

Department of Literature
The Lester and Sally Entin
Faculty of Humanities
Tel Aviv University

החוג לספרות
הפקולטה למדעי הרוח
ע"ש לסטר וסאלי אנטין
אוניברסיטת תל אביב

3.9.18

To
Professor Piotr Taracha
Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies
The University of Warsaw

Re: Thesis for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy – Ms. Agnieszka Podpora

Dear Prof. Taracha,

I have read the Doctoral thesis of Ms. Agnieszka Podpora, titled "Ethics of Memory in Post-Holocaust Literary Narratives in Poland and in Israel", and written under the instruction of Prof. Shoshana Ronen and Prof. Przemyslaw Czaplinski. My evaluation of this thesis is based on my acquaintance with the field of literary representations of the Holocaust in Hebrew and other languages and on my own extensive writing on the subject.

I am pleased to express my profound appreciation of Ms. Podpora's research, which I find worthy of endowing her with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

First and foremost, I find it impressive that in the hitherto thoroughly researched area of Holocaust representation, Ms. Podpora identified an intriguing field which has not yet received the attention it undoubtedly deserves: that of the links and parallels between the Israeli and Polish memory of the annihilation of the Jews in WWII. The Polish Post-Holocaust narrative is, as the thesis demonstrates, more complex than the Israeli one, primarily since it comprises both the stories/testimonies of Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivors who remained in Poland following the war, and those of non-Jewish Poles, themselves victims of Nazi terror, but nevertheless often regarded as indifferent by-standers to the crimes against the Jews, if not, in some cases, actual collaborators with the perpetrators. However, various similarities in the private and national contexts within which the collective memories of the catastrophic events of WWII – both Israeli and Polish – have been constructed, provide a solid ground for a comparative research of the kind Ms. Podpora has conducted. "The Polish and Israeli post-Holocaust cultures engage in renegotiating the place of the Shoah within the respective communal narratives," writes Podpora, as part of her well-argued and well-rationalized proposal, in the opening part of her work, to scrutinize "some aspects of



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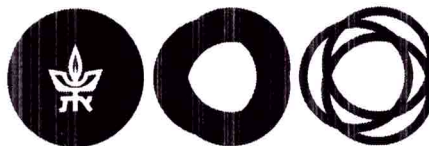
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the [Israeli and Polish] testimonial languages". In this respect, Podpora's research is indeed innovative and groundbreaking.

The two opening theoretical chapters provide the grounds for a close-reading of some specific Hebrew and Polish literary works which constitute the center of the study. One is dedicated to the concept of witnessing, the other – to the relevant Israeli and Polish cultural, social and political backgrounds. Both are most impressively thorough and erudite: It seems that Ms. Podpora has read every single piece of academic literature on these issues, particularly the first one. Her discussion of witnessing is an exceptionally illuminating review of existing research, which not only presents Ms. Podpora's wide knowledge and deep understanding of updated theories of witnessing, but also proposes some new questions that emanate from them. Some of these questions, among others, are: What may be the meaning/obligation of being witness not only to an "event that has no witness" (Felman), but also, and more so, in an era when most Holocaust survivors are no longer with us; How relevant is the very term "representation" to witnessing in such contexts; How might the distance from the events become an advantage, rather than a drawback, to ethical witnessing; How testimony based on archival materials constitutes a new form of witnessing; And finally, how the reflexive potential of a literary work may constitute its ethical stand.

The chapter titled "Constellations of Hebrew and Polish Literature of the Holocaust" does not provide new information (though it, too, is thorough and learned). Nevertheless, it proposes somewhat surprising – yet convincing – parallels between these "constellations", as both turn out to be related to questions of national revival, reawakening of old traditions, political stances that to some extent go in the same directions etc. I should mention, at this point, that to my judgment, Ms. Podpora regards changes in the Israeli cultural milieu regarding Holocaust remembrance in the 1980's more dramatic than they actually were, thus somehow devaluating some highly innovative earlier projects that obviously influenced later developments. I suggest more thought is given to this issue in a future adaptation of the thesis into a book.

The following three chapters are dedicated to specific comparative analyses, along three different themes that correlate with the questions raised in the introductory and theoretical/historical chapters. Here I have some reservations regarding the Hebrew corpus chosen for the three case studies: in general, all Israeli literary works referred to in the thesis are those that have been defined in previous research as post-Holocaust, and particularly second-generation (in a broad sense of the term) texts. The list under consideration here, comprised by previous researchers, is not, however, comprehensive; some innovative ideas regarding various other works that may be relevant to the discussion could be addressed. However, I mention this drawback only as constructive advice for a possible future adaptation of the research into a book. I do not think that amendments in this direction are required for the thesis to be a valid and



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sound work. This is particularly true since I find the three separate discussions, which have a lot to do with the question of witnessing – for example of witnessing as a joint feminine project of mother and daughter in both the Hebrew and Polish texts under discussion – innovative, intriguing and utterly convincing. Here, too, Ms. Podpora's acquaintance with the huge amount of existing research in various languages is extraordinary, and in itself makes her a true expert on the subject. In addition, her skilled use of comparative methodologies is outstanding.

In general, and as already noted above regarding surprising parallels in the historical, cultural and political backgrounds, I read with great interest both the fresh readings Ms. Podpora suggests and the similarities she identifies in the conceptualization of testimony and the act of witnessing, with all its implications, in the two seemingly far removed bodies of literature, created in so far removed literary milieus. And this is true both regarding thematic and theoretical issues as well as questions of forms and genres, as is obvious in the last chapter, titled "(non)fiction of Witnessing".

In summary, I find Ms. Podpora's thesis to be of high value and considerable contribution to the research of post-Holocaust literature, and therefore worthy of endowing her with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I congratulate her on her fine achievement.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should any further information be required.

Respectfully Yours,

Prof. Iris Milner
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