

**Literature of Societal Trauma:  
A Study of Literature Following the Holocaust  
and the Dirty War**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of Honors Studies in English

By

Sarah Jane Phillips

Spring 2015

English

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

**The University of Arkansas**

## **Acknowledgements**

As readers and advisors for this honors thesis research project, I sincerely thank Profs. Yajaira Padilla, Sergio Villalobos, Gwynne Gertz, and Laurence Hare for their time, their expertise, and their willingness to invest in my education and in my future.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
History of the Holocaust .....	9
History of the Dirty War .....	12
<i>Night</i> By Elie Wiesel .....	16
<i>The Book Thief</i> By Markus Zusak .....	23
<i>Steps Under Water</i> By Alicia Kozameh .....	32
<i>La historia oficial</i> .....	37
Conclusion .....	43
Works Cited .....	46

## Introduction

In this project I will consider the effects of war on a population, both at the individual and communal level, and how those effects manifest themselves in literature.

War, in this case World War II and the Holocaust in Germany and the Dirty War in Argentina, gives way to a wide variety of societal traumas, the effects of which are both tangible and abstract. A means of comprehending such abstraction may often result in an oversimplification on the part of the reader who may view such literature about war and trauma through a ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ lens.

This black and white delineation is easily comprehensible and readily available in much of literature. Take the superhero narrative, for instance. In these stories a reader is offered a protagonist and an antagonist and the narrative is often not complicated beyond this. Yet, as suggested by the works I analyze here: *Night (1955)*, *The Book Thief (2005)*, *Steps Under Water (1987)* and *La historia oficial (1985)*, a story that comes out of war and trauma necessitates a more complicated structure than a single protagonist and a single antagonist working against each other. Sometimes it is clear who is being victimized and who is perpetrating violence. But as repeated case studies will show, the victim is not always only the victim but sometimes also a victimizer and vice versa.

I chose to take on research into these wars because I find that it moves me. A friend asked me once, as I was beginning this paper, why I wanted to look at something so sad. She asked me if I knew how much ‘sad stuff’ I would have to read. I told her that I did. When the inevitable ‘Why?’ came I told her that I was moved by it and that I could not let it go unnoticed. This paper is a detailed look at only four pieces of literature that

come out of societal trauma, two from the Holocaust and two from the Dirty War. The options were very nearly endless.

The world of Holocaust literature is fascinating for me, personally. I read Elie Wiesel's work, called *Night*, at the recommendation of my parents and later as a high school and college student. The work has been formative in my understanding of World War II. Perhaps most importantly, it did not sate an interest in survivor's stories, but started one. After *Night*, I read *Dawn (1961)* and *Day (1962)*, the remainder of the trilogy and Wiesel's first works about the war. These works led me into the genre I now know to be Holocaust literature. I have yet to read something in the genre that I did not feel was hugely important to me.

On that note, the concept of genre is an important consideration in this project. The label that a genre provides can color a reading of a certain work. "Genre theorists and analysts... have shown that texts that share the same communicative purpose and audience (i.e., texts in the same genres) are more similar in terms of their global structure, style, and conventions," than texts that do not share the same purpose (Bouwer, Renske, et al; 4). In that vein, many, if not all, of the texts analyzed and discussed here could be labeled 'survivor's stories' and they share several important characteristics.

*Night* is a firsthand account of survival of the Holocaust in World War II. *The Book Thief* is a look at a child who loses her first and then her second family but survives the war. *Steps Under Water* is a firsthand account of a woman who survives imprisonment, but she is imprisoned during the Dirty War. And *La historia oficial* is a film that considers the survival and unlikely upbringing of a child born to a political

dissident of the Dirty War. All of these works offer a first person account, an intrinsic part of a survivor's narrative.

Interestingly, the first person accounts are not all from the same perspective.

*Night* and *Steps Under Water* are both recollections from survivors themselves and are written not too long after the wars are over (ten and four years, respectively). *The Book Thief* is told from the perspective of Death who is not the protagonist of the story. The protagonist is a young German girl named Liesel who survives the war while many of her loved ones do not. *La historia oficial*, as a film, is not told to the viewer in the same way that a novel might be. But the film focuses on Alicia, Gaby's mother. Gaby is the child who is born in a prison and adopted by Alicia and her husband. But both mother and adopted daughter are survivors of the Dirty War in their own way.

One of the most noticeable side effects of societal trauma is the effect on memory.

In these situations, truth is varying from person to person. What happened to one and what may be true for him, may not be true for another. But that makes the first story no less true. About her novel, *Steps Under Water*, Alicia Kozameh writes that some of Sara's (her alter ego and protagonist) memories may be hallucinations. Whether or not Sara hallucinates though, does not change that the time spent in prison has altered her irrevocably and that her life will never be the same after it. The fragmented nature of her novel will reflect her fragmented psychology following her time in jail. She has blocked some things from her memory because they are too painful to cope with after her release and her subconscious may be repressing some of the memories or altering them to make them more palatable. This is likely true of the protagonists of the other works analyzed here.

Comparing literature from the Holocaust of World War II and the Dirty War allows for a cross-cultural look at the effects engendered by societal trauma, as well as the possible overarching characteristics of literatures born out of trauma. There are also many connections that can be made between these two histories of war. The Second World War was certainly a precursor for many of the social and economic problems that faced Argentina well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. World War II was devastating to the world economy and having an export-based economy, Argentina suffered greatly. There was also a large influx of German immigrants that changed the social hierarchy within that society. The Dirty War did not happen on the same scale as the Holocaust or cause the same significant patterns in immigration, but the Dirty War can be seen in an equally global context. In this time frame the United States and other western powers were legitimizing military states in Latin America in an effort to quell the threat of communism.

The militarization of each government is another shared link. Hitler legally came to power in Germany under the Enabling Act of 1933, which allowed him, essentially, five years of uncontested power. In those five years he would go on to take over and become a dictator refusing to resign at the end of the five year period. Argentina will have a rapid succession of military dictators after Perón leaves office in 1955, many of whom will have the same kind of sway as Hitler in earlier Germany. At odds with the German model, these dictators in Argentina will not last as long, some staying in office as little as six months, with the longest at four years, until Alfonsín was elected in 1983 bringing the return of democratic government. But the militarization of politics and the advancement of a military state are important in both situations.

Any Kaminsky, professor and Ph.D. of Latin American literature, further underscores the existing link between the Dirty War and the Holocaust. “Tapping into an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in Argentina’s national culture,” she writes, “the junta brought to the prosecution of the Dirty War a military ethos indebted to and admiring of Nazi practice” (Kaminsky 106). She posits that the link between the two may feel more substantive to Jewish prisoners of the Dirty War, given the importance of anti-Semitism in the Nazi regime.

## World War II and the Holocaust in Germany

Germany was a country in shambles following the end of World War I (1914-1918). Their economy was ruined by the war effort and they were forced to pay reparations to several countries across Europe. This economic collapse, coupled with owing such large sums of money, set the political situation in a perilous state. In 1919 Adolf Hitler joined the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – DAP, or the German Workers' Party. He would rise through the ranks of this organization until taking over the government under the Enabling Act in 1933. The president however, Paul von Hindenburg, technically remained in power until his death in August of 1934. From this point forward Hitler would legally be the dictator.

