

## 10 Holocaust Memory and the Critique of Violence in Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*

*Stef Craps*

This chapter explores the role of Holocaust memory in *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*, a play by the British dramatist Caryl Churchill that powerfully bears witness to 'Operation Cast Lead', the three-week Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip launched on December 27, 2008, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in response to which it was written.<sup>1</sup> Some 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed in the fighting, and tens of thousands of Palestinians were left homeless.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, led by the South African jurist Richard Goldstone, found that violations of international human rights and humanitarian law had been committed by both sides, but the so-called Goldstone Report also highlighted the severity of the violations of the Israeli Defense Forces compared to those of the Palestinian militants.<sup>3</sup> Written in January 2009, *Seven Jewish Children* premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre on February 6, 2009, and was performed across the UK, in the US, and around the world—including Israel—in the following months. The play, which is very brief (six pages or 10 minutes in performance), was offered for free on the Internet to anyone who wanted to produce it. The only conditions Churchill imposed were that no admission fee should be charged and that donations should be collected for a London-based charity called Medical Aid for Palestinians.

*Seven Jewish Children* comprises seven scenes made up of simple sentences, most of which begin with the words 'Tell her' or 'Don't tell her'. No setting is specified for any of these sequences, nor are the lines assigned to specific characters. In fact, there is no character list, nor even a suggested number of actors. As a result, the text on the page looks more like a poem than a play. Although the circumstances are a little opaque,<sup>4</sup> it is clear that what we are given to witness are discussions among the parents or other adult relatives of an absent and unseen Jewish girl—a different one in each scene—about what to tell her or not to tell her about what is happening in the world around her.<sup>5</sup> Each scene refers to a different period of modern Jewish and Israeli history. The first two scenes are generally taken to represent the Holocaust, but the first could also be set at an earlier time of anti-Semitic persecution: Churchill has said that she was inclining towards

nineteenth-century Russia when she wrote the scene, and the first stage production at the Royal Court, which she oversaw, opted for 1930s Germany.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, the scene relies on the typical Holocaust trope of a child in hiding from the Nazis, reminiscent of the plight of Anne Frank but also of Roberto Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful*.<sup>7</sup> From the Holocaust, the play progresses through other key moments—post-Holocaust emigration to Palestine, the establishment of Jewish settlements and the displacement of the Palestinian population, the Arab–Israeli War of 1948, the occupation of the Palestinian territories following the Six-Day War, and the First and Second Intifada—until, in the seventh and last scene, it arrives at the present moment: Operation Cast Lead and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza that occasioned the play. The general arc of the play is thus from Jews as victims of persecution to Jews as victimizers themselves through Israel's actions towards the Palestinians, culminating in the assault on Gaza.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, *Seven Jewish Children* proved highly controversial and triggered heated discussions, with theatre critics, other commentators, and the general public speaking out for or against it. The BBC refused to broadcast a radio version of the play because it was perceived to be too partial; *The Guardian* responded by not only printing the play but also producing a video of it and making it available on its website.<sup>8</sup> Debate raged in the British press as to whether the play is anti-Semitic or not. While some accused Churchill of anti-Semitism, others praised her for what they saw as her compassionate intervention. Of particular interest is the polemic that arose between Howard Jacobson, who condemned the play, and Jacqueline Rose, who supported it.<sup>9</sup> The controversy about Churchill's play also hit the US as it began to be performed there as well. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon came out in support of the play, publishing a very perceptive analysis of it in *The Nation*.<sup>10</sup> Also of note is the transcription of an impassioned discussion between Jeffrey Goldberg and Ari Roth, who staged a performance of *Seven Jewish Children* at Theater J in Washington.<sup>11</sup> Churchill herself—who rarely speaks publicly about her work and frequently refuses interviews—weighed in on the debate surrounding the play by reacting to Jacobson's accusations in a letter to the editor of *The Independent* and by answering questions put to her by Roth in an email which he posted on the Theater J blog with her permission.<sup>12</sup> *Seven Jewish Children* has also sparked at least five response plays: Iris Bahr's *Seven English Children*,<sup>13</sup> Robbie Gringras' *The Eighth Child: For Caryl Churchill*, Israel Horovitz's *What Strong Fences Make*, Deborah Margolin's *Seven Palestinian Children: A Play for the Other*, and Richard Stirling's *Seven Other Children*.<sup>14</sup> These response plays, which are sometimes performed in a double or triple bill with Churchill's play, share the assumption that the original play lacks balance and oversimplifies the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than rejecting Churchill's play as a piece of anti-Semitic propaganda, I consider it an example of how art can bear witness to and address

