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Holocaust Through the Eyes of Female Characters in  
Selected Works of American Literature

Holokaust očima ženských postav ve vybraných dílech  
americké literatury

Bakalářská práce

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## Zadání bakalářské práce

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### **Cíl, metody, literatura, předpoklady:**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá ženskými postavami ve vybraných dílech z americké beletrie pojednávajících o období holokaustu. Úvodní teoretická část této práce představí nejprve holocaust obecně a následně se zaměří na popis životů židovských žen v tomto období. V následujících kapitolách se představí a analyzují vybraná prozaická díla a jejich hlavní ženské postavy. Závěrečná část této práce se soustředí na vzájemné porovnání jednotlivých hlavních hrdinek a také událostí ve vybraných knihách a skutečností holokaustu.

KOLÁŘ, Stanislav: *Seven Responses to the Holocaust in American Fiction*. Tilia: Ostrava 2004.

LOWRY, Lois: *Number the Stars*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989.

PALACIO, Raquel J.: *White Bird*. New York: Knopf, 2019.

SCHAEFFER, Susan Fromberg: *Anya*. New York: Avon Books, 1974.

STYRON, William: *Sophie's choice*. New York: Random House, 1979.

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### **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou závěrečnou práci Holokaust očima ženských postav z vybraných děl americké literatury vypracovala pod vedením vedoucího závěrečné práce samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
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## **Anotace**

JASELSKÁ, Jana, *Holokaust očima ženských postav z vybraných děl americké literatury*. Hradec Králové, 2023. 40 s. Bakalářská práce.

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá ženskými postavami ve vybraných dílech z americké beletrie pojednávajících o období holokaustu. Nejprve práce představuje samotný pojem holokaust a s ním spojený pojem antisemitismus. Dále je v práci popsána stručná historie nenávisti vůči Židům. Nejvíce pozornosti je pak věnováno období druhé světové války, kde práce popisuje různé formy oprese nacistického Německa vůči židovskému obyvatelstvu a jiným skupinám lidí, kteří byli bráni jako „nevyhovující“. Následně se práce zaměřuje na osudy židovských žen během holokaustu. V potaz jsou brány zvláštnosti a jedinečnosti zážitků těchto žen v porovnání s muži. Dále práce nabízí stručné shrnutí zápletek z jednotlivých vybraných děl a krátké představení jejich hrdinek. Jedná se o knihy *Sophiina Volba* od Williama Styrona s postavou Sophie Zawistowské, *Anya* od Susan Fromberg Schaefferové s postavou Anyi Savikin, *Spočítej hvězdy* od Lois Lowryové s postavou Ellen Rosen a v poslední řadě *Bílé ptáče: Zázračný příběh* od R. J. Palaciové s postavou Sary Blum. Všechny postavy jsou posléze porovnány mezi sebou. Práce dále posuzuje, do jaké míry jsou tyto fiktivní příběhy srovnatelné s realitou holokaustu.

Klíčová slova: holokaust, ženské postavy, americká literatura, realita, fikce

## Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce pojednává o ženských postavách ve vybraných dílech americké beletrie, které sledují období holokaustu. Přesněji se jedná o postavu Sophie Zawistowske z románu *Sophiina Volba* od Williama Styrona, dále o postavu Anyi Savikin z románu *Anyi* od Susan Fromberg Schaefferové, dále o postavu Ellen Rosen z románu *Spočítej hvězdy* od Lois Lowryové a v neposlední řadě o postavu Sary Blum z grafického románu *Bílé ptáče: Zázračný příběh* od R. J. Palaciové. Cílem této práce je porovnat jednotlivé postavy a jejich zážitky z holokaustu mezi sebou. Dále práce porovnává, do jaké míry se děj knih a ony zážitky hrdinek blíží skutečné realitě období holokaustu.

Nejprve práce představuje samotný pojem holokaust a s ním spojený pojem antisemitismus. Dále práce popisuje stručnou historii nenávisti vůči Židům. Nejvíce pozornosti je věnováno období druhé světové války, kde jsou popsány různé formy utlačování, které nacistické Německo použilo vůči židovskému obyvatelstvu a jiným skupinám obyvatelstva, kteří byli bráni jako „nevyhovující“. Poté se práce přesouvá k popisu osudů židovských žen v holokaustu. Důraz je dán na zvláštnosti a jedinečnosti zážitků těchto žen v porovnání s muži. V neposlední řadě teoretická část práce nabízí stručný souhrn děje každého z vybraných děl a představení analyzované hrdinky.

Ačkoliv jsou v rámci praktické části porovnány všechny postavy mezi sebou, nejužitečnější je rozdělit analyzované hrdinky do dvou párů. První pár představuje Ellen Rosen z knihy *Spočítej hvězdy* od Lois Lowryové a Sara Blum z grafického románu *Bílé ptáče: Zázračný příběh* od R. J. Palaciové. Druhý pár se pak musí skládat ze Sophie Zawistowske z knihy *Sophiina volba* od Williama Styrona a Anyi Savikin z knihy *Anyi* od Susan Fromberg Schaefferové.

Ellen a Sara tvoří pár proto, že jsou v podobně mladém věku a díla, jejichž jsou hrdinkami, jsou napsaná též pro čtenáře mladšího věku. Na začátku knih je oběma deset let. Děj *Bílého ptáčete* se rozptyluje mezi lety 1940 a 1945. Na konci knihy je tedy Saře zhruba patnáct let. Děj knihy *Spočítej hvězdy* se odehrává pouze pár měsíců, tudíž Ellen je na konci knihy stále deset. Kromě věku pár sdílí i způsob, jakým hrůzy holokaustu přežil. Obě hrdinky se před Němci schovávaly. Ellen se schovávala nejprve u rodičů své přítelkyně Annemarie a později v domě jejího strýce. Sara měla úkryt ve stodole, kam jí zavedl její spolužák a později přítel a první láska Julien. Samozřejmě ale existují i rozdíly mezi postavami. Například Sara bohužel ztratí svou matku ve vyhlazovacím táboře Osvětim, zatímco Ellen přežije i s oběma svými rodiči díky strýci Annemarie, který je převezde do válečně neutrálního Švédska. Úskalím

obou zmíněných hrdinek v kontextu této bakalářské práce však je, že ačkoliv jsou obě ženského pohlaví, jejich zážitky z období holokaustu nejsou spjaté s jejich pohlavím, nebo-li jiné než zážitky podobně starých chlapců. Kvůli jejich věku nezažily holokaust očima dospělých žen, tudíž se jejich zážitek spíše dětský.

Druhý pár, skládající se z Anyi a Sophie, se od prvního liší. Obě postavy byly v době druhé světové války vdané a měly děti. Obě tudíž viděly holokaust očima dospělé ženy a jejich zážitky by měly odpovídat těm, které měly skutečné dospělé ženy během tohoto období. Obě hrdinky si prošly koncentračními tábory, kde je nejvíce důkazů o tom, že jejich pohlaví určovalo, jaký bude jejich zážitek z holokaustu. Příklady těchto zážitků, které jsou speciální pro ženské pohlaví a jsou jím ovlivněny, jsou sexuální obtěžování a nucení k pohlavnímu styku.

V knize *Sophiina volba* se mluví o pohlavním styku poměrně často i v jejím „přítomném čase“. Jedná se však pouze o konsenzuální styk. Ovšem v *Osvětimi* je hrdinka ke styku několikrát donucena. Tato situace vyvstane například mezi Sophií a její spoluvězenkyní v domě Rudolfa Hösse. Následně se Sophie snaží svou sexualitu dokonce využít proti Hössovi v naději, že výměnou za styk Höss osvobodí z tábora jejího syna Jana. Sophiina dvojice, Anya, nikdy není nucena do pohlavního styku. Je ale ovšem svědkem i obětí sexuálního obtěžování. Ještě v době před válkou je v románu popsáno několik pogrom, které jsou mířeny specificky na židovské ženy a jejich zostuzení. Tomuto se ale protagonistce podaří uniknout. Obětí sexuálního obtěžování se Anya stává až v pracovním táboře Kaiserwald. Po příjezdu do tábora je totiž vystavena vysoce invazivní lékařské prohlídce. Lékař provádějící tuto prohlídku má nevhodné poznámky o Anyině těle a téže ji nevhodně osahává.

Porovnání postav mimo své dvojice jen potvrdilo, že hrdinky z dvojice první jednoduše nemají dostatek životních zkušeností, aby mohly být porovnány s hrdinkami z dvojice druhé. Mezi každou postavou se našel alespoň jeden aspekt, co mají společný. Celkově se, kvůli jejich rozdílným věkům, jejich zážitky z holokaustu ale diametrálně lišily.

V porovnání děje románů se skutečnými událostmi holokaustu byl brán v potaz hlavně účel, se kterým autoři jednotlivé knihy psali. *Spočítej hvězdy* a *Bílé ptáče* byly napsány za účelem představit téma holokaustu mladším čtenářům. Obě autorky ale střídaly alespoň nějaké informace o daném tématu. Obě knihy tudíž obsahují scény, které jsou historicky přesné. *Bílé ptáče* ovšem také obsahuje scény, které jsou nerealistické. Tyto scény jsou ale obsaženy jasně pouze kvůli zápletce knihy. *Sophiina volba* je v rámci historické pravdivosti označena jako „pseudofaktická“. I Styron si samozřejmě zjistil nějaká historická fakta, dokonce na ně i

odkazuje v románu. Avšak některé scény jsou jednoduše vymyšleny. Stejně jako předchozí díla je román zamýšlen spíše jako představení tematiky holokaustu pro americkou veřejnost, tentokrát dospělou. *Anya* byla psána s největší touhou být historicky přesná. Tato historická přesnost se ale soustředí nejvíce na události před válkou, které, ač jsou zajímavé, nejsou tématem této bakalářské práce. Román však stále obsahuje dostatek scén, které se mohly udát i ve skutečném holokaustu. Je ale nutno říci, že ke konci knihy má protagonistka možná až nerealisticky velké štěstí.

Ačkoliv všechny vybrané postavy jsou ženského pohlaví, pouze dvě z nich—Sophie a Anya— si z období holokaustu odnesly zážitek, který byl k jejich pohlaví specifický. Sophie a Anya viděly holokaust ženskýma očima. Zatímco Ellen a Sara zažily holokaust stále jako děti a tím pádem neměly žádné zážitky, které reflektují jejich pohlaví. Toto může být viděno jako bod, ve kterém práce selhala, jelikož pouze dvě postavy ze čtyř splňují její zadání. Co se týče historické přesnosti románů, není překvapením, že ne každá událost v románech je pravdivá. Nicméně všichni autoři vybraných knih si zjistili historická fakta týkající se tématu holokaustu. Romány v sobě tudíž mají alespoň kousek pravdy.

## **Annotation**

JASELSKÁ, Jana. *Holocaust Through the Eyes of Female Characters in Selected Works of American Literature*. Hradec Králové: Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, 2023. 40 pp. Bachelor Degree Thesis.

This bachelor thesis deals with female characters in selected works of American fictitious prose discussing the period of the Holocaust. Firstly, the thesis presents the term the Holocaust itself and the related term antisemitism. The history of hatred toward Jews is described afterward. The main focus is given to the period of the Second World War where the various forms of Nazi Germany's oppression toward the Jewish population and other groups deemed as "unfit" are discussed. The thesis then focuses on the life stories of Jewish women during the Holocaust. The specialties and uniqueness of their experiences are taken into consideration in comparison with men. Next, the thesis offers a brief summary of the plot of each selected work and a short introduction to the work's heroine. Namely, the selected works are *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron with the character Sophie Zawistowska, *Anya* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer with the character Anya Savikin, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry with the character Ellen Rosen and last but not least *White Bird: A Wonder Story* by R. J. Palacio with the character Sara Blum. After their introduction, the characters are compared to one another. Lastly, the thesis determines to what extent are the fictitious stories compatible with the reality of the Holocaust.

