

Liat Steir-Livny

The Open University of Israel (Israel)

The Hero's Wife: The Depiction of Female Holocaust Survivors in Israeli Cinema Prior to the Eichmann Trial and in its Aftermath

Abstract: Israeli culture in the 1940s and 1950s was dominated by ideological considerations. Zionist films, as other aspects of Eretz-Israel and Israeli culture, distinctively propagated Zionist ideas. As a consequence of their sociopolitical focus, these films neglected the complexities of the relationship between Holocaust survivors and the native Jews in Eretz-Israel. Instead, Holocaust survivors were reduced to a homogeneous entity that bore distinct negative connotations. Films depicted female Holocaust survivors as mentally unstable, unfit mothers, and often played up negative sexual stereotypes. In these films, the women were “cured” or went through a process of “purification” thanks to the Zionist establishment. Historical research often cites the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) as being a turning point in the Israeli public’s perception of the Holocaust, and its representation in Israeli culture. This article will focus on an analysis of the film *The Hero's Wife* (Peter Frye, 1963) that was produced in the aftermath of the trial. It will discuss the innovative representations of this unresearched film, and will seek to answer the questions of why, and in what way, its narrative comprises a subversive antithesis to the narrative shaped by Zionist fiction films made prior to the Eichmann trial.

Keywords: *Holocaust cinema; Holocaust survivors; The Eichmann trial; Holocaust commemoration*

Introduction

Israeli culture in the 1940s and 1950s was dominated by ideological considerations. Zionist films, as other aspects of Eretz-Israel and Israeli culture, distinctively propagated Zionist ideas. Cinema served as an artistic platform for an ideological outlook, through which the Zionist establishment sought to display its political, national, and economic achievements. Such films necessarily presented a tendentious worldview, and instead of dealing directly with the Holocaust, focused on the Zionist “lesson” to be learned in its aftermath:

the importance of establishing a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Consequently, these films neglected to address the complex encounters of Holocaust survivors with the native Jews. Instead, Holocaust survivors were reduced to a homogeneous entity that bore distinctly negative connotations. The films depicted survivors in general, as physically and mentally ill, and female survivors as mentally unstable, unfit mothers, and often played up negative sexual stereotypes. These films included a transformation process, as survivors changed from “diasporic Jews” to “New Jews.” Accordingly, the women were “cured” or went through a process of “purification” thanks to the Zionist establishment. Historical research often cites the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) as a turning point in the Israeli public’s awareness and perception of the complex reality of the Holocaust. It was the first time that Israelis were exposed to so many testimonies. The trial brought the Holocaust into every home and affected Holocaust awareness, the representation of the Holocaust in culture, the public sphere, and the educational system (Shapira, 1997, Weitz, 1999, Yablonka, 2004).

This article will focus on an analysis of the film *The Hero's Wife* (Peter Frye, 1963) that was produced in the aftermath of the trial. It will discuss the innovative representation of Holocaust survivors and subversive narrative in this as-yet unresearched film, comparing it to representations found in Zionist films of the 1940s and 1950s.

Holocaust Survivors in Israeli fictional Films, 1940–1960

In the early years of the State, the relationship between Holocaust survivors and indigenous Israelis was complex. Although sincere attempts were made to assist in their integration, the empathy offered to the survivors was often accompanied by a measure of suspicion (Yablonka, 2000). Native Jews wondered how the newcomers had survived, while six million others had perished. They had difficulty understanding how those European Jews who did not offer resistance to the Nazis, and who, in their view, exhibited passivity and humility – qualities most traditionally associated with Diaspora Jews. Holocaust survivors who didn’t rebel were considered the antithesis of the partisans and ghetto fighters – also survivors – who were nevertheless treated in a completely different fashion. Although also hailing from Europe, these Jews were not viewed as “diaspora Jews” but rather, as an extension of the Zionist enterprise in Europe (since many were members of Zionist youth movements) (Shapira, 1997). The term “Holocaust and Heroism,” which was prevalent in the 1950s, created a clear distinction between those who went to their deaths “like lambs to the slaughter” and those who faced a “respectable death” while fighting and resisting. The distinction between fighter and non-fighter was further sharpened by the notion that “the best had been killed.” The division that was thus created between those who were murdered and those who had survived was based on the idea that those who had remained alive had probably been able to “get by,” and not always with integrity (Segev, 1991; Porat, 2001). Attitudes towards women in the Holocaust were very diverse (Geva, 2010). Mothers and female fighters were often depicted as heroines, however, at the same time, female survivors were also depicted

as mentally-ill, violent, unfit for motherhood, or as having compromised their sexual values in order to survive (Levenkron, 2008; Shapira, 1997).

