

**Between Local and Global Politics of Memory:
Transnational Dimensions of Holocaust Remembrance in Contemporary
Serbian Prose Fiction and Film**

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Abstract

*Serbia joined the ITF (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research) in 2011. This resulted in increased institutional efforts to pay more attention to Holocaust education and commemoration. However, critics have observed that many of these state-supported initiatives use the Holocaust to conceal the state's role as perpetrator or accomplice in mass war crimes and genocide committed during the Second World War and during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Against this backdrop, I discuss two recent Serbian Holocaust novels, Ivan Ivanji's *Man of Ashes* (2006) and Zoran Penevski's *Less Important Crimes* (2005), and Goran Paskaljević's film *When Day Breaks* (2012). I argue that Holocaust memory in these works does not function as a 'screen memory' – one memory that covers up or suppresses other, undesired memories – but as a prism through which memories of the recent Yugoslav past as well as stories of present injustice, which the dominant political elites and mainstream society would prefer to forget or not to see, are filtered and brought to light. Ivanji, who is well acquainted with the politics of memory both in Germany and Serbia, also reflects critically upon the current globalization of Holocaust remembrance, thus providing feedback on the possibilities and limits of the memorial culture stimulated by the ITF.*

Introduction

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Conclusion

Introduction¹

Since the foundation of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education and Research (ITF, since 2013 known as IHRA – International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) at the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in January 2000, a European transnational politics of memory has emerged that puts the Holocaust high on the agenda.² Signed by more than 40 participating countries at the closing of this conference, the Stockholm Declaration not only put great emphasis on the importance of Holocaust remembrance and education but also framed to a large extent the Holocaust in terms of a universal moral lesson in good and evil.³ Aleida Assmann distinguished two major goals in IHRA's programme, which she aptly summarized as follows: "1) to transform [the memory of the Holocaust] into a long-term memory at the moment when the communicative memory of survivor-witnesses was fading away" and "2) to carry the memory of the Holocaust across European borders by creating a supranational memory community with an extended infrastructure of social institutions, finances and cooperative networks."⁴ Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that international consensus about the importance of Holocaust memory and the need to create institutions and networks to sustain and disseminate it was reached because of the growing awareness that soon there will be no Holocaust survivors alive who could bear witness to what they went

¹ I would like to thank Robert Gordon, Emiliano Perra, Jakob Lothe, and *Quest's* anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. All translations are my own: I am grateful to Vlad Beronja for his help in making my translations from Serbian sound more natural. Finally, I would like to thank Zoran Penevski for providing the cover image of his novel *Less Important Crimes* and for giving his permission to reproduce it in this article.

² The ITF / IHRA was initiated by Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson in May 1998. For the history of the IHRA, see: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/history-ihra> (this and all websites accessed 9 September 2016).

³ It says, among other things, that 'the unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning' (article 1), that "the magnitude of the Holocaust [...] must be forever seared in our collective memory. [...] The depths of that horror, and the heights of the heroism [of those who defied the Nazis] can be touchstones in our understanding of the human capacity for evil and for good" (article 2). The full text of the Stockholm Declaration is available at: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration>.

⁴ Aleida Assmann, "The Holocaust, a Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community," in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97–117; 102.

through. The awareness of this coming ‘after testimony,’ as Jakob Lothe, Susan Suleiman, and James Phelan suggest, “also implies an obligation to the future,’ a requirement to ‘thin[k] about the future of Holocaust narrative and about the afterlife of Holocaust narratives in different cultures.”⁵ It is against the backdrop of this constellation – of the awareness of the ‘after-testimony’ era, of joint international efforts to remember the Holocaust, and of their local reception and implementation – that I will explore Holocaust literature and film as a medium of transnational memory in post-conflict Serbia.

I will examine how recent Serbian Holocaust fiction ties in with and reflects upon international debates about Holocaust commemoration and education. How do authors from Serbia of different generations tackle the ‘obligation’ towards the future of Holocaust narrative? How does their work relate to and reflect on the shift towards the ‘Europeanization’ and ‘universalization’ of Holocaust memory in the former Yugoslavia? I will examine two recent Holocaust novels from Serbia, Ivan Ivanji’s *Man of Ashes* (2006) and Zoran Penevski’s *Less Important Crimes* (2005), as well as Goran Paskaljević’s film *When Day Breaks* (directed by Paskaljević, the scenario was written by Filip David, 2012).⁶ I will argue that in these works, contrary to ‘official’ memory politics, Holocaust memory does not function as a ‘screen memory’ (*Deckerinnerung*) in Freud’s sense, that is, as one memory covering up or repressing other, undesired memories.⁷ Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s model of multidirectional memory, I will show how in the works discussed, Holocaust memory functions as a prism through which memories of the recent Yugoslav past, as well as stories of present injustice that the dominant political elites and mainstream society would prefer to forget or not to see (or, crucially, to have them substituted by other memories), are filtered and

⁵ Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman and James Phelan, “Introduction: ‘After’ Testimony,” in *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, eds. Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and James Phelan, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 1–19; 2–3.

⁶ Due to space limits, I will focus on a selection of works from Serbia only. Relevant works from Croatia would have been Miljenko Jergović’s novel *Ruta Tannenbaum* (2005), Slobodan Šnajder’s play *The Fifth Gospel* (*Peto jevanđelje*, 2004), and numerous novels by Daša Drndić.

⁷ In his rereading of Freud’s concept of screen memory, Michael Rothberg argued that “the displacement that takes place in screen memory (indeed, in all memory) functions as much to open up lines of communication with the past as to close them off.” See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12.

brought to light in a non-competitive, intrinsically multidirectional way.⁸ My reading of these three works is particularly inspired by Max Silverman's notion of palimpsestic memory.⁹ In the works discussed, the figure of the palimpsest is operative in both the principal ways pointed out by Silverman. First, the works all show that the present is "haunted by a past which is not immediately visible but progressively brought into view" so that the relationship between past and present is evoked as multi-layered, as "a composite structure, like a palimpsest, so that one layer of [temporal] traces can be seen through, and is transformed by, another."¹⁰ Secondly, the figure of the palimpsest can be recognized in the ways in which the works combine "not simply two moments in time (past and present) but a number of different moments, hence producing a chain of signification which draws together disparate spaces and times."¹¹ Very much like Rothberg, Silverman argues that this palimpsestic understanding of memory brings "the prospect of new solidarities across the lines of race and nation."¹² Of course, the interaction between different temporal and geographical layers and how they superimpose on one another is in each work realized with different means and to different ends. Before turning to the novels, I will discuss briefly how the IHRA paved the way towards a European memory culture focusing on the Holocaust and I will give a succinct overview of the first results of this international infrastructure and networking in Serbia.

The IHRA in South-Eastern Europe: Towards the Europeanization of Holocaust Memory in the Former Yugoslavia?

As Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder have noted, the Stockholm declaration and the formation of the ITF/IHRA can be seen as part of a broader development of

⁸ In his path-breaking work, Rothberg offers an alternative to competitive understandings of memory, which perceive the interaction of different collective memories as a "zero-sum struggle over scarce resources." Believing in "a direct line between remembrance of the past and the formation of identity in the present," adherents to the "competitive memory model" fear that public attention to one historical trauma necessarily implies the exclusion of other tragedies from the public sphere. Instead, Rothberg suggests that "we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative." *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

“the de-territorialization of Holocaust memories,” which “opens up to an abstract and hence universally accessible terrain on which cosmopolitan memories can form.”¹³ While they rightfully consider ‘the Americanization of the Holocaust’ as one of the important triggers of this process of universalization, it is equally important to note that the Holocaust *qua* universal norm “helped Europeans redefine themselves [...]: the need to avoid another Holocaust provided a foundation for (official) European memory.”¹⁴

The first signs of the institutionalization of such an official memory became apparent in 2005, when the European Parliament voted the establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January (the date on which Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army), leading Claus Leggewie to claim that the Holocaust had become Europe’s ‘negative foundation myth’ – that is, that the historical trauma of the Holocaust actually paved the way towards European unification.¹⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that the European Union also expects future members to comply with this ‘memory codex.’ Or as Tony Judt remarked well before Leggewie: “Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket.”¹⁶ This also applies to the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Parallel to or as part of their rapprochement with and integration into the European Union, Croatia (in 2005), Slovenia (in 2011), and Serbia (in 2011) became members of the IHRA, while Macedonia currently has the status of observer country.¹⁷ As member states, Croatia and Serbia committed themselves to the goals of the IHRA, which includes “clear public policy commitment to Holocaust education at a senior political level,” the establishment and observation of an annual ‘Holocaust Memorial Day,’ and “the opening of archives related to the Holocaust for researchers,” as well as the guarantee that “there is or will be academic, educational, and public examination of the country’s historical past as related to

¹³ Levy, Daniel and Nathan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁵ Claus Leggewie, “Seven Circles of European memory,” *Eurozine*, December 20, 2010, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-12-20-leggewie-en.html>.