Keywords: Holocaust, female characters, American literature, fiction, reality

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## Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	The Holocaust.....	3
3	Women in the Holocaust.....	8
4	Introduction to the Selected Pieces of Literature.....	11
4.1	Sophie's Choice.....	11
4.2	Anya.....	12
4.3	Number the Stars.....	13
4.4	White Bird: A Wonder Story.....	14
5	Comparison of the Selected Characters.....	16
5.1	Sophie Zawistowka and Anya Savikin.....	16
5.2	Ellen Rosen and Sara Blum.....	18
5.3	Sophie Zawistowska and Ellen Rosen.....	20
5.4	Sophie Zawistowska and Sara Blum.....	23
5.5	Anya Savikin and Ellen Rosen.....	25
5.6	Anya Savikin and Sara Blum.....	26
6	Comparison of the Fiction to Real Events of the Holocaust.....	29
6.1	Sophie's Choice and Reality.....	29
6.2	Anya and Reality.....	31
6.3	Number the Stars and Reality.....	33
6.4	White Bird: A Wonder Story and Reality.....	35
7	Conclusion.....	38
8	Bibliography.....	41

# 1 Introduction

This thesis deals with female characters in selected works of prose of American fictitious literature that discusses the period of the Holocaust. The four selected works and characters are William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* with the character Sophie Zawistowska, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* with the character Anya Savikin, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* with the character Ellen Rosen, and R. J. Palacio's *White Bird: A Wonder Story* with the character Sara Blum. The aim of this thesis is to compare each character and her experience to one another and compare each work's story to the reality of the Holocaust.

Firstly, the term the Holocaust is described. It is explained that it has multiple other names and it is also discussed how Jewish people feel about the various terms. A related term antisemitism is also explained and brief history and reasonings for it are provided. When it comes to the history of antisemitism, the main focus is put on the period of the Second World War. Especially then, the various oppressive tactics of Nazi Germany toward Jews and other "unfit" groups of people are discussed. The focus is then shifted to the experiences of Jewish or other women affected by the Holocaust. Special attention is given to the phenomena that were unique to women.

The connection between theory and practice is a brief summary of each plot of the selected works. In the summary, a brief introduction for the character chosen for the comparison is included. This section is included so that the comparisons that follow are easier to understand.

The first comparison in the thesis is that of the characters. Each heroine and her experience are compared to one another. The personality of the character but also the plot of the work and its setting are taken into consideration. In *Sophie's Choice* and *Number the Stars*, the narrator and their reliability also have to be taken into account. The second analysis conducted in this thesis aims to determine to what extent are the stories portrayed in the books similar or compatible with the reality of the Holocaust. Since the authors are Americans and do not have Jewish ancestors, they had a unique opportunity to convey stories of the Holocaust from a different perspective. The aim of this thesis is to determine how true the perspective they offer is.

Besides personal interest, this topic for the thesis was chosen because the books have gained reasonable success. In the Czech context, especially *Sophie's Choice* has gained a lot of attention and it is even a part of many students' reading lists during their secondary education. While it is surely beneficial that the topic of the Holocaust is brought closer to the general public



and even children who have not learned about it yet in school through these novels, it is still important to remember that these characters and stories are just fictional. That, at the same time, does not have to mean that they do not contain anything real within them. The novels just need to be thought of as a first step towards real knowledge. When it comes to why female characters were chosen, it was simply because of my own gender.

## 2 The Holocaust

The Holocaust is a term closely related to the Nazi regime of the Second World War. It is an attempt of Germany's National Socialist regime to exterminate Jews (Bartrop, 8) and other "unfit" individuals such as homosexuals, Roma people, political opponents, or people with health impairments. It is, however, important to note that even though a significant number of these unfit but not Jewish people died, their murders are not part of a calculated genocide. After all, the Holocaust was mainly aimed at the complete disappearance of Jews from Europe (Bartrop, 49-50). The number of people who died in the Holocaust is impossible to count exactly but it is estimated that about six million Jews were murdered. One million of those being children under the age of twelve and another five hundred thousand young adults between the ages of thirteen to eighteen (Bartrop, 8).

After the war, there was not a unified term for the murders occurring during it. The person to break the silence was Raoul Hilberg, a historian that studied the very event that is known today as the Holocaust and called it "the destruction of Jews". The term "The Holocaust" was first introduced to the general public through the television series "The Holocaust" in 1978. It, obviously, existed before the series but thanks to it "The Holocaust" started to be used internationally as a term for the extermination of Jews. The term, however, is not as unified as it may seem. The first problem with it is that historians cannot seem to agree on when the Holocaust started. Some say that it started in 1941 when the murders started to be organized, others say the Holocaust started already in the 1930s. Additionally, it is not clear who exactly was targeted by the Holocaust. Some historians state that it is a term concerning strictly Jewish people. Others include all people considered "unfit" within the term (Maria van Hapener et. al, 20).

Even though some historians consider the term "the Holocaust" to refer strictly to the extermination of Jews, the Jewish people themselves prefer to use a different word (Maria van Hapener et. al, 20). One reason being the before-mentioned mix-up of who is the term really referring to and the second being the translation of the term. In Ancient Greek, "holocaust" means "burnt offering" or "sacrifice". Even though the Jews themselves chose this term during the Second World War, some are not in favour of it today. An example of this sentiment is Amir Ben Dror, an expert on the Holocaust, who is conducting tours and workshops for teachers in Jerusalem. He, personally, does not like the term because it is not of Hebrew origin and more importantly, he does not see the "sacrifice" in the Holocaust. He claims it was a unique genocide that was not a result of political or religious disputes but simply conducted because the Jews

were born (Susskind-Sacks). People like Amir prefer to use the term "Shoah" which is Hebrew and translates to "calamity" or "destruction". Another term of Hebrew origin describing the horrific events happening to Jewish people during the Second World War would be "Churban". It was historically used to describe the fall of the two Temples in Jerusalem and is translated as "catastrophe" in English (Bartrop, 8).

Shoah is not something to come out of the blue. It was more or less a result of centuries-old phenomenon called antisemitism. Antisemitism was an international phenomenon that displayed open hatred towards Jews. These unpleasant feelings people had towards Jews started as soon as the beginning of Christianity. Most notably because they were often blamed for the death of Jesus Christ. From then on, Jews were blamed for plagues and other catastrophes while also being excluded from certain types of professions. After the French revolution, Jewish people were awarded equal rights, however, they were still blamed for wrongs in society such as negative aspects of industrialization. The nineteenth century also brought ideas of racial antisemitism in which Jews were considered "a problem". In twentieth-century Germany, these ideas were supported by a general feeling of dissatisfaction and hurt national pride after the First World War. Nationalism was getting stronger and from 1933 when the Nazi Party came to power there was no doubt that there would be no place for Jews in New Nationalist Germany (Maria van Haperen et. al, 21-22).

The singling-out of Jews was solidified just two years later with Nuremberg Laws on Citizenship and Race. This set of laws defined the position of Jews in society. For instance, Jewish doctors were to only operate on other Jews and Jewish students were expelled from universities. Most importantly, Jews were no longer looked upon as citizens of Germany. It also became illegal for them to marry someone of a different race than Jewish. Because of this, many Jews wanted to leave Germany. These tendencies would occasionally be encouraged by short-term arrests which were supposed to provoke Jews to leave (Bartrop 10).

The first large arrests of Jews happened during the night from 9th to 10th November 1938. In history, this night bears the name "Night of Broken Glass" or "Kristallnacht" in German. On this night, ninety-one Jews were murdered and over thirty thousand were arrested. The real number of lives lost during the night is, however, thought to be higher as most of the murders went unrecorded (Bartrop, 10). Furthermore, shop displays of Jewish stores were destroyed as well as other Jewish property (Maria van Haperen, 22). According to the official propaganda, this night and subsequent arrests were "reprisals" for the assassination of Ernst vom Rath by a Jewish student in Paris some days earlier. It was also presented as a spontaneous

outbreak of hatred against Jews by ordinary German people but in reality, most of the perpetrators were members of the Nazi Party in regular clothes (Bartrop 10-11).

In addition, the Jewish community was ordered to pay for the murder of vom Rath and for the damages to the German state which took the whole situation a step further. Also, after the Night of Broken Glass, it became normal to physically harass Jews. After that, the Jews were sure that this unfriendly atmosphere and the regime were not going to just pass as they thought they would in the past. Therefore, they started to seek refuge in other countries in order to save their lives. At the same time, though, countries were not so keen on the idea of Jewish immigration and more and more territories were annexed to The Third Reich (Bartrop, 11).

German attack on Poland on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 started the Second World War. Poland was divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. Germany's part was renamed Wartheland and was from then on part of the Third Reich. Thanks to the annexation of Poland, two million Jews were now under Germany's control (Maria van Haperen, 23). In October, the ghettos were established. The ghettos were places designed to segregate Polish Jews (Bartrop, 11). It was also supposed to make later deportation of Jews easier. Usually, it was overpopulated with little equipment. Jews were also forced to work in the ghettos (Maria van Haperen et. al, 23-24). Persecution, starvation, and deprivation of medical care were frequent features of life in the ghettos (Bartrop, 11) and it did not really matter in which ghetto you were (Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin) the conditions were more or less similarly terrible in all of them (Maria van Haperen et. al, 24).

In June 1941, operation Barbarossa began which meant Germany attacked the Soviet Union and broke their previous agreement. Hitler believed it was essential to take over the Soviet territory as it had "Living Space" ("Lebensraum") for Germans. As German troops proceeded through Soviet land, their "Special Action Groups" ("Einsatzgruppen") were a few steps behind eliminating all of Germany's enemies. First, it was communists and partisans but of course, the Jews were not waiting long for their turn (Maria van Haperen et. al, 24). The Special Groups would take Jewish men, women, and children outside of their village or town, force them to dig up their own graves, and then shoot them. Later, vans with poisonous carbon replaced this method because its repetition was mentally difficult on the soldiers. Also, it was more economically convenient and sterile (Bartrop 11-12).

In August and September of 1941, the war with the Soviet Union was not looking successful for Germany. It was, therefore, obvious that Jews could not be deported there. The

already overcrowded ghettos were also not infinitely spacious. So, the first purely exterminating camp was established in Chełmno (Maria van Haperen et. al, 27). This is thought to be the moment when Hitler definitely decided to wipe out all Jews (Bartrop, 12). After all, according to his logic, if the Jews were to start another war, they would be exterminated, and since the World War was already happening, the Germans only needed a plan on how to exterminate them (Maria van Haperen et. al, 27).

The Final Solution or "Endlösung" (Maria van Haperen et. al, 28) was first presented at the conference in Wansee, Berlin on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1942. The plan was coordinated between relevant government departments and in the following months, more death camps were established in Poland. They were called Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek and Belzec. With the exception of Auschwitz, which was also a concentration and working camp, they did not serve any other purpose than murder. During the summer of 1942, the ghettos were gradually liquidated and the Jews living there were sent to one of the six existing camps (Bartrop, 12).

The situation overall got worse for Jews in 1942. In ghettos, they were dying of starvation and exhaustion. During the raids on ghettos in order to move Jews to the camps children and people with disabilities were shot on the spot. The same treatment awaited anyone who tried to escape or resist. After that, they were either walked outside of their village or town to be shot or transported to one of the extermination camps. When Jews arrived to the camp they were stripped of their personal belongings, their head was shaved and they were forced into "a shower" to disinfect. Instead, they were gassed to death in a gas chamber. Sometimes, selection took place, where people were selected according to their ability to work or not. People not fit to work were gassed (Maria van Hapener, 33-35).