As World War II officially began in 1939, the beginnings of the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> followed in 1941. The Holocaust was an ambition, instigated by Hitler and the Nazi Party, to cleanse Germany of Jews, primarily, and to perfect an Aryan race of peoples. Hitler believed that Aryans were genetically superior and he legalized the persecution of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, communists, and the mentally and physically disabled in his pursuit of the superior race.

In his book Peter Longerich, a Holocaust historian, breaks down the different and changing phases of the central Nazi government that eventually lead to the implementation of this objective, known as the Final Solution. He writes that in 1941 the murder of “hundreds of thousands of people had been planned, but not yet of millions”

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose and extent of this paper, Holocaust, with a capital ‘H,’ will refer to the holocaust that was levied against the Jewish population in Europe during World War II. It is in no way meant to diminish other holocausts that have occurred throughout world history.

(Longerich 427). Longerich writes that “the ability to adapt to rapidly changing conditions” in the global context meant that “the persecution of European Jews by the Nazi regime produced such terrible results” (Longerich 435). The Nazi regime’s plans for relocation, persecution and eradication of the Jewish race changed with the war as it evolved.

From 1941 until the end of the war in 1945 an estimated 6 million Jews were systematically killed. Some of the killings took place in towns, but the majority of them happened in concentration camps. Concentration camps were labor camps where Jews performed hard labor, and were clothed and fed just enough to stay alive. Conditions being so poor, many died from starvation or fatigue, from disease due to subpar sanitation, and from exhaustion. In many of these camps, scattered across Germany and Austria, the work that the prisoners were doing was an effort to support the German war cause. Some camps, most significantly Auschwitz, were not labor camps, but death camps that streamlined the execution of almost all those sent there. Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*, spent a short time in Auschwitz before being transferred to work elsewhere.

Though one of the strongest feelings inspired by the Nazi party was anti-Semitism, an estimated 5 million non-Jewish peoples were also killed in concentration camps during the Holocaust, bringing the suspected total to 11 million dead. Among those mentioned earlier, political prisoners were sent to concentration camps and Germans who publicly spoke out against the war. This reality of the Holocaust is one

highlighted in *The Book Thief* as well as in an interview with former Hitler Youth member Kurt Tweraser<sup>2</sup>.

Born in 1930, Tweraser grew up in occupied Austria and, like Liesel in the novel, participated in conscripted Hitler Youth activities on the weekends. In 1943 Tweraser's uncle spoke out against the German cause while in a bar one evening, speculating that they would lose the war. Tweraser's uncle was soon denounced to the authorities and sent to Buchenwald where he died shortly thereafter. This instance is not without precedent and this factor will further link World War II and the Dirty War. In Argentina, the most harassed and discriminated peoples were those who spoke out against the government.

---

<sup>2</sup> This interview was one that I was able to personally conduct with Mr. Tweraser, who is a former professor at the University of Arkansas.

## The Dirty War in Argentina

The Dirty War was a time between 1976 and 1983 in which the government and the people clashed in Argentina. This clash resulted in an estimated 30,000 people “disappeared” in less than eight years. The majority of those who were disappeared have been presumed dead. They are called *desaparecidos*<sup>3</sup>. A specific set of circumstances led to the culmination of sentiments that ultimately caused the Dirty War.

The first of these circumstances was World War II. In Germany, during the war, the Nazi party flourished. Their ideals about class and race invaded society and unleashed a powerful movement that would divide the people from within. With the fall of such a powerful group, the consequences were bound to be enormous. Charged internationally with war crimes, many Nazi-sympathizing Germans would flee in order to avoid prosecution. Some of them would end up in Argentina, a non-extradition country until 1997. Additionally, WWII dramatically altered the economic landscape, nearly crippling many of the countries involved.

Prior to the outbreak of war there were already a considerable number of German immigrants in Argentina. Their presence will later prompt further immigration from Germany. Technically, Argentina was allied with the Axis powers, including Germany, until January of 1944. In March of 1945, they succumb to pressure from the Allies and declare war. Although until then they had remained a neutral country, money was leaving Argentina to support to the Allies. The world economy, as each country looked

---

<sup>3</sup> “Desaparecido/a” is the Spanish translation of “disappeared.” “Disappeared” is the term used by the government to describe people who have been taken. Many of the disappeared people were later accounted for in camps, many were killed, and many are still missing.

inwards for the war effort, became strained and this affected Argentina, also, as they depended heavily on exports.

The economic reality in Argentina before the war is another important factor to consider. Guillermo O'Donnell, a political scientist, writes that Argentina "does not fit the stereotype of the 'underdeveloped country'" (O'Donnell 399). Instead, he posits that it is a "dependent society" with a "high concentration of economic and political power" and that this reality would have affected the political behavior of the military in the years leading up to the coup and subsequent war. The years prior to the war, specifically the period between 1955 and 1966, saw an annual per capita income growth of 1.3%. The inflation rate during the same time, annually, was 32.67%, far surpassing the growth in income (O'Donnell, 400). Increased demand for imported goods devalued internal products, further crippling the economy. Socioeconomic division grew during these years and political divisions tended to coincide with them (O'Donnell 400).

A further component to be considered is the politicization of the military prior to the war. Historically the military in Argentina has operated outside of the realm of politics, overseeing the state instead of being in service to it. Situationally, the military had the most sway over the presidency, most likely due to the quick succession of presidents. As the political pull of the military became known, people increasingly turned to them for support. This led to constant threats of overthrow and an increase in the military's power because of the social recognition. A "long-standing tradition of coups d'etat and intense participation in national politics," opened the way for divisive internal conflicts, like the Dirty War (O'Donnell 403). The politicization of the military

coupled with the militarization of social problems allowed for the outbreak of internal war.

This internal warring manifested itself in a variety of ways. As mentioned earlier, the economy was suffering and continued to suffer due to political conflict. As economies struggle, so do people. And as the people of Argentina struggled, the political unrest grew. People found themselves divided on party lines. This contrasts sharply, in some ways, with the history of the Holocaust. In Germany, the division was very clear: you were a member of the Nazi party or you were dissident, a threat, and likely a Jew. In Argentina the lines were much more obscured. Friends and neighbors turned on each other and police began to brutalize the people they were supposed to keep safe. There was not the same level of racial prejudice in Argentina that was experienced in World War II Germany and this is partially due to the global context of the Cold War that influenced public opinion about communism.

Sometimes people who resisted or who opposed the military rule were disappeared during the war. Sometimes the people who disappeared were not known to be involved in any sort of active resistance. This has made chronicling the war difficult. In the report of the war published by the Human Rights Commission<sup>4</sup>, *Nunca Más* and *Never Again* in English, an eye witness talks about being kidnapped and taken to a prison. While she was in interrogation, blindfolded, she says that she realized “that the person who was asking me questions had not the slightest idea why I was there” (*Nunca Más* 290). This speaks to the sometimes disordered nature of the groups operating

---

<sup>4</sup> The report of the war was commissioned internationally, not internally, and is called the Human Rights Commission Report.

behind the Dirty War. While the tactics, like people disappearing and being put in camps and forced to work are very similar in nature to the movement in World War II Germany, their ideologies are in stark contrast because the threat of communism was so great in Argentina.

