Time and Trauma in *Last Journey into Silence:*
A Conversation with Shosh Shlam

Featuring Aimee Pozorski and Petra Schweitzer

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Last Journey into Silence (2001) is a stunning documentary that chronicles the journeys three daughters make to reestablish relationships with their mothers—Holocaust survivors who recently have moved to an Israeli hospice called Shaar Menashe. My work on this film is in two parts: the first is an interview that Petra Schweitzer and I conducted with Israeli director Shosh Shlam; the second is an essay analyzing Shlam's representation of traumatic time in the lives of these women.

Background on Interview

In spring 2002 Shlam visited Emory University for the Atlanta premiere of *Last Journey into Silence*. On April 1, 2002, Petra Schweitzer and I interviewed Shlam about her use of time in the film, as well as her personal experiences with traumatic time as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. Perhaps fittingly, given her film's focus on traumatic repetition, the tape recorder did not pick up the interview suitably; upon returning to the tape, we could not hear Shlam's responses. That first interview, then, seemed to be nothing more nor less than a missed encounter.

Nearly two years later, we returned to some of the original questions in a second interview—for another repetition linked to the trauma of the Holocaust and its effects on the second generation. We began this second interview with a question about silence and its paradoxical manner of transmitting the unspoken truth of the past.

Part I

Aimee Pozorski and Petra Schweitzer: You said at one point that *Last Journey into Silence* is a film about silence—as indicated in the film's title. Yet, this is a rather unusual way to think about a film that seeks to bear witness to, and to tell the story of, the legacy of the Holocaust. How can a documentary bear witness via silence, ultimately?

Shosh Shlam: I thought I was going to make a film about stories from the Holocaust, of people I met, Holocaust survivors who became psychiatric patients and spent their lives in the closed ward. But I soon found out that it was going to be a film about silence. The patients did not tell anything and their medical records were practically empty. It turned out that the film is not about the Holocaust that happened in the past; in terms of these people's internal time, the time by which they continued to live, the Holocaust never ended. I went out to look for their children and tried to hear the stories through them. They only knew a few scattered facts. In their homes there was a thick wall of silence that separated them from their parents.

Primo Levy defined the "true survivors" as:
Those who touched bottom
Did not return to tell
Or came back mute
Because no one returned to tell his own death.

AP and PS: Could you explain briefly the genesis of the film—what led you to Shaar Menashe and to these three sets of mothers and daughters in particular? As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor yourself, why did you choose this hostel, and these

women, as a way to document the effects of the Holocaust?
SS: I am the daughter of a Holocaust survivor who alone survived his entire family. As a child I lived with the nightly screams and inherited the pain, the wound that is bleeding still. The inner bleeding led me to search for survivors, those whose lives are flooded by night. I began my quest for survivors in hospitals throughout the country. Then I heard a hostel was about to be opened for Holocaust survivors, the first of its kind in the world, at Shaar Menashe Hospital. Survivors who were hospitalized for thirty or forty years in mental institutions were going to live there. The fact that they were going to be all in one place made my task easier. I chose women to get away from my father. The daughters gave their consent and participated in the film because they regarded it as a personal journey that deepens their knowledge of their mothers.

AP and PS: Was the film a surprise for you—that is, did it seem to take on a life of its own after your initial conception? If so, how?

SS: The film was a surprise in more ways than one. I started out to make a film about stories from the Holocaust period and their implications in the lives of the survivors now. I found out they were unable to tell their story. Silence was the story. They were imprisoned inside the hell of their memory, which they carry inside. They do not remember the Holocaust; they live it. They survived the death camps but in fact died in them.

The film became the story of the second generation, the daughters who are venturing back into the past, in order to get to know their mothers. It is a painful journey of each one of them and an effort to include their mothers in their lives.

AP and PS: Although *Last Journey into Silence* has been described as a generational film about mothers and daughters, often the most striking statements come from men—such as the volunteer at the hospice and the man mourning his friend at the grave site. Was this surprising to you, especially since silence seems to surround your subjects who are women? Is this an intended difference, given your experiences with your own father? How is the speech of the men different from the muteness of the women in the film?

SS: The volunteer in the film is a Holocaust survivor himself. He went there "not to do a good deed—a 'mizvah'—but because I belong here, with them, their history is my history, I too come from the same hell." He was able to overcome the trauma, build a family, live again. They were not. They are still not free of the camp, and their silence is evidence of the hell they live in. Only death will free them of everything. This emotional sterility in relation to parents who are survivors is a consequence of its continuing long after its chronological end and geographic place. This I had in common with the women in my film. We all tried to meet our survivors, and such meetings cannot occur without our efforts.