The war, however, started to take a turn for the worse for the Third Reich. First, the Nazi army started to withdraw on the Eastern Front and later (1944) on the Western Front as well. That caused the Germans to focus more on the annihilation of Jews once more while there is still time. This focus was mainly aimed at the Jews of Hungary, which were untouched by German's effort to exterminate them until now. Also, the extermination of Hungarian Jews could take place only at Auschwitz as the other camps were evacuated due to the approach of the Soviet Army (Bartrop, 14).

Evacuation of camps is better known under the term "death marches". The prisoners were forced to walk for long periods of time to unknown destinations without break and as a

result, many of them died (Bartrop 14-15). The people that survived the marches were placed in Western camps where they awaited liberation from the Allies (Maria van Haperen et. al, 39). The last major camp, Mauthausen, was liberated on 8th May by the American army (Bartrop, 15).

After liberation, many people found themselves without homes or places to return to. To overcome this situation, the Displaced Persons camps were established. Although not very suitable at first, once improvement measures were taken and a feeling of routine was present, people started working to improve their situation building churches, synagogues, and even attempts at cultural and educational life were made. However, many Jewish refugees did not wish to remain in Europe and wanted to return to the British Mandate of Palestine. This was problematic, as the British forbid the admission of Jews in an effort to not offend the Arab population. Therefore, many Jews immigrated illegally. This was solved by the creation of Israel in 1948. Some fled westward immediately after the war due to the fear of the Soviets (Bartrop 123-125).

Crimes of war were punished by the Nuremberg Trials which took place from 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1945 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 1946. In these trials, 24 of the men thought to be the most notable war criminals stood in front of the judge. Twelve of them were sentenced to death. Many of the convicted, however, remained unpunished until as late as 2011 (Maria van Haperen, 39-40).

### **3 Women in the Holocaust**

As mentioned before, the Holocaust targeted all Jews including men, women, and even children. Roma, Polish, and women with disabilities were also targeted. However, as with nearly all life's experiences, men and women experienced the Holocaust differently. Of course, not entirely differently, but some of the experiences men and women faced were shaped by their gender (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Before the war, men's and women's responsibilities were entirely different in Western culture. Women usually stayed home while men went outside of the home to take care of business and financially supported their families. This resulted in women being isolated and not having people to turn to for help during the Nazi terror. In Eastern Europe, however, women brought another culture into their homes and contributed to their family's funds. In Poland for example, Jewish girls went to Polish schools more than Jewish boys so they were accompanied more by Polish culture and people. Jewish women, therefore, had contacts to help them if needed. If they passed as Aryans they could even live illegally outside of the ghetto. Although it may seem like an advantage now, it was not always that way. Especially unmarried women were conditioned to care for their parents which led to them going in transports to camps because they thought it was just to relocate. When it became clear they would not come back from these transports, some still insisted on accompanying their family members (Ofer, Weitzman).

A big part of gender differentiation during the Holocaust was also shaped by Jewish expectations of the Nazis. Initially, the Jews thought that mainly or only men would be the target of the Holocaust. This caused women to take more of an active role in society. They physically went outside more than men in an attempt to protect their husbands or sons. The men were advised not to be seen in daylight as they were thought to be at a higher risk of an arrest. Additionally, it was often times women who went to the police and tried to get their husbands or sons out of their custody. They would argue with the police and when they found out they just needed to be bribed they found the means to get what they wanted to retrieve their husbands. Since men were thought to be the primary target, they were also encouraged to escape to other countries more. For example, during the war, women formed the majority of the inhabitants of Warsaw (Ofer, Weitzman).

At first, the assumptions were true because in the first days of the war truly only men were targeted. A great example of this is "The Night of Broken Glass" in which only men were arrested and sent to camps. Men were also more likely to be harassed on the streets and

imprisoned. As the war progressed, however, the harassment extended to women also. Mostly, women were humiliated with a sexual undertone. They were, for example, forced to undress in front of Nazi officers or strange men and be touched and mocked. Despite this, they were not subjected to violent harassment until the liquidation of the ghettos which could not be said for Jewish men. When it comes to sexually motivated harm, it is needed to note that even though in some instances men and women were treated equally, the perception of the act was different. For instance, when both sexes were forced to undress in front of German guards, the experience was seen as more humiliating towards women. Both sexes had to endure invasive searches and examinations as well. Although men do not recall it to be pleasant, they only ever speak of being stripped of their identity. Whereas women report having felt sexually violated and degraded. Even though rarely, there are also testimonies of Jewish women being raped by the Nazi officers (Ofer, Weitzman).

Although Ofer and Weitzman state that rape was rare and they were more afraid of the thought it could happen than it actually happening, the Holocaust Encyclopaedia declares that women, in fact, were subjected to sexual violence while doing forced labour in the Reich and in the camps. In return for the favour of a sexual manner, the guards would give the workers food or other comfort items. Sometimes, these instances resulted in a pregnancy. If the child from this pregnancy was determined not fit for Germanization the mother would be forced to have an abortion or would be sent to provisory nurseries which was almost a guaranteed death sentence for both the mother and the child. In some camps, there were also established brothels where women were forced to work (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Perhaps the most important distinction between men and women was that of mothers and fathers. In the ghettos, there were often times policies requiring a Jewish woman that fell pregnant to get an abortion. In the camps, it also was not desirable to fall pregnant. If a woman was visibly pregnant during selection, she was sent to the gas chamber. If she, however, managed to hide the pregnancy and carry the baby to term she was risking her and the baby's health. To limit the difficulties connected to having children in the camp, physicians usually hid poison to feed the new-borns once they were born. If the guards found out both the baby and the mother would be sent to the gas chamber. The same went for mothers who had young children on their hands during selection (Ofer, Weitzman).

In some cases, the women could choose to either go to work or accompany their children to the gas chamber. When they discovered that they were not saving their children by working, they often chose to go with their off-springs (Ofer, Weitzman). There, however, were also



instances where mothers would try to save their own life abandoning their children. During the selection, they would hide from the child so they would be sent to work and not to be gassed. The guards would then use psychological manipulation to track the mother down and sent her with her child to the gas chamber (Baumel-Schwartz). Ultimately, the connection between women's and children's fates was what caused many deaths of young Jewish women and what made their experience that much different from that of Jewish men (Ofer, Weitzman).

Men's and women's experiences during the Holocaust can also be distinguished by their coping mechanisms in the camps. One thing everyone in the camps had to cope with was hunger. Both genders experienced it, however, they dealt with it differently. Although both genders would talk about food in order to have at least a metaphorical connection to it, they would talk about it in differing ways. The men would go on about the dishes they will enjoy once the war is over. On the other hand, women were sharing recipes among themselves. This could be a result of two factors. The first one being the roles before the war. Women were used to cooking while men only ate. Also, it was a process of teaching younger female prisoners to cook since they had no other resources to learn because once the war was over, they were expected to fulfil their household duties of cooking (Baumel-Schwartz).

When in the camps, the women also developed something called "lagerchwestern" relationships. In English called "sister-like" relationships, were bonds between women that were not related whatsoever but acted as if they were sisters. They mutually helped each other and encouraged each other. Some of them might have known each other from a time before the war but the majority of these relationships formed when in the camps. This was also strengthened by sharing the recipes. They basically encouraged each other to survive by mutual assistance and thinking of the future. Sister-like bonds are specific to women. No "brotherly" alternative can be found among men. (Ofer, Weitzman).

One of the smallest distinctions between men's and women's coping was the way they handled the clothes they received in the camps. The clothes were distributed randomly regardless of gender or size. Due to this, the clothes would often not fit the recipient. The men would just wear the clothes not caring about the appropriateness. The women, however, somehow found a way to adjust the clothing to their size. They would sew the garments with makeshift needles and threads from a blanket which they also received when they arrived in the camp. This, again, points to different attitudes of the genders toward imprisonment (Ofer, Weitzman).

## 4 Introduction to the Selected Pieces of Literature

### 4.1 Sophie's Choice

*Sophie's Choice* is a novel by William Styron published in 1979. Although the name might suggest differently, the whole book is narrated by Stingo, a southern aspiring writer. In the late 1940s, Stingo moves to Brooklyn, New York, where he first works at a publishing house. After quitting, he moves to a cheap housing arrangement to focus on his writing. There he meets Nathan Landau and Sophie Zawistowska, lovers living up the stairs from him. Nathan, a Jewish American, is thought to be a cellular biologist but later in the book, it is discovered to be a lie. In fact, he is abusing drugs and suffers from schizophrenia. Sophie, a Polish Catholic, is a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The novel is composed into chapters mostly chronologically with occasional flashbacks to first Stingo's past and then Sophie's. The protagonist is characterized by being young and sexually unfulfilled. He, therefore, immediately takes interest in Sophie. Throughout the course of the plot, he serves as emotional support for Sophie because her position in life is challenging. Her relationship with Nathan is abusive as he suffers from major jealousy issues which then correspond with his mental illness. Interactions between the couple can quickly switch from loving to emotionally and even physically abusive.

As the novel progresses, Stingo also finds out more and more about Sophie's past and life in the concentration camp. When narrating her memories, however, she often conceals the real events and changes the stories only for the truth to be revealed later. Also, it is unclear how genuine Stingo's concern for Sophie really is because of his before-mentioned borderline obsession with sex and romantic interest in her. In the end, he even wants to run off with her to his homeland in the US South, Virginia. That happens because Nathan has another one of his jealous outbursts accusing him and Sophie of having an affair. On the journey there, Stingo learns Sophie's deepest secret. In the camp, she had to choose between her children which one of them would live. In a panic, she chose her daughter to be gassed and left her son to live in the camp. Despite her attempts to save him while imprisoned, she never learned what happened to him. Even after hearing this Stingo does not lose interest in Sophie and they spend the night together. In the morning, Stingo learns that Sophie decided to run back to Nathan. Together, the lovers decided to act out a suicide pact Nathan had proposed earlier (Styron, 9-710).

As the main narrator is not Sophie it is difficult to characterize her. We see Sophie as Stingo sees her and because of his idealized picture of her, it is challenging to distinguish her real personality. Stingo portrays Sophie as a beautiful victim who did not deserve the treatment

she got in life. Firstly, the treatment from Nathan and later, when he discovers the happenings of Auschwitz, her faith there. It would, however, be a lie to say that she was only the victim. For example, when it comes to her relationship with Nathan, she keeps coming back to him. It is true that she does not have many options as to where to go, however, when the opportunity to run away with Stingo presents itself, she still decides to go back to Nathan.

## 4.2 Anya

*Anya* is the second novel written by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, which was first published in 1974. As opposed to *Sophie's Choice*, *Anya* is narrated in the first person singular so the readers get to know her thoughts and feelings first hand and not perceived by someone else.

The story follows the life of Anya Savikin and her family. They are Jews of Russian origin, although, at the start of the book, Anya mentions she is not religious, nor is her father (Schaeffer, 3). The book is divided into three parts that are bordered by an introductory prologue and an ending epilogue.