some of the most important issues of our day in a serious and sensitive manner. In this chapter, I will focus on the way in which *Seven Jewish Children*, a play born of moral outrage about events in Gaza, mobilizes the memory of the Holocaust. The Holocaust and Gaza are the starting point and end point, respectively, of the historical trajectory which the play traces.<sup>16</sup> Concern over the linkage which Churchill thus establishes between these two events is at the heart of the anti-Semitism charges. In an article in *The Independent* which prompted angry reactions from both Rose and Churchill, Jacobson denounced what he saw as the play's equation of Jews with Nazis, which, he argued, is symptomatic of a rising tide of anti-Semitism in mainstream British media and culture. The 'thesis' of *Seven Jewish Children*, he wrote, is that 'Jews [are] visiting upon others the traumas suffered by themselves, with Israel figuring as the torture room in which they do it'. No sooner had the Jews escaped 'the hell of Hitler's Europe' than they set about constructing 'a parallel hell for Palestinians'.<sup>17</sup> Invited to elaborate on his critique in an interview with *Standpoint* magazine, Jacobson put it in even starker terms: 'Israelis are the new Nazis, the Holocaust in Europe becomes a new Holocaust in the Middle East, Gaza is new a [sic] Warsaw . . .'.<sup>18</sup> In his *Independent* article, Jacobson dismissed the validity of any comparison between Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto—'there is not the remotest similarity, either in intention or in deed'—and interpreted suggestions to the contrary as a new and sophisticated form of Holocaust denial.<sup>19</sup> By analogizing events in Gaza to Nazi atrocities, one 'disinherit[s]' the Jews—who have 'betrayed the Holocaust and become unworthy of it'—of pity, as the Palestinians are identified as 'the true heirs of their [the Jews'] suffering'.<sup>20</sup>

Jacobson and like-minded critics read *Seven Jewish Children* in terms of the familiar shouting match between Israeli and Palestinian invocations of the Holocaust. As Michael Rothberg points out, the Holocaust's invocation in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict typically takes the form of 'a ritual trading of threats and insults'.<sup>21</sup> Citing the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, Gil Hochberg has characterized the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a 'battle of memories'.<sup>22</sup> According to Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and Ilan Pappé, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian collective memories—memories of suffering and victimhood—tend to be seen by both sides as mutually exclusive, as canceling each other out: 'each side sees itself as a sole victim while totally negating the victimization of the Other'.<sup>23</sup> The Israeli–Palestinian battle of memories thus constitutes a prime example of what Rothberg has called 'competitive memory': the notion that 'the interaction of different collective memories within [the public] sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence'.<sup>24</sup> According to adherents of the competitive memory model, the articulation of the past in collective memory has to be understood as 'a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers, a struggle that is thus closely allied with the potential for deadly violence'.<sup>25</sup>

Hochberg reminds us of the inequality of the Israeli–Palestinian memory competition: ‘the visible Jewish history of suffering erases the Palestinian memory of loss, becoming, in [Darwish’s] words, “the condition for Palestinian forgetting”’.<sup>26</sup> Israel has used the memory of the Holocaust to legitimize political injustices and violence against the Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries. In the years since 1967, visions of a ‘second Holocaust’ allegedly facing the Jewish people from the Palestinians resisting the occupation or from Arab states in the region have repeatedly been invoked by Zionists as part of a strategy to justify whatever Israel does as self-defense and to reject territorial concessions. As Hochberg points out, the success of the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory in the service of a Zionist agenda is helped by the tendency among some Palestinians and other Arabs to ‘deny[] or minimiz[e] the gravity of recent Jewish suffering’.<sup>27</sup>

What Jacobson specifically objects to, however, is the appropriation of Holocaust terminology and imagery to highlight the plight of the Palestinians and to deprive the Israeli Jews of the moral capital they had gained through their past suffering—the mirror image, one might say, of the Zionist instrumentalization of Holocaust memory. While comparisons of the treatment meted out by Israel to the Palestinians in the occupied territories to the experience of the Jews in 1940s Europe had been made for a long time, the practice reached a peak—or a low point—during Operation Cast Lead. Within days of the initial assault, critics of the Israeli invasion, in the blogosphere and the mainstream media, began to compare the situation of the Palestinians in Gaza to that of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. At scores of demonstrations held across the world against the military operation, protestors carried signs reading ‘Stop the Holocaust in Gaza’, ‘Israel: The Fourth Reich’, ‘Holocaust by Holocaust survivors’, ‘Gaza = Warsaw Ghetto’ or juxtaposing gruesome images of Holocaust victims and Gazans. Jacobson rightly takes offense at such in-your-face comparisons which elide crucial historical differences and preclude empathy with both sides in the conflict. However, he is misguided, it seems to me, to accuse *Seven Jewish Children* of falling victim to, and perpetuating, such simplistic and dubious equations. In what follows, I will attempt to show what is problematic about his reading, which is representative of a wave of negative reactions provoked by the play, and go on to suggest that *Seven Jewish Children* constructs a much more complex and ethically responsible relationship between the two histories.