Despite these many similarities, however, there is an elemental difference between the Dirty War and the Holocaust that cannot be overlooked. In World War II Germany the violence that was perpetrated against the Jewish community, via the Holocaust, was genocidal in nature and strictly a result of the desire to purify and perfect a society. In Argentina, however, while anti-Semitism was an important factor, political dissidents were those against whom violence was levied. The military dictatorship, needing to secure its own power, imprisoned anyone that might be a threat to the ruling regardless of race. Yet, the idea of “cleansing” was also used to substantiate getting rid of communist dissidents. The military was looking to reform Argentine society by completely wiping out its dissident elements.

## **Night – Elie Wiesel**

*Night* is a semi-autobiographical novel by Elie Wiesel that tells the story of young Eliezer as he is forced into a ghetto and later, a concentration camp. It traces his physical and spiritual journey as he navigates life as a Jew in Nazi Germany. First published as *La Nuit* in France, *Night* came out in 1955, ten years after Wiesel's own release from Buchenwald in 1945. In 1960 it was published for the first time in English. Since then, it has been translated into over 30 languages and become a canonical text in the genre of Holocaust literature. As its popularity has grown in the literary scene, the presence of *Night* in classrooms in both high schools and universities has also increased.

Carol Danks, an English teacher and member of the Ohio Council for Holocaust Education, writes that “one of the most effective ways to teach the history of the Holocaust is through its literature” (Danks 1). She goes on to list criterion that make texts appropriate and effective in a classroom setting following that with the assertion that *Night* satisfies all of those because it “presents accurate historical information, has an authentic narrative voice, seems approachable to students, and can be taught in limited classroom time” (Danks 2). These reasons may all contribute to the continued popularity of *Night* in the classroom.

*Night*, as a novel, allows the reader a look inside the life of someone victimized during the Holocaust. It shows the very real, if sometimes unseen, effects of war. The societal trauma that is being perpetrated is also being felt, by those victimized, and this book allows that trauma to be addressed today. Wiesel is bringing the reader into a time of unimaginable and almost unparalleled hardship in order to show one side of the war.

*Night* is not the whole story of World War II; it is only the story of survival of one boy, Eliezer, and his family.

The novel follows Eliezer's journey from home to ghetto to concentration camp. Eliezer is a child when the war starts and his family hears what is going on, but cannot believe what they are hearing. None of it seems real or believable, and so they stay in Sighet, their hometown. Eventually their neighborhood becomes a ghetto, but at first life does not seem to change very much. The neighborhood that Eliezer, his family, and many local Jews live in is walled in by the German forces and new rules are put into place. For instance, a new curfew is established and there are rules about who and how many can go in and out of the ghetto at a given time. They remain in their home, in this newly-formed ghetto, for a time and the appearance that everything will be fine is maintained, fears are allayed. Later all of the Jews in Sighet are "relocated," meaning sent to a concentration camp. Upon arrival at the first concentration camp, Eliezer and his father are separated from his mother and other siblings. The two are bounced from camp to camp until Eliezer is liberated from Buchenwald in 1945. His father dies shortly before that.

The relationship between Eliezer and his father is an important one in the novel. By allowing the reader to see their relationship and its progression, the impact of the war and the trauma it inflicted becomes more visible. When the family is first deported, they are all in one cattle car. The whole family is able to stay together and they are with other Jews from Sighet. This changes, though, when they arrive at the first camp, Birkenau. The narrator says that "an SS came toward us wielding a club," and said "Men to the left! Women to the right!" (Wiesel 29). This will be the last time that he sees his mother and

youngest sister and he will not see his other sisters until long after the war is over. In this instant, his father becomes his only family and their relationship becomes crucial.

Survival for Eliezer will mean surviving with his father, not independently of him. But as his father does not survive the camps, Eliezer experiences a survivor's guilt and this haunts him. Inextricably bound by the shared trauma, Eliezer and his father grow ever closer and Eliezer's emotional survival will come at a high cost.

Through a series of lies and sometimes luck, Eliezer and his father manage to enter into life in the camp together. Before that, though, they are selected for the crematorium. The two walk, hand in hand, to the pit into which the selected<sup>5</sup> prisoners are being tossed and burned. This walk to death that they make together, and only very narrowly escape, binds them in a tangible way. As the two are only a step away from the pit, a Kapo puts his hand in front of Eliezer and directs him to the left, sending him and everyone behind him in line to a barrack instead of to death. From this moment forward they will be living for each other. Eliezer will eventually steal bread and essentials and risk his own life for his father. He will slow down to walk with him, motivate him to keep him going and chance everything repeatedly to make sure that they can stay together.

In many ways, the parental role is reversed and another side effect of the trauma of war is manifested. Because he is older than and not as strong as Eliezer, his father is more hurt by the starvation and hard labor. Eliezer is confronted with the realization that he is the one who will have to keep his father alive, because he is younger and stronger.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Selection" in a concentration camp usually meant you were slated to be killed immediately. Sometimes selection meant labor so dangerous that life expectancy was very short.

In many instances we see his father giving Eliezer food when he has any to spare, and even when he does not. It is not a lack of care on his father's part; the physical realities of life in a camp are forcing the reversal. As his father grows ever sicker, the necessity for Eliezer to support him grows, too. In a very short time Eliezer goes from being a child with a family and father to being the father and having no other family.

Eventually, though, the relationship between father and son will become strained. The trauma of life in the camp will manifest itself in Eliezer in a way he is not expecting. Not long before their march to Auschwitz, Eliezer's father is struck after asking about the location of the toilets. Wiesel writes that Eliezer "stood petrified," that his father had been struck and that he "had not even blinked" (Wiesel 39). Internally, this sends him reeling, wondering at the change within himself. Deeply distraught, he does not come to the aid of his father, he remains totally silent, and their relationship has again changed. Every man in Auschwitz, it seems, has to be looking out for himself. Eliezer knows that to stand up for his father means certain punishment of his own person, and his father knows that, but his conscience is torn. Importantly, though, Eliezer says that this only occurs to him after the fact and that while they were there his actions do not seem wrong to him. Instinctively, he stayed still and silent.

Later, the shift in Eliezer will be even more dramatic. When his father is beaten with an iron bar for working too slowly, by a Kapo, Eliezer stands by and again does not say or do anything. He writes "I thought of stealing away in order not to suffer the blows" and that "I felt anger in that moment, it was directed not at the Kapo but at my father" (Wiesel 54). He is angry that his father is letting this happen, that he is too weak to get back up. Somehow he feels that he should have been able to avoid the wrath of the

Kapo even though he knows that violence here is meted out without prejudice. The tone of this passage intimates that he regrets this change within him, but also that his emotions were very strong. When his father dies later, after a long and harrowing illness, Eliezer experiences an unsettling mixture of sadness and relief. He knows that his own life will now be easier and safer with his father dead and he struggles with the reality of that knowledge. He feels guilty being relieved that his father is dead.