Set in Poland's Vilno (Nowadays, the town belongs to Lithuania), the first part of the book, titled "In History", talks about Anya's adolescence, and life before the war. This part is focused mainly on happy memories of Anya. The house she lived in with her family is described, what was the relationship she had with each member of the family like, how were her maids... In this part, the main topic except for descriptions is Anya's attendance of medical school. Then, however, after a little convincing, she marries Stajoe Lavinsky, moves with him to Warsaw, and quits medical school which she ends up never finishing. Because of that, she works on and off as a nurse before, during, and after the war. The happiest moment for Anya, though, is when her daughter Ninka is born. Unfortunately, not everything is always positive even in this part. Occasionally, there is a pogrom on Jews or even Jewish women specifically (Schaeffer, 9-126).

The second part is called "Biblical Times". In this part, the fairy tale of Anya's life so far starts to disintegrate. The war breaks out and after she convinces Stajoe to move back to Vilno, the whole family is moved into a ghetto. There, her family members, including Stajoe, leave Anya one by one. The only one left is her mother, with whom she is separated from just before transportation. Her daughter Ninka was smuggled out of the ghetto before its liquidation, therefore, Anya was not sure where she is or what happened to her (Schaeffer, 129-215).

The third part of the book details Anya's journey in the Kaiserwald labour camp and after the war. The happenings in Kaiserwald are described as if it was normal. The characters even joke around sometimes. The protagonist ends up getting close to a secretary of a Hauptmann who helps her escape the camp. After escape, she spends the rest of the war in the home of Ninka's substitute parents, in Riga. Therefore, reuniting with her. Anya is no longer the person she was before the war and relies on her memories to keep her alive. In the end, she decides to move to America and even though she has got married again, she feels misunderstood and lonely. Her little Ninka has married off and had children of her own. She wants to travel a lot and does not care too much about a close-net family bond like Anya used to have with her family. (Schaeffer, 215-464).

The novel is very descriptive. Generally, Schaffer herself admitted it was crucial for her to convey the lives of Holocaust victims before the war as accurately as possible. In addition, memories are very important in this novel as it creates a sort of reality for the protagonist. Therefore, the book contains a lot of recollections in general (Schaeffer, 493-494). Schaeffer is also a poet which plays nicely into the more lyrical parts of the novel (Kolář, 87).

Even though Anya is the narrator of her story, her true character is not as clear. She mainly focuses on family and the relationships between the members. She is especially focused on her mother and later on Ninka. She, therefore, is mainly characterized by her relationship with others as opposed to her own personality traits. Most importantly, Anya lives in memories. Memories are her sense of reality and what keeps her alive (Kolář, 105). For her, it is not important how she lives now but how she used to live with her family and late husband.

### **4.3 Number the Stars**

*Number the Stars* is a novel by Lois Lowry originally published in 1989. This piece of literature differs from the previous ones by being a children's book. The story, therefore, also follows a child protagonist as well as the plot is much simpler so that it is easier to grasp for the target audience. It is divided into chapters chronologically and narrated in the third person singular.

The story is set in the autumn months of 1943's Denmark and follows the protagonist Annemarie and her Jewish best friend Ellen. Annemarie and Ellen live in the same building and their families are also friendly. On Jewish New Year, Ellen and her family visit a synagogue where they are told that they are going to be "relocated" as members of the Jewish community.

To avoid this, Ellen is left with Annemarie's family and pretends to be her older late sister when the Germans come looking for Ellen's family (Lowry, 9-67).

The next day, Annemarie, her mother, and Ellen travel to Gilleleje, a fishing town just over the sea to neutral Sweden. The protagonist's uncle, Henrik, makes living as a fisherman there. First, both girls are just playing at his house and do not know why they are there. Then, slowly, Annemarie is realizing what is going on and what is about to happen. When she asks, however, she is told to not ask many questions, as that prevents her from being "brave" (Lowry, 68-106).

During one night, Ellen's parents and three other Jews come into the house for a supposed mourning custom. In reality, though, all of them are smuggled into Sweden by Uncle Henrik's boat. The book ends with the end of the war and a hopeful Annemarie wishing to see her friend again (Lowry 107-170).

Although the story is narrated in the third person singular, the story mostly follows Annemarie and her thoughts. The narrator cannot read any other person's mind except Annemarie's and when there is an attempt to do so it is just her assumptions. It is, therefore, challenging to know how Ellen felt during the whole book. Except for the fact that she was terrified, of course, which Annemarie is able to see through her face expression and assumption based on her own feelings. The book also contains little to no descriptive scenes that would convey Ellen's feelings. The only personality trait that is talked about extensively in the book is bravery. Annemarie considers Ellen to be very brave for lying to the Germans about her identity. She also thinks highly of her for enduring the voyage to Sweden. Annemarie's and the other characters' bravery is also talked about periodically.

#### **4.4 White Bird: A Wonder Story**

*White Bird* is the newest and most innovative piece of literature in this selection. It is a graphic novel written by R. J. Palacio in 2019. Based on the content, it would target the young adult demographic very well. It is narrated retrospectively in the first person singular by the protagonist Sara Blum. The book is divided into three parts and those parts are bordered by a prologue and epilogue, similar to *Anya*.

The book starts in present-day's France with a FaceTime call between a grandmother Sara and her grandson Julian. Julian asks Sara to tell him the story about her experience during the Second World War. The grandmother is a little apprehensive about it at first but in the end, she agrees to do it (Palacio, 3-7).

The first part of her story starts in 1940 when France surrendered and became divided into two parts. Sara and her parents lived in the part that was not occupied. Her life was like a fairy tale. Until one day, when the Germans entered her school and searched for Jews to take them somewhere. The teachers rushed her and the other Jewish children out of the school to hide them in the woods. Sara, however, does not feel like walking in the snow, so she runs back to the school and hides there. Unfortunately, a boy whose parents are sympathizing with the Nazis tells the soldiers that the children were hidden before they arrived. The Germans find the children and take them away. Sara is later found by Julien, a classmate of hers, that takes her to a barn near his house and hides her there (Palacio, 11-70).

In the second part, Sara is just hiding in the barn. Julien and his parents bring her food, clothes, and water. Through this time, she and Julien start to fall in love with one another which is confirmed to be mutual one night when they go on a walk and kiss for the first time. The next day, however, Sara is almost killed by the very same boy that told the Germans about the forest hiding earlier (Vincent) but she escapes. The same cannot be said for Julien, though. That day he was arrested and murdered by the Nazis (Palacio. 70-178).

The third part talks about the events right after the war. Although Sara lost her mother during the first part, she reunites with her father in this one. They move to Paris together. She says, however, that she visits Julien's parents every summer. In the epilogue, Julian, Sara's grandson, thanks his grandmother for sharing her story as they both end the FaceTime call in tears (Palacio, 179-204).

Although the book is a little more mature than the previous one presented, there still was not much space to introduce the protagonist's personality. Also, this is a graphic novel, therefore, descriptive parts are challenging to incorporate into the plot. Based on her actions though, Sara is smart and courageous. It is possible that she is a little stubborn sometimes. Most of the time though, she is bored in the barn, thinks about her family and when the war will end. Additionally, the book is heavily focused on the love story between Sara and Julien so for the most part, Julien is the person Sara thinks about. Even though Sara is understandably scared to be found by the Germans, the war is more in the background of this story rather than in its centre.

## 5 Comparison of the Selected Characters

### 5.1 Sophie Zawistowska and Anya Savikin

Sophie's and Anya's stories are pretty comparable. They both come from upper-middle-class backgrounds. The war catches them both at similar ages. They also have had similar experiences thus far. Both of them were married and had children, even though Anya's Ninka was significantly younger than Sophie's Eva and Jan. From this fact, it could be deduced that Sophie was a few years older than Anya.

Starting from the basic facts about the novels, they are similar in length. The story-telling is different, though. For Sophie, even though she is telling her story, the narrator of the book is Stingo. The parts where she is recollecting her past are not so frequent, therefore her story is presented rather in retrospective bits and pieces here and there, in the novel, than in a coherent plot. The reader actually does not get to know so much about her. Additionally, the structure of the book can be confusing at times as the actual plot is set in 1947. In *Anya*, however, there are no interruptions to the story-telling. Actually, the only touch of "present time" the reader gets is in the prologue and epilogue. In addition, the story is narrated in the first person singular, so there are no possible mistakes in the transmission of the information Anya wants to convey. Thematically, the novels differ as well. Anya works incredibly hard to keep all her memories and tries to hold on to them almost obsessively as they are all she has left. On the other hand, Sophie wants to forget everything in her past and move on without feeling guilty. Sadly, she is unable to do so.

Before the start of the war, they both had relatively similar lives. Both of them were married and had a child, or in Sophie's case, two children. Both of them lived in Poland. What, however, differentiated them was their nationality which later determined their faith. Sophie was Polish. Anya was of Jewish Russian origin. Being Polish, Sophie worked in a factory and had she not stolen a ham, she would not have ended up in a concentration camp. Anya, however, had more certain faith as she was put into a Jewish ghetto and then was transported to a camp. Another similar aspect is that before they went to their respective camps, their husbands died.

As was mentioned, both of them were incarcerated in a concentration camp. For Sophie, it was Auschwitz and for Anya it was Kaiserwald. Auschwitz was an extermination camp, whereas Kaiserwald was "only" a labour camp. Anya's author justifies this as more digestible for the readers (Schaeffer, 495-496). Regardless of the type of camp, neither of the characters had an experience as a regular worker there. Both Sophie and Anya earned privileged spots in the camp's hierarchy. Sophie is considered "a valuable worker" because she has experience

with typing. Her job in the camp is to type on a typewriter for Rudolph Höss. She also does not sleep in the barracks with the rest of the incarcerated but in Höss' basement. Anya is not working like every other prisoner either. For her, the main reason for this is the secretary of the head of the camp, Erdmann. He protects her and does favours for her. He even helps her sneak out of the camp. When it comes to escaping the camp, Sophie, of course, thinks about it. Instead, however, she opts to convince Höss to let her son Jan go from the camp and put him in the Lebensborn program.

That brings another significant difference between the characters—their children while they were in the camp. Before the transportation, Anya decides to leave Ninka on the stairs of the church. Therefore, she goes through the camp without her daughter. Later, she is happily reunited with her. Sophie, sadly, goes to the camp with both of her children. At selection, she chooses the eight-year-old Eva to be gassed and the ten-year-old Jan to live. She and Jan, however, never reunite. When she is asked by Nathan what happened to him, she answers she does not know. “He is just lost. Lost.”, she says (Styron, 479).

Even before the war, the characters differed in their personality. Sophie has not had much of it, to tell the truth. She always did what others wanted from her, particularly her father. She married a guy he wanted her to—a man that was actually similar to him, or maybe just easily manipulated by him. She also typed out his lectures and handed out his pamphlets. Both her husband and her father thought very low of her and let her know the fact, therefore, she likely suffered from low self-esteem. Anya, on the other hand, was a little bit spoiled throughout her life. This manifests for example, when her youngest brother Mischa sleeps comfortably in her bed and she kicks him out because he brought “germs and dirt” into her sheets. This attitude of hers got better over time, though. Because the story is told by the fifty-two-year-old Anya, to this event she says: “I was terrible, terrible.” (Schaeffer, 17).

The events during the war, however, only deepened the pit between the character's personalities. Sophie having lost her children mourns them constantly. She also feels great amount of guilt over sending her daughter to the gas chamber. Anya is also focused on her daughter but in a different way. She looks for her everywhere and when she is by her side, she never wants to let her go. After the war, Sophie's guilt only deepens. She desperately tries to forget the events of the Holocaust and in an attempt to do so she drinks excessively. The fact she is in an abusive relationship does not help her either as Nathan guilt trips her all the time with accusations of infidelity. Ultimately, those can be the reasons she chose to take her life away. Contrary to Sophie, Anya is trying to keep her memories of her late family members



alive. She lives in her memories and survives in the real world. By extension of this logic, she is saddened by the fact that Ninka is not family oriented. Rather, she does not care to maintain as close relationship with her mother as Anya had with hers. She keeps her depression more hidden compared to Sophie. She feels her life is basically over but she still chooses to live and cherish her memories.

