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“Were I not here to record it, there would be no trace”: Chava Rosenfarb’s “In the Boxcar” and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*
Abstract

Patrick Modiano’s Dora Bruder and Chava Rosenfarb’s “In the Boxcar” – an excerpt from the as-yet not fully translated novel Letters to Abrasha – rely on original and creative methods in their responses to events and memory associated with the Holocaust. In contrast with these works, this article also considers the approach taken in Michal Glowinski’s memoir The Black Seasons, as well as in Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak’s The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City. These texts convey, in a new light, pre-war and wartime sites: Paris, Auschwitz, Lodz, Warsaw, and the ghettos installed by the Germans in the latter two cities.

Compte-rendu


Patrick Modiano’s Dora Bruder, published in French in 1997, begins in its English edition with a pair of maps and a photograph. The maps are of a particular tangle of Paris streets; the photograph is of a young woman and her parents, which the author uncovered while reading “an old copy of Paris-Soir,” dated December 31, 1941.1 The parents had placed the following notice: “Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1 m 55, oval-shaped face, gray-brown eyes, gray sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris.”2 The section of Paris outlined in the maps, the XIIth and XVIIIth Arrondissements, is redolent of the past, or, to properly convey Modiano’s writerly goals, it conjures overlapping pasts, which include occupied Paris in late 1941 until the summer of 1942, the late fifties, when Modiano was an adolescent, and the middle sixties, when a girlfriend of his lived at “Rue Championnet. Ornano 49–20,” at the heart of the maps’ neighbourhoods.3 These artifacts, presented at the book’s opening pages, point to Modiano’s literary method, which the 2014 Nobel Prize Committee celebrated as “the art of memory with which he
Chava Rosenfarb’s “In the Boxcar” and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation.”

*Dora Bruder* is the finest example of Modiano’s writing that defies easy classification: neither fiction, memoir, auto-fiction, nor personal history. His narratives might signal a new literary genre, certainly a fresh genre of writing about the Second World War, in which a particular time and place overlaps or merges with another time and place. The goal in *Dora Bruder* is to evoke Modiano’s own postwar Parisian existence, as it is unavoidably shaped by the wartime city. It is difficult to convey the experience of reading this kind of writing, which differs from most other work that links the personal with the historical. At times, Modiano’s prose is a time machine, conveying its protagonist through a portal that breaks the limitations of past and present lives. As the reader follows Modiano’s narrator along the Boulevard Ornano, he is transported, forced like a solid object through a time strainer, which brings the book’s contemporary movement and surroundings in sync with the past. It is challenging to find the right words for this literary method: it has the quality of a narcotic, or of flashbacks more easily rendered in film. “From day to day,” Modiano writes, “perspectives become blurred, one winter merging into another. That of 1965 and that of 1942.”

Modiano’s provocative proposition is that traces of past time and place are present. “It takes time,” he writes at the start of *Dora Bruder*, “for what has been erased to resurface. Traces survive in registers, and nobody knows where these registers are hidden, and who has custody of them . . . All it takes is a little patience.” Modiano applies such patience to the disaster that befell 15-year-old Dora and her parents in occupied Paris, as the French police enacted German orders that Jews—whether born in the country or elsewhere—be sent to deportation camps near the city before being transported to Auschwitz, where Dora was murdered. What is proposed in *Dora Bruder* is not just an ethic of writing, but one of waiting and patient investigation. This approach allows the author to magnify and verify the particulars of place and time, so “what has been erased” can “resurface.”

Critics and reviewers highlight Modiano’s originality, his peculiar mix of genres, and his creative relationship to memory. Yet an approach not unlike his is suggested in the preface to *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, a monumental volume some 900 pages long, which includes full-sized maps of the ghetto. Its authors, Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, preface their Guide in a tone similar to Modiano’s, while offering the tantalizing proposition that a recovery of the perished wartime world is possible:

> The Warsaw Ghetto no longer exists. It is true we can still find fragments of its walls or remnants of the cobblestones, but the essence of this part of the city, the
sealed district of Warsaw, is hidden from us by earth, asphalt, the foundations of new houses, and oblivion. If we want to see that lost world, we have to dig it out from under layers of indifference, lapses of memory, and ignorance. The only place in which the inhabitants of the ghetto can still be found—along with their homes, the streets they lived in, and their lives, suffering, and deaths—is a place in our memory.  