Eliezer knows that the most effective way to keep healthy and alive is to distance himself from his father. Practically speaking, in a concentration camp, death breeds death. Prisoners are selected for work details based on their physical fitness. The perception of a certain individual's physical fitness suffers if those around him appear weak or ill and all prisoners know this. Nonetheless Eliezer has stayed with his father. But this knowledge has been in the back of his mind throughout their entire time together in camps and regardless of the way he feels about it, it is something he no longer has to worry about. Knowing that his own odds at survival are slightly better now is a small consolation for the loss of a father and Eliezer struggles with the knowledge that his father's death has helped him.

Not only is the relationship between father and son noticeably altered by the war, but Eliezer's faith is radically changed, too. Prior to the war he had been a deeply spiritual child who longed to study the Kabbalah. Every night he would sit with a man, Moishe the Beadle, who was learned in both the Kabbalah and the Zohar, and they would talk. He wanted to absorb all that he could of the Jewish faith and tradition and against the advice of his father sought out a teacher. Going into the war Eliezer has his faith and it is hugely important to him. He uses his faith in a good and giving god to sustain him.

As he walks to the pit to be burned, he recites the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, for himself and for his father. Even though he is nearly paralyzed with fear, this action comes to him unconsciously because religion is ingrained in him.

After being in Auschwitz for three weeks, though, the reader realizes that Eliezer's faith may be wavering. He writes about a conversation between some of the prisoners in which they talk about God and "the redemption to come" (Wiesel 45). Eliezer says that "As for me, I had ceased to pray" and that "I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice" (Wiesel 45). One day, Eliezer witnesses a hanging. All of the prisoners are required to file past the dead man, still hanging, and look at him. This experience does not faze him; death is normal by now. Later though, he sees a child hanged. The boy's death was a slow and painful one, being not heavy enough to have his neck broken immediately. When Eliezer walks by him he is still alive and he stays that way for nearly half an hour. From behind him he hears someone ask, "For God's sake, where is God?" and the only answer he can give himself is "This is where – hanging here from this gallows..." (Wiesel 65). Later he will refuse to fast during holy days, such as Yom Kippur, and he will report the opening of a "great void" within himself separating him from God (Wiesel 69).

By focusing solely on Eliezer's journey, Wiesel is offering a binary that consists of Eliezer versus the German Nazis. The reader is led to the understanding that Eliezer's survival is in spite of the Nazis and that he is in some ways against them. This division is enforced in the camp life that is clearly delineated between Jews, via Eliezer, and Germans, via the Nazis, and this is not irreconcilable with the actual history of the Holocaust. Sources repeatedly confirm the persecution of Jews by the Nazi party. *Night*

is a text that struggles to retell history in a way that is both truthful and approachable.

Wiesel is quoted as having said "While I am able to fight against injustice, I have no idea how to go about fighting against ugliness" when asked about revisionists of Holocaust history (Manseau 387). He has labeled his own work as "semi-autobiographical" to allow for the fact that memory may not coincide perfectly with quantifiable fact, though in many ways the two agree. This notion of imperfect recall following a trauma is a theme that will resurface in the other works analyzed here.

## **The Book Thief - Markus Zusak**

*The Book Thief* is a novel that also deals with World War II and the Holocaust. However, it takes a much different approach than Elie Wiesel's account in *Night*. While *Night* is a firsthand account of a Jewish prisoner, a teenage boy, *The Book Thief* is told from the perspective of Death, narrated by him, and focused on a German girl of nine, almost ten, when the book starts (Zusak 21). By offering the German perspective, Zusak is upsetting the binary of German against Jew that permeated Wiesel's work and that is present in other WWII or Holocaust novels.

Its primary focus on non-Jewish Germans (and their ensuing sympathies with Jewish Germans) sheds light on the hunger and joblessness caused by the war, the manipulation of the community by the party, and feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and depression that plagued society. As such, it is a novel that considers the equalizing effects of violence felt on both sides of the war.

*The Book Thief* is a fairly current novel. Written and published in 2005 and adapted for film in 2013, it shows that the world is still struggling to fully comprehend what happened in World War II. The continuing popularity of Wiesel's work says the same. This novel is the story of Death's three encounters with Liesel Meminger and how her life led to those three meetings. Liesel, a German girl, was adopted by a German couple, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, in 1939 even though she was not orphaned. At the beginning of the novel we see her mother giving her, and her brother Werner, up for adoption voluntarily, though at the time we do not know why. Right before the adoption, Liesel's brother, Werner, dies and she encounters Death for the first time. It is in that

graveyard where she also steals her first book: "The Gravedigger's Handbook." Liesel, though nine years old, cannot yet read but the book is her only remaining tangible link to her deceased brother. In the Hubermann's home she finds two loving and caring people, albeit one who shows it better than the other. Rosa is loud and harsh and favors 'saumensch' or 'female pig' as a term of endearment. Hans, a painter by trade and accordion player at night, favors a softer approach and while he does not read well either, he teaches Liesel everything he knows and later learns with her.

Life in Molching is increasingly difficult for Hans and Rosa as they are not members of the Nazi party. Hans Hubermann does not agree with some of their policies and as the war progresses this dissention will cost him heavily. Work will become harder to find and his family will be in more danger. To add to this trouble, Hans and Rosa take in a Jewish man, Max Vandenburg, and for years they hide him in their basement.

During World War I Max's father had saved Hans' life at cost of his own and Hans feels indebted and obligated to help Max. Though he feels this way, there is nothing begrudging about his help and in this family the German versus Jew division that is prevalent in much of Molching, is suspended. The presence of Nazi soldiers in the town has manifested itself in several ways, chiefly in an increase in anti-Semitism. It is illegal to help or be found sympathetic to a Jew. This sentiment or anti-Semitism is expressed publicly and politically and is expected of the citizens of Molching.

This confusion of stereotypes is particularly apparent in Liesel. At school she learns about the war and the Jews, and she is taught to hate and fear them. At home, however, she is getting to know Max, who seems nothing like the people described to her at school. At school and in society there is a very distinct feeling of good and bad that

centers on a distinction between Jews and other Germans. But this sensation is repeatedly challenged and eventually overcome as Liesel slowly begins to know Max. Liesel is required to participate in Hitler Youth activities on the weekends. She goes to join all the other neighborhood children in organized marches, they learn the German national anthem, they hear speeches from the Fuhrer (Adolf Hitler), and the older children study *Mein Kampf*<sup>6</sup>. These activities start before Max comes to stay with them and her confusion, for a time, grows. Her knowledge of and friendship with Max, though, wins out and their friendship remains strong. In Max, Liesel is exposed to the “oppositions” viewpoint. She learns new things about the Fuhrer that she was never taught at school or at Hitler Youth. Liesel learns about Max’s mother and how she, along with the rest of Max’s family, is taken away to a camp just because she is Jewish. She learns about Adolf Hitler’s anti-Semitism and the disrespect with which he treats people who are like her friend, Max.

Max, along with Hans, seems intent that Liesel should know the truth, be that what it may. Right after he comes to stay with them, Liesel asks Max if the Fuhrer took his mother away. He hesitates briefly before he says ‘yes’ (Zusak 220). In that moment Liesel identifies with Max. They are both, in her eyes, motherless children. Liesel does not yet understand that the reasons for the disappearances of their mothers were very different. Societal propaganda and Hitler Youth events are telling her that Max’s mother was taken because she was a Jew, but her own motherless state precludes that assumption. This exchange is a realization of sameness. Liesel and Max are united in

---

<sup>6</sup> *Mein Kampf* is the manifesto of Adolf Hitler in which he has outlined his plans for the future of Germany and his political ideologies.

their losses instigated by the Fuhrer. Instead of furthering the distance between them, Liesel and Max are drawn together, and again the German versus Jew binary is weakened. The trauma of losing a parent, as a result of the war, binds them and while it was initially an effect that was devastating to each, it is now a commonality.

In Wiesel's *Night*, the divide is between Jews and Germans. Now, in *The Book Thief*, it transforms into a divide between motherless children and the Fuhrer who took their mothers away. The original division is not gone but has rather transformed to become the dominating division for Liesel in her life on Himmel Street. In Max's case the reason for the loss of his mother was clear. His mother was a Jewish woman in a Germany occupied by anti-Semitic Nazi soldiers and government. Liesel's case is not so clear. We know as readers that Liesel's mother was in serious trouble; she was voluntarily giving up her two children for adoption. We know nothing of Liesel and Werner's father and nothing else about their family or life before life on Himmel Street becomes Liesel's reality. There is, though, a small instance of bullying towards Liesel in which a reference to her biological mother being a communist is made. While this is not explicitly confirmed it is an extremely logical answer to the mystery of why Liesel's mother was giving up Liesel and Werner. It would explain the necessity of their exit from her life and quite possibly the non-existence of their biological father. Communists, regardless of ethnicity, were persecuted in much the same way as the Jews in Germany during this time.

A side effect of Wiesel's structure in *Night* is the dehumanization of Germans in their portrayal. This is the case in several of the survivor's stories that I am analyzing. A race of people was victimized by a select group of another race and so societally all

members of the “other” race become equated with the radicals. A similar “othering” and equation will happen later, during the Dirty War in Argentina. In *Night*, we see very few non-Nazi Germans, but the sentiment remains. The reader leaves the novel feeling that both Nazis and Germans hurt Jewish people. However, in *The Book Thief*, the German character is presented very differently and in a way that humanizes them for the reader.

Liesel’s adoptive parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, are a prime example of the way Zusak chooses to represent the character of the everyday German people. They are non-sympathizing, but need to fly the party flag from time to time in order to avoid trouble. They are very poor and work is hard to come by for everyone, but it is even harder if you are not a member of the party. They stay under the radar and they even hide Max Vandenburg, a Jew. In a tangible way Zusak is humanizing the average German and positing that there is more to the German of World War II than just the Nazi that is often presented in opposition to the Jewish character.

Liesel Meminger takes to Hans Hubermann immediately upon meeting him. The reader is given an image of him that is kind and giving and when contrasted with Rosa, the stocky “wardrobe-like” loud woman, it is not hard to see why. Hans becomes the father that Liesel allegedly never had. Liesel had a mother before the war who gave her up for adoption, but no mention of a father. Much like Eliezer Wiesel and his father, who go through life in concentration camps together, Liesel and Hans also survive the war together. Hans teaches Liesel to read and they share words and books together in the way that Wiesel and his father share bread. Each sacrifices for the other and their relationship remains dynamic, changing throughout the novel.

Hans is at first a perfect father figure for Liesel. He connects with her and it is he who convinces Liesel to come out of the car of the social worker and join him in his life on Himmel Street with Rosa. His patience for Liesel seems without depth as he teaches her to read and he shares her struggles with her. There is a day though, years into Liesel's life with the Hubermann's, that the pair are together and Liesel, in a rage, speaks out against the Fuhrer. Hans slaps Liesel after she does this. Taken aback, she realizes that what she has done is unsafe, but the sting of punishment from Hans is severe and lasting. Liesel knows that Hans is unsupportive of much of the Nazi party's politics, but she also knows the importance of maintaining their appearance as sympathizing Germans. Max's life depends on their performance and Liesel is aware of this, but her anger gets the better of her in this instance and the rebuff takes her by surprise. In an uncharacteristic move Hans has relayed to her the importance of the façade and the necessity of each of them playing their part to ensure the family's survival.

Even within the society that is Nazi sympathizing, things are not so black and white. To counter Hans and Rosa's unsympathetic views, the reader is presented with a view of sympathizing Nazi Germans. Rosa Hubermann does the laundry for wealthier families in Molching in order to bolster the family's income. As the war goes on, work gets harder to find and one of her best clients is the burgermeister (the mayor) and his wife, Ilsa Hermann. The burgermeister is, of course, required to be a member of the Nazi party and the reader is given no indication that he is not a dedicated member. Liesel sometimes delivers laundry for Rosa and she slowly comes to know Ilsa in the small exchanges that they have at the door. One day, Liesel is invited into their home and she realizes that their house has a library. Liesel has never seen so many books. Ilsa realizes

that Liesel is admiring them and she invites the girl to choose a book to read. Liesel is enthralled by the opportunity to read so many books. In this way the Nazi German's family is humanized for both Liesel and the reader.

As Liesel continues to read in Ilsa's library, she finds that many of the books have a name inside them that she does not recognize. She asks about it and Ilsa reveals that many of the books had belonged to her son, who has since died. Liesel, even though she has now lived in Molching a few years, never knew that the burgermeister had a son. With the revelation of the boy's death the Nazi German is further humanized. The reader is allowed to see that everyone is affected by the war and that no one, regardless of status or affiliation, is untouched. This equalizing nature is also alluded to with the voice of Death as the narrator. Death talks about everyone and visits everyone indiscriminately.

The book, however, does not only provide the German perspective but also explores the effects of the war on a Jewish person, in the character of Max Vandenburg. Max comes to the family by way of a used copy of Mein Kampf in which Hans has hidden a key. The accordion that Hans plays belonged to Max's father and the question "Do you still play the accordion?" lets Hans know that he can trust Max and allows Max to identify himself without revealing aloud that he is a Jew (Zusak 173 ). Max stays with the Hubermann's for years and in all of that time he stays indoors and rarely comes in sight of a window. Max's presence is a huge risk for the Hubermann's. At one point, Max becomes extremely ill. They worry whether or not he will live. Initially, one would think that his death would relieve them of the constant danger of exposure and trouble, but after a serious illness Max remarks that a "dead Jew is just as dangerous as a live one,

if not worse” because they would have no way to get rid of his body and would surely be detected then (Zusak 334).