Those who accuse the play of anti-Semitism invariably cite the monologue near the end of scene 7, set during Operation Cast Lead, which interrupts the flow of the dialogue for the first and only time. Presented as yet another answer to the question of what the girl should or should not be told, it turns into a shocking expression of rage, tribalism, and indifference to Palestinian suffering. It is worth quoting in full:

Tell her, tell her about the army, tell her to be proud of the army. Tell her about the family of dead-girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the

whole world knows why shouldn’t she know? tell her there’s dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of. Tell her they did it to themselves. Tell her they want their children killed to make people sorry for them, tell her I’m not sorry for them, tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we’re the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can’t talk suffering to us. Tell her we’re the iron fist now, tell her it’s the fog of war, tell her we won’t stop killing them till we’re safe, tell her I laughed when I saw the dead policemen, tell her they’re animals living in rubble now, tell her I wouldn’t care if we wiped them out, the world would hate us is the only thing, tell her I don’t care if the world hates us, tell her we’re better haters, tell her we’re chosen people, tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? tell her all I feel is happy it’s not her. (7. 18)

As reprehensible as the sentiments expressed in this long speech may be, Churchill does not demonize the Jewish people by including it in her play, as Jacobson and other critics would have us believe. Bent on exposing the playwright as an anti-Semite, they tend to read things into the text that are not there. One example is Jacobson’s claim that the speaker of the monologue ‘feel[s] happy’ when he or she sees Palestinian children covered in blood;<sup>28</sup> what the speaker actually says is that he or she is ‘happy it’s not her’; that is, his or her own child. Another example is Dave Rich and Mark Gardner’s description of this section of the text as ‘the monologue of genocidal racist hatred’, which suggests that the speaker enthusiastically supports ethnic cleansing because he or she is a racist bigot.<sup>29</sup> In actual fact, however, he or she feels numb, callous, and defiant, and sees the military operation as a tragic but necessary act of self-defense.

These misreadings also account for the blood libel charges that have been leveled against the play: it allegedly perpetuates the centuries-old lie, used to incite anti-Jewish violence, that Jews ritually murder non-Jewish children. According to Jacobson, for example, Churchill ‘repeat[s] in another form the medieval blood-libel of Jews rejoicing in the murder of little children’. ‘This is the old stuff’, he continues: ‘Jew-hating pure and simple’.<sup>30</sup> Rich and Gardner similarly accuse Churchill of bringing the blood libel ‘up to date’, and Melanie Phillips even goes so far as to call the play—which, in her view, ‘demonstrably and openly draw[s] upon an atavistic hatred of the Jews’—‘a ten-minute blood-libel’.<sup>31</sup> In her response to Jacobson’s attack on her play, which she says she does not recognize from his description, Churchill understandably expresses bafflement at the blood libel accusation, calling it ‘extraordinary’.<sup>32</sup>

What the playwright does do in this long speech, as several Israeli and other commentators have confirmed, is accurately capture the rhetoric of war that actually circulated both inside and outside Israel at the time of the Gaza invasion. In *The Jerusalem Post*, Larry Derfner wrote that the monologue represents ‘an authentic voice, a view of Palestinians held by

many, many Jews here and abroad, even if they don't express it publicly'. He heard 'an awful echo' in it of 'the inner (and often outer) voice of Israel at war'.<sup>33</sup> Antony Lerman, writing in *The Guardian*, concurred: 'Anyone who has followed the contradictory Jewish reactions to Gaza will recognise the authenticity of different voices in this monologue'.<sup>34</sup> Kushner and Solomon made the same observation in *The Nation*: 'sad to say, there's no sentiment in the monologue's spew that we have not heard or read at some point from presumed "defenders" of Israel'.<sup>35</sup> In her response to Jacobson, Rose showed this to be the case even for several other lines from the play which Jacobson selects as if they self-evidently supported his case.<sup>36</sup>

Apart from distorting the meaning of the lines, critics who see the monologue as the 'proof text'<sup>37</sup> for the play's alleged anti-Semitism also mistake the sentiments expressed by the speaker for the play's final word, a summing up or ultimate conclusion. To argue that *Seven Jewish Children* supports any one message is to suppress the fundamental multivocality of the play, the diversity of opinions held and positions adopted by its characters. Conflict and disagreement between different voices about what children should or should not be told is precisely what drives the play forward: the constant 'tell/don't tell' refrain is 'the central device of the play'.<sup>38</sup> The dialogic nature of the play is particularly obvious in performance when the lines are divided among different actors, as in the Royal Court production, which featured nine actors. However, it is still in evidence when all lines are spoken by a single actor, as in the video produced by *The Guardian* in collaboration with the playwright. It has been claimed that the *Guardian* version 'has no debate' and 'remov[es] conflict',<sup>39</sup> but it seems much more plausible to me to see single-performer productions of the play as staging an internal conversation inside the head of one person.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the conversation does not end with the crude rhetoric of war, as the monologue is followed, and countered, by three more lines: 'Don't tell her that. / Tell her we love her. / Don't frighten her' (7. 19–21). As Kushner and Solomon note, while there is anger in the writing, there is also 'empathy, tenderness and intimacy'. After all, 'Nothing is more intimate than discussions between parents about what to tell their children; no act of speech is more carefully weighed or more fiercely protected. This is a family play, told from within the family. It concludes with love, and it concludes with fear'.<sup>41</sup> Churchill herself has rejected the suggestion that *Seven Jewish Children* incites rage against all characters on stage. In her reply to Roth's email, she points out that, although the play 'may make the audience angry with the character who has the long speech'—which, she adds, would not be 'a bad thing'—it 'doesn't [sic] make the anger extend to all the characters in the play right back to the early scenes'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the first two scenes clearly direct our empathy to Jewish victims of persecution. Furthermore, some of the characters are obviously uncomfortable with, if not opposed to, violence and aggression against the Palestinian people. Alternative opinions can be heard in lines such as 'Tell her maybe we can