Here Engelking and Leociak present a Modianesque proposal — “if we want to see that lost world”—before seeming to cancel that possibility, forcing memory to the fore over any opportunity of recovery. But this passage is followed by the assertion of another more compelling form of recovery: “This guide takes us around a city that does not exist”; it “is a guide to a Warsaw of shadows.” Through it one might “meet” the “shades of Warsaw’s Jews.” As Modiano puts it, “It takes time for what has been erased to resurface.”

Modiano’s writing proposes distinctive possibilities and demands. Powers of investigative sitzfließ are required to uncover the links between his own place and time and that of Dora’s. But Modiano acknowledges that which cannot be recovered of the wartime: “what we shall never know” about wartime lives, “this blank,” he calls it, “this mute block of the unknown.” His strategy runs counter to recent novels of the Holocaust—seemingly a genre in its own right—in which all of the faraway grotesquerie of the camps is ripe for imagining, whether this be the junk science of Mengele’s abuse of Jewish twins or, as a recent book has it, the “tattooist of Auschwitz.” This kind of work almost always bears little or no personal relationship to the writer’s own time and place, and is usually untethered from the writers’ actual memories or personal experience. One looks in vain to see if these books’ authors have bothered to walk in what remains of Muranow or down a Silesian country road to appreciate the landscape as it is today.

One Polish–born Canadian writer of wartime, Chava Rosenfarb, typically takes an approach distinct from Modiano’s to her material. As a survivor of the German occupation of Poland, of the Lodz Ghetto, and then of German camps, including Auschwitz, Rosenfarb needed no imaginative renderings of things she had not seen, nor was she in need of strategies for merging postwar experience with wartime events. Best known for her Yiddish–language trilogy Der boim fun lebn (1972), translated as The Tree of Life in 1985, Rosenfarb was a realist. Her detailed narratives sprawl, organized around large suites of carefully conceived characters, who are at times based on historical figures like Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, or on the author herself, while her application of fictional strategies on actual events remains a secret. Rosenfarb’s novels are portraits of life as it was lived, born of experience, framed in fictional tableaux. But both The Tree of Life and her yet to be fully translated later work Briv tsu Abrashn (1992), or Letters to Abrasha, are narratives that are strongly motivated
by autobiographical detail. In *The Tree of Life*, both the city Lodz and the ghetto into which its Jews were corralled, are mapped and mined to provide an encyclopedic view of the atmosphere of the prewar place and its perished wartime version. One might see *The Tree of Life* as a counterpart guide, presented in fictional form, to Engelking and Leociak’s *Guide to the Warsaw Ghetto*. The first volume of *The Tree of Life* provides a general portrait of Jewish Lodz, in chapters devoted to every facet of the community: its wealthy and its labourers, its youth and its activists, its educators and artists. *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* provides a detailed portrait of all imaginable constituencies of the “perished city,” including the *Judenrat*, the Jewish police, welfare workers, educators, the religious, and youthful leaders of the Spring 1943 uprising.

The original English-language edition of Rosenfarb’s novel, published in Melbourne, bore on its inner cover boards a reproduction of a map of Baluty, the working-class section of Lodz where the Germans installed the ghetto. The American edition, reprinted in three separate volumes, introduces the map in the second volume, which depicts the construction of the ghetto. On it one finds documented sites — “The Carpentry Resort” and “Baluter Ring”—alongside locations associated with Rosenfarb’s fictional characters: “Rachel’s second dwelling”; “Esther’s garret.” Key characters, like the poet Simkha Bunim Berkovitch, are lightly fictionalized representations of actual figures, in this case the poet Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch, whom Rosenfarb portrayed in loving detail in a non-fictional memoir.13

Lodz, like Modiano’s Paris, was not destroyed in wartime. Paris survived by way of French capitulation. In Lodz, the large German population provided a kind of buffer to the German genius for urban annihilation. It is even said that the ethnic Germans who were resettled beyond the ghetto fence and gates made it far more difficult for the ghetto population to come and go in secret than it was for the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto. Lodz, renamed Litzmannstadt, was reconceived in German wartime plans.