The fiction films dealing with Holocaust survivors produced between 1945 and 1961 did not reflect this complex encounter. Most of them were made with the support of the establishment, and were intended, first and foremost, to spread the message of Zionism. The clear propaganda agenda served as an artistic platform for an ideological doctrine. Through these films, the establishment sought to achieve political, national, and economic goals, such as fundraising and recognition of Zionism and its struggle towards the establishment and consolidation of a Jewish state. The films thus revolved around the immigration and absorption of Holocaust survivors in Eretz-Israel, and the narratives, therefore, were constructed to fit the theme of Zionist redemption (Avisar, 1998; Zimmerman, 2002; Gertz, 2004; Steir-Livny, 2009).

These films seemingly told stories of immigration and integration, but the real protagonists were the Land of Israel (pre-state Israel) and its Jewish inhabitants. The films depicted native Jews as being generous, sensitive, and ready to help, and the country itself was portrayed as a sunny, flourishing landscape filled with fruit, smiling children (symbolizing the beginning of a new life), and happy young pioneers working the land. An uplifting soundtrack provided the backdrop for simplistic narratives in which Holocaust survivors, scarred from their experiences and exhibiting negative qualities, undergo a metamorphic process with the help of the native Jews in the healing environment of the fledgling country. At the conclusion of each film, the survivors close the door on the past and fully integrate into society, leaving the trauma behind. This cinematic representation ignored the complexity of living with the traumatic memories, and instead, presented the successful integration of survivors as being dependent solely on the help of the native Jews (Steir-Livny, 2009). The self-healing, inner strength, and tireless action characteristic of Holocaust survivors were entirely disregarded.

Negative stereotypes of female Holocaust survivors flourished alongside the notion that “the best had been killed.” In the films, problematic female characters could only be healed and changed in the land of Israel. For example, In *The Great Promise* (Joseph Lates, 1946), Tamar, a teenage Holocaust survivor, displays antisocial behaviors after arriving in a children’s village. At first, she does not communicate with the native children. She is violent, steals, and runs away when the stolen goods are discovered under her bed. The village children’s warmth and kindness, however, persuade her to come back and change. By the end of the film she has integrated so well that she is indistinguishable from the other children. In *Yonatan and Tali* (Henry Schneider, 1953), a Holocaust survivor who is released from a mental institution gives up her two children for adoption in a Kibbutz, where they will be raised to be “proper” Israelis. The mother relinquishes her children of her own free will, magnifying the negative image of female Holocaust survivors through the choices she makes.

As was common in other cultural fields of the era (Bartov, 1999; Zartal, 2002; Steir-Livny, 2009) Israeli cinema also portrayed female survivors as having used their sexuality to survive

the Holocaust, either by being used as prostitutes by the Nazis or in other ways. For example, *My Father's House* (Herbert Klein, 1947) follows David, a teenage survivor, as he searches for his father in pre-state Israel. Miriam, a beautiful young survivor, who has arrived with him, tells a kibbutz member that in Auschwitz she had been forced to engage in prostitution. As evidence, she presents him (and the camera) with a tattoo indicating her role in the camp. The filmmakers were quick to explain that Miriam's case was not exceptional. Later in the scene, Miriam says that many women had been forced into prostitution, and since they could not bear to live with their actions, had committed suicide after the war. The film *Faithful City* (Joseph Lates, 1952) depicts a group of orphaned survivor children arriving at a youth farm in Jerusalem in 1947. Anna is a teenager who, according to the film, made manipulative use of her sexuality to survive. She attempts to use these sexual manipulations with the Zionist youth guide but he refuses to cooperate. These female characters undergo a process of purification, leaving them modest and asexual by the end of the films.