share' (4. 22) and 'Tell her we want peace' (6. 36), and a 'cousin' of the girl in the final scene is referred to who 'refused to serve in the army' (7. 8). Conversely, Churchill does not portray all Palestinians as pacifists: stonethrowing (6. 19), café bombings (6. 22), rocket attacks (7. 4), and Hamas fighters (7. 10) are all mentioned in the course of the play.

Another central feature of *Seven Jewish Children* that resists its reduction to a single meaning but tends to get overlooked in the heat of the polemical moment is its indeterminacy. We have already noted that Churchill does not specify the actual number of actors, nor who speaks which lines. However, considerable variation is also possible in how individual lines are spoken. As Kushner and Solomon point out with reference to the line that immediately follows the monologue, 'If an actor stresses "tell" in the line "Don't tell her that," it might suggest, That's true, but don't let her know. But if "that" is emphasized, it might mean, How can you even think such an outrageous thing? And much will depend on how the actor strikes the first word, "Don't"—collegially or adversarially'.<sup>43</sup> Depending on where the emphasis is placed, lines can take on completely different meanings. Thus, the sentence 'Tell her we killed the babies by mistake' (7. 16), which occurs two lines before the monologue, can imply either that killing the babies was a genuine mistake ('Tell her we killed the babies by mistake') or that the babies may have actually been killed on purpose ('Tell her we killed the babies *by mistake*'). Jacobson, predictably, has no time for such niceties and adduces this line as supposedly incontrovertible evidence that Churchill presents Jews as 'monsters who kill babies by design'.<sup>44</sup>

The goal of this 'corrective' reading so far has been to show that *Seven Jewish Children* does not simply choose any one side in the Israeli–Palestinian memory war at the expense of recognition of, and empathy for, the suffering of the other side. Contrary to what its opponents make out, rather than portraying the Israeli Jews as new Nazis, the play is careful not to equate the Holocaust and Gaza. However, while it avoids establishing direct parallels, it does invoke connections between these different histories of extreme suffering. The play appears to suggest a psychological link between the trauma of the Jews during the Holocaust and Israeli aggression against the Palestinians in the present. 'The point', Rose writes, 'is to make us think about how trauma transmutes itself into ruthless self-defence'.<sup>45</sup> Jewish victimhood has fueled, and been used to justify, Israel's victimization of the Palestinians, as Israel has come to view itself as eternally vulnerable.

As Rose notes, this argument is not exactly new: similar claims have been made by the Israeli writer Shulamith Hareven and, more recently, by the Israeli historian Idith Zertal and the former Knesset speaker Avraham Burg.<sup>46</sup> According to Burg, for example, Israel has become pathologically fixated on the Holocaust: 'We cling to the tragedy and the tragedy becomes our justification for everything. We sit on the branch of

past mourning, not taking off to the heights of humanity and humanism where we belong'.<sup>47</sup> He calls for a different way of commemorating the destruction of the European Jews which would let go of the idea that the Holocaust is 'our exclusive property': 'I strive toward a Jewish people that say, "Never again" not just for us Jews, but for every suffering victim in the world today, who I hope will enjoy the support and protection of the Jews, yesterday's victims who defeated Hitler'.<sup>48</sup> In his view, it is time for Israel to emerge from national trauma and to truly defeat Hitler by opening itself to a new vision of solidarity with other sufferers: 'The Shoah can remain locked in a gated Jewish ghetto, but it can also be world heritage. We who rose from the ashes should be the best friends of the persecuted everywhere'.<sup>49</sup>

In a similar vein, Churchill's play undermines the assumption, held by the speaker of the monologue, that Jews have a monopoly on victimhood. To quote again from the monologue: 'tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we're the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can't talk suffering to us'. What *Seven Jewish Children* shows us, rather, is—in the words of the Arab Israeli director of the Tel Aviv production of the play—that 'profound pain has no home'.<sup>50</sup> The play subverts the reader's or the viewer's expectations by gradually shifting his or her attention from the seven Jewish children of the title to other, Palestinian children, who begin to be mentioned from scene 4 onwards, and demanding empathy for their plight:

Don't tell her she can't play with the children  
 Don't tell her that she can have them in the house.  
 Tell her they have plenty of friends and family (4. 15–17)

Don't tell her the boy was shot (6. 14)

Don't tell her about the family of dead girls  
 Tell her you can't believe what you see on television  
 Tell her we killed the babies by mistake (7. 14–16)

Unlike the seven Jewish children, whom the adult characters are concerned to keep safe and to protect from painful truths, these other children lead untold, unvalued, and unprotected lives. Storytelling, which in scene 1 is a positive, life-giving activity, turns increasingly sinister from scene 3 onwards. The adult characters are shown to pass on a distorted view of the world to their children, with tragic and violent consequences. The euphemistic and evasive stories the children are told by their elders are partly responsible, it is suggested, for the continuation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, insofar as they blind successive generations of Israeli Jews to the suffering of the Palestinians or rationalize it away. *Seven Jewish Children* does not deny the narrative of Jewish victimization but forces the

recognition that it is not the whole story, that Palestinian suffering deserves and demands to be spoken as well, and that another kind of story will be needed for the conflict to be resolved instead of perpetuated.<sup>51</sup>

Churchill's play thus resonates powerfully with Edward Said's moving reflections, in his 1997 essay 'Bases for Coexistence', on the importance of thinking histories of Jewish and Palestinian suffering together for the Israeli–Palestinian battle of memories to be terminated and the vision of an inclusive society to be realized:

there is a link to be made between what happened to Jews in World War II and the catastrophe of the Palestinian people [i.e., the events of 1948] . . . Neither is equal to the other; similarly neither one nor the other excuses present violence; and finally, neither one nor the other must be minimized. There is suffering and injustice enough for everyone. But unless the connection is made by which the Jewish tragedy is seen to have led directly to the Palestinian catastrophe by, let us call it 'necessity' (rather than pure will), we cannot coexist as two communities of detached and uncommunicatingly separate suffering.<sup>52</sup>

Like no other text that I know, *Seven Jewish Children* heeds Said's call for Jewish and Palestinian collective memories to be linked in a continuous trajectory in such a way that they address rather than negate one another.

These memories can be seen, moreover, to 'cohabit' the play, in the sense given to this term by Judith Butler in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, in which she proposes a conception of cohabitation as the ethical basis for a critique of Israeli state violence.<sup>53</sup> Taking her cue from Said, Butler defines cohabitation in terms of convergent exiles, and emphasizes that this convergence does not take the form of a strict analogy between different histories.<sup>54</sup> Rather, she says, invoking Walter Benjamin's ruminations on the messianic, it is a matter of the interruption of one time by another: 'a memory of suffering from another time . . . interrupts and reorients the politics of this time'.<sup>55</sup> A certain breaking apart of the amnesiac surface of time opens onto and transposes the memory of suffering into the future of justice, not as revenge, but as the figuring of a time in which that history of oppression might be drawn to an end. She understands the 'co' in 'cohabitation' as 'the nexus where convergent temporalities articulate present time, not a time in which one history of suffering negates another, but when it remains possible that one history of suffering provides the conditions of attunement to another such history and that whatever connections are made proceed through the difficulty of translation'.<sup>56</sup> The point, for Butler, is not to equate Zionism with Nazism; rather, '[t]he point is that there are principles of social justice that can be derived from the Nazi genocide that can and must inform our contemporary struggles, even though the contexts are different, and the forms of subjugating power clearly distinct'.<sup>57</sup> The 'transposition without analogy'<sup>58</sup> of the history of the oppression of the

Jews, she argues, leads to a political ethics that is committed to alleviating oppression in the present. As Butler writes in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*,

though the critique [of Israel] is often portrayed as insensitive to Jewish suffering, in the past and in the present, its ethic is wrought precisely from that experience of suffering, so that suffering itself might stop, so that something we might reasonably call *the sanctity of life* might be honored equitably and truly. The fact of enormous suffering does not warrant revenge or legitimate violence, but must be mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, in an article that specifically engages with different co-articulations of memories of Jewish and Palestinian suffering, Rothberg advocates 'a radically democratic politics of memory' which would include 'a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims'.<sup>60</sup> It seems to me that such a memory politics of differentiated solidarity underlies and informs *Seven Jewish Children*, which thus counters the hegemonic assumption—of which its harsh reception is symptomatic—that any critique of Israel is anti-Semitic.<sup>61</sup> Rather than firing just another senseless salvo in the Israeli–Palestinian memory war, the play opens up a space in which, to quote Rothberg, 'the uncomfortable proximity of memories' becomes 'the cauldron out of which new visions of solidarity and justice must emerge'.<sup>62</sup>

## NOTES

1. Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (London: Nick Hern, 2009). Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.
2. The Israeli casualties were ten soldiers, of whom four were killed by friendly fire, and three civilians from southern Israeli towns that came under Palestinian rocket fire. Estimates regarding the death toll on the other side vary, but it is clear that Palestinian fatalities included hundreds of non-combatants ('Casualties of the Gaza War', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., February 19, 2013, accessed April 7, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties\\_of\\_the\\_Gaza\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Gaza_War)). A significant number of casualties also fell when Israel launched another air offensive in the Gaza Strip after an intensification of Palestinian rocket attacks in November 2012, sparking fears of a repetition of the Cast Lead scenario. During 'Operation Pillar of Defense', as this eight-day offensive was called, four Israeli civilians and two soldiers were killed by Palestinian rocket fire, and more than 150 Palestinians lost their lives, including many civilians ('Operation Pillar of Defense', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., April 7, 2013, accessed April 8, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Pillar\\_of\\_Defense](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Pillar_of_Defense)).

3. United Nations Human Rights Council, *Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories: Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict* (New York: United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). In 2011 Goldstone partially recanted his own report in a remarkable *Washington Post* op-ed piece (Richard Goldstone, 'Reconsidering the Goldstone Report on Israel and War Crimes', *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2011, accessed July 17, 2013, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-04-01/opinions/35207016\\_1\\_drone-image-goldstone-report-israeli-evidence](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-04-01/opinions/35207016_1_drone-image-goldstone-report-israeli-evidence)); the report's co-authors, however, rejected his re-evaluation (Hina Jilani, Christine Chinkin, and Desmond Travers, 'Goldstone Report: Statement Issued by Members of UN Mission on Gaza War', *The Guardian*, April 14, 2011, accessed July 17, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/14/goldstone-report-statement-un-gaza>).
4. *Seven Jewish Children* does not contain any specific historical dates or public figures; there are no named events or named actors; and there is no mention of Israel, Israelis, or Palestinians. However, there is one mention of Jerusalem (3. 18), one reference to Arabs (4. 12), and one reference to Hamas fighters (7. 10). Moreover, the play invokes numerous iconic historical moments and images, allowing anyone with some knowledge of the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to 'decode' it without too much difficulty.
5. A possible explanation for the fact that the seven Jewish children of the play's title all turn out to be girls could be that girls—who are typically thought of as more vulnerable, sensitive, and easily frightened than boys—tend to inspire greater care and protectiveness, making the discussions among the adults about what to tell or not to tell their children more urgent. Moreover, women's traditional role is to be the guardian of tradition, to preserve the cultural heritage and transmit it to the next generation: in that respect, too, it makes more sense for the recipients of the adult characters' stories to be girls rather than boys.
6. Caryl Churchill, 'RE: 7JC', email to Ari Roth, *The Theater J Blog*, March 24, 2009, accessed April 8, 2013, <http://theaterjblogs.wordpress.com/2009/03/24/caryl-churchill-speaks-part-1/#more-1105>.
7. *Life Is Beautiful*, dir. Roberto Benigni, Miramax Films, 1997, DVD. The association with *Life Is Beautiful* is reinforced by the play's opening sentence, in which one of the speakers proposes to '[t]ell her it's a game' (1. 1): after all, Benigni's film is built on the same conceit of a Jewish parent trying to protect his child from the Holocaust by pretending that it is just a game. These Holocaust echoes work against the (mis)interpretation of this—very minimalist—scene as describing Israeli persecution of Palestinians, although the fact that the play does not immediately preclude such a reading is significant. Just as *Seven Jewish Children* unsettles the expectations of readers or viewers who interpret the first scene (correctly) as describing Jewish suffering and are thereby led to assume that Jews will figure as victims of oppression throughout the play, so it can be seen to wrongfoot those readers or viewers who initially (mis)interpret the opening scene as describing Palestinian suffering. In both cases, the reader or viewer is made to consider the two histories of victimization in relation to one another.
8. *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*, by Caryl Churchill, perf. Jennie Stoller, *The Guardian*, April 25, 2009, performance, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/video/2009/apr/25/seven-jewish-children-caryl-churchill>.
9. Howard Jacobson, 'Let's See the "Criticism" of Israel for What It Really Is', *The Independent*, February 18, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/howard-jacobson/howard-jacobson-lets-see-the-criticism-of-israel-for-what-it-really-is-1624827>.