¹⁶ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 803. Larissa Allwork has recently proposed to see Holocaust remembrance as fostered by the IHRA as a case of ‘civil religion.’ See Allwork: “Holocaust Remembrance as Civil Religion: The Case of the Stockholm Declaration (2000),” in *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, eds. Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schult, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 288–304.

¹⁷ For a list of member and observer countries, see <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/member-countries> and <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/observer-countries> respectively.

the Holocaust period.”¹⁸ Both states are now gradually including the Holocaust into the school curriculum, organizing teacher training (often in collaboration with Yad Vashem), opening exhibitions, and investing in museums, for example. In other words, since their IHRA membership, Croatia and Serbia have been creating the institutions without which, as Assmann reminds us, any politics of memory would be unthinkable and on whose stability the future of Holocaust memory also depends.¹⁹

However, critics have noted that although the institutional efforts by Croatia and Serbia might be theoretically in line with the IHRA’s and European memory politics, in practice this ‘Europeanization of memory’ also has its flip side and has sometimes led to rather ambiguous results that tend to avoid or conceal uncomfortable issues from the national past.²⁰ In Serbia, the first exhibition on the Holocaust, held in spring 2012 in the Museum of Yugoslav History, received criticism for concealing or even omitting the role of domestic collaborators, specifically of the quisling regime of Milan Nedić and the Belgrade police forces led by Dragomir ‘Dragi’ Jovanović, and for not addressing the anti-Semitism of local intellectuals such as bishop Nikolaj Velimirović.²¹ As Milovan Pisarri put it in his review of the exhibition: “The problem lies in the fact that the message it conveys is clear [...]: the Germans are held responsible for the Holocaust, and they are the only ones to blame and hold accountable.”²² Pisarri further criticized the

¹⁸ For the complete list of membership criteria, see <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/membership-criteria>.

¹⁹ Aleida Assmann. *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, (Munich: Beck, 2006), 238–241.

²⁰ For a critical analysis of the Croatian context, see Ljiljana Radonić, “Standards of Evasion: Croatia and the ‘Europeanization of Memory,’” *Eurozine*, April 6, 2012, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-04-06-radonic-en.html>.

²¹ As early as in June 1942, the part of Serbia occupied by Nazi Germany and which was ruled in alliance with the quisling regime of Milan Nedić, was declared to be ‘judenfrei.’ On collaboration with the Axis forces in Serbia, see Ana Antić: “Police Force under Occupation: Serbian State Guard and Volunteers’ Corps in the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies X. Back to the Sources: Re-Examining Perpetrators*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 13–36; Olivera Milosavljević, *Potisnuta istina. Kolaboracija u Srbiji 1941–1944*, (Belgrade: Helsinski odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2006); Walter Manoschek, *Serbien ist judenfrei*, (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995), 109–154. On Velimirović, see Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Anti-Semitism: Post-Communist Rehabilitation of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic*, (New York: Central European University Press, 2007).

²² Milovan Pisarri, “Exhibition on the Holocaust in Serbia: The Problem of Selective Memory,” *Blog Foruma za primenjenu istoriju*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.fpi.rs/blog/exhibition-on-the-holocaust-in-serbia-the-problem-of-selective-memory>.

exhibition for some serious factual errors and for representing the Jewish population in pre-war Yugoslavia as “the ones who were really pulling the strings of Serbian industry and economy on the whole at the time,” a statement that comes close to the stereotypes that lay at the basis of Goebbels’ anti-Jewish propaganda.²³

Lea David has looked more broadly at the ways in which the Serbian state and political elite deal with the memory of the Holocaust in the post-Milošević era. She analyzed the implementation of the IHRA standards as reflected in the school curriculum, Holocaust commemorations and the official speeches held at these occasions, and embodied in the close Israeli-Serbian collaboration between Yad Vashem on the one hand and the Serbian Orthodox Church led by bishop Jovan Ćulibrk on the other. David points out the existence of two different agendas: one that commemorates the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and another that analogously portrays the Serbs themselves as victims of genocide.²⁴ Characterizing the state’s attitude as “simultaneously both neglecting and embracing different segments of Holocaust memory,” David convincingly argues that Serbian policy boils down to a double form of Holocaust instrumentalization. On the one hand, Holocaust memory serves the Serbian state as “a means of dealing with the contradictory demands at the domestic and international levels.” On the other, the state uses the Holocaust as a ‘screen memory’ that not only emphasizes Serbian victimhood during the Second World War and its role as “righteous amongst the nations” but in doing so also redirects attention from “the Serbian role in the wars of the 1990s” towards “a much more suitable discourse on WWII [...] which can be adjusted to both domestic and international demands.”²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lea David, “Holocaust as Screen Memory: The Serbian Case,” in *History and Politics in the Balkans*, eds. Srđan Jovanović and Veran Stančetić, (Belgrade: Center for Good Governance Studies, 2013), 64–88.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–66; 68; 84. The term ‘righteous amongst the nations’ is used by the state of Israel and Yad Vashem to refer to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis. As David suggests, the Serbian political and clerical elite embraces the Holocaust to selectively “promot[e] the values of a Human Rights regime” (*Ibid.*, 76). Promoting a master narrative about “Serbian victimization throughout history” (*Ibid.*, 81) the Serbian political and clerical elite avoids discussing Serbian participation in the Yugoslav wars (including the country’s role in or logistic support to the most serious war crimes, such as mass killings, mass rape, or concentration camps in which non-Serbs were interned, tortured and killed) in the same terms of human rights violations as used in debates about the Holocaust or suffering of Serbs during the Second World War. For those reasons, David argues that Holocaust memory is indirectly utilized to “construct and insinuate Serbian righteousness and victimhood in the wars of the 1990s” (*Ibid.*, 81).

As Assmann put it, “national memories cannot be integrated within a European memory as easily as the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research might wish.”²⁶ Indeed, the “two generally recognized and honourable roles for European nations to assume” in the post-war period, the role of victim and that of resister, are characteristic of many Eastern European nations after 1989, as Assmann notes,²⁷ and also seem to be the dominant memory templates in Serbia today. In the state-supported and institutionalized memory of the country, there seems to be no place for what Reinhard Koselleck called ‘negative memory’: the need for a nation to make the effort to remember not only its own victims but also its own, homegrown perpetrators from within the nation.²⁸

To summarize, the IHRA has certainly stimulated Serbia to invest in Holocaust education, leading to efforts that have in effect led to an increase in official commemorations and educational materials ranging from school handbooks, exhibitions, websites, teacher trainings, conferences, and scholarly works. However, the zero-sum logic typical of post-Yugoslav identity building – which puts the victims of the *own* national group in the limelight but has a blind spot for victims of other nationalities killed by members of the own nation – prevails and seems even in uncanny ways to be compatible with the ‘universalizing template’ of the IHRA. In what follows, I will first examine *Man of Ashes*, in which Holocaust survivor Ivan Ivanji, reflecting on the example of the Buchenwald memorial complex, critically examines recent developments in Holocaust memorialization in Germany and thinks through their consequences for the broader European context.

Ivan Ivanji’s *Man of Ashes*: Remembering the Holocaust in the Shadow of Goethe’s Oak

Ever since the publication of his prose debut *They Didn’t Kill Man* in 1954, the

²⁶ Aleida Assmann, “Europe: A Community of Memory?” (Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 16, 2006), *GHI Bulletin* 40 (2007): 11–25; 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15; 16–18.

²⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, “Formen und Traditionen des negatives Gedächtnisses,” in *Verbrechen erinnern: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, eds. Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei, (München: C. H. Beck), 21–32. Radonić, “Standards of Evasion,” came to similar conclusions regarding Croatia.

writer, translator, and former diplomat Ivan Ivanji has been returning time and again to the concentration camp Buchenwald and its sub-camps (*Außenlager*) in Magdeburg, Niederorschel, and Langenstein-Zwieberge where he had been interned as a Jew during the Holocaust.²⁹ In 1989, he published the novel *Jumping over Your Shadow* (*Preskakanje senke*), followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by many other novels, collections of short stories, and essays.³⁰ His work is unique in that it offers us insight into how a Holocaust survivor keeps writing about the Holocaust over time, not only because he seems to be haunted by the memories of the camps but also perhaps because the changed historical context seems to challenge him to revisit his memories and re-narrate them in light of current debates. While he wrote *They Didn't Kill Man* in an attempt to work through the memories of the horrors he went through – as he put it himself, “I just had to get it down on paper”³¹ – in his more recent fictional and non-fictional work Ivanji approaches the issue of the Holocaust and his own experience and memories of the camps from a different perspective, anchored in and framed by the present.³² In his essays and novels, he reflects upon and problematizes the whole culture and vocabulary of Holocaust remembrance that has emerged over the past decades, particularly in Germany, where he is often invited as a speaker at commemorations or conferences, a reflection that includes his own role as one of the few remaining survivors. At the same time, he does not shy away from connecting the Holocaust

²⁹ The period of Ivanji's 1950s work lies beyond the scope of this paper, not least because Holocaust memory (and countermemory) under socialism in Yugoslavia raises a very different set of questions: in the 1950s Ivanji's contemporaries who addressed the Holocaust included the prominent playwright Đorđe Lebović. On Lebović, see Stijn Vervaeke, “Staging the Holocaust in the Land of Brotherhood and Unity: Holocaust Drama in Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 92/2 (April 2014): 228-254.

³⁰ These include *Balerina i rat* (*The Ballet Dancer and the War*, 2003), *Poruka u boci* (*Bottle Post*, 2005), *Aveti iz jednog malog grada* (*Ghosts from a Small Town*, 2009), *Slova od kovanog gvožđa* (*Letters of Forged Iron*, 2010), *Moj lepi život u paklu* (2016), and many essays in the Serbian weekly *Vreme* (*Time*) and in journals and edited volumes in German. Many of these recent novels appeared first in German, after which the author himself rewrote them in Serbian (Ivanji prefers the term rewriting over translating). Interview with the author on 5 January 2016; on Ivanji's bi(tri)lingualism, see also his essay “Kinderfräuleinsprache und ‘naški jezik,’ unsere Sprache,” in *Erinnerung an Jugoslawien in der deutschsprachigen Literatur: zur Exophonie*, eds. Kristian Donko and Johann Georg Lughofer, (Ljubljana: Goethe-Institut, 2014), 4-7.

³¹ Interview with the author, January 5, 2016.

³² Thus, writing as ‘working through’ (*Durcharbeiten*) receives here a double meaning: writing as an attempt by the author to free himself of those painful memories, and as Freud's repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*), that is, as the urge to revisit, rework, rewrite the same memories in order to get them somehow under control and give them a place in his life narrative. See Freud, “Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten” (1914) and “Jenseits des Lustprinzips” (1920).

to stories of non-Jewish suffering or dissecting critically new forms of right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and racism or organized state violence in the light of his own experience of Nazism.

Set in 1997–2005 in Buchenwald and Weimar, Ivanji's novel *Man of Ashes* (*Čovek od pepela*, 2006; *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald*, 1999) deals directly with the issues of remembering and forgetting, the importance and the contradictions of Holocaust remembrance and education today, and the role of survivors in these processes. The story opens in 1997, when a roof worker, repairing the roof of one of the buildings of the memorial centre at Buchenwald, discovers a large number of urns containing the ashes of victims killed by the Nazis. The director of the centre decides to bury the urns, 701 in total, together in one communal tomb – because the urns were left uncovered, identification of the individual victims was impossible. This is done in a public ceremony in which representatives of the four religions of victims who perished in the camp – a rabbi and a Catholic, a Protestant, and an Orthodox priest – take part, as well as a camp survivor in whom we can recognize Ivanji. However, in an unexpected twist of fate, the 'souls' of the killed merge into one big cloud that hovers over the Ettersberg and the city of Weimar, reminding the living of their duty to remember the victims of the Holocaust. In the course of the novel, it becomes clear that there are different dead inhabiting the Ettersberg, who all claim the right to be remembered.

After a few pages, it emerges that the first person-narrator is a survivor of Buchenwald – apparently Ivanji's alter ego – when, commenting on the impressions a high school student wrote down after his visit to the camp, he notes: "I was the same age as this child when I was interred here as a prisoner wearing the number 58116."³³ The first-person narrator describes his repeated visits to Buchenwald and Weimar on the occasion of the annual commemorations and recalls his memories of the concentration camp. These chapters alternate at random with chapters told by an authorial narrator who describes the birth of the 'Man of Ashes' – an amorphous cloud of 'souls' held together by a force called 'the principle' (in his German version of the novel, Ivanji calls this 'das Es'), who all tell how they died in the camp. As Tihomir Brajović, one of the rare Serbian literary critics who has written about Ivanji's novel, noted, "the narrator was prompted to the act of writing [...], realizing the contradictions of that assiduous and systematic, but at the same time to him deeply problematic and, we could say, in a

³³ Ivan Ivanji, *Čovek od pepela*, (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2006), 14. Further references to this novel will be indicated by parenthetical page numbers following the quotes in the main text.

certain way forgetful *Erinnerungsarbeit* or ‘memory work.’”³⁴ Brajović connects Ivanji’s novel to a series of post-Yugoslav novels (by Dubravka Ugrešić, David Albahari, Saša Ilić, and Igor Štiks) that thematize issues of forgetting and remembering in the wake of the Yugoslav wars and whose narrators or protagonists point to “a particular cultural phenomenon that we could call the syndrome of ‘displaced,’ ‘transposed’ or ‘compensatory’ memory characteristic of the self-understanding and representation of neuralgic topics of the recent past in a significant part of the contemporary literature of the Western Balkans.”³⁵ Brajović’s terminology somehow resonates with Freud’s ‘screen memory’ in that it implies “the paradoxical narrative form of ‘evocative oblivion’ that ‘neutralizes,’ distances and ‘objectivizes’ the still painful traumas and frustrations of the own community by remembering the historical experience of others.”³⁶

I certainly agree with Brajović that the authors he mentions lay bare the mechanisms of social oblivion at work in post-Yugoslav societies and to a large extent follow his analysis of *Man of Ashes*. However, he fails to notice the multidirectional dynamics at work in much post-Yugoslav memory fiction – in both the novels he discusses and the works analysed here – and thus neglects the novels’ potential to *contest* the social oblivion their narrators or protagonists problematize. Bringing to the fore the multi-layered quality of the memory site(s) they are dealing with and showing the potential of Holocaust sites to trigger associative links with other temporally or geographically removed memories of suffering, the works of art discussed here not only evoke (by way of certain tropes and/or a specific narrative structures) the palimpsestic nature of cultural memory, but also destabilize received ideas about the subject(s) of memory and the role of culture in processes of remembering.

Already on the first page of the novel, Ivanji introduces the Ettersberg as an ambiguous and polyvalent site of memory. It is both the place where the concentration camp Buchenwald was located and the hill that Goethe, who lived and worked for a large part of his life in nearby Weimar, sometimes visited at night

³⁴ Tihomir Brajović, “Geteov hrast na Zapadnom Balkanu. Fenomen kompenzativne memorije u savremenom srpskom, hrvatskom i bosanskohercegovačkom romanu,” *Sarajevske sveske* 29–30 (2010): 477–489; 478. An abridged English version is published under the title “Goethe’s Oak Tree in the Western Balkans: Wars, Memories and Identities in Contemporary Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian Novels,” in *Balkan Memories: Media Constructions of National and Transnational Memory*, ed. Tanja Zimmermann, (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012), 163–169.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 482.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 488.

and where he allegedly inscribed his famous poem *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* onto the wall of a wooden cabin.³⁷ Reminding the reader that the last verse of the poem, “Warte nur, balde / ruhest du auch” (“Just wait, soon / You will rest as well”) is actually a premonition of eternal rest, of death, the narrator ironically points out the discrepancy between Weimar as the seat of German classicism and symbol of German civilization (*Hochkultur*) and the concentration camp the Nazis constructed in its immediate vicinity, at the symbolically loaded place on which, as legend had it, ‘Goethe’s oak’ stood.³⁸ The need to think through this unsettling incongruity is most directly articulated by the director of the centre, whose thoughts are communicated to us in free, indirect speech, resulting in a mix of narrator’s voice and the voice of character:

He would have liked for the fact that Hitler came after Goethe and that there exists a certain connection between the two to be taken seriously. Of course this doesn’t mean that Goethe prepared the ground for Hitler, even though in his role as a chief advisor [to the Grand Duke] he was a rather authoritarian statesman; but, as far as Weimar is concerned, *it simply has to be acknowledged that supreme culture was hardly resistant to infection and moreover that barbarism arose in the very midst of culture.* (16, emphasis added)

The narrator cynically adds that, “in the mind of the Buchenwald prisoners, many of whom were far more educated than their German guards and executioners, Goethe played a specific, and for some, even a great role. For them, Weimar, until the moment they arrived in the camp, was connected with Goethe’s name. And from then on?” (16).³⁹ Even though the narrator put it as a rhetorical question, the answer seems to be clear: the very existence of a concentration camp near Weimar probably shattered the prisoners’ last illusions about the potentially benevolent influence of culture on people and should also force the reader to think. Mentioning that Weimar had been selected as the ‘European capital of culture’ for

³⁷ Literary history has by now accepted that ‘Wanderers Nachtlied’ (‘Wanderer’s Nightsong’) was written on the Ettersberg, whereas ‘Ein Gleiches’ (‘A Similar Song’), both published in the same volume in 1815, was allegedly written on the wall of a wooden lodge on the Kickelhahn mountain near Ilmenau. Goethe, *Gedichte*, ed. Erich Trunz, (Munich: Beck, 1998), 555.

³⁸ The narrator comments extensively on the beliefs surrounding the ‘Goethe-Eiche.’ Pointing out that in Goethe in his talks with Eckermann explicitly mentions a beech tree (Buche), he concludes that the whole story is actually a legend in which the mythic German oak merges with Goethe’s beech. (106–110)

³⁹ Later in the novel, the narrator will give his own answer to the question: “I can’t remember whether as prisoner 58116 in Buchenwald I knew that the camp was located in the neighbourhood of Weimar in which Goethe used to live. Probably I didn’t” (58).

1999, the narrator finely points out the difficulties Weimar's citizens have in integrating the remnants of the concentration camp into the idealized picture of their city as they would like to present it to the world, except perhaps as a form of memory tourism – note the switch to indirect free discourse from the second sentence on, through which the narrator ironically distances himself from the alleged point of view of Weimar's inhabitants:

The inhabitants of Weimar would prefer to cut themselves off sharply from the Ettersberg, the mound that rises above them. If the horror must be remembered at all, let it then remain up there on the hill. It is also perfectly convenient to set up museums and monuments up there, a memorial centre, or whatever they call it, where wreaths can be laid down and where you can stand with certain horror; the feeling of horror increases the adrenalin and adrenalin is necessary for certain forms of tourism, and for that reason there will always be enough visitors to former concentration camps – in other words – just one more attraction! Let the city itself, however, remain the cradle of everything beautiful, noble, and good, in glory of the Germans and to the benefit of the whole world. (54)

At the same time, the narrator suggests the impossibility of separating those two pasts – the bad of the Ettersberg and the noble of Weimar – pointing out that young neo-Nazis gather at the foot of the bronze monument to Goethe and Schiller in the city's Theatre Square and threaten or even beat up foreigners.

Buchenwald itself is no less multi-layered than Weimar. Recalling the fact that after the end of the war the Soviet forces also interned their adversaries in Buchenwald, "sometimes even in the same barracks" (17), the narrator explains that for those people there will be a memorial centre built within the confines of the existing centre but that this causes quite a stir in public opinion in Germany:

In one instance, the director has to defend the decision of his institution to construct a separate building for the historical representation of the Soviet special camp against the charges that it violates the resolution of the European Parliament and equates these two prisons, while in another instance he has to declare that there are revisionist tendencies in Germany

and that he does not adhere to them. (17)⁴⁰

These two or even three different historical layers of the camp and their respective victims are all (re)present(ed) in the novel, which thus echoes the palimpsestic nature of the site.⁴¹ As Sarah Dillon writes, “the presence of texts from the past, present (and possibly future) in the palimpsest does not elide temporality but evidences the spectrality of any ‘present’ moment which always already contains within it ‘past,’ ‘present’ and ‘future’ moments” and, referring to De Quincey, “the fantasy of the palimpsest of the mind, and the disunity of the self it implies, does [...] lead [...] to a post-Romantic notion of the spectralized subject.”⁴² United in the figure of the Man of Ashes, the voices of Jews, communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, Gypsies – the latter three of which, as the narrator puts it, “have no lobby” (26), meaning that after their death, nobody remembered them or erected a monument for them – intermingle and together form a spectral subject that haunts the present. However, the dead of Buchenwald are unexpectedly interrupted in their conversation by two other voices they experience as foreign elements. The first voice they discover in their midst is that of one of Goethe’s servants who had been inhabiting the Ettersberg for centuries – yet another way to indicate how the high culture of the age of German classicism and the barbarism of the Nazis are inseparably connected – a rather ironic choice because the servant is not the best representative of high culture: the only story he keeps repeating is that he served hot chocolate to Goethe. The second one is the hostile voice of a member of the Hitler Youth (*Hitler-Jugend*) who “planned to fight for Germany” but whom the Soviet forces interned in Buchenwald in order to re-educate him, where he died of pneumonia:

⁴⁰ The director of the Memorial Centre, who is sketched by the narrator with much sympathy, can be easily recognized as the fictional double of Volkhard Knigge – “a young historian who has had for a long time a scholarly interest in psychoanalysis” (16) and who doesn’t hesitate to take a clear position in the debate about historical revisionism. Debates about the question whether the co-representation of the GDR and the Nazi eras entails an equation of both regimes continue to the present day; for a recent case in which Volkhard Knigge has also voiced his opinion, see Philippe Oehmke, “Zwickmülle der Vergangenheit,” *Der Spiegel* 21 (2008): 166-168.

⁴¹ If we include the camp’s function as memory site of antifascist struggle in the GDR, there are actually three layers; see Sarah Farmer, “Symbols That Face Two Ways: Commemorating the Victims of Nazism and Stalinism at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen,” *Representations* 49 (1995): 97–119; 102, 107. In Ivanji’s novel, this layer is echoed by the roof worker, who recalls that when he visited the camp as a child in the GDR, the teacher told them about the death of Ernst Thälmann, a leader of the German Communist Party who was murdered in Buchenwald by the Nazis (7).

⁴² Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 37.

I wasn't cremated with you. But I did die and was buried immediately next to you. I really don't know how I got here or how I acquired the ability to speak nearly fifty years after my death... [...] They understand. Here is someone who was not interned in the concentration camp for the enemies of Hitler's Germany, who was not liberated on 11 April 1945, but who found himself in the Soviet special camp No. 2, which was set up after the war for defeated Nazis, on the same site, partly using the same barracks. (100–101)

At first, the others are upset by his presence, but one of them, a former Jehovah's Witness, argues in his defence:

We should not generalize. The former Nazis weren't the only ones interned in those Soviet special camps, there were also those who opposed the forced unification of the social democrats with the communists, or communists convicted by the courts set up by the Soviet authorities, because they had butted heads... Some of my brothers were also interned. It's not that I have inside knowledge of these things, but suffering is suffering... (101)

The figure of the dead 'souls' sticking together and acting as a living being allows Ivanji, in a magical realist vein, to tell the stories of those killed by the Nazis in Buchenwald without necessarily appropriating their voices. It seems, however, that recalling their stories is not sufficient for the narrator: the figure he created also needs a face (104). Meditating on the face the amorphous being could take on, the narrator concludes that there actually is one face that he could give the Man of Ashes – it is found on a sculpture made by Buchenwald survivor Bruno Apitz, which in yet another unexpected twist connects the 'Man of Ashes' to Goethe. When on 24 August 1944 the Americans bombed the camp, as a consequence of which more than 320 prisoners died, Goethe's oak was partly turned into ashes. The camp authorities ordered a group of prisoners to cut down the oak and saw it into pieces, but Apitz managed to take a piece with him, out of which he carved a sculpture after the death masks of those who had died in the 'medical ward' (*Pathologie*) in the camp. He called it 'The Last Face' and told his friends that "in this way, out of the many faces of our dead one unique face was created" (105). As Michael Rothberg notes, "within the theory of multidirectional memory, acts of remembrance can thus be understood as processes of articulation in the two senses of that word given to it by Stuart Hall: they are acts of enunciation and they are acts of connection."⁴³ Ivanji's *Man of Ashes* tries not only to voice – to utter,