Today a visitor can walk the streets of the city, in particular the rough-edged neighbourhood of Baluty, entering courtyards redolent of long-ago Lodz, so that “perspectives become blurred” as the city’s present reveals time past.14 In photographs, Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, who was installed by the Germans as head of the Lodz *Judenrat*, is seen speaking beneath an iron lamp standard of a design that still stands. One can breathe in a lungful of lignite coal smoke, so distinctive in certain Polish cities at dusk, which conjures Lodz of old in the shadow of Poznanski’s palace and the tenements of Baluty slums. Doing so, one feels, as Modiano does of Paris, “alone in making the link” between Lodz today and that of Rosenfarb’s wartime city.15 In the same way, prewar Lodz, known as the Polish Manchester, comes into view. In the tenements lived textile workers and their families, while the palaces housed the bosses, many Jewish, of the city’s manufacturing industry. Modiano insists that we
follow him in his recovery of Boulevard Ornano in wartime; Rosenfarb makes no such suggestion as she describes Lutomierska Street in the heart of the Jewish slum, with its merchants, fish market, horse thieves, and “streetwalkers who plied their trade . . . as well as the kosher matrons buying groceries, and the pious Jews going to synagogue.”

Another Polish Jewish writer who conveys the unusual ethical demands of this kind of memorial writing is Michal Glowinski. His memoir of the Warsaw Ghetto and hiding in the countryside is called *Czarne sezony*, or *The Black Seasons*. As he recounts those he remembers from the ghetto, he is oppressed by the idea that “it’s possible I am the only one who remembers them, the only one who knows that they once lived, worked, taught—and perished—together with the world of which they were a part.” Modiano points to a similar burden of memory. Of Dora Bruder’s experience of occupied Paris, her incarceration at the Tourelles transit camp, where French Jewish Affairs police shook down inmates before readying them for transport to Auschwitz, Modiano writes, “Were I not here to record it, there would be no trace of this unidentified girl’s presence.”

I highlight these points in Modiano and Glowinski to look with care at an unusual passage in a recently translated chapter from Rosenfarb’s novel *Briv tsu Abrashn*. The original Yiddish text was published in Israel in 1992, while a long excerpt from one chapter appeared in English in 2015, translated by Goldie Morgentaler, under the title “In the Boxcar.” In many ways the novel is stylistically conventional and realist in tone, with a remarkable attentiveness to a host of suffering characters who have been rounded up at the closing of the Lodz Ghetto and sent to the deportation place at Radogoszcz station for transport to the unknown. The present-day monument at this site includes a brutal cement wall testifying to the years of the war attached to a looming brick tower. The cement wall covers tracks that were used by deportation trains leaving Lodz for death sites. On the memorial’s inside walls hang, under glass, a surprising series of artifacts. These are the lists of names for deportation, typed out in columns with coloured check marks beside each name, which German army clerks used to account for those sent to killing sites. These lists are ephemeral aids to memory like Modiano’s discovery of the personal ad “in an old copy of *Paris-Soir*. The typed sheets, with their strikeouts and check marks, evoke the killers’ hands well.

Important counterparts to Rosenfarb’s “In the Boxcar” chapter are found in the early sections of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, where both authors portray a train wagon’s progress across a European landscape and its arrival at Auschwitz–Birkenau. Holocaust memoirs offer an array of different presentations of this experience. Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* is notable for the distance travelled by the German–ordered freight car. Warm Italian weather gives way to cold central and eastern European climate, and the names of known places give way to the unknown.
The poignant impact of Rosenfarb’s rendering of the boxcar flows, in part, from its detailed, realist character. But Rosenfarb does more with this shared material. Her presentation of the interior of the wagon includes a variety of characters—old, young, religious, and politically motivated—who observe each other as the wagon’s movement shakes them “to and fro like sheaves in the wind.” Unlike Levi and Wiesel, Rosenfarb presents the interior of the boxcar in minute detail: “The small boxcar window was covered with a grating of barbed wire, like the window in a prison cell. It was located at the upper corner of the wagon, to the right of the sealed door. A dozen hands held on to the knotted mesh of wire separating us from the outside world.”

“In the Boxcar” makes plentiful use of dialogue and dramatic interaction between characters. One expects that it recalls Rosenfarb’s own departure from Lodz in August of 1944 en route to southern Poland. The narrator of “In the Boxcar,” is 20, roughly the author’s age when she left Lodz, and she travels as Rosenfarb did with parents and a sister. These autobiographical details, placed alongside novelistic characters and events, struck me as particularly painful upon first reading. I felt as if I had abruptly entered a genre of writing about the war that promised unusual intimacy in its presentation of actual events. The otherwise conventional fictional surface of the narrative is interrupted by a surfeit of the personal. This is Modiano’s effect in Dora Bruder, when he forces the reader to consider the links between the author’s own experiences and their affinity and proximity to those of Dora’s. In Modiano’s case it is his father’s experience in German occupied Paris that acts as a kind of anchor in his portrayal of wartime.