When it comes to the aspect of Sophie and Anya being women in the Holocaust, both of them had different experiences as well. In the camp, Sophie is coerced into a sexual act with a female co-worker. She also mentions having relations with her friend Wanda. Additionally, she tries to seduce Rudolph Höss. In the novel, she is actually quite sexualized. However, that remains true and maybe even multiplies after the war. She even says she never knew she could “like it” as much as she does (Styron, 435). Anya is not as liberated as Sophie but she does endure more threats of and actual sexual violence. During the pre-war time, there is more than one pogrom aimed specifically at shaming women. She also endures highly invasive medical examination in the camp. Although she does not describe it as being particularly humiliating or really her feelings about it at all, it still can be considered quite horrifying.

Anya and Sophie have probably the most similar experiences out of all of the selected heroines. Still, there are differences between them to be found. Both of them, however, experienced the Holocaust through the eyes of a woman.

## **5.2 Ellen Rosen and Sara Blum**

Both *Number the Stars* and *The White Bird* are stories catered for and about young people. *Number the Stars* is a children’s book so the length and writing style operates in accordance with the fact. Therefore, the book is focused on the plot rather than explanations or descriptions. Also, the book is not narrated by a Jewish character Ellen but by her best friend Annemarie. All information known about her, therefore, is given to the reader from a point of view of someone else. *The White Bird* is closer to a young adult novel as the main character, Sara, is followed during her teenage years for most of the book. Being a graphic novel, the focus is again mostly on the plot. There are, however, a few exceptions like memories, dreams, or depictions of events the main character could not have been a part of. It is important to note that the whole story is a retrospective. Although the narrator is Sara herself, she tells the story from the point of view of an old grandma to her grandchild, not a teenage girl. That is why scenes that she could not have been a part of appear (Fishman). After the war, she surely received information that helped her to get the whole picture, and to make the story clearer for her grandson, she had to include it.

Although at first glance the books and characters might seem alike since the target audience is, there are few actual similarities. One of them, however, is that both characters start their journey at ten years of age (Fishman). *Number the Stars* has only a few months' time span though, whereas *The White Bird* follows Sara from the start of the war to its end. It is only natural, then, that she grows older during the events the book portrays. The only known character trait that is actually common for both of the girls is courage.

Ellen is applauded for her bravery when she pretends to be Annemarie's sister. Technically, it is Annemarie's father who comes up with the evidence but Ellen still gets credit for saying out loud a different name when she is asked by a soldier to clarify who she is (Lowry, 65-67). It needs to be taken into consideration that Ellen is very young and very afraid so even such an "insignificant" action as saying a different name can be considered brave. Additionally, Ellen has to lie to the Nazis directly, while Sara is faced with Vincent who is in collaboration with the Germans but she attended the same class with him. Therefore, she knows her main threat on a personal level which helps her in dealing with him. What is more, Vincent does not have the authority to arrest Sara. Since he is the same age as her, he is not an official officer yet. Thus, he would have to call his higher-ups to arrest her which would give her time to escape.

That does not mean that Sara is less courageous than Ellen. Although she is in hiding for most of her story, she has smaller instances of bravery throughout the book. For example, she has to get through the sewers to the barn Julien is hiding her in (Palacio 60-62). The act itself does not seem too difficult in the grand scheme of the latest events. From an ordinary point of view, however, it is not a pleasant experience. Another example of Sara's courage is the scene where she escapes Vincent who is trying to kill her. Technically a wolf saves her because it kills Vincent before he gets a chance to kill her. The brave action here is that she does not even flinch when the wolf appears (Palacio, 154-157). Additionally, after this wolf incident, she runs to Julien's family's house to try to save him after she found his notebook in Vincent's bag (Palacio, 160-162). That is dangerous because his neighbours are believed to collaborate with the Germans which proves to be untrue in this very scene. While running there, however, she does not know that yet, so she is putting her life in danger. That could be considered courageous. On the other hand, she is in love with Julien so she might not be as brave as just blinded by love and scared of losing him. Nonetheless, it was a hazardous move that needed bravery from Sara regardless of the actual reason this action was motivated by.

Despite previously mentioned similarities, there are also many differences between the characters. Although both characters spend the war in hiding, the hiding of both has different features. Sara is hidden in a barn in France. Throughout the whole war period she can theoretically be found by the Germans. Ellen is first hidden at Annemarie's home and then at Uncle Henrik's, which is comparable to Sara's situation. After that, however, she leaves for Sweden and although the book does not follow her story, it is suggested that she and her family live a free life in Sweden. Their family situation is another difference between Sara and Ellen. Ellen is, after hiding in Annemarie's family, reunited with her parents. Sara is not in contact with her parents throughout the war at all. After the war, she finds her father but unfortunately learns that her mother had passed away in a camp. That brings another difference—Sara has lost a parent, whereas, Ellen has not. In addition, Sara has lost Julien, her first love. Ellen has not had anyone close to her pass away. It is safe to say then, that Sara's war experience was more depressing than that of Ellen's even though both books are portrayed to have a happy ending.

Both girls are also interested in art. For each of them, there is a different area of art they are interested in, though. Sara draws a lot and Ellen likes to act. Ellen is picked out in school plays a lot and considers making it her career. Sara just does it for fun. For both of them, though, their art is a way of their survival. Ellen has to act like Annemarie's sister and only because she is skilled in acting and has courage can she do it (Campo). To Sara, her drawing has a more therapeutic character. It is an activity to pass the time as well as a tool to organize her thoughts while in hiding.

Overall, similarities and differences can be found in the characters. In relation to the war, both of them had different journeys and different ways of dealing with them. It is also important to note that while being female, both of the girls are very young in the stories so it cannot be said that they experienced the Holocaust through the eyes of a grown woman. Therefore, the experiences of the other two characters, Sophie and Anya, differ significantly.

### **5.3 Sophie Zawistowska and Ellen Rosen**

At first glance, there is not much *Sophie's Choice* and *Number the Stars* have in common. The main issues when comparing these two books are the target demographic of the books and the age difference between the characters. As mentioned before, *Number the Stars* is a children's book. Therefore, it is age appropriate for its readers. It somewhat shies away from describing terrifying details full of gore. In fact, although Ellen is confronted by the German officers more than once in the book, the dangerous transportation is orchestrated by

the adults without her knowledge. In a way, she is spared a lot of emotional stress. She is told what to do, instead of having to make oftentimes very difficult and life-changing decisions. The same cannot be said about *Sophie's Choice*. It is definitely a novel intended to be read by adults. The content is emotionally heavy and the happenings in the book are often rather depressive. That is only concerning Sophie's memories. In the "present day", the book is not fit for children either, as it is sexually explicit and depicts an unhealthy attitude to sex and relationships. On top of that, even though Sophie heavily relies on Nathan and others for making decisions for her, he is highly unstable and therefore, she always ends up alone, having to make decisions herself.

The characters are incomparable when it comes to their age as well. Actually, Ellen is closer to Sophie's daughter's age than her own. Ellen is supposed to be ten years old and Eva—Sophie's daughter—is eight years old. Their experiences in the books mirror their age. One example of this, as mentioned before, would be making decisions. Ellen, being a child, is rather passed around than deciding anything. Often times, she does not even know what is happening or what is the plan. Sophie is an adult, therefore, she should make decisions for herself and additionally, for her children. At the same time though, Sophie has learned that her opinion is unimportant and to be obedient to other people's demands. She is capable of making choices and at her age she should be able to decide what she wants but it seems she is too people pleasing to express what she truly wants a lot of the times. Still, even if she agrees to do something to please others, she, in reality, hides her true feelings and the choice that she makes by herself.

Another experience that is too mature for Ellen and, therefore, inaccessible for her would be the experience of romantic relationships. The only relationships Ellen is part of are those with her parents, Annemarie, and by extension Annemarie's parents and Uncle Henrik. No romantic interest or even a meaningless childhood "crush" is mentioned, in fact, for both Ellen and Annemarie. The focus is simply on their friendship. Sophie, on the other hand, has experienced romantic and even sexual relationships. In better words, she has maintained relationships with men. When it comes to romance though, it is unclear if Sophie has ever truly been in love. Her husband was not a good match for her and Nathan was abusive. Her true feelings toward Stingo remain foggy as she ultimately chose to commit suicide with Nathan. That can be seen as saying she loves him and not Stingo. However, the act can also be blamed on the intense guilt she felt regarding her most crucial life choice which does not have anything to do with truly loving Nathan. In fact, it could be considered an easy way out for her or a means to an end. It is certain, though, that Sophie has not suffered a shortage of male interest in her

life. After all, even in the novel's present time, she had two people romantically pursuing her at the same time. Romance is something Ellen will surely experience later in life. However, at the time of the novel, it is simply something completely outside of her age group experience and the plot of the novel.

Another large part of the plots that is different for the characters is the experience of a concentration camp. Sophie, even though she did not have regular experience working there, experienced the Auschwitz extermination camp. Ellen, on the other hand, did not. She was lucky enough to escape to the safety of Sweden. At the same time, this could be due to the area the novels were set in. Sophie, living in Poland, is literally closer to the camps than Ellen. Therefore, she has a higher probability of ending up in one of them. Also, as was mentioned before, Ellen's story is supposed to be read by children. If Lowry were to put her in a camp, she would have to describe her suffering there, which might be inappropriate with a novel targeted at children.

What they have in common though, is that both of them escaped the danger of being killed by the Germans. Sophie survived the camp and went to the United States after the end of the war. Ellen was smuggled by a boat to neutral Sweden. Both of them got to see the end of the war. At least, when it comes to Ellen, it is suggested so when, at the very end of the novel, Annemarie's father says: "When the Rosens come home, you can give it [Ellen's necklace with the Star of David] back to Ellen." (Lowry, 170). Therefore, it is suggested that Ellen will live long after the end of the book. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Sophie. Although she survives the war, she does not live a long life after it. After spending the night with Stingo, he returns to their rental housing to find the police and ambulance there. After he is let inside, he sees Sophie and Nathan laying in an embrace peacefully. He is, however, advised "not to look them in their faces" as they swallowed sodium cyanide (Styron, 698-699).

The main similarity between the characters is that both of their stories are narrated to the reader through someone else. Stingo is the narrator of Sophie and Annemarie is Ellen's. Both narrators are, of course, different. Even though *Number the Stars* is told in the third person singular, the main character is still Annemarie. Therefore, everything known about Ellen is through the thoughts of Annemarie. Stingo, however, writes Sophie's story as almost a means of an autobiography. Everything the reader knows of Sophie is told by her to Stingo, who interprets it a certain way. Rather, he narrates it to the reader in a certain way. His story lies under hers. It emerges from hers (Law, 50). No such thing can be said about Ellen and

Annemarie as even though Annemarie is the protagonist, Ellen is not used as a tool to tell her story. They both exist in it.

Sophie Zawistowska and Ellen Rosen both have valid experiences of the Holocaust. However, their respective stories differ a lot. The biggest reason why is their massive age difference which is obviously reflected in their journeys. Ellen, due to her young age, has an experience of a child, whereas Sophie's experience is that of an adult woman.

#### **5.4 Sophie Zawistowska and Sara Blum**

Sophie and Sara have a lot of the same differences between them as Sophie and Ellen. Again, the characters are divided by their age difference and by extension the target audience of readers of each book. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, *Sophie's Choice* is a read for adults. *White Bird: A Wonder Story* is a coming-of-age graphic novel for young adults. Therefore, some mature topics are touched upon but not as bluntly as in Sophie's Choice.