⁴³ Michael Rothberg, "Afterword: Locating Transnational Memory," *European Review*, 22/4 (2014): 652–656; 654.

articulate or enunciate – the stories of the different victims of Buchenwald, but also to make connections between them as well as with temporally and geographically more remote stories of suffering. He also tries to give them a face in a way that reminds us of Lévinas's understanding of the face: as Judith Butler put it, a face “makes various utterances at once: it bespeaks an agony, an injurability, and a divine prohibition against killing.”⁴⁴

The narrator makes plain that the Man of Ashes as a spectre (or embodiment of the return of the repressed) haunting the surroundings of Weimar could be useful not only in Germany, but also other places: “He is surely needed in the sky above my fatherland. My former fatherland. Above Jasenovac, Banjica, Keraterm, Ovčara, Knin, Srebrenica” (141), listing places of camps and sites of torture and mass killings during the Second World War and during the wars of the 1990s.⁴⁵ He also mentions “the scorched medieval monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija...” (141), where the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians by Serb forces in 1999 took place, in the wake of the NATO bombings, followed by the ethnic cleansing of the remaining Serb communities south of the river Ibar in 2004 by the Albanian majority. Emerging from the site of memory (*Denkmal*) of Buchenwald, the Man of Ashes hovers as a mobile memorial (*Mahnmal*) over places where victims of extreme violence are not (yet) properly remembered and as a spectre from the past that incessantly haunts the present.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, “Precarious Life,” in *Radicalizing Levinas*, eds. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 8.

⁴⁵ Jasenovac was the largest concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia where Serbs, Jews, Roma, communists, as well as politically non-compliant Croats and Muslims were systematically tortured and murdered between 1941 and 1945. The number of victims of the whole camp complex has been subject to fierce polemics, but is currently estimated at between 122,300 and 130,100. For the debate and most up-to-date estimates see Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941-1945: Logor smrti i radni logor*, (Jasenovac-Zagreb: Javna ustanova Spomen-područje Jasenovac, 2003), 116–123; Dragan Cvetković, “Holokaust u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj - numeričko određenje,” *Istorija 20. veka 1* (2011): 163-182. The camp Banjica (officially called ‘camp Dedinje’) in Belgrade was established by the decision of the Gestapo and realized by the police of the Serbian quisling government to intern communists and their sympathizers from the whole territory of Serbia and the Balkans; out of the approximately 30,000 interned between 1941 and 1944, between 4,286 and 8,756 were killed. Keraterm was a death camp established and run by the Serb forces in the early 1990s near Prijedor in north-west Bosnia where between 1,000 and 1,500 men of mostly Bosniak and Croatian nationality were tortured and killed. Ovčara was a place near the Croatian town Vukovar where in 1991 Serb paramilitary forces, backed by the Yugoslav army, killed Croatian POWs and civilians, 200 of which were found in a mass grave while 60 are still missing. The Knin camp was a detention camp where Serb militias mistreated, beat, and humiliated Croatian soldiers and civilians. In Srebrenica, Serb forces shot approximately 8,000 men of Bosniak nationality.

However, even the figure of the Man of Ashes as an attempt to articulate the untold stories of Buchenwald's many victims leaves the narrator puzzled by certain ethical dilemmas, leading him to consider some of the blind spots of current Holocaust memorialization. One of the problems is related to the difference that existed among the victims as a consequence of the power hierarchy installed by the Nazis and brings us to the grey zone between victims, accomplices, and executioners. A particular case in Buchenwald were the people employed in the so-called 'Bureau of Labour Statistics' (*Arbeitsstatistik*), who could replace persons on the list for transport to Auschwitz with others, and assign them instead to work units that had higher chances of survival. The narrator mentions that he owes his own survival to an invisible hand in the *Arbeitsstatistik* which, in the Winter of 1944–45 qualified him as a mason's apprentice and sent him to the sub-camp of Niederorschel: "If I were a believer, I would say, blessed be his name. But I never learned his name. I only know that he wore a Buchenwald number, certainly stitched onto a better prison uniform than the one I had, and that he had the power to decide over life and death. Over my life. Over my death" (69). He laconically adds: "what he did for me, historians in the German literature about Buchenwald officially call *Opfertausch* – the exchange of victims. They usually write about it in a negative context" (69). One of the prisoners employed in the *Arbeitsstatistik* was the famous French-Spanish writer Jorge Semprun. The narrator writes in very unambiguous terms about Semprun here: "As a prisoner, Jorge Semprun was lord of life and death. That distinguishes him from me. Not only the fact that he is six years older than me. Not only the fact that he is a much better known writer, and that he was a minister of culture in Spain after the fall of Franco" (69).

The uneven representation of the victims of Nazism today is another issue addressed by Ivanji, although not of the same order because it is inherent to contemporary (geo)politics and not a consequence of the inner logic of the concentration camps. Ivanji mentions how former camp prisoners from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine who are invited to the anniversary of the liberation of the camp are hosted in the refurbished former SS-barracks on the site of the Buchenwald camp instead of in hotels in the city of Weimar: "I am finding out that even today former camp prisoners are not all equal. Just as they also weren't at the time they wore striped prison uniforms" (133). A third issue is related to scale and time, and indicated by the narrator when he wonders "when another ten centuries go by, how will people look at that distant past that is our present?" (79–80).

Whereas Ivanji's narrator generally takes a positive stance towards the critical memory culture that has developed in Germany over the past decades, he nevertheless sighs: "Let the Germans do with the concentrations camps and the monuments on the places where they were erected whatever they want, I don't need them. Neither the Germans nor their museums of horror. But the German language... In no other language can I express myself in the same way" (80). The irreconcilability between the horrors he went through in the Nazi camps and his love for the German language is complete, and seems, albeit on a very personal level, somehow to echo the gap between (German) culture and (Nazi) barbarity that runs as a red thread through the novel. In the following section, I turn to examine whether or not, and how the 'warning' by Ivanji's *Man of Ashes* is taken up by Serbian authors of the second and third generation. Their work takes us from Weimar to Belgrade, from Buchenwald to the Old Fairgrounds, and, not unlike Ivanji's novel, draws our attention to the palimpsestic structure of local Holocaust sites and associatively connects Holocaust memory in Serbia to other traumatic events.

Zoran Penevski's *Less Important Crimes*: Towards a Digital 'Constellation of Self-Critical National Memories'

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, many recent Serbian Holocaust-related novels, artworks, and scholarly and popularizing publications focus on the Old Fairgrounds (*Staro sajmište*) in Belgrade. Located on the left bank of the river Sava, between the two bridges that connect the historic city centre with New Belgrade, the Old Fairgrounds are the most significant Holocaust site in Serbia. Initially built in 1937 to host the International Fair, only four years later the site was transformed by the Gestapo into a concentration camp. At first, the camp functioned as a *Judenlager*, where approximately 7,000 Jewish women, children, and elderly people were detained. In the winter of 1941/1942, approximately 500 Jewish prisoners died of cold, disease or hunger. In spring 1942, approximately 6,300 Jews were killed in a gas van (in Serbian called 'dušegupka,' literally 'soul-killer') that was sent from Berlin for that purpose.⁴⁶ At that point, German-

⁴⁶ Along with Jews, approximately 500 Roma were interned in the concentration camp. Held in horrible conditions, around 60 of them died of disease and exposure. However, most other Roma were released between January and April 1942 after they had provided evidence that they had a permanent address in the city. Jovan Bajford, *Staro sajmište. Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja*,

occupied Serbia was the first country in Europe declared ‘*judenrein*’ and the camp was turned into an *Anhaltelager*, a temporary detention camp for political prisoners, captured partisans, and forced labourers, mostly Serbs from Bosnia and Croatia but also Bosniaks, Albanians, Greeks, and Jews.⁴⁷ Within those two years, between May 1942 and July 1944, approximately 31,972 people passed through the camp, out of which at least 10,636 perished.⁴⁸ Despite the fact that the Old Fairgrounds are “the largest individual Holocaust site in Serbia,” the site up until now has not received a proper Holocaust memorial and plans for a museum have never been realized.⁴⁹ This negligent attitude is all the more significant because the site is one of the rare concentration camps located almost in the centre of the city.