- html; Jacqueline Rose, 'Why Howard Jacobson Is Wrong', *The Guardian*, February 24, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/23/howard-jacobson-antisemitism-caryl-churchill>; Howard Jacobson, 'Why Jacqueline Rose Is Not Right', *The Guardian*, February 26, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/26/carylchurchill-antisemitism-jacqueline-rose>.
10. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, 'Tell Her the Truth', *The Nation*, April 13, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/article/tell-her-truth>.
  11. Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Caryl Churchill: Gaza's Shakespeare, or Fetid Jew-Baiter?', *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2009/03/caryl-churchill-gaza-apos-s-shakespeare-or-fetid-jew-baiter/9823/#more>.
  12. Caryl Churchill, 'My Play Is Not Anti-Semitic', *The Independent*, February 21, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-jacobson-on-gaza-1628191.html>; Churchill, 'RE: 7JC'.
  13. *Seven English Children* is mentioned in a *Washington Post* article (Monica Hesse, "'Jewish Children' Comes to D.C. Already Upstaged by Controversy", *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-03-17/news/36854605\\_1\\_british-playwright-caryl-churchill-theaters-jewish-community](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-03-17/news/36854605_1_british-playwright-caryl-churchill-theaters-jewish-community)), which also quotes what is presumably its opening line ('Tell her her new medical treatment was developed in Israel'), and in an article in the online magazine *Broad Street Review* (Carol Rocamora, 'The Storm over Caryl Churchill's "Seven Jewish Children"', *Broad Street Review*, May 16, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, [http://www.broadstreetreview.com/index.php/main/article/caryl\\_churchills\\_seven\\_jewish\\_children/](http://www.broadstreetreview.com/index.php/main/article/caryl_churchills_seven_jewish_children/)); however, I have been unable to find any other references to this play. The full text of the other, better-known response plays is available online.
  14. Robbie Gringras, *The Eighth Child: For Caryl Churchill, Makom*, March 3, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://makomisrael.org/blog/the-eighth-jewish-child-for-caryl-churchill/>; Israel Horovitz, *What Strong Fences Make*, *The Theater J Blog*, April 19, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://theaterjblogs.wordpress.com/2009/04/19/a-new-response-play-to-7jc-by-israel-horovitz-what-good-fences-make/>; Deborah S. Margolin, *Seven Palestinian Children: A Play for the Other*, *The Neshamah Center*, [2009], accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.neshamah.net/seven-palestinian-children/>; Richard Stirling, *Seven Other Children, Harry's Place*, May 16, 2009, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://hurryupharry.org/2009/05/16/seven-other-children-a-theatrical-response-to-seven-jewish-children/>. Churchill's play also resonates in interesting ways with a 2001 documentary film about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict called *Promises*, which follows Israeli American filmmaker B. Z. Goldberg as he interviews and brings together seven Israeli and Palestinian children who live only 20 minutes apart yet lead completely separate lives (*Promises*, dir. Justine Shapiro, B. Z. Goldberg, and Carlos Bolado, *Promises Project*, 2001, DVD).
  15. As the emergence of these various response plays shows, *Seven Jewish Children* initiated a period of intensive memory work regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this respect, it is somewhat reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1902), which over the years has given rise to numerous creative responses, especially by postcolonial writers seeking to rectify the novella's allegedly racist portrayal of Africa.
  16. *Seven Jewish Children* is hardly unique among Churchill's plays in juxtaposing past and present and refracting one through the lens of the other. In fact, Churchill has written numerous plays throughout her career that use history to shed light on Britain's present. Some of her best-known plays can serve as examples: both *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1982) and *Cloud Nine* (London: Pluto, 1979) consist of two acts, one set in the past and one set in the present, which resonate with one another. *Seven Jewish Children* does stand out, however, in that it does not engage with British history—at least not in any direct sense (the seeds of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were, of course, sown during the British Mandate period)—and moves in a more or less continuous way from the past to the present.
  17. Jacobson, 'Let's See'.
  18. Howard Jacobson and A. B. Yehoshua, 'Denying Israel's Deniers', *Standpoint*, April 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://standpointmag.co.uk/dialogue-april-09-denying-israels-deniers-howard-jacobson-a-b-yehoshua-anti-semitism>.
  19. Jacobson, 'Let's See'. For an insightful analysis of the Gaza-Warsaw nexus, see Michael Rothberg, 'From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory', *Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust Memory*, ed. Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg, spec. issue of *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 53:4 (2011), 523–548.
  20. Jacobson, 'Let's See'.
  21. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 311.
  22. Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 116.
  23. Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and Ilan Pappé, 'Beyond the Destruction of the Other's Collective Memory: Blueprints for a Palestinian/Israeli Dialogue', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 20:1 (2003), 93–108, 93.
  24. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.
  25. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.
  26. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, 117.
  27. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, 118.
  28. Jacobson, 'Let's See'.
  29. Dave Rich and Mark Gardner, 'The Blood Libel Brought Up to Date', *The Guardian*, May 1, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/01/carylchurchill-theatre>.
  30. Jacobson, 'Let's See'.
  31. Rich and Gardner; Melanie Phillips, 'The Royal Court's Mystery Play', *The Spectator*, February 8, 2009, accessed March 20, 2010.
  32. Churchill, 'My Play Is Not Anti-Semitic'.
  33. Larry Derfner, 'Hearing Echoes in "Seven Jewish Children"', *The Jerusalem Post*, April 22, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=139926>.
  34. Antony Lerman, 'Antisemitic Alarm Bells', *The Guardian*, May 4, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/04/caryl-churchill-antisemitism-play>.
  35. Kushner and Solomon.
  36. Rose.
  37. Kushner and Solomon.
  38. Lerman.
  39. Travis Bedard, 'More Seven Jewish Children', *Cambiare Productions*, April 25, 2009, accessed March 22 2013, <http://blog.cambiareproductions.com/2009/04/25/more-seven-jewish-children/>.
  40. Lerman.
  41. Kushner and Solomon.

42. Churchill, 'RE: 7JC'.
43. Kushner and Solomon.
44. Jacobson, 'Let's See'.
45. Rose.
46. Shulamith Hareven, *The Vocabulary of Peace: Life, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1995); Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, trans. Chaya Galai (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005); Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over; We Must Rise from Its Ashes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
47. Burg, 9.
48. Burg, 152, xiv.
49. Burg, 156.
50. Samieh Jabbarin, qtd. in Rachel Shabi, 'Caryl Churchill's Seven Jewish Children Staged in Tel Aviv', *The Guardian*, June 12, 2009, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jun/12/caryl-churchill-seven-jewish-children-tel-aviv>.
51. This analysis is indebted to a lecture by Jean Howard, who interprets *Seven Jewish Children* as a play that is centrally concerned with the ethics of narrative (Jean Howard, 'Protestant Radicals and Jewish Children: Caryl Churchill's National Histories', Leonard Hastings Schoff Memorial Lecture Series 'Staging History; Imagining the Nation', Columbia University, New York, February 22, 2010, lecture).
52. Edward Said, 'Bases for Coexistence', 1997, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (London: Granta, 2000), 207–209, 207–208. This passage is also cited by Hochberg in an essay in which she explores Said's understanding of the central role memory plays in shaping the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as well as of its potential to offer a way out of it (Gil Hochberg, 'Edward Said: "The Last Jewish Intellectual"—On Identity, Alterity, and the Politics of Memory', *Social Text*, 24:2 (2006), 47–65).
53. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012).
54. Butler, *Parting Ways*, 29, 121.
55. Butler, *Parting Ways*, 124.
56. Butler, *Parting Ways*, 130.
57. Butler, *Parting Ways*, 121. Or, as she puts it elsewhere, 'The point is not to confirm that Zionism is like Nazism or is its unconscious repetition with Palestinians standing in for Jews. Such analogies fail to consider the very different modes of subjugation, dispossession, and death-dealing that characterize National Socialism and political Zionism. The point is rather to ask how certain kinds of principles might be extrapolated from one set of historical conditions to grasp another, a move that requires an act of political translation that refuses to assimilate the one experience to the other, and refuses as well the kind of particularism that would deny any possible way to articulate principles regarding, say, the rights of refugees on the basis of a comparative consideration of these and other instances of historical dispossession' (Butler, *Parting Ways*, 29–30).
58. Butler, *Parting Ways*, 129.
59. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 103–104.
60. Rothberg, 'From Gaza to Warsaw', 526.
61. For a powerful refutation of this charge, see Butler, *Parting Ways*.
62. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 313.

## 11 Living Among the Ruins of Memory and Language

Jorge Semprún and Testimony

*Ursula Tidd*

Since the publication of *Le Grand Voyage* (1963), Jorge Semprún has emerged as one of the most sophisticated writers on the experiences of exile, deportation and incarceration during the Second World War. The challenge for Semprún, a Francophone Spanish exile and Buchenwald concentration camp survivor, is not that of Holocaust representation *per se* but of facilitating the reception of Holocaust experience: to find those who can listen to Holocaust testimony and imagine the hitherto unimaginable.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, aesthetic and ethical considerations are thoroughly imbricated in Semprún's approach to writing about his Buchenwald experience.

In this discussion, Semprún's engagement with testimony will be explored, specifically the ways in which he expands the possibilities of representation and reception through the development of a particular testimonial idiolect. The term 'idiolect', drawn from linguistics, refers to the form and variety of language which is specific to a given individual. As a polyglot and translator immersed in European literature and continental philosophy, Semprún's idiolect is especially rich. Distinctively combining bilingualism with a rich cultural and philosophical intertextuality, his writing is marked by a reflexive awareness of the workings of perception and memory and constitutes, as I will argue, an original approach to the task of Holocaust representation and remembrance in the broader European context. In the following discussion, I will initially explore Semprún's distinctive approach to testimony by discussing the origins of his writing career, begun approximately 15 years after his return from Buchenwald in 1945. I shall then delineate the features of his testimonial idiolect before concluding with some reflections on the significance of his approach.

### SEMPRÚN'S LITERARY ORIGINS

Semprún was born in Madrid in 1923 into a politically-committed family, with close links to successive Spanish governments on both the Republican and Conservative sides. His father, a prominent Catholic Republican, was a lawyer and diplomat. His mother, Susana Maura, also came from a highly