Surprisingly, “In the Boxcar” breaks from its realist mode at a key point, and it is the passage where this break takes place that echoes Modiano’s literary and even metaphysical strategies. The boxcar arrives at Auschwitz as its locomotive emits “a prolonged sigh and [grows] silent.” A member of the Kanada detail, there to snatch luggage from the mass of people exiting the train wagons, snarls the name of the place where they have arrived. Rosenfarb moves the scene through a tumult of voices, interruptions, and shocks, along with the odd literary flourish: “All the boxcars had spat out their contents... The open wagon doors looked like the countless gaping mouths of a monster again waiting to be fed.” SS men, characterized by their theatrically neat uniforms and their robotic comportment, enact a version of the familiar German genius for plunder and violence. “Women and children remain here!” one shouts. “Men move to the other side!”

At this point the narrative breaks open; it hits a limit point. Put differently, the chapter moves into a new literary and experiential realm, a moment of singularity and specialness, like Modiano’s narrative portals when “perspectives become blurred” and a particular place and time come into unusually sharp focus. To quote the passage from “In the Boxcar” in Morgentaler’s translation: “A sudden hush. The enor-
mous open sky overhead looked as hollow as the inside of an empty bell. The rustle of loose papers scattered on the ground, the whisper of pages from the small psalm books fingered by the breeze. These sounds, so very faint, reached our deafened ears.” This tableau is somehow out of time, as if, on the ramp, for a few moments, the hullabaloo lifts, danger subsides. Awareness of existence and the expansive sky above Auschwitz overtake the dreadful events. The reader falls into this sudden hush in much the same way that Modiano draws the reader into the “blurred” moment, the startling street corner when “the city of yesterday appears . . . in fleeting gleams behind that of today.”

In a few instances in Modiano’s work it is cinema that allows one to pass from one time to another, as if time past can be trapped and made accessible via a movie, which is redolent of a particular time and place: “light of the early sixties, soft, limpid” he asserts, is encapsulated in such films from the period as *Lola* and *Adieu Philippine*. When he returns to a street familiar to him he finds it “frozen” in that light.

What draws Rosenfarb’s reader into the portal and causes this passage to rhyme differently from the rest? The hush. The appreciation of the sky and the ability to consider it formally (it is enormous and open); so that the scenario can be rendered in philosophical terms. The sky’s overarching meaning is clear as it is presented as being as “hollow as the inside of an empty bell.” In the original Yiddish this phrase might also be translated as “an empty mute bell.” These details offer a reckoning, one not expressed directly by the narrator, but by an omniscient authorial voice, as ominous stage directions. This is offered alongside an oddly cinematic flourish, the “rustle of loose papers scattered on the ground, the whisper of pages from the small psalm books fingered by the breeze.” The ramp is momentarily stilled, as if out of time, for our consideration. Everything going on upon it is silenced, revealing the immediate meaning and impact of arrival.

This vignette, so abrupt, evokes a remembered, or, at least, a reimagined scenario that stands apart from the rest of the fictional tableau offered in “In the Boxcar.” It is a rupture in the narrative; an expression of consciousness, knowledge, and self-possession that Rosenfarb’s narrator cannot claim in the rest of the piece. I would designate it a limit point in the chapter, like Glowinski’s recognition of his solitude in memory of ghetto dwellers, now murdered. It is also like Modiano’s pursuit of experience that cuts through time, allowing an overlap of past and present.

Later in “In the Boxcar,” realism gives way to the grotesque, in response to the extremity of the scene:

Sonia, doubled over, her knees sinking, stumbled ahead as if at any moment she might collapse. She held onto her belly as though about to give birth, while her head was turned backwards towards the gate. From there came Sarah, pulling
Hanka along in a kind of dancing step. So musical had we all become. Oh, how Mama and Vierka seemed to come dancing towards me, although I had lost them from sight.