Zoran Penevski’s novel *Less Important Crimes* (*Manje važni zločini*, 2005) connects two timelines: the first one, the frame narrative, is situated in the late 1990s to early 2000s, and starts with the student protests against the Milošević regime and encompasses the 1999 NATO bombing of the country and the protests that on 5 October 2000 brought an end to the Milošević era and the emergence of democratic rule in 2003–2004. The second timeline covers the late 1930s, the Second World War, and the Holocaust in Belgrade. These two stories are both told by a heterodiegetic third-person narrator, but each in a different style and rhythm, the first indicating the hasty, restless urban life of contemporary Belgrade youth, the second evoking the calm, serene voice of an old-fashioned historian, reminiscent of the voice-over of a documentary on a history channel. In the course of the novel, the relevance of the two storylines to each other becomes clear and finally they come together with a detective-story-like twist.

(Belgrade: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2011), 33–44. See also Jovan Byford, “History of the Semlin Camp,” <http://www.semlin.info/>.

⁴⁷ The majority of the prisoners came from the German occupied zone and from the Independent State of Croatia. Perceived as potential supporters of or participants in the partisan movement, they were considered as a factor of instability. However, also ordinary peasants without any connection to the resistance movement were interned. Most prisoners of the transit camp were used as slave labour and transferred to work camps in Germany, Norway and smaller labour camps in central Serbia; a smaller number, mostly political prisoners and partisans, were deported to Mauthausen and Auschwitz. Large groups of prisoners died in the detention camp of hunger, exhaustion and diseases caused by the bad sanitary conditions. Bajford, *Staro sajmište*, 44–53.

⁴⁸ Bajford, *Staro sajmište*, 11; 21–53. Byford takes the figures from Milan Koljanić’s study *Nemački logor na beogradskom sajmištu*, (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11–12. As the city manager of Belgrade, Goran Vesić announced several times in 2015 and January 2016, this might finally change in the next few years: after the renovation of the central tower in 2016, a memorial centre will be constructed including the Italian and the Czechoslovak pavilions of the Fairgrounds. See <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/317202/Beograd/Staro-sajmiste-od-logora-do-memorijalnog-centra>.

The narrative set in the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s follows the young and hip journalist and lover of electronic music Miloš Milić who works for an online news portal in which we can easily recognise the TV and radio station B92, which at the time played a crucial role as one of the only anti-regime channels in Serbia and was one of the first to go online. At a house music party, Miloš is approached by three guys of his age (in their twenties or thirties): Dušan Pavlović, comic-strip artist Ivan, and the brothers Vlada and Filip. Dušan introduces the group with the words “we’re from the RDB” – not the *State Security Department* (*Resor državne bezbednosti*), as any Serbian citizen would have interpreted the abbreviation at the time, but rather the *Digital Belgrade Department* (*Resor digitalnog Beograda*), “a very serious website about Belgrade, more specifically, about its scars of urbanity.”⁵⁰ They ask him to join their network because he has experience with web editing and because he is from New Belgrade, the part of the city they have not covered yet. More specifically, they want him to gather information about one of the biggest ‘scars’ of Belgrade’s cityscape: the Old Fairgrounds.⁵¹

Miloš agrees to join the RDB, and his search for information on the Old Fairgrounds not only teaches him a lot about the hidden past of Belgrade and the faith of the Belgrade Jews but also helps him put the recent past in perspective, particularly the crimes committed by the Milošević regime about which he learns through his work as a journalist. At the end of the novel, the reader, together with the characters of the frame story, discovers that Miloš’s and Dušan’s grandfathers appear to have been friends. Actually, they turn out to be the main characters of the storyline set in the 1930s and 1940s: the technician Stanimir Pavlović and the photographer Petar Milić, who met at the second international Fair held at the Belgrade Fairgrounds in 1938. During the Nazi Occupation, Petar Milić documented the genocide of the Jews but was denounced to the Gestapo by a Serbian informer, after which he was imprisoned, tortured and killed on the site

⁵⁰ Zoran Penevski, *Manje važni zločini*, (Belgrade: Okean, 2005), 22. Henceforth, references to the novel will be indicated by parenthetical page numbers in the main text. All translations are my own.

⁵¹ Eight years after the publication of *Less Important Crimes*, Milovan Pisarri and Rena Raedle edited a book that seemed to go a long way towards realizing the ambitious plans of Penevski’s trio from the ‘Digital Belgrade Department’ and which brings to the fore Holocaust sites and sites of antifascist resistance in Belgrade during the Second World War: *Places of Suffering and of Anti-Fascist Struggle in Belgrade 1941–44*, with the fitting subtitle *A Guide to Read the City: (Mesta stradanja i antifašističke borbe u Beogradu 1941–44. Priručnik za čitanje grada*, (Belgrade: B92, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung South East Europe, 2013).

of the Old Fairgrounds. Stanomir Pavlović was employed by the Germans as a car mechanic; one of his tasks is to clean the gas van. When he realizes that he is becoming an accomplice in the killings of the Belgrade Jews, he sabotages the van. After the war, the communist authorities accuse him of collaboration with the Nazis and execute him in September 1945.

The way in which Miloš, with Dušan's assistance, discovers the fate of his grandfather – about which his father, who grew up as an orphan, had not told him anything – not only highlights an interruption in the chain of intergenerational memory but also zooms in on the role and responsibility of bystanders of genocide. His search in the archives leads Miloš, and with him the reader, to ponder issues of complicity and collaboration in different times – in the 1940s, during the Second World War and the Holocaust, and in the 1990s, during the Yugoslav wars, the Srebrenica genocide, Kosovo war crimes, and the NATO bombing. This plot structure mirrors that of the novels and films, which Silverman has described as examples of palimpsestic memory, in which “a significant part of the intrigue [...] derives from the fact that the investigation into one buried memory [...] turns out to be an investigation into another [...]. Or rather, the two are shown to be profoundly connected, so that what one might have thought of as distinct moments in time and space are recomposed to create a different spatio-temporal configuration.”⁵²

The novel connects these issues through the trope of the past as a virtual database. The guys from the *Digital Belgrade Service* define their website as ‘an interactive map of Belgrade in which points in space [*prostorne tačke*] also have their temporal wells [*vremenski bunari*] with interesting data [...] the virtual makes it possible for everything to come to the surface’ (34). Not accidentally, both grandfather Petar and grandson Miloš are obsessed by the modern media of their time and use photography and the internet respectively to document and archive (in an attempt to save those memories from oblivion and bring them to light in the future) cases of extreme violence or flagrant social injustice that are forgotten, repressed, or ignored by their fellow citizens. The intertwining of different temporal layers, switching back and forth between the 1990s and the 1940s is echoed not only by the idea of an interactive website that by way of hyperlinks opens up and connects the forgotten stories of sites of suffering in Belgrade, but also by the very structure of the novel. The literary text itself consists of 156 very short numbered chapters, which like narrative ‘flashes’ or ‘hyperlinks’ to different

⁵² Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory*, 3.

webpages, texts, and images tell the stories of the two different generations and provide the reader with historical information on the Belgrade Fairgrounds. Finally, the idea that Belgrade's traumatic history can be read as a palimpsest is also evoked by the cover illustration of the book, which was created by Penevski. The cover shows a photograph in sepia of the Terazije, one of Belgrade's main streets through which the gas van drove on its way from the Old Fairgrounds to Jajinci. In this photograph, a map of the site of the Old Fairgrounds is traced out, suggesting a layering that inverts ordinary spatio-temporal relations: rather than being buried under the present, the past is projected upon it, suggesting the impossibility of erasing the presence and importance of the past in the present [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1. Book cover of Zoran Penevski's novel *Less Important Crimes* (2005).

Reproduced courtesy of Zoran Penevski.