When it comes to the age of the characters, Sophie is an adult and does not really go through major changes throughout the plot. Her character growth is contained in uncovering her secrets. Her main challenge is to overcome her fear and guilt and say what really happened in her past. Sara, on the other hand, starts out the book in her younger years and ends it being a teenager. It is only logical then, that her character goes through major changes. The best example of this would be her relationship with Julien. At first, she did not hate him or find him weird like all of the other kids in her class but she did not really talk to him either. In the end, though, she ends up falling in love with him. That could be interpreted as her realising that it does not matter what others look like if their personality is beautiful. Also, by this action, she no longer relies on the opinion of her social group (her classmates) but bases what she thinks of Julien on her own experience with him.

Their significant age difference, of course, is again highlighted by experiences of Sophie that are just unreachable for Sara, yet. The biggest example of this would be Sophie's drinking and sexual relationships. In the whole book of *White Bird*, there is no mention of alcohol even in passing as "a thing for adults". In *Sophie's Choice*, the activities not involving alcohol and other substances are, in fact, rarer than those where the characters get at least "a little tipsy". Especially Sophie is described as having a high tolerance to alcohol (Styron, 431).

Sexual relationships are also off the table for Sara. She is romantically involved with Julien, who is her first love. Sex is not even talked about in the book, though. Her feelings for Julien are gradually presented throughout the book and when they go for their one and only

date, they share only a mutual first kiss. The depiction of it is almost fairytale-like. First of all, it is almost like a dream come true for both Sara and Julien. They both have had the other in mind for a while (Palacio, 138-139). Secondly, due to the age range of an average *White Bird's* reader, it is better if love has a magical feel to it. It could potentially be seen as problematic if a character in YA fiction experienced a "love affair" similar to Sophie's.

Sophie's relationships are far more pragmatic and sexual. She marries her husband Kazimir but admits to not liking him as he shared her father's opinions about Sophie's supposedly low intelligence and belittled her (Styron, 342). Nathan, her other lover, also did not think too highly of Sophie. Due to his altered mental state, he was often cruel to her physically and emotionally. Despite all of this, when he asks to marry her, she is beyond excited. She expresses deep sadness over the fact that she now realises that it was just the substances talking out of him and he did not mean it seriously (Styron, 452-453). At the same time, she never mentions she loves him, just that she feels awful without him and has to go back to him. An example of this would be her goodbye letter to Stingo. She does not like leaving Stingo as he's "a great lover" but she feels a need to go back to Nathan (Styron, 688).

Another thing that is different for both of the characters is their experience of the war. Sophie, even though she is Polish, has experienced the Auschwitz concentration camp. Sara has not, even though she is Jewish. It could, therefore, be said that Sophie had a more direct experience of the Holocaust. Her time at Auschwitz is criticized for not being authentic enough since she only lived in the basement of Rudolph Höss (Krzyżanowski, 66), still, it should be considered as more dangerous or life-threatening. Regardless if the description of *Sophie's Choice's* Auschwitz is similar to the real one or not. Sara, however, is "only" hidden in a barn. She knows there is a war behind the walls of the barn but she is mainly lost in her thoughts. She is given food and necessities and only really has to fight for her life when she is confronted by Vincent. Whereas Sophie is forced to talk to Höss every day and, therefore, risks him being angry and potentially hurting her more frequently. Also, Vincent, since Sara knows him, is far less threatening than Rudolph Höss, even with his affiliation with the Nazis. The only time Sara is somewhat in contact with a concentration camp is when she talks about how her mother was taken there and eventually passed away there. Whereas Sophie, her children, her father, and her husband were taken there. For both of them though, the year their lives changed from relatively normal, was the year 1943. That is the year Sara started hiding in the barn and Sophie was transported to Auschwitz.

The experiences of Sara Blum and Sophie Zawistowska are different. Both of their stories differ in their maturity because of the ages of their readers. Sophie's story is definitely more mature and so are the readers of her story. It reflects the story of a woman more. The story of Sara is more that of a teenage lady that experiences her first love in the unfortunate time of the Second World War. The maturity of the plots is also reflected in the ages of the heroines. Due to their age difference, the characters do not have much in common. Their experience of the Holocaust is also different. Sara is hiding in the barn, therefore, the horrific happenings of war are almost unknown to her. The only time she comes across danger is when she is confronted by Vincent and the unfortunate death of Julien. Sophie, on the other hand, experiences the violence and evil of the war almost daily in the Auschwitz camp. Rather, even though her experience of the camp was not so conventional, she is still closer to the actual Holocaust than Sara.

### **5.5 Anya Savikin and Ellen Rosen**

Life experiences and experiences during the Holocaust of Anya and Ellen are not overly similar. Even at the start of the novel, in the adolescent year of sixteen (Schaeffer, 17), Anya is much older than Ellen. During the time of *Number the Stars*, Ellen is only ten years old. That makes Ellen closer to Ninka's age than Anya's. The target audience for both novels is also anticipated to be different. Lowry wants her novel to be an introduction to the Holocaust for readers maybe as young as Ellen. Schaeffer wants her novel to be as authentic as possible even at the cost of being very graphic (Schaeffer, 494). *Anya* is also very descriptive, so some of the sad sights, especially in the camp, are depressing. Lowry refrains from overly aggressive or graphic scenes. Ellen is, understandably, afraid of the Nazi officers but they never do more than look around or ask a few questions. Anya is a witness to bombings, deaths of family, and beatings of fellow prisoners.

Aside from the target audience, the novels are also composed completely differently. *Anya* is made up of chronologically organised recollections. These recollections are bordered by the prologue and epilogue where the "present day"—1973—Anya talks about her present situation (Schaeffer, 471). It is also narrated in the first person singular. Ellen's story is narrated through her friend Annemarie. It has no prologue or epilogue, just chronological plot.

At the start of the war, both characters live in an occupied city. The versions of an occupied city, however, differ in each novel. In Denmark, it was almost peaceful. Ellen and Annemarie were stopped by a soldier. Soldiers even came to Annemarie's home or inspected them while on the train to Uncle Henrik. However, no public beatings or bombings are



mentioned. Anya and her family in Poland are under a bomb attack several times in the novel. During those, some people are usually killed by accident.

When it comes to experiences of the war for each character, they also differ significantly. Anya lives in a ghetto with her family for a while. After that, she is transported to Kaiserwald labour camp. Although she enjoys certain privileges there, she still gets beat and loses her freedom. Ellen, in comparison, never truly loses it. She temporarily has to live with Annemarie and later at Uncle Henrik's but ultimately, she escapes to neutral Sweden and is free, as is suggested, for the remainder of her life. By this escape, she also avoids any potential "relocation" to a camp, unlike Anya. It, however, could be said that both of the characters escaped something during the time of war. Ellen escaped to Sweden by Uncle Henrik smuggling her and Anya escaped the labour camp with the help of Erdmann. Moreover, because of this escape, both of them survived.

Perhaps the only similarity Ellen and Anya share is that they are both dependent on their mothers. For Ellen, the dependency is obvious as she is a child. During their time apart, she obviously misses both of her parents. Annemarie's mother tries to fulfil the role of a mother for both girls during this time and she does so quite successfully. However, Ellen is still very glad to reunite with her own parents as they are obviously irreplaceable. Similarly, Anya's relationship with her family, especially her mother and daughter, is very important to her. This can be seen multiple times during the novel. The greatest example is when she convinces her husband Stajoe to go back to Vilno after the war breaks out (Schaeffer, 135). In Warsaw, where they stayed previously with Stajoe's parents, she has the support of Stajoe's mother. Anya appreciates her involvement, however, similarly to Ellen, it is just not enough for her. She needs her biological mother.

Overall, Ellen and Anya do not have much in common. Even though some similarities can be found, namely the relationships of both heroines to their mothers, their experience of the Holocaust was not comparable. Due to their massive age gap and subsequently differing life experiences, it can be said that only Anya had an experience of a woman in the Holocaust. Ellen's story is a child's story. Despite their age though, both of them had a valid experience of the Holocaust.

## **5.6 Anya Savikin and Sara Blum**

*Anya* and *White Bird*, similarly to *Number the Stars*, do not have a lot in common. When talking about their age difference and the anticipated readers, the books are a little closer to

each other than the previous comparison though. Sara starts the book out in her younger years but gradually grows up. Anya starts the book as a teenager. Although, both their stories last several years, Anya's story is significantly longer, therefore, she is older at the end of the book. Due to the graphic scenes, *Anya* should be read by adults. *White Bird* belongs to the Young Adult category.

The story-telling of these novels is almost identical. Anya tells her story from her own view chronologically. The narrator in *White Bird* is also Sara in the first person singular and it is also organised chronologically. Additionally, both books include a prologue at the start of the novel and an epilogue at the end. In both books, these opening and closing chapters are narrated still by the heroine but slightly older. Anya is fifty-two in those chapters (Schaeffer, 469). Sara does not state her age exactly. However, as *White Bird* is a graphic novel a lot can be deduced just from the picture shown. In these pictures, Sara has grey hair, glasses, and wrinkles. To add, she tells the story of her Holocaust experience to her grandson Julian. Her grandson is also in his teenage years. Therefore, Sara is of elderly age as well.

The experiences of these two during the war were very different. Anya went through a ghetto, was transported to a labour camp, and after escaping she hid with the people looking after her daughter. None of that was Sara's case. Sara "only" hid in a barn and later at Julien's parents' flat. Anya, therefore, had a much more direct confrontation with the Holocaust. What is similar for both characters, concerning the Holocaust, though, is that both of them lost their mothers. Sara's mother was taken to and subsequently passed away in the Auschwitz extermination camp (Palacio, 76). Anya and her mother are separated when boarding the transport train and it is suggested that Anya's mother was gassed (Schaeffer, 212). To add to Anya's misery, though, she lost all of her family members except her daughter.

That brings another difference. Throughout the duration of the chronological story, Anya has a child. Sara does not. This argument goes back to the age difference the characters have between each other. For Anya, though, her child is the most important. Sara does not have to worry about the fear of losing her child. It is true, however, that losing Julien was similarly traumatic for Sara. At the end of the day, he was her first love. When in the teenage years, everything feels like a tragedy. Much more so, when an event is actually a tragedy. So that Anya would not be left behind, it is important to state that even though she does not handle it as dramatically, her husband Stajoe also died.

Moreover, when it comes to the topic of being a woman during the Holocaust, again, Anya had a more woman-like experience. Sara, although she is quite similar in age to Anya at the end of the book, does not experience the sexual harassment Anya does. This is caused by the fact she was hiding. She did not have to go through any medical exam at a concentration camp like Anya did. Also, the book is targeted at young adult readers. These scenes are very mature and not everyone would deem them appropriate for their teenager. This fact is not meaning to discredit Sara's experience. It is just to point out that even though she is of older age than Ellen, for example, she still did not experience everything like her older counterparts— Anya and Sophie.

A positive similarity between the books is their almost magical coincidences. Anya is slightly criticized for her accidental but ever-so-convenient encounters with long-lost acquaintances. Kolář deems it too repetitive and unrealistic (Kolář, 103-104). Schaeffer, however, argues that people during the Holocaust survived thanks to good luck (Kolář, 102). If not completely realistic, it, at least could be taken as a positive break from the depressive times at the camp. *White Bird* also contains some of these coincidences. Most notably, the wolf attack on Vincent (Palacio, 155-157). Ultimately, even if the events in the books seem a little out-of-touch with reality, if it helps the characters to survive, it is for the better.