AP and PS: In what ways do you see your father's influence on the film? For example, in what ways have your experiences as a child of a survivor translated into a documentary about survivors who have been misdiagnosed as psychotics and are struggling to maintain a connection with their daughters?
SS: As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, I remember nights full of rage. The day was a dam that blocked the surge of emotions seeking to drown the soul. As a child I inherited the main and the silence that would not be broken. Those nights were the mirror of my father's silent heart.

AP and PS: How did you go about filming and editing such rich material? For example, the moments capturing the "Pump up the Jams" exercise session and the celebration with the clowns during Purim are quite striking and particularly challenging for your viewers. Why did you choose to leave these scenes in and what moments did you have a difficult time cutting?

SS: The scenes of the Purim party and the physical education class express life and joy. They come to

underline the death that surrounds them. Those survivors are living dead; outside reality does not penetrate through to them; they are detached in time and place. The last scene in the film, between Chana and her daughter, in which she begs the former to take her along with her, was long and filled with pain. I had to re-edit it because the emotional burden was unbearable.

AP and PS: In the past several years, there have been many acclaimed films tackling the Holocaust as their subject matter. *Schindler's List* and *Life Is Beautiful* are perhaps the most memorable. These films, however, rely heavily upon dialogue, upon a sense that words can convey the horror of the Holocaust. Your film, conversely, is much more alienating because of its focus on silence. Was this an intentional intervention in Holocaust representation? Why is your film so effective in conveying this particular history, despite the fact that the subjects of your film seem so estranged from language?

SS: The film's strength is in the silence, in what is not said by the dumb faces expressing the death in which the Holocaust left those survivors. They do not remember the Shoah; they live it still. They remain sealed to us like the freight wagons that carried them to the death camps. They are still on that journey toward nothingness, emptiness, still on that track.

Part II

Today, one hundred survivors live in the hostels of the Center for Mental Health, Shaar Menashe, which was built in 1998 to specialize in "socializing therapies" (35). The repeated intrusion of the Holocaust into the lives of survivors—the fact that they are "still on that journey," to borrow from Shlam—indicates that they suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as the after-effects of witnessing an event "outside the range of usual human experience"—not psychosis (250). In his 2002 Time article discussing the work of Shaar Menashe and the mental health of its residents, Matt Rees explains the process by which doctors in Israel campaigned to have survivors treated for Holocaust trauma instead of psychosis. According to Rees, those suffering from PTSD had been considered "hopeless schizophrenics" who were given mind-numbing drugs or kept in solitary confinement—with both "solutions" resulting in the loss of speech. Conversely, "testimony therapy" helped survivors as "doctors listened for the first time to the inmates recounting the horrors of the camps" (35).

It may seem ironic, then, that Shlam's film is not structured around the kind of testimony one would expect: the kind of talking cure that we associate with the history of psychoanalysis. Instead, *Last Journey into Silence* testifies in a way that the most compelling literature testifies: through silences, unexpected turns of phrase, and the kind of awkwardness that best betrays a history of trauma. Shlam's testimony of silence—or silenced testimony—emphasizes the problem of time experienced by the Holocaust survivors living in Shaar Menashe. For example, Chana, the daughter of a woman who has recently begged to go home with her, answers during one particularly devastating moment of the film: "What does *soon* mean? You have to give me time." Such an awkward moment between mother and daughter, a moment calling attention to the temporal confusion of their lives, signals a more general complication of time for these two generations of women since the Holocaust. On the one hand, "What does *soon* mean" asks the simple question of duration: "In how many days, weeks, months, or years can I possibly prepare for your homecoming?" Yet, on the other hand, "What does *soon* mean?" surfaces as a thoroughly existential question, a question emphasizing the survivors' disjointed relationship with time and its meaning in their lives. "You have to give me time" also begs for chronological time as a way of staving off the intrusion of trauma into their lives. After all, Shlam suggests, these survivors may have lived through the Holocaust but they are, paradoxically, still living with it as well.