The Eichmann Trial – A Turning Point

Approximately half a million Holocaust survivors were living in Israel when then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stood at the Knesset's podium in May 1960 and announced that Adolf Eichmann had been captured. The country was electrified at the news that he was being brought to Israel and was to face trial under the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law. As the trial began in April 1961, 110 witnesses from Europe and Israel were summoned to testify. After a trial lasting eight months, Eichmann was found guilty. He was executed in May 1962. The trial marked the first time in which Israeli society was intensely confronted with the personal stories of so many survivors from various countries. The testimonies of Holocaust experiences from various perspectives were relayed to the Israeli public day after day, over the course of months, via radio and the press. For the first time since WWII, the door had been opened for observing their trauma more profoundly (Yablonka, 2004; Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010). In its aftermath, several changes appeared in the realm of Holocaust commemoration: The trial served as the catalyst for the commemoration of lost Jewish communities, in which survivors played an integral part. The scope of Holocaust education was broadened, as dictated by the Ministry of Education and Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day was given a consistent structure. The first Jewish youth delegations travelled, in 1966 and 1967, to the German concentration camps in Poland. During those years, works of literature, poetry, and theatre by survivors began gaining recognition, and Israeli non-survivor authors also began to slowly address the Holocaust and its effects in their writings (Laor, 1993; Tydor Baumel, 1995; Gertz, 2004; Brutin, 2005; Holtzman, 2006).

I argue that the trial had brought about a profound change in the portrayal of a female Holocaust survivor. The film *The Hero's Wife* marks the first time that a female Holocaust survivor is depicted with complexity and depth and is portrayed as a strong woman who lives in the shadow of the trauma and yet succeeds in starting a new life.

A Profound Portrait of a Female Holocaust Survivor

Peter Frye was a Jewish Israeli-Canadian film and theatre director, who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s. In Israel he directed many successful plays, anchored several radio shows, and established and headed the department of theatre arts at Tel Aviv University. Frye directed three Israeli fiction films in the 1950s and 1960s [*I Like Mike* (1961), *The Hero's Wife* (1963), and *My Margo* (1969)], before moving to the UK in the 1970s. For the leading role in *The Hero's Wife* he cast his wife, Batya Lancet (Ruby and Frye, 1995).

Apparently, the creation of a nuanced female Holocaust survivor image was influenced by the Eichmann trial, and not by the fact that Frye hailed from Canada, since during the fifteen years prior to the Eichmann trial, fiction films representing stereotypically negative images of female Holocaust survivors (discussed above) were not directed by native Israelis, but by directors from Europe and the USA.

The Hero's wife focuses on Rachel, a widowed Holocaust survivor who lives in a kibbutz. Her husband had been an Eretz-Israeli emissary to Europe and they met at a DP camp. After their marriage they settled in his kibbutz. Since her husband's death in the 1948 war, Rachel hasn't had a relationship with another man, until Jerry, a rowdy Jewish-Mexican volunteer arrived at the Kibbutz at the beginning of the 1960s.

Although the film's title is "The Hero's wife," Rachel is not an object, and her identity does not revolve around being someone's wife; in fact, she is an independent woman with a complex personality and, as the main protagonist, her story forms the principal narrative. In this, the film is an anomaly; not only compared to films of the 1940s and 1950s that focused on Holocaust survivors, but also compared to all the national-heroic-themed films that were produced from the 1930s to the late 1960s and which focused solely on male narratives and on the land of Israel (Gertz, 1993; Talmon, 2001; Yosef, 2010; Peleg, 2006).

The 1940s and 1950s fiction films that represented Holocaust survivors were filmed from the native Jews' perspective. For example, in the opening scene of the film *My Father's House* (Herbert Klein, 1946) a scene of new immigrant survivors arriving by sea is filmed from the beach towards the water, from the perspective of the people waiting on the shore. In *The Great Promise* (Josef Leites, 1947) and *Tomorrow's A Wonderful Day* (Helmar Larsky, 1948) the arrival of child survivors is seen through the eyes of Jewish children already living in the fledgling state, who have been waiting for their arrival. Initially the survivors are depicted as strangers to the Zionist space. They view their new country as an extension of the concentration camps (*Tomorrow's a Wonderful Day*), have difficulty adapting to their new surroundings and want to flee (*My Father's House*) and don't understand the essence of the collective experience (*Dream No More*, *The Great Promise*) (Zimmerman, 2002; Gertz, 2004; Steir-Livny, 2009).

In contrast, the opening scenes of *The Hero's wife* feature Rachel, the newcomer, walking through the blossoming fields surrounding Lake Kinneret. It is she who introduces the viewer to the area's beauty, and not the veteran Israelis. Rachel is the first character followed by

viewers, long before any kibbutz members appear on screen. Rachel shares her name with that of the famous pioneer poet who also lived on the shores of Lake Kinneret, and thus, she symbolically shares her identity as one of the original settlers, and not merely as a Holocaust survivor. Rachel the survivor sees the kibbutz as her home, and when confronting Jerry, the existentialist, she courageously represents the kibbutz's collective values as her own. The plot follows her point of view; many scenes are seen through her eyes and her voice-over augments some of the scenes, revealing her thoughts and inner-dialogue: Holocaust memories and her loneliness and longing for her dead husband.