As in the previous chapter, these two heroines do not have much in common. Due to their age difference and the readers of their novels, they had a completely different feel to them. Their experiences also differ quite largely as Anya was imprisoned in the Kaiserwald camp and Sara was not. This is all connected to the fact that Anya's experience overall was more mature than Sara's and, therefore, Anya's experience was that of a woman and Sara's that of a teenage lady. Some smaller similarities can be found between the novels, however. For example, their storytelling or elements of good luck.

## **6 Comparison of the Fiction to Real Events of the Holocaust**

Before and during the war, the US has not had much contact with the Holocaust. Immediately after the start of the war they hoped they would remain neutral and joined the war only once they were attacked directly (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). When it came to the news of the Holocaust, the American authorities were hesitant to publish “atrocities”. During the First World War, unfavourable information about the enemy was published which later turned out to be untrue. Due to this, the American press was cautious when presented with information about the Holocaust. Eventually, an article about it was published on the tenth page of The New York Times but other than that not much attention was given to the subject matter (American Response to the Holocaust).

The public was introduced to the full extent of the Holocaust when the extermination and labour camps were liberated (American Response to Holocaust). Even after that though, the topic was not a frequently discussed one. During the 1950s American Jews did not discuss the Holocaust publicly, rather it was more of their “family secret” (Diner, 443). Reasoning for this varies from personal reasons like “not wanting to talk about it” to the general way of lifestyle of the 50s that encourages people to just “fit in”, move to the suburbs and be happy to be in the United States (Diner, 442-443). During this time, the American Jews were also pretty indifferent toward the country of Israel. That, however, changed in 1967 with the Six-Day War thanks to which the Holocaust became a political lever (Diner, 444).

With its prominence in political life, the Holocaust pervaded into different spheres of life including literature. The selected works of literature discussed are written by non-Jewish American authors. Therefore, their similarity to real events of the Holocaust can be disputable.

### **6.1 Sophie’s Choice and Reality**

Out of the selected works, Sophie’s Choice is different from the rest. Firstly, it is the only novel written by a man. The more important difference for this chapter, however, is that the book does not contain any note by the author about the historical accuracy of the plot. Luckily though, an article by Jean W. Cash “Styron's "Pseudofactual" Portrayal of the Holocaust in Sophie's Choice“, could be helpful in this matter as it contains an interview where Styron talks about how fictional Sophie and her story is.

As for Styron’s motivation for writing the novel, he says he wanted to use it “as a metaphor of absolute evil”. Basically, he wanted to explain the horrors of the Holocaust to the American public but in a way, they would understand, “through peculiarly American eyes”.

That is why the novel has Stingo as the protagonist and not Sophie (Cash, 29). Stingo's function is to learn about the Holocaust as the reader does while narrating. (Cash, 31). The character of Sophie was, according to Styron, based on a dream he had. Apparently, he combined this vision he had of a woman named Sophie with another story he had supposedly heard of another Holocaust victim, who had to choose between her children (Cash, 30). An interesting choice of Styron's is also to make Sophie Polish and not Jewish, to which he says: "What I'm trying to do here is to take something that's on the rim of people's consciousness- namely the idea that there was a particular woman who suffered a hideous loss at Auschwitz who was not Jewish- without reducing the Jewish suffering at all." (Cash, 32).

Overall, the book does not hide its "pseudo factuality". The author even admitted he purposefully gave Stingo attributes that he himself has, so the readers would not notice when he started to talk about something made-up. To not judge him too harshly though, Styron did his own research on the Holocaust and during some passages in the book, he mentions historical facts. He even mentions some non-fictional literature the readers can pick up if they are further interested in the topic (Cash, 30-33).

Despite the length of the novel, there are only a few instances that can truly be analysed if true or not. That is because the novel is composed in such a way that Styron just mentions facts or true events. A great example of this is the mention of the Lebensborn program. Lebensborn is explained right before a scene where Sophie pleads with Höss to try and get her son Jan there because he is blonde and speaks German (Styron, 397-420). The problem is, there is no possible way of knowing if a similar situation has actually happened.

It is known that the Höss family had a housekeeper called Aniela Bednarska who lived in his basement. There are, however, no records of a similar conversation to the one between Höss and Sophie ever occurring between him and Aniela (Ditty, 73). At the end of the day, if it had occurred it would have been a very private conversation just like in the novel. Especially, if he had decided to help the housekeeper, he would have to do it in secret so not many people around him knew and he would not put himself at risk.

It is, however important to state that Höss had, in fact, a housekeeper sleeping in a basement which brings the novel a little closer to historical accuracy. Sophie was his secretary but slept in Höss' basement. This fact is mentioned because there has been some criticism regarding Sophie's position in the camp. Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski for example, deems Sophie as undeserving of being seen as a victim when she had special treatment in the camp. He also

states that “Auschwitz in Sophie’s Choice and the Auschwitz in reality have little in common...” (Krzyzanowski, 66). This statement, however, is not developed further. In Styron’s defence, the only experience depicted in his novel is that of Sophie. Therefore, he should not be criticized for historical inaccuracies because he was never comparing her to a regular worker in the camp.

Up until now, it could seem that Sophie’s Choice is, at least moderately so, historically accurate. According to Ofer and Weitzman though, the most famous scene from the book is not. Of course, the scene in question is the one where Sophie is allowed to choose between her children which one of them shall live and which one shall die in a gas chamber. The two authors say that the situation during the selection was a little different than described in the book. As a mother, a woman had two options. One of them was to abandon her young child and present herself as a childless worker. The other was to be gassed with the child (Ofer, Weitzman). Therefore, they suggest no choice between the children was permitted to any mother.

However, if Styron is given the benefit of the doubt, the soldier allowing Sophie to choose says that she can only do so because she is Polish and not Jewish. Since she is of better racial background, she has the privilege to make this awful choice (Styron, 667). Additionally, Styron claims to have heard this story from someone which cannot be proven either as true or as false (Cash, 30).

Overall, Sophie’s Choice does not claim to be factual. Styron himself admits he did not want to go into detail with the description of the real Holocaust events. He states he feared he might be not accurate and also, he did not want his novel to be too violent. It was not his scheme, as he puts it (Cash, 32). As presented, some of the events in the novel could have more truth to them than others but ultimately, Sophie’s story serves as an introduction to the topic of the Holocaust, therefore does not require absolute historical accuracy.

## **6.2 Anya and Reality**

*Anya*, like the rest of the books except *Sophie’s Choice*, contains an author’s note at the end of the book. Schaeffer says that the book is based on a friend that she came to know but does not mention her name. Anya Savikin is then a purely fictional character. It is, perhaps, the only book from the selected that aims to be as authentic as possible. The author even rejected all secondary sources as a means to learn about the Holocaust. The reason for this, she states, was because a book she had read was inaccurate. The historical book said that Polish Jews obtained yellow Stars of David they had to wear. She was corrected on this mistake by a taxi driver that was a survivor and by coincidence happened to take her somewhere. He told her the

Jews, in fact, had to make their own stars. From that point, Schaeffer accepted interviews as the only way of gathering information so this book could be authentic as possible (Schaeffer, 493-496).

A huge part of the novel are descriptions of Anya's house and her life before the war. The author found this information by interviewing the survivors about their life before the war. Again, the names of the people are not mentioned (Schaeffer, 493-496). Since the descriptions are very lengthy and could be very personal, for the purpose of this thesis, only a few instances from the book will be compared to reality.

When it comes to the pre-war part of the book, Ofer and Weitzman write that it was more common for Jewish girls in Eastern Europe to attend school. That resulted in them being able to make connections and later even work illegally outside of the ghetto (Ofer, Weitzman). That is exactly what Anya did. Before the war, Anya attended medical school which she was, sadly, forced to leave because she got married and moved to Warsaw. She was supposed to finish her studies there but she got pregnant. Unfortunately, after her daughter was born, the war started. Luckily though, her experience at medical school got her a job as a nurse while in the ghetto. This job got her some money to obtain necessities for her family.

When it comes to her life in the ghetto, the separation of Anya and her mother could be true. Anya, being fit to work, went to the other side than her mother who must have been older and not so fit (Schaeffer, 212). According to Ofer and Weitzman, these separations were common during selection. Some of the younger women even refused to leave their mother's side and went to death with them (Ofer, Weitzman). Later in the book, Schaeffer even mentions another perspective of the selection. Anya actually meets survivors that hid from their children during it. Therefore, they survived and the children died (Schaeffer, 485). According to Baumel-Schwartz, this actually happened sometimes, even though the survivors were reluctant to admit it first (Baumel-Schwartz).

After arriving at Kaiserwald, Anya is submitted to a humiliating medical inspection. Her head is shaved and she is stripped down naked. A doctor examining her makes comments trying to embarrass her. He even pinches her nipple and pulls on her pubic hair (Schaeffer, 221). This type of behaviour was not uncommon. During these examinations, many women report feeling humiliated and violated. Men, although they endured the same torment, do not recall having such experiences (Ofer, Weitzman). It can be said that in this scene, Anya "lived through" an authentic experience. Other typically womanly experiences can also be seen in *Anya*. For

example, on the train she meets Sonia, a young woman that reminds her of her sister (Schaeffer, 219). During her whole stay in Kaiserwald, she continuously tries to get better treatment for Sonya and cares for her as she is terminally ill. This friendship could be interpreted as an example of the lagerschwestern phenomenon, where women formed sister-like bonds with each other in the camps (Ofen, Weitzman).

However, at Kaiserwald, Anya, like Sophie, does not have regular experience. Due to the protection of Irving Erdmann, she enjoys “unprecedented privileges” (Kolář, 93). In addition, Erdmann later reveals to be a Jew in disguise and helps Anya escape. This, according to Kolář, is incompatible with Nazis’ pedantry (Kolář, 103). Kolář’s claim is also backed up by the fact that almost everyone in the Kaiserwald camp died (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Therefore, it is highly unlikely that someone would escape. There would be records of it. Schaeffer defends this choice by saying that Anya was just lucky and that is how people truly survived the war. Kolář insists, however, that these “happy coincidences” are present way too often in the last chapters (Kolář, 102-103). Schaeffer herself, however, admits to one inaccuracy and that is when Anya goes back to Warsaw after the war (Schaeffer, 495).

Even though the novel *Anya* was composed mainly from interviews with survivors, not all occurrences are completely historically accurate. In this case, however, the author’s intention was to capture the survivors’ lives before the Holocaust as authentically as possible. Actually, Anya’s stay in Kaiserwald is the shortest part of the book and the author suggests it was done intentionally so as she wanted to make the novel understandable and felt like incorporating a death camp would be too much for the readers (Schaeffer, 495-496). The life before the war, on the other hand, is the longest part. As she does not mention the names of the people she conducted the interviews with, though, it is impossible to know whether their memories are at least close to the truth. The author even admits she does not care whether their memories are factual as they will have validity of their own even if they are a little distorted (Schaeffer, 494).

### **6.3 Number the Stars and Reality**

In Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, the relation of the book’s plot to reality is pretty straightforward. That is, the author herself sets the record straight at the very end of the book in the author’s note. She provides the reader with a little history lesson and presents her motivation for writing the book (Lowry, 171).

*Number the Stars* is based on the life story of Annelise Platt to whom the book is dedicated. Lowry and Platt met in Bermuda while on a vacation in 1988. Apparently, the two



of them got into a conversation and Annelise's storytelling seemed so compelling to Lowry that she decided to write a story based on her experiences. Real Annelise did not smuggle Jews into Sweden but Lowry decided to make the fictional Annemarie do so because she "supposed she had heard the story before" (Blakemore).