Even though Shlam portrays some compelling conversational exchanges, such as the "you have to give me time" encounter to which she refers above, the film very much is about what is not—what cannot—be said between these two generations separated by the intrusion of the Holocaust in his-

tory. In this sense, the film reveals the way history has marred the bond between mother and daughter, leaving them lost and disoriented. They are "out of time" on at least two levels: first, they perform daily rituals marking time until their final days; and second, they appear not to function in linear time. They both have run out of time and they live outside time. As living legacies of the Holocaust, their days are structured around traumatic repetition outside the bounds of chronological time. According to Rees, as a result of the creation of the Shaar Menashe hospice, "At least some of the survivors with their minds still trapped in the camps may finally be liberated" (36).

However, as *Last Journey into Silence* reveals, liberation does not come so easily. Although the liberation Rees speaks of implies a kind of escape from a physical locality, the traumatic repetition in the lives of the residents significantly prevents any kind of psychic liberation. As Dan Krauss has it, these survivors "still live in the hellish world of Nazi terror and concentration camps. For them, time has stood still since the horrors they experienced shattered their minds." Michal Kapra explains that "life for them. Was not stronger than Death. It just went on" (2). And Shlam, picking up on this language of freedom and incarceration, argues that these residents "are imprisoned in the hell of their memory, which they carry within. They do not remember the Holocaust; they live it. Inner time rules their lives." Shlam's groundbreaking documentary, then, captures this inner time—the traumatic time—in which these survivors live. She recalls that her film "was not going to be a movie about a Holocaust that took place once, in the past. Because in terms of the internal time of these people, the time by which they live, the Holocaust has never ended" (quoted in Milner, 1).

At first glance, Chana's "What does soon mean?" seems to demand a specific answer: tomorrow, next week, next year. Her question, though, also emphasizes the cycle of traumatic time that her mother has come to live by. As such, it points to the way that time eludes our philosophical grasp and emphasizes the problem of time in connection with traumatic events. Other scholars recently have tried to articulate this problem: Emory professor Kate Brown, for example, has used the phrase "Empty Time" to articulate the complicated relation between trauma and mourning, while Jean-Francois Lyotard has used the phrase "lost time" to explain, in the words of Geoffrey Bennington, "this sort of past 'beneath the forgotten.' " Shlam herself has indicated that she tried to capture on film how the residents practice "killing time." For example, during the hourly cigarette break, a voiceover from the daily news reports the current hour and minute. The ritualistic events of eating and smoking both mark time and use up time—they "kill" time. However, the phrase "killing time" also speaks to a larger obsession with time by pointing out a kind of vengeance. It is time itself these residents want to kill—to do away with altogether. "What is the day for them?" Shlam asks, "Every hour there is a cigarette." She stops talking at this point during a conversation about her film. Every hour there is a cigarette. Stop. Nothing more.

According to Phil Hall, one recent reviewer of the film, "There is no spontaneity at Shaar Menashe, with all routines performed in cold, sterile clockwork precision." He notes that everything from meals to smoking breaks are rigidly scheduled—ultimately arguing that "a disturbing recurring image through the film is the setting of the tables for mealtimes: the Shaar Menashe staff serves up plates and bowls packed with less-than-appetizing food while the patients stand impatiently and impotently on the far side of huge locked glass doors" awaiting the dinner hour (*Film Threat Reviews*). Perhaps, as sterile as routines are, they are one way for the staff at Shaar Menashe to put the residents back into time. The hourly cigarettes and the rigidly scheduled meals all impose an external measure of time where there is no such regularity, control, or orientation in their experiences of "inner time."

Shlam's *Last Journey into Silence* remarkably emphasizes the problem of time following traumatic events. These survivors exemplify the difficulty of situating oneself in time outside of history, without language, and within a perpetually ongoing traumatic experience. Typically, we think about history in terms of beginning and end points marked confidently with dates. For example, we might say that the Holocaust began with the rise of Hitler in 1933 or Kristallnacht in 1938 or the first concentration camp in 1940—and "ended" in 1945. Text on the website www.remember.org, for example, attests that in 1945 "the Holocaust is over and the death

camps are emptied." For certain survivors of traumatic experience, and certainly for the survivors now living in Shaar Menashe, the Holocaust has neither an easily determined beginning nor end point. It emphatically was not "over" in 1945. "Traumatic time"—as contrasted with "historical time"—knows neither end nor closure. "She constantly spoke of how the Germans were going to come back," Josephina's daughter emphasizes. "She was afraid the Germans would come back and we would have to go back there again."

Last Journey into Silence is structured around arrivals and departures—it is structured, therefore, in time. It charts the journeys of these mