

'Shawl' bares Hitler aftermath

By Jane Berry
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It doesn't take great insight to realize that the pain of Adolf Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jews is still with us.

It's written between the lines of many news stories involving Israel, and for Jews everywhere, what happened in Auschwitz and other concentration camps a half-century ago is more collective memory than history. The events are over; the aftermath is not.

This long-term aftermath of pain is the subject of Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl," and for this reason the thin volume containing a single short story and a novella differs from other Holocaust literature that has become classic, such as Elie Wiesel's "Night" or "The Diary of Anne Frank."

Both the story, "The Shawl," and the novella, "Rosa," center on the interior experience of Rosa Lublin, a Jew caught in the Nazis' death net. In the seven-page story we find her in a camp, where she hides her infant daughter, Magda, in a shawl she has been allowed to keep. The baby, curled in self-preserving silence, sucks first on Rosa's dried-up breasts and then on the shawl itself.

Miraculously, the shawl conceals Magda until she is 15 months old. Then one day Rosa's hated niece, Stella, takes the shawl to keep warm, leaving the baby exposed.

The SS guards find the infant and fling her to death against an electrified fence.

Rosa, defying her instinct to scream ("the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton") and run to Magda, rams the shawl into her own mouth, stuffing down her pain to keep the guards from shooting her.

"Rosa," the bulk of the book, deals with the woman's life 30 years later. She is alone, nearly 60, living in Miami in a seedy hotel with a one-burner stove and no telephone. She is "a madwoman and a scavenger," indignant toward the retirees surrounding her. Her pain still silent within her, she speaks to almost no one and writes in crude and deceitful English to Stella, who sends her money.

To Magda, however, Rosa writes from her soul. In the finest literary Polish she still remembers from pre-Nazi days, she writes to the ghost of her daughter, whom she now conjures up with the shawl. "My lioness, my snow queen," she writes to Magda, who she imagines is a professor of philosophy at Columbia, a beautiful woman of 30. Believing Magda lives is the pinhead of sanity to which Rosa clings; it is ironic to her, believing this, that others think she is crazy.

Contrasted to the images of the ghostly Magda is the pathetic image of Rosa herself, scurrying around Miami beaches looking for a pair of underpants she thinks she has lost. "What did you lose?" asks a man who is trying to befriend her. "My life," Rosa replies.

On another occasion she remarks that she has had three lives — before, during and after Hitler. "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie."

This book is about the way the human spirit clings to



Author Cynthia Ozick

"The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick. Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. 70 pp., \$12.95.

life, even if that means burrowing down into the psychic darkness where no life seems to exist — and even if the reality of that darkness does not match the crude reality of the outer "real world." Magda in life was Rosa's daughter but in death she transcends that; she is Rosa herself, the child within her, the part of her that was powerful and beautiful, a young girl dressed (as she imagines Magda at 16) in a blue dress of her own with black buttons that are like "the unlit shards of stars."

The book is also about how little the outer, rational world can have to do with the reality of spirit. In one part of the book, Rosa is contacted by a Dr. Tree, an "Institute for Humanitarian Context" professor who is studying "survivor syndroming" and wants to interview Rosa. Tree writes in very learned language that he is fascinated with the "wide range of neurological residues" in people who were in camps.

"Disease, disease!" exclaims Rosa. "Humanitarian context, what did it mean? An excitement over other people's suffering... Consider also the special word they used: survivor. Something new. As long as they didn't have to say human being." Rosa knows it is the rational world that is crazy.

The beauty of Ozick's book is the power of its compressed language. While some human experience lends itself to epic length, others are best spared the indignity — almost the irreverence — of wordiness. In her lean and powerful 70 pages, Ozick has written just enough. To have written a longer work would have been to violate further the spirit of the character she has evoked. To have written less would have been to abandon her to her silence.