As difficult and dangerous as life has become for the Hubermann's, it is equally so for Max. If they are discovered, they will all be, at very least, sent to concentration camps. Max is plagued with the knowledge that he is endangering the family every minute that he stays there. This weighs strongly on his conscience and we see the toll that this takes on him in the form of depression. Liesel rescues him from this by bringing him weather reports every day and sometimes newspapers when she can find them. She reads to him and brings the outside world in to him. The audience sees that Max puts on a brave face for Liesel but that he is struggling too. Crippling depression at the thought of the harm he may be bringing on his benefactor family erodes Max's mental state.

When Hans acts out against the war publicly, they fear that their home will be searched and Hans believes he has put Max's life in danger. To be cautious, Max leaves that same night. As the war progressed, Nazi soldiers marched prisoners through Molching on their way to the concentration camp at Dachau. Hans sees an older man struggling to keep up and he gives him a small piece of bread. Both the prisoner and Hans are whipped. This move means that Max is now on the run and that life for Liesel and the Hubermann's has again changed dramatically. Feelings of guilt invade their lives and each struggles with a sense of inadequacy. They also know that Max's leaving will mean more food for each of them, and they are only barely scraping by. The feeling of relief that Eliezer experienced in *Night* when his father died is felt here similarly. Each feels guilty that the death or disappearance of another person will benefit them. Due to the scarcity of resources during the war, both in camps and outside of them, as

represented by the two novels, there being fewer people means that life will become easier. This sensation of shortage in food, clothing, money, or privacy invades both novels.

Throughout the novel there are bombings in and around Molching. There are houses designated as shelters on each street because of the size and structure of their basements. Towards the end of the novel, the sirens go off, alerting the town of a bombing raid. Everyone goes to his or her respective shelters, except Liesel. Liesel had been in her own basement, reading, and fallen asleep. She did not hear the sirens. When she wakes up she finds that Himmel Street has been bombed. The house that Hans and Rosa and her closest friends were taking shelter in, was destroyed, along with most of her own. Liesel lost Hans, Rosa, and her best friend Rudy that day, among many others. This is the third time that Death encounters Liesel; she is in the street crying over Rudy's body, kissing him for the first and last time. Rudy is Liesel's best friend in the novel and her neighbor. They went to school together, played together, and their favorite past time was to have foot races. In these races Rudy would always bet Liesel a kiss that he could beat her. He always won, but she never let him kiss her. Even though she is not Jewish and did not go to a concentration camp, she is left alone at the end of the war, like Eliezer in *Night*. Like his, her life is destroyed, both literally and metaphorically. Yet both survive this trauma and go on to become writers, each in their own world.

## **Steps Under Water - Alicia Kozameh**

In many of the same ways that *Night* and *The Book Thief* are survivor's stories, *Steps Under Water* is, too. While not as widely read as *Night*, it is a firsthand account of life during the Dirty War, in prison and out of it. Alicia Kozameh published the novel first in Spanish in 1987 in Buenos Aires under the title, *Pasos bajo el agua*. It was translated into English in 1996. Like *Night*, *Steps Under Water* is semi-autobiographical, further linking the two texts.

The novel is a story that traces a young woman's journey through resistance, imprisonment, and freedom. Sara, the protagonist, works with her husband, Hugo, in rebellion against the military dictatorship. In September 1975 Sara and Hugo are both arrested and imprisoned. Sara spends three years and three months in jail. The novel begins after her release and flashes back, simultaneously telling her story and considering the social effects that a war of this magnitude has on a society, both individually and communally.

The first instance we see of the effect of war on Sara is at home. Her husband, Hugo, had left for work and he had not come home. Instead, a group of cops banged her door in, waking her from a nap, beating her for information about her husband and about the resistance. They tied her to a chair, beat her again, told her that Hugo was dead and threatened her own life before taking her to a prison.

Due to the severity of the intrusion and the interrogation the reader is immediately drawn to Sara's cause and the line between victim and victimizer is somewhat

distinguishable. When we learn that her husband has been killed, we are sympathetic to Sarah regardless of any cause, which raises key questions for readers.

Sarah refers to the men who have beaten and arrested her as ‘the cops’ (Kozameh, 13). This contradicts what many of us understand to be the role of law enforcement. Because Kozameh does this we, as readers, are required to examine our predispositions and biases as well as our stereotypes. What kind of society is she in that requires its people to be fearful of their law enforcement? This is a result of the war that is felt socially. The internal conflict has turned law enforcement into an aggressive and militaristic force.

When Sara is arrested, in her home, she is tied to a chair and blindfolded while the men tear apart her home allegedly looking for guns. One of them finds Hugo’s leather jacket and puts it on. He leaves the home with the stolen jacket and it reappears throughout the novel. At first, the jacket is a reminder of Hugo. Once she is in prison, though, she is told that Hugo is alive. This time they are telling her the truth. But the cop with the jacket becomes a torment for Sara. It no longer reminds her that Hugo is dead, but that they are both now helpless and imprisoned. Once released, while still living in Buenos Aires, she thinks she sees the man in the jacket on several occasions and the experience is always immobilizing for her. As Alicia Partnoy, a book reviewer and Dirty War survivor herself writes, the “treasured jacket becomes an instrument for psychological torture” for Sara (Partnoy n.p.). She panics if she encounters someone in public wearing a/the jacket that might have been Hugo’s. The war and the time she spent in prison have conditioned her to constantly look over her shoulder. The unease that she feels about the jacket is just one manifestation of her altered mental state.

Sara's best friend in prison was a woman named Elsa. Elsa's husband, Marco, gives Sara a job upon her release from prison even though Elsa is still in jail. But Sara and Marco soon develop feelings for each other and Elsa and Sara's friendship is sorely tested. Hugo, Sara's husband, is still in prison and Elsa and Marco are the closest people to Sara. Marco feels slighted by Elsa when she is released from prison. She is hyperfocused on their son, Lucas, and this drives Marco to Sara.

The presence of a possible affair in the novel is another social side effect of the Dirty War. Arrest and prison time have dramatically altered the lives of both of these women. Elsa reacts to her freedom by clinging to her son, the time spent away from him propelling her into overdrive upon release. Sara, contrarily, is feeling lost, hopeless, and alone. Her relationship with Marco, and whatever it actually entails, is her way of coping with the stress that she is under. Elsa had been the person she clung to. Now Elsa is too busy making up for lost time with her son. The reader realizes that Sara is lonely and conflicted and that seeking companionship may have been the natural path for her. Eventually, Elsa will realize this too.

"You come back after years of absence, and all you see is Lucas" Marco tells Elsa (Kozameh 66). Elsa defends her position, citing the need to care for her child. Sara, with her husband still in prison and no children, is looking for someone to cling to. Elsa, who stuck by Sara's side in prison is now caught up in her family life (though that means only Lucas) making Sara feel even more alone, just like Marco. But Marco and Elsa are married. While the reader wants Sara to be happy, we also realize the gravity of the situation. Sara does, too, and is now debating internally.

Sara agonizes over her relationship with Marco. The first time we see him kiss her, all she can say is “Elsa, Elsa, Elsa” (Kozameh 60). And although Elsa has decided to end her friendship with Sara, in no uncertain terms, she tells Marco that “she’ll always be my friend” and the reader begins to better grasp the depth of the relationship that has developed between the two women (Kozameh 61). This closeness that Sara and Elsa have is a result of their shared hardship: the years spent in prison. Marco and Elsa fight a considerable amount, he telling her that nothing is forever. Sara and Elsa have had the conversation to end their friendship. Yet despite all of this, Sara is struggling.

As it is later revealed to the reader that the women have made up following this fight and alleged affair, we realize the extent of the mental trauma inflicted on these women. They realize that they were in a situation that was extreme and forced them to extremes both during and after. Sara repeatedly questions the loyalty of her friends and even of her family. It is not always a direct questioning, but she worries that anyone could be a spy and could have her sent back to prison, the thing she dreads most. The questionable nature of her involvement in the resistance and the unofficial nature that surrounded her arrest lead her to worry about all of her interactions. Sara has seen her husband, her neighbors, and her friends imprisoned and disappeared. The war has left her fearful and untrusting. It has left Elsa with the same feelings.

The war not only affected Sara and Elsa in tangible ways, but also Marco. Marco did not spend any time in prison: nonetheless, the Dirty War irrevocably changes his life. His wife was imprisoned and he was all of a sudden a single parent. The reader does not see the effects of the war on Marco until after Elsa is released. Elsa, with her own problems, does not realize that Marco has also struggled and several painful

conversations ensue. Their marriage is severely tried by the war. Marco feels abandoned when she is gone, though he can understand that it was not by her choice, and he still feels abandoned when she is back, due to the focus she has on their son. With Marco's character, Kozameh is telling the reader that no one escapes the social trauma that the war inflicts. Even those who do not participate and who are not directly or physically hurt are still significantly impacted.

This notion of collateral damage pervades Kozameh's novel as well as the other texts analyzed here. In *Night*, the death of Eliezer's father, while of paramount importance to him, might be insignificant in the whole scope of the war because his death does not change the outcome for anyone. In *The Book Thief*, collateral damage is shown to the reader through the bombings that happen in Molching that are seemingly random. In *Steps Under Water*, Kozameh asks that the reader look at Sara's life after the war. The style of the book – fragmented sections of memories from both the protagonist and others – allows the reader a sense of the psychological trauma inflicted on the society as a whole, not just on those who were directly impacted.

## **La Historia Oficial**

To further the trajectory of the social implications of the Dirty War, I will analyze *La historia oficial/ The Official Story*. *La historia oficial* is an Argentine film that debuted in 1985 and won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film that same year. The film tells the story of an upper class family from Buenos Aires just after the war. The family consists of a mother and father, Alicia and Roberto, and Gaby, their adopted daughter. Over the course of the film Alicia begins to question her daughter's origins, her husband's involvement in underhanded business dealings, and the social realities of having an illegally adopted child. Eventually Alicia will find out that Gaby is the daughter of a *desaparecida* and she will confront Roberto and be forced to consider her own role in the situation.

*La historia oficial*, like *Night*, *The Book Thief*, and *Steps Under Water*, is a survivor story. Alicia has survived the war knowing hardly anything about it and Gaby is a survivor because she was born to a *desaparecida* and lived. Many children born in prisons during the war were stolen, sold, or killed. Alicia's status, with husband Roberto in a government position, likely shielded her from the reality of the daily disappearances and killings. Censorship of books and newspapers shielded her understanding even further.

Near the beginning of the film, Alicia's notion of the war is unsettled by one of her students. During class one day her student states that "history is written by assassins." Alicia is taken aback and offended, intending to report him. There are a couple of possibilities that could explain her vehement response. First, it could be

possible that this idea has never occurred to her. However, as she is a history teacher, I feel that this is unlikely. More possibly, it could be that she is simply unaware of the reality of the war and she feels a sense of nationalistic pride that this student has challenged. With her husband working for the government it is unsurprising that the textbooks align with her understanding of recent events, or the official story, to quote the title. This small exchange between student and teacher, coupled with a conversation with a close friend of Alicia's, will be the catalyst for the research into Gaby's background through the whole film.

To ground this story historically, I look to *Nunca Más*. According to the report "10% of women who disappeared (3% of all the disappeared people) were pregnant women" (*Nunca Más* 285). The report goes on with witness' accounts about women giving birth in prison. Many of these women are still considered disappeared, as are their children. In several instances they are listed in hospital registries as N.N. meaning 'identity unknown' and their children are registered as belonging to other families. This is Gaby's story.

In *La historia oficial* Alicia has a friend who tells her a story very similar to those in *Nunca Más*. Ana, her friend, lived with a man labeled a subversive and she tells Alicia about going to jail because of this and about seeing children being taken. One night after having dinner together and several drinks, Ana tells Alicia more about her experience during the war. She talks about seeing people beaten and killed and about knowing women who were pregnant in jail. She tells Alicia that people on the outside would buy those babies without knowing where they came from. Alicia is immediately defensive asking, "Why would you say these things to me?" Ana is not meaning to imply anything

underhanded about how Alicia adopted Gaby, but Alicia's suspicions are already roused. To add to her concerns, she knows nothing about how Gaby came to her family. She trusts that Roberto has done everything properly but the subject is taboo between them. Each time she has brought it up and each time she will bring it up he shuts down the conversation.

Alicia's relationship with Ana is troubled. The two women, like Sara and Elsa in *Steps Under Water*, are friends who share a great deal of history. In contrast to *Steps Under Water* though, this shared history does not extend to tragedy. Both Sara and Elsa were imprisoned, they suffered the imprisonment together and relied on each other for survival. Alicia and Ana, however, are separated by the war. Alicia's life is not noticeably changed by the war while it is going on, but Ana is in prison. This difference in experience makes conversation difficult between the two women. The audience is given a sense of a long-standing friendship that can no longer be maintained because the war has taken such a large toll on Ana. But Ana is not the only one affected. We see Alicia affected by the war, too, in the struggle to maintain friendships with people to whom she can no longer relate.

As Alicia begins to quietly search for information on Gaby's past, she learns about the existence of an organization that is dedicated solely to finding information about the *desaparecidos* and their children: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo<sup>7</sup>. As she meets women involved with this organization the full force and scale of the war begins to hit

---

<sup>7</sup> "Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo" or "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" were a group of women protesting peacefully for information about their disappeared family members. It's important to note that they used their traditional positions as mothers to turn the state's conservative discourse on the family against itself. In other words, they appealed to the state's supposed respect for mothers as a means to protest and demand answers.

her. For Alicia, and for many of Argentina's upper classes, the impact of the war had been slight. State-sponsored terrorism and violence was not directed at them and censorship may have kept them from hearing about it. For Alicia, Ana is the only person she knew who was directly impacted by the war. Ana had lived with a man who was labeled a political dissident and this was how she ended up in prison and in exile, along with the man.