While the novel on the one hand seems to celebrate the possibilities of the Internet to access the past and remember its dark sides, the surprising space-time connections that resurface, the protagonist's reflections upon collective forgetting, and the ways in which this oblivion is carved into the cityscape are rather pessimistic. Furthermore, the parallel between the indifference of many contemporary Serbian citizens towards the memory of the genocide of the Jews during the Second World War, committed in the heart of its capital, and the negation of the genocide in Srebrenica and the war crimes in Kosovo, sheds an entirely new light on the motto that opens the novel, a quote from Milošević who in 1998 claimed: "our whole country will develop as New Belgrade" (7). While New Belgrade is the most modern and urban part of Belgrade, it is also the municipality in which the remnants of the Old Fairgrounds are located. What is more, the use of this quote as a motto for the novel seems to suggest that the backing of institutions and political forces is needed for the memory of a traumatic past to enter the sphere of cultural memory. If this institutional support is lacking, then a possible alternative, as the novel seems to suggest (even though it does so using the form of the novel and not of a blog or website), is the space of the world wide web, which allows us to make *digital* "constellation[s] of self-critical national memories,"⁵³ which, as the title of the book implies, do *not* consider the evil done to others as *less important crimes*. An important role in unearthing the connections and putting them on the (digital) map, seems to be reserved for the young urban generation. However, Penevski's postmodern novel with its dense play between different temporal layers and locations as well as its complex plot might not be the most effective medium to reach out to bigger audiences, in particular the young. In the next section, I turn to a recent Serbian film centred on the topic of Holocaust remembrance.

Goran Paskaljević's Film *When Day Breaks*: Between the Duty to Remember and the Pitfalls of Didacticism

Not unlike Penevski's *Less Important Crimes*, the plot of Goran Paskaljević's film *When Day Breaks* (*Kad svane dan*, 2012) revolves around a quest, the protagonist's

⁵³ Assmann, "The Holocaust, a Global Memory?," 101.

search for a hidden truth.⁵⁴ This quest starts in November 2011, when the protagonist of the film, retired music teacher Miša Brankov, receives a letter from the Jewish Museum in Belgrade. At the Museum, the curator explains to him that workers of the municipality had found a metal box during recent renovations on the water pipes on the site of the Old Fairgrounds. She gives him the metal box, which contains some photographs, a letter, and an unfinished music score entitled ‘When Day Breaks,’ composed, she tells him, by his real father, Isak Weiss. Together with his wife Sara, the composer Isak Weiss was interned at the Old Fairgrounds where both of them were killed because they were Jews. The box contains a note in which Weiss asks the finder – in case they do not manage to get out of the camp – to give the box to the Brankovs, who look after their son Miša. Miša Brankov cannot believe that he was actually adopted by the Brankovs, at whose farm in the vicinity of Pančevo in the Banat he grew up, but he nevertheless takes the box home.⁵⁵ On his way out, the curator shows him the exhibition about the concentration camp the Old Fairgrounds and the gas van the Nazis used to kill the Jews, upon which Brankov utters: “It is terrible... that I hardly knew anything about this” (13:20). A visit to Emil Najfeld, an old acquaintance of the Weisses in Belgrade, confirms the story of the museum curator. Brankov’s brother, who still lives on the farm where they both grew up also admits that he was asked by his parents to accept Miša as his brother and never show or tell him that he was adopted. Brankov visits the Old Fairgrounds, gets increasingly obsessed with the story of his parents and starts to believe that his father actually tried to speak to him through the unfinished music score, a kind of conversation with the dead that will be made possible when he, his son, finishes the score. He wants the piece of music to be performed on the Old Fairgrounds, as a last honour to his parents and the other Jewish victims who perished there. However, this ambition proves extremely difficult because the people whom he approaches are reluctant to help him either because they do not see the importance of the commemorative event or do not believe his story. The current conductor of the amateur choir Brankov formerly conducted is practicing for the choir’s New Year’s programme, and his son, a professional musician, is preparing his orchestra and choir for the premiere

⁵⁴ *When Day Breaks* has received quite some international acclaim and won awards at a number of international film festivals, amongst others the Grand Prix at the film festival in Terni (Italy, 2012), in Merida (Spain), and in Cleveland (USA); in 2013, the film was selected as the Serbian candidate for the Oscar competition but did not receive any awards.

⁵⁵ Not accidentally, the scenario for the film was written by Serbian Jewish author Filip David, who as a child survived the Holocaust because he and his family were hidden from the Nazis by Serbian peasants. In 2015, Filip David was awarded the NIN prize for novel of the year 2014 for *The House of Memory and Oblivion* (*Kuća sećanja i zaborava*).

of one of his own compositions. The son's reaction to his father's description of what happened at the Old Fairgrounds is particularly telling: "Come on, dad! That's over now. Who cares about this today? Let the state bother about that! If that [site] is not marked, there is a reason for it" (66:25). In the end, it is the downtrodden and disadvantaged of contemporary society who perform the composition: a Gypsy orchestra, the lead violinist of which is Brankov's former pupil Rade; Marko Popović, a previously famous classical singer who after the death of his son – who was in the early 1990s recruited by force to serve in Milošević's ugly wars and killed on the front – became an alcoholic living in a wooden cabin on Ada ciganlija.⁵⁶

Brankov's quest clearly links the memory of the Holocaust with stories of injustice suffered by those who today live at the margins of Serbian society. The house on Danube Street in Dorćol, where the Weisses lived, is now inhabited by a poor family who fear that they will be thrown out of their humble abode because real estate investors plan to tear down the building. Some of those people, including refugees from the wars of the 1990s, even live on the site of the Old Fairgrounds, a detail that foregrounds the palimpsestic character of the site today. However, the multi-layered quality of the camp's history during the Second World War is not mentioned. Although the museum curator correctly tells Brankov the history of the 'Judenlager Semlin' as a camp for Jews and Roma and also mentions Serbian collaboration with the Nazis, her story ends in 1942, thus omitting one important historic layer: that of the transit camp of 1942–1944, in which thousands of prisoners died. In *When Day Breaks*, the Old Fairgrounds seem to be represented as a place of Jewish and Roma suffering only. The film explicitly links current right-wing violence against Roma in Serbia to (neo-)Nazism, showing how the wedding party of the Roma family whose boys Brankov is giving violin classes for free is brutally interrupted by hooligans who set the building on fire with Molotov cocktails.

As film critic Kristina Đuković rightly remarked in her review of the film, the big weakness of the film is its didactic tendency, which she sees reflected on a formal level in two ways.⁵⁷ Firstly, the fact that, even though the film, by way of the slow

⁵⁶ Ada ciganlija is a peninsula on the southern bank of the river Sava; it is one of the city's larger public green areas and a popular recreational zone. Its northern edge is characterized by floating barges used as weekend houses – hardly anyone lives here permanently, but those who nevertheless do, are geographically, socially and symbolically situated at the margins of the city.

⁵⁷ Kristina Đuković, "Kad svane dan – Goran Paskaljević: beživotno predavanje," *Popboks*, January 8, 2013, <http://www.popboks.com/article/9322>.

and wide-frame shots, suggests a personal, inner drama, this drama and, as she puts it, the protagonist's "search for social catharsis" is not reflected by the narrative logic of the film, which "evolves according to a list of elaborated points which, like a checklist of daily tasks, map out in a very general and in a completely non-engaged way – and this is particularly contradictory – one of the most tragic stories of this part of the world. For that reason, the film is made to perform a kind of generic civilizational [sic] duty and not, as might be wished, to tell the story in an engaged way." Secondly, she points out that the characters, including the protagonist, are flat, and that presenting a well-educated humanist like Brankov as someone who had no knowledge whatsoever about the Old Fairgrounds makes the story unconvincing: "even though the famous actor Mustafa Nadarević tries hard to breathe some life into the gypsum mask that was given to him instead of a character, this storyline of the film is almost mathematically restrained, as if intending to reach a dry didactic conclusion about the negligence of our time." Duković rightly singles out the fantastic ending of the film - when Miša Brankov, carried away by the tunes of the gypsy orchestra performing the music score composed by his father, in a kind of half-dream, half-hallucination meets his parents and engages in a snow fight with them – as one of the aesthetically more successful moments of the movie. Clearly born of the impetus to save Holocaust memory from oblivion and to educate, the film straddles the line between the aesthetic and the didactic. Whereas the film's main thrust might be said to be in line with the IHRA's emphasis on education, as a work of art it is rather modest. Apart from the message of the importance of Holocaust remembrance, the film's understanding of memory as a palimpsest is much simpler and ultimately far less convincing than that put forward by the novels. Instead of complex relationships between past and present, the film suggests simple one-to-one analogies: for example, the position of Serbian Roma today is suggested to mirror that of the Jews in the Holocaust in a straightforward way. The multi-layered nature of the Fairgrounds' history is acknowledged, but in a very selective way, omitting many non-Jews. The film offers a clear critique of the many failures of state-organized Holocaust remembrance in Serbia, but its own representation of Holocaust memory is rather reductive and its understanding of transgenerational transmission rather naïve.