In reality, the rescue of Denmark Jews actually happened. The mission to exterminate Jews or rather their "relocation" was found out by the Danish resistance on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1943 when Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat, informed them about it. Right after, a unique nationwide initiative to help Jews get to Sweden began. People offered them hiding places in their homes, hospitals, or churches until they were transported by the fishermen's boats to safety. Despite the efforts, almost five hundred Jews were transported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia anyway. Danish officials, however, pressured the Germans about the Danish Jews' well-being in the ghetto. They went as far as going to check up on them. On 15<sup>th</sup> April 1945, the Danish Jews were deported to a different camp in Germany under the wings of the Swedish Red Cross. From there, they were eventually sent to Sweden where they stayed until the war ended. Thanks to the effort of the Danish resistance and Danish officials, over seven thousand Jews and six hundred and eighty of their non-Jewish family members were safely smuggled to Sweden by boat, and all but fifty-one Jews transported to Theresienstadt survived the ghetto (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

As can be seen at the end of the novel, Lowry studied the history of Nazi occupation in Denmark and even visited the country. She, however, says that the characters are more illustrations of Danish people than actual people (Lowry, 171-172). As was said, the real Annelise did not help smuggle Jews to Sweden but was understandably terrified of the occupation, so Lowry decided to give her more bravery and a more significant reason to worry by smuggling Ellen, who represents all Danish Jews (Blakemore). Another example of one character representing a group is Peter Nielsen, who is based on the participants in the Danish resistance. More specifically, he is very similar to one member of the Danish resistance that Lowry found a picture of. He was only twenty-one years of age when he was executed by the Nazis so Peter is similarly young in the story (Lowry, 175).

Overall, at its core, the story is pretty similar to reality and could have happened in real life. However, there are surely aspects of the story that can be questioned. For example, the many encounters with the Nazi officials. If a person was suspicious, it would be only logical that the Germans come to check on them but Annemarie and her family seem to not do anything of that nature. Rather, the reader knows their intent so for them, they are tense situations.

However, there is no way that the Germans would have picked out the same family multiple times if they checked them earlier and no suspicious activity was confirmed. To conclude, the story has its more dramatized moments but the core storyline is very close to the actual happenings in Nazi-ruled Denmark. In addition, even though Lowry studied the history behind the Holocaust in Denmark, she did not intend for the book to be completely historically accurate. In the author's note, she pinpoints a few instances and characters from the book that are real. At the same time, she does not claim the book is a Danish history textbook. In fact, she concludes her note by stating the main purpose of the book is to remind people that a world of human decency is possible (Lowry, 176).

#### **6.4 White Bird: A Wonder Story and Reality**

*The White Bird: A Wonder Story* proclaims itself as fiction in the author's note at the very end of the book. The author claims to not have known much about the topic of the Holocaust throughout her childhood and contrasts the experience with her husband that is Jewish, so Shoah has always existed for him. Palacio claims to have been interested in the topic and to have learned about it more since her childhood. She also had her husband and his family to deepen her knowledge. Ultimately, she says the book is completely fictional and its purpose is to form "an act of resistance" toward the indifference of non-Jewish bystanders of that time, so a tragedy like the Holocaust would never happen again (Palacio, 209-210).

It is unknown how much of the reality of the Holocaust in France Palacio studied, since according to the book, her husband's relatives directly affected by the Holocaust were Polish (Palacio 210). Still, the main topic of the book, Sara's hiding in a barn, is close to reality. Jews during wartime hid quite frequently. In some cases, they obtained false identification papers and changed their identity. The papers were crucial as identity checks were common. People with false papers also frequently changed locations to avoid recognition. Moving during wartime was common, however, it was risky for Jews to move into close-knit small communities. Usually, everybody knows everybody in a small village, so if they did not want to be suspected of their Jewish origin, they had to move somewhere where not many people would notice newcomers. This was also primarily an option for people that did not have distinctively Jewish features as they could get away with lying about their origin. Children specifically were sometimes left with their Aryan-looking friends as can be seen for example in Lowry's *Number the Stars* (The Holocaust Explained).

Sara belongs, however, to the second category of Jews in hiding, the "out-of-sight-hiding". Jewish people that could not obtain false papers hid in places like barns, attics, and

cellars. Sara, unfortunately, did not have time or space to try and obtain them. In fact, in the book, there is no mention of false identification at all. Still, Sara belongs to this category because she was in hiding. Completely isolated from the outside world, hidden Jews relied on the help of their friends, neighbours, and acquaintances. For the helpers, the situation was also risky because they had to sneak in food and other day-to-day items. They had to try avoid suspicion when getting the goods for those in hiding and avoid being seen going into the place of hiding because someone could denounce them. For Sara, these helpers were Julien and his parents. The most known true story of hiding out of sight is that of Anne Frank and her family. They were hiding in an attic for two years but eventually were found out by the Gestapo and sent to a camp. There, Anne died. The only one to survive the war was her father Otto, who later found and published her diary containing her experience while hiding (The Holocaust Explained).

The Milice, a Nazi organisation mentioned in the book, actually existed as well. In the book, its members are represented by Sara's classmate Vincent, who eventually finds her hiding in the barn. This could also be considered in accordance with the reality as the organisation's main task was to defeat the French Resistance and therefore, by extension, hunt down the people like Julien who were hiding Jews thus resisting the idea of getting rid of them (Trueman). Although Sara is found by Vincent, she never gets arrested because Vincent is killed by a wolf (Palacio, 157). That is where the story gets unrealistic. In reality, the risk of getting attacked by a wolf is above zero but so low it cannot be calculated (International Wolf Center). However, in the context of the story Vincent had to be dealt with and his death has nothing to do with the historical accuracy of the story as a whole.

What can seem historically far-fetched is Julien's death, however. He is just picked off the side of the road, driven away, and killed (Palacio, 146-177). Palacio does not give an explanation of why he had to be killed other than to illustrate Jewish people's losses during the Holocaust (Palacio, 210). The only explanation for this, other than a dramatization of the plot, is that since Julien had a limp he could be considered to be in the "Asocial" category by the Nazis. Those were people that collected welfare, were alcoholics, drug addicts, or were unemployed (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). The book does not mention anything about Julien receiving any form of welfare, though. Therefore, it is just an assumption that he might have received it because he was disabled in a way.

Overall, as the author mentions in her note, the aim of this book was not to be historically accurate. Although, some similarities with the reality of the Holocaust can be found. Ultimately,

the happenings of war are rather in the background of the story. There are, therefore, not many situations where the author could be completely historically wrong or even make something up. Palacio herself wanted her novel to be more of an illustration of what Jewish people lived through. She wanted it about the emotions they felt. Mainly, this book serves as educational material for children of America that do not know much about the Holocaust as well as a reminder to all people to stop antisemitism or any form of discrimination when they see it (Palacio 210).

## 7 Conclusion

The aim of this bachelor thesis was to compare female characters and their experiences of the Holocaust portrayed in fictitious works of selected literary works by non-Jewish American authors. The second goal was then to conduct a comparison of the events in each of the works to the real happenings of the Holocaust. Both comparisons were meant to be done through the lens of experiences of the Holocaust that are specific to the female gender.

The selected literary works are *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, *Anya* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, and last but not least *White Bird: A Wonder Story* by R. J. Palacio. What links all of these works together is, of course, the topic of the Holocaust. The analysed characters from each work are also female and fell victim to the horrors of the Holocaust.

Although a comparison of all characters between one another is conducted in the thesis, the results will be more comprehensive if the characters are divided into two pairs. The first pair presented will be the character of Ellen Rosen from Lowry's book *Number the Stars* and the character of Palacio's *White Bird*, Sara Blum. The second pair then has to be formed by Sophie from Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Anya from Schaeffer's *Anya*.

Ellen and Sara are of similarly young ages and the novels they were in were targeted at younger readers, as well. Their experiences of the Holocaust are similar in a way that both of them are basically hiding from the Germans—Sara in a barn and Ellen in the home of her friend Annemarie. A positive similarity between the novels is also that both of the girls survive the Holocaust. Differences between the characters can be found as well, for example, Sara unfortunately, loses her mother, who is sent to Auschwitz extermination camp. Ellen gets to escape the Holocaust completely with both of her parents when they are smuggled to the neutral country of Sweden. The issue with these two characters, however, is that although their gender is female, because of their age, they were unable to experience the Holocaust as grown women. The treatment of the Germans toward them was not determined by their gender and overall, the experience of both of them resembled the experience of children.

The second pair, consisting of Anya and Sophie, is different. Both Anya and Sophie are grown married women with children at the time of the Second World War. Therefore, their experience should be classified as an experience of women in the Holocaust. This statement is supported by the fact that the way they were treated by the Germans and other people, for example, fellow prisoners in concentration camps, was determined by their gender. Both of the

characters went through concentration camps, so that is where the evidence for their gender-specific treatment is taken from. The examples supporting this claim are the sexual harassment and coercion into intercourse the characters experience.

In *Sophie's Choice*, sex is quite a frequent topic of conversation. In the novel's present time, Sophie has several consensual sexual encounters. In the Auschwitz extermination camp, however, she is coerced into sex multiple times. The most notable instance when a situation like this arises is when her female inmate shows her a pair of underwear. Afterward, Sophie actually tries to take advantage of her sexuality and seduce one of the leading officers in the camp, Rudolph Höss, in order for him to release her son Jan from Auschwitz. Anya is both witness and victim of sexual harassment. Before the war, there are several sexually motivated pogroms, in the novel. Anya, luckily, is never a victim of those. She, however, experiences this harassment in the labour camp she is transported to. The greatest example of sexual violence towards her is the medical exam she endures when she enters the camp. The exam is highly invasive. The doctor conducting it also makes degrading remarks about Anya's body.

The comparison of the heroines outside of their pairs proved even further that their experiences of the Holocaust are significantly different. The older characters showed to have broader life experiences that are simply unreachable for the younger heroines. Even though between each of them similarities were found, ultimately it cannot be said that the two groups are comparable.

When it comes to the extent of the historical accuracy of the novels, it varies. In this section, the intentions of the authors were taken into consideration. *Number the Stars* and *White Bird: A Wonder Story* were intended to introduce the young audience of readers to the topic of the Holocaust. The readers were also meant to learn a lesson from each book. Both Lowry and Palacio conducted research for their books, therefore, some of the scenes are historically accurate. However, in Palacio's case, some scenes are quite far-fetched and unrealistic. It is obvious, though, that those scenes are included solely to serve the plot of the novel. *Sophie's Choice* was meant to be "pseudo-factual". In the context of the novel, it means that Styron conducted some type of research that he even refers to in the book. However, some of the scenes are simply made up. Like the previous works, its purpose is to serve as an introduction to the Holocaust to the American public. Anya aimed to be as authentic as possible. The main authenticity Schaeffer aimed at, however, lies in the pre-war period which is not the subject of this thesis. Still, even the scenes during the war are similar to reality. At the end of the novel, however, the character is just too lucky for the novel to be realistic.

Ultimately, although all the characters selected are of the female gender, only two of them—Sophie and Anya—had an experience of the Holocaust that was influenced by their gender. Sophie and Anya saw the Holocaust through the eyes of grown women. Whereas Sara and Ellen experienced the Holocaust as children and therefore, did not experience any gender-specific treatment during it. This finding can be marked as a failure of the thesis since only two of the characters out of four fulfil the goal of it. When it comes to the historical accuracy of the novels, it was not surprising to find that not all information is accurate. It can, however, be said that although the novels contain fictitious scenes, all of the authors did at least some research on the topic of the Holocaust. The novels, therefore, have a historically accurate core within them.

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