Through the organization, Alicia meets Sara. Sara's daughter has been disappeared and she is desperately searching for any information on her. She has a picture of her daughter at a young age and she looks startlingly like Gaby. Sara believes Gaby may be her granddaughter. If this is true, Alicia's suspicions will be confirmed. She will know that Gaby was stolen and also that her husband bought her illegally. Alicia begins to trust these women, albeit slowly, and she finally allows Sara to meet Gaby.

With the inclusion of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an historical group, the film directors are showing the viewers that the war had farther-reaching consequences than just death. All of the women who participate in this group are missing family members. At the conclusion of the war several lists were published with names of those who had been killed or disappeared but they were inconclusive and incomplete. Many of the deaths and kidnappings were not recorded and there were a number of forced exiles that were not recorded either.

In cases of international war, in which a whole country is on the same side, reports of death appear as they are known. In cases like the Dirty War, however, which was an era of state-sponsored internal terrorism, these reports are often unavailable to the

public or edited to show the current political power in a favorable light. With a military dictatorship, the withholding of information is a powerful tool. Families who do not know about their children are left wondering and some of them will never know the truth.

Part of my inspiration in selecting a film, along with works of literature, is because it is possible for a film to visibly show some of this devastation to a viewer that a book cannot give to its reader. A book can tell you how Sara felt when she realized that Gaby might be her granddaughter, but only a film can physically show it. The camera focuses on her face and the viewer watches her expression change, realization dawning on her. There is no need for an explanation and the viewer is not left wondering, the effect is visible and immediate.

Another immediately visible and impactful component of this film is the title. By calling a film about war *The Official Story* and making the main character a history teacher, the filmmakers are asking serious questions about what the official story might truly be. Throughout the film Alicia's understanding of events is challenged by the people around her: first by the student in her classroom and later by her husband, Roberto, and her friend, Ana. Alicia struggles to find the real story behind the official story of Gaby's adoption. Unfortunately, in this case, these two stories are different and the official story is not true.

Like much of the Argentine middle and upper class, for many years Alicia does not challenge the official story given to her. This film is a look at the tangible aftermath of the war on those who were both directly and indirectly impacted. For the Ibáñez family, the war happened in the papers, it was not something that happened to them. For

Gaby's biological parents and for her grandmother, Sara, the war had been very real. It is only after the war is officially over that its effects reach the Ibañez family. The viewer realizes that just because the fighting has stopped that does not mean that the pain is over. The far-reaching consequences of war are seen and felt in this film about Gaby, her biological family, her adoptive family and their struggles in trying to do what is best for her.

## Conclusion

As I continued research into these two wars and the literature that has followed them, a few patterns began to emerge. Literature that comes out of societal trauma tends to have a first person perspective, it is a story of survival, and it refuses to cooperate within a simple binary.

The first person perspective allows the reader a look into the life and mind of someone who has survived a serious trauma. In the cases of *Night* and *The Book Thief*, the trauma is ongoing. In *Steps Under Water* and *La historia oficial*, the trauma has passed but the effects of it are still evident. This first person narration allows the reader, or the viewer as the case may be, a chance to connect with the story teller and a measure of credibility is allotted to the narrator because of this.

The concept of a survivor story is inextricably linked to this style of literature. In all four of the works analyzed here the idea of a survivor is ingrained in the work. Not all stories of survival are the same though, even if they come from the same time or the same source. Wiesel and Zusak tell very different stories about the Holocaust and World War II and Kozameh's protagonist, Sara, can only recall pieces of her memory. In his book, *The Untimely Present*, about postdictatorial Latin America, historian Idelber Avelar writes that "mournful literature will search for those fragments and ruins" and this is evident most noticeably in Sara, who cannot remember the whole truth of what happened to her from start to finish, she can only remember in fragments (Avelar 3). By calling these narratives "survivor's stories," the authors and filmmakers are conceding that the accounts may not be factually accurate as they are based on memories that are fluid and changing.

Each of these four works elucidates a simple binary that we as readers often bring to literature. The works do this by complicating ideas of good and bad or black and white. In many cases the binaries are internalized, as in *Night*, where Eliezer struggles with sensations of guilt and hatred. These same sensations are seen in both Sara, in *Steps Under Water*, and in Alicia, in *La historia oficial*. These works allow for the understanding of simple binaries – German versus Jew or police versus prisoner – but they also question the reality of such simple binaries and give the reader and viewer a more complex look.

This type of comparative analysis lends itself to a vast array of possible studies. The analysis done here is only a small percentage of the work that could be done with regards to the literature of World War II in Germany and of the Dirty War in Argentina. Anti-Semitism in Argentina could be further researched in order to extract another connecting tie between these two events. A further study into memory could also be done. In my research I found that the idea of accuracy of an eyewitness account is often called into question and I believe a study into the necessity or the ability of an eyewitness account to be perfect would be fruitful. Familial relationships of survivors of trauma, the role of faith in one's survival, the costs of survival both physical and psychological, and the further complication of simple binaries could all be pursued.

With this research I aim to shed light on two events in world history that still affect us today. As a society, we experience traumas regularly and understanding how these few people processed their social trauma allows us as readers and viewers to understand our own reactions to these events and events like them. It is impossible to fully conquer and fully understand events such as the Holocaust and the Dirty War but

the “impossibility of representing the totality” is part of the importance of trying (Avelar, 11).

It is difficult to address harsh social realities and all four of the works analyzed here have taken on issues that are simultaneously sensitive and threatening. They have done so in the first person voice, they have examined and questioned the survivor, and they have gone beyond simply positing their statuses as victims to enlarge the understanding that we have of the effects of societal trauma.

### Works Cited

- Avelar, Idelber. *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999. Print.
- Bouwer, Renske, et al. "Effect Of Genre On The Generalizability Of Writing Scores." *Language Testing* 32.1 (2015): 83-100. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.
- Danks, Carol. "Using The Literature Of Elie Wiesel And Selected Poetry To Teach The Holocaust In The Secondary School History Classroom." *Social Studies* 87.3 (1996): 101-105. ERIC. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.
- Kaminsky, Amy. "Memory, Postmemory, Prosthetic Memory: Reflections on the Holocaust and the Dirty War in Argentine Narrative." *Layers of Memory and the Discourse of Human Rights: Artistic and Testimonial Practices in Latin America and Iberia* (2014): 104-17. Print.
- Kozameh, Alicia. *Steps Under Water*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California, 1996. Print.
- La Historia Oficial*. Almi Pictures, 1985. Film.
- Longerich, Peter. *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Manseau, Peter. "Revising Night: Elie Wiesel And The Hazards Of Holocaust Theology." *Cross Currents* 56.3 (2006): 387-399. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.
- Guillermo O'Donnell. "Modernization and Military Coups." *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 399-420. Print.
- Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared ; with an Introduction by Ronald Dworkin*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986. Print.
- Partnoy, Alicia. "Solidarity And Survival." *Women's Review Of Books* 15.2 (1997): 26. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 18 Mar. 2015.

Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2005. Print.