Conclusion

In one of his recent essays, written on the occasion of a conference held in 2015 in Berlin devoted to the role of commemorative centres in Holocaust education in

Germany, Ivanji recalls a remark made at the conference by Monika Grütters, Germany's minister for culture and media, who said that "we are still in the lucky position of hearing the voices of the living witnesses to an era (*Zeitzeugen*), but soon the authentic sites of persecution and annihilation will be only 'stone witnesses.'"⁵⁸ Ivanji commented on the minister's statement as follows:

I hope that those numerous memorial centres are not built for us and because of us. They are built for the people who visit them, for those generations who did not endure the two decades [sic] of Nazi rule, which I in a simplified way call 'The Time of Evil' so that they would learn something that was not talked about in their family, about which they perhaps learned a little bit at school, so that they could face these fragments of truth about the history of their nation when they visit one of the memorial centres. [...] They are built for the next generations; for our descendants, for the descendants of perpetrators and in the first place for the descendants of that large majority of people who watched the crimes happen but did not dare to take any action against them.⁵⁹

While some are afraid that with the death of the last survivor, the memory work of the centres will also come to an end, Ivanji relativizes this fear, saying that the memory of the Holocaust and its significance for the present is now left to the coming generations. This belief is strengthened by his seeing the interested faces of fourteen-year-olds visiting Buchenwald: "We 'witnesses to an era (*Zeitzeugen*)' said what we had to say, we're leaving the stage, dying out, and now what matters is the survival and function of the German memorial centres in the twenty-first century for the second and third generations after us and our perpetrators."⁶⁰ Commenting on the use of the word *Zeitzeuge* and its currency in German academy, Ivanji notes that he personally has always found the curiosity and interest of the young more important than any court that could have asked him to testify. He makes it clear that he does not perceive himself as "the witness of an era;" rather that he can testify to what he experienced, adding an unusual 'message' for the policy makers and academics gathered in Berlin: "It's nice of you that you don't want to forget us, thank you, but please devote your energy to helping those

⁵⁸ Ivan Ivanji, "Konferencija o radu memorijalnih centara u XXI veku u Berlinu: Kako se sećati zločina" ("A Conference about the Work of Memorial Centres in the 21st Century in Berlin: How to Remember Crimes"), *Vreme* 1291, October 1, 2015, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1331472>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

who are suffering today. At this very moment, refugees, for example, regardless of where they come from, if they are in need.”⁶¹

Turning to the Serbian context, he reflects on the still unresolved status of the Old Fairgrounds and the debates about the creation of a memorial centre on the site (which is now again under threat by Serbia’s prime minister’s ambitious urbanization project of the Sava banks, ‘Belgrade on the Water,’ financed with Saudi funds). Even though Ivanji is convinced that ‘witnesses of an era’ and their children should not necessarily have a particular right to decide what kind of memorial centres Belgrade will build, he nevertheless states that, if it were up to him, “they should not be graves, but places of life, of intelligent learning about good and evil.”⁶²

From one of his other essays, it becomes clear that this ‘learning about good and evil’ should not be understood as turning Holocaust memory into a universalizing message devoid of any local specifics. As one of the most impressive attempts to transfer Holocaust memory to the next generation, Ivanji singled out the theatre play *Invisible monuments* (*Nevidljivi spomenici*, 2015).⁶³ Co-authored and played by 23 pupils from the Third Gymnasium in Belgrade, the play shows how teenagers in Serbia today question the role of their own family in war crimes in the Second World War as perpetrators, accomplices, and bystanders. The project was realized with the support of the Zagreb Goethe Institute, the famous Belgrade Bitef Theatre, and the Third Gymnasium but without any financial support of state institutions.⁶⁴ In his afterword to a recent thematic issue on transnational

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Ivan Ivanji, “Kultura sećanja – Jedan performans, jedna izložba i jedna predstava o Holokaustu: Moj krik iz dečjih usta,” *Vreme* No. 1274, June 4, 2015, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1302836>.

⁶⁴ This project is only one of the many examples that shows that an alternative, non-competitive culture of Holocaust remembrance in Serbia is emerging mostly thanks to initiatives by the non-governmental sector. Due to the focus of this article, I cannot discuss these efforts in detail, but important examples include the project *A Visit to Staro Sajmište* (*Poseta Starom sajmištu*, <http://www.starosajmiste.info/en/#>), which not only created a very informative website but also organised guided visits to the Old Fairgrounds and a series of seminars and study tours; the educative project *Days of Remembrance* (*Dani sećanja*, <http://danisećanja.rs/?lang=en>), the project *Against Oblivion: Four WW II Camps in Belgrade* (*Protiv zaborava: četiri logora II svetskog rata u Beogradu*, <http://www.protivzaborava.com/en/about/>) as well as initiatives by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia, such as the fascinating digital archive *Portraits and Memories of the Jewish Community Before the Holocaust* (*Portreti i sećanja Jevrejske zajednice pre Holokausta*, <http://www.jevrejipamte.org/>).

memory, Rothberg noted:

The forms of dialogue, connection, and translation that take place in multidirectional encounters do not take place on an even playing field [...]. It goes without saying that powerful forces – and especially the state – will attempt to create historical memory in its own image and to cast it in stone. But state-sanctioned memory and enforced forgetting can only ever tell half the story. [...] The dynamic of multidirectional memory comes with no guarantees, but it does help constitute a terrain for practising a politics of location that articulates local concerns with national and transnational scales.⁶⁵

As my analysis of Ivanji's *Man of Ashes* has shown, in unearthing the multiple layers of the Buchenwald concentration camp, the novel reveals how a carefully balanced form of Holocaust remembrance such as that organized in Buchenwald can bring to light and help articulate other (hi)stories of extreme violence without necessarily leading to the appropriation of the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. These (hi)stories can be related to the same place, as in the case of the (often innocent) victims of Soviet repression in the immediate postwar years, or to geographically and historically more remote events, as in the case of the war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Not unimportantly, Ivanji's novel suggests that institutionalized forms of Holocaust memorialization should also acknowledge "victims without a lobby" such as Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Roma and treat all survivors—including those from Eastern Europe—on equal basis. He shows that, while Holocaust memory is thus intrinsically multidirectional (both internally, for example, the "hidden" stories of Jehovah's witnesses, homosexual, and Roma, and externally, that is, related to historically or geographically different events), it indeed depends on the concrete realization of locally embedded politics of memory whether and to what extent certain stories can come to the surface and be brought into circulation. Finally, the novel seems to suggest that, in places where such a memory culture does not exist, works of fiction can at least partly compensate for the gaps and silences in state-sanctioned memory. After all its protagonist, the *Man of Ashes*, unites the souls of *all* victims in inhabiting the Ettersberg.

Moving our focus from Germany to Serbia, from a well established network of Holocaust memorial centres and a rich culture of vivid public debate to a highly politicized public arena, the role of critical cultural practices seems to become even more important. Ivanji's and Penevski's novel, and Paskaljević's film to a more

⁶⁵ Rothberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," 655.

limited extent, unsettle, complement and add a nuance to state-conducted Holocaust remembrance in Serbia. In doing so, they confirm the important role of art in transforming the communicative memory of the Holocaust in Serbia into long-term memory. The novels and film expose the existing tensions between local memory politics characterized by ethno-cultural compartmentalization on the one hand and the international trend of Holocaust universalization and its implicit promise of a cosmopolitan ethics on the other. Raising uncomfortable questions about issues of complicity and collaboration in mass crimes committed during the 1940s and 1990s, they construct “constellation[s] of self-critical national memories.”⁶⁶ and reveal the transnational potential of Holocaust memory in Serbia. However, Paskaljević’s film’s lays bare some of the pitfalls of the Holocaust memorialization boom in contemporary Serbia. Certainly, the impetus to educate broader audiences about the Holocaust in Serbia is important (and definitely in line with the IHRA’s goals), but only if the full complexity of local history is acknowledged. If this is not the case, then interaction between the local and global frames of Holocaust memory might as well be framed as a story of missed opportunities.

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