a friend of [Miep Gies](#): the protector of the Frank and van Pels families and guardian of Anne Frank's diary, who died in January at the age of 100. Together, they wrote [Gies's memoir](#).

When Gold finished *Lost and Found* late last year, Gies was still alive; slipped inside the new book is a brief, poignant note, commemorating the life of this remarkable woman,

who died wearing the black onyx ring that Peter van Pels's mother had given her as a token of gratitude. "At the time", writes Gold, "Miep promised to wear the ring always. This promise, like others she made in her life, she had honoured fully." And she adds a further moving postscript to Gies's story. Last year, she discovered another small child whom Gies helped to save, tracking him down in Israel. The two were reunited shortly before Gies passed away. Someone asked Gold if she could elaborate. She refused. The man was delighted to meet Gies again, but didn't want his story to be told.

How great is the desire to finally leave the Holocaust behind? Gold has written extensively on the subject; now she feels weary, burdened by its shadow. "I no longer have the 'stomach' to research and detail more such stories", she writes in *Lost and Found*, after a friend alerts her to the incredible tale of [Irena Sendler](#), who saved 2,500 children in the Warsaw ghetto, smuggling them out in sacks and the bottom of her toolbox. A woman in the audience empathised. "I've been trying to escape it all my life", she said. "My parents were refugees from Germany. I grew up with it. But I don't want to read about it any more. I need to distance myself, to move away. Of course", she added, "I keep getting drawn back in."

"Let us never assume there is not more and more, and more and more, and then more to write about", said Norman Mailer. No topic can ever be "finished" with – least of all one such as the Holocaust. Nor was the Holocaust a uniquely Jewish tragedy; and nor do you need to be Jewish to write about the Jewish side of it: after all, it was the Australian lapsed Catholic Thomas Keneally who gave the world *Schindler's Ark*. But it's understandable that some Jews are beginning to tire of writing (and reading) stories about their parents' and grandparents' suffering – even as the imperative intensifies to record the remaining first-hand accounts while we still have time. And when, 30 years or so from now, the Harry Patch of the Holocaust dies, I wonder how the descendants of Hitler's survivors will deal with no-longer-living-history. Will there be another upsurge in the literature of the Shoah? How will the process of distancing continue to unfold?

In the meantime, we can perhaps look forward to hearing more about Irena Sendler after all. Gold, like the rest of us, is not quite yet able to break free. She writes to her friend: "In spite of what I say, don't stop sending endangered stories to me, if you stumble on any, like that of Irena Sendler ... despite myself, I'll be mulling [it] over during my upcoming trip to Poland and Bulgaria."

If the book materialises, I for one will be ordering a copy.

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