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REPRESENTATION OF CULTURE, TRADITIONS, AND IDENTITY IN HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' MEMOIRS: EVIDENCE OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Culture is understood by some scholars as a system formed through how individuals and groups select, interpret, and internalize traditions. In this sense, group identities function as the core of living tradition systems, structured around a limited set of key symbols and identity-shaping narratives (Honko, 2009). The study of tradition and social identity is gaining growing significance in the context of globalization, as contemporary societies are marked by high levels of human mobility and dynamic cultural exchange (Ismail, 2021, 221). Traditions are symbolic cultural systems that are passed down from generation to generation. “Culture and identity are not just some abstract notions, but 'living' concepts which are closely connected to people's lives <...>” (Constantin & Rautz, 2010, 189).

Currently, we can observe scholars' growing interest in Holocaust survivors' first-person accounts, which have been viewed from different perspectives. According to Suzanne L. Bunkers, “we need to pay special attention to the stories of those individuals who have survived, for their discourses of trauma evolve into discourses of endurance and survival – both in physical and psychological terms” (Bunkers, 2006, 3). Therefore, this paper explores the representation of culture, traditions, and identity as a source of resilience in Holocaust survivors' memoirs, focusing on “Love in a World of Sorrow” by Fanya Gottesfeld Heller (2005) and “A Mother's Courage” by Malka Levine (2023). Moreover, the research defines how personal narratives reflect the preservation, transformation, and reconstruction of cultural and traditional frameworks under conditions of extreme trauma.

By comparing Heller's and Levine's narratives, the paper highlights the shared patterns in the articulation of identity. Both authors were born on the territory of Western Ukraine (former Polish territories): Fanya Heller – in the town of Skala, Malka Levine – in Volodymyr-Volynskyi. Before the war, they were immersed in multinational landscape, cultural and religious diversity, all the nationalities peacefully coexisting. At Skala school, each ethnic group “had religious instruction once a week with its own special teacher. The Catholic priest taught the Poles; <...>, the Orthodox priest, taught the Ukrainians; and Mr. Bouk instructed the Jews” (Heller, 2005, 42).

Both authors describe their families' tragic experiences against a historical background and write about their survival owing to Ukrainian and Polish people who hid them at the risk of their own lives. Heller and her family were first hidden in the attic of Jan's, a Ukrainian militiaman's, house; later – by a Polish peasant Sidor Sokolowski in the “miniature chicken coop that was attached, like a malignant growth, to the exterior wall of the barn” (Heller, 2005, 157). Levine with her mother and two brothers were saved by the Yakymchuks, a Ukrainian family, and spent eighteen months in a pit behind the barn, attacked by mice and lice. Despite experiencing trauma and living in horrendous conditions, both mothers tried to retain their pride, keeping their hiding places in order. For instance, Levine's mother swept their pit “with a little broom she made of twigs” and always left “a few drops of water in the pot so she could wash the bowl” (Levine, 2023, 131).

In both memoirs, familial traditions emerge as central mechanisms for preserving identity under extreme conditions. Heller's and Levine's mothers were deeply committed to sustaining culture and religion even amid the terrors of the Holocaust. This adherence to Jewish religious customs helped to reaffirm their identity and testified to their resilience and were a form of resistance “at a time when the Nazis want[ed] to eradicate Jews and their culture from the earth” (Skiles, 2025, 9). On Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Light, Levine's mother managed to light a candle, thus bringing a sense of hope to her children. As Passover approached, she told her children how their

extended family used to honour this Festival of Freedom, keeping long-standing Jewish traditions alive. In the years before the war, these holidays had been happy and full of celebration (Levine, 2023). Heller's mother also tried to raise her children's spirits telling them of peaceful-time Sabbath (the weekly day of rest in Judaism, which begins at sunset on Friday evening and ends at nightfall on Saturday, traditionally marked by the lighting of candles on Friday evening, followed by a festive meal). The author describes "[t]he kindling of the Sabbath lights in the silver candlesticks on the embroidered tablecloth", when "the entire family sat down for a meal together" (Heller, 2005, 111). On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, traditionally marked by a 25-hour fast, during which adults abstain from food and drink, Heller's mother "fasted from sundown to sundown", ignoring her husband's attempt to persuade her that it was not a suitable time for fasting. Holiday celebrations retain profound symbolic significance. Observances of Jewish holidays are portrayed in both memoirs not merely as religious rituals but as acts of cultural resistance.

Memories of family meals and food served on holidays are also vital elements shaping identity (Strand, 2023, 467). Both families were starving in their hiding places and could hardly keep from thinking about food. Heller describes the feeling of growing hunger in the following way: "I had previously thought of hunger as a gnawing mouse in the stomach; now it became a rat that took up residence in my body and chewed on my mind" (Heller, 2005, 177). The mention of nutty mincemeat, bitter herbs, dumplings, dry matza, wiener-schnitzel with eggs, gefilte fish, etc., brings back tastes of childhood during peaceful times, "resonates with the theme of Jewish national identity" (Zhang, 2026, 2), and is not only "concerned with tastes and aromas but with people <...> and emotional intimacy" (Strand, 2023, 467).

The analysis demonstrates that both memoirs portray culture and traditions not only as inherited practices but also as determination to survive and expression of resistance in the time of displacement, loss, and trauma. Particular attention is paid to

the role of religious customs in sustaining a sense of identity as a response to the disruption of established cultural norms during the Holocaust. Culinary traditions function as powerful carriers of memory and identity, too. References to familiar foods, and shared meals evoke a sense of pre-war normalcy and belonging, and link survivors to their cultural heritage and familial past.

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THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES IN THE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL AREA

Contemporary global trends, encompassing worldwide interconnectedness and the merging of distinct cultures, provide a significant impetus for fostering cross-cultural conversation. In this milieu, mastering foreign languages assumes paramount