Here the grotesque enacts another kind of irruption in Rosenfarb’s realist tableau. But the effect is not quite the same as that in the scene on the ramp, nor does this passage propose the blurring of boundaries we find in Modiano.

The rarity of the kind of writing used to describe the arrival on the ramp in Rosenfarb’s oeuvre raises interesting questions about the author’s work and Holocaust literature more broadly. Morgentaler, Rosenfarb’s translator and daughter, suggests a creative shift that took place in her mother’s later career:

When she was writing _The Tree of Life_, she could not bring herself to reimagine the concentration camps, and so the novel ends with the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, and we are left to imagine the subsequent fates of the main characters. But as time went on, temporal distance might have cushioned some of her memories and made it easier for her to describe the concentration camps. “In the Boxcar” is an excerpt from _Letters to Abrasha_ (not yet available in English), the novel she wrote after _The Tree of Life_. That excerpt describes the cattle car ride to Auschwitz, the characters’ arrival there, and the selection. I think it took great courage to write this scene; reliving that event must have been intensely painful.”

Rosenfarb’s distinctive status as a writer of fiction who is also a survivor may be relevant here. “There have been,” Morgentaler adds, “very few fiction works by actual survivors” who more commonly turn to memoir, diary, or autobiography. The unusual vignette I highlight from “In the Boxcar” may have its creative source in this late-career approach to the fictive rendering of remembered events.

As the reception of the Holocaust in various genres shifts, the vogue for calling the experience of its events inexpressible, or incomprehensible, rises and fades. One is struck, in the narrative limit points I have raised—in Modiano, in Glowinski, and in Rosenfarb—by instances of literary effectiveness in dealing with the extremity and cruelty, even the estranged quality of the events being described. One version of this in _Dora Bruder_ is Modiano’s experience of watching an Occupation-era film, whose “peculiar luminosity” and whiteness strike him as an artefact of the Occupation years. The “film,” he writes, “was impregnated with the gaze of moviegoers from the time of the Occupation—people from all walks of life, most of whom would not have survived the war . . . by some kind of chemical process, this combined gaze had materially altered the actual film, the lighting, the voices of the actors.”
This notion of the fixative potential of film, an almost magical mode of recovery, is noted in Glowinski’s *The Black Seasons*. It comes up in the context of Glowinski’s recollection of the distinctive colour of the ghetto, which, he writes, was no colour. He maintains that the whole ghetto was awash in a particular shade, which was that of the sheets of paper used to cover corpses that lay out on the street: “I never again saw such paper; yet I think that the description ‘discolored’ would be closest, most fitting. Precisely that color without color—neither white nor ash nor even gray.” Uncannily, it is while watching Andrzej Wajda’s 1990 film *Korczak* that Glowinski encountered that unsettling shade again. The film’s presentation of a “black-and-whiteness,” a “grayness with no boundaries, no differentiation,” embodied the ghetto in “the very form in which it had imprinted itself” in his “memory decades earlier.” This is at once captivating and horrifying. How had Wajda accomplished such an effect? The cinematic image—as with the written word in Modiano and Rosenfarb—fixes a specific place in time in an uncanny way. Such artistic outcomes offer a strong counterproposition to notions of inexpressibility or incomprehensibility. “I think of Dora Bruder,” Modiano tells us. For Rosenfarb, the focal point with unusual potential is the “enormous open sky overhead . . . hollow as the inside of an empty bell.”

Is it fair to say that such narrative limit points appear only in Holocaust writing, with the extremity of its subject matter and its peculiar ethical demands on writer and reader? Or are there other kinds of writing where, as Modiano puts it, “perspectives become blurred, one winter merging into another,” so that what has been so brutally erased by the perpetrator and by time resurfaces? Modiano and Rosenfarb offer a literature of limits, of estrangement and shock, which intimately ties the reader with the past. In Modiano’s case, this is a characteristic literary strategy. In Rosenfarb, it proves to be an irruption in an otherwise straightforwardly descriptive and realistic oeuvre.
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11 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 20.


14 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 6.

15 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 41.


18 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 53. In this category of the almost forgotten Modiano includes his father, Albert Modiano, “in a Black Maria on the Champs-Élysées in February 1942.”

19 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 3.


21 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 41.


24 Johnson and Allardice.

25 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 66.

26 Glowinski, 7.


28 Glowinski, 7.

29 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 64.

30 Modiano, Dora Bruder, 9.