Rachel ends her tour of Lake Kinneret at her husband's grave. Unlike films from the 1940s and 1950s which followed survivors as they underwent a transformative initiation into the Zionist collective, Rachel begins the film already ensconced in the new State, having paid a heavy price in the country's establishment (death on the battlefield)— an esteemed symbol in the national-heroic genre.

As opposed to narratives in earlier films, Rachel's joining the kibbutz doesn't mean that she has closed a door to the past. *The Hero's Wife* presents, for the first time, a Holocaust survivor who, although haunted by her memories, is very much part of society. Her past has not been forgotten but instead, mingles with the present. For example, shots of her visiting the fields near her home are accompanied by intercuts of children's drawings from the Holocaust. When the camera zooms out, it becomes apparent that one of these paintings is hung in Rachel's room, above containers filled with fresh vegetables. This juxtaposition reflects old and new, past and present; a coexistence which thrives in her life and her soul. In another scene, a romantic walk becomes the setting for Rachel to tell Jerry about her experiences as a child in Mauthausen. During this scene, the frame suddenly fills with images of children from the Holocaust, and the spell of the peaceful stroll is broken.

Most films of the 1940s and 1950s focused on the negative characteristics of Holocaust survivors, which were ultimately eliminated by the end of the films. As a result, only the last few minutes of each film presented the survivors in their newly-transformed personas. The purpose behind this allocation was political: it magnified the healing powers of the land of Israel and its people, thus highlighting the need for a stable Jewish state. In *The Hero's wife*, Rachel's past is summed up in just one sentence that describes how when her husband Eli met her in the DP camp, she was trading in the black market. The rest of the film is dedicated to portraying her in the present as a tough, noble, and strong woman who contributes to society even as she lives in the shadow of her memories. The film doesn't depict a process of transformation with the help of Jewish veterans but instead, emphasizes the heroine's own strengths.

Unlike previous films, *The Hero's Wife* doesn't depict Rachel as a person with problematic traits that threaten social structures, but as an essential part of the kibbutz life. As the film opens, Rachel is already an admired and respected teacher. She lives a quiet life and contributes by teaching Hebrew to immigrants. At kibbutz events she is at the centre of activity, and members of the kibbutz ask for her help and admire her personality

traits (“aren’t you tired of being so kind?” one of them asks her). She is loved by veterans, newcomers, and children alike.

Indeed, Rachel charms both Joseph the kibbutz member, and Jerry the volunteer, and ultimately, she makes her choice. Diverging from the norms of usual Israeli behavior, she develops feelings for Jerry, the anarchist volunteer who is several years her junior. She successfully fights for Jerry to stay in the kibbutz until he finishes his Hebrew studies. The openness with which Rachel expresses her feelings in the context of that puritan time and setting represents bravery, courage, and strength of character.

Conclusion

Zionist cinema of the 1940s and 1950s often focused on the negative traits of Holocaust survivors, depicting them as stubborn, rebellious, introverted, and antisocial. In these early films, the process of healing from their tormented pasts could only be accomplished with the intervention of the native Jews. Successful assimilation into Israeli society was always linked to the erasure of memories; it was requisite that survivors leave their pasts behind in order to embrace a healthy life in their new home. This narrative clearly reflects and corroborates the Zionist narrative, which regards the Land of Israel as the only place where survivors can heal and begin a new life.

The Hero’s Wife is significant in the chronology of Holocaust depictions, since it represents, for the first time, an attempt to broaden the borders of remembrance in Holocaust-themed Israeli fiction films. Rather than centralizing the land or its people, the film features a female Holocaust survivor as its protagonist. This deeply developed main character, while still bearing the echoes of her past, lives at the centre of society. Without abandoning its clear Zionist message, this film focuses on the unique qualities and inner strength of a Holocaust survivor who manages to be a Zionist role model while struggling with her memories. This film, therefore, deserves to be more acknowledged in the realm of Israeli Holocaust cinema as a groundbreaking attempt to change misconceptions and negative stereotypes of female Holocaust survivors.

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Author

Dr Liat Steir-Livny

The Open University of Israel, Department of Culture at Sapir Academic College, Israel, and the Department of Literature, Language, and the Arts.

Contact details: 3 Hamizpe st, POB 4389, Shoham, Israel; e-mail: liatsteirlivny@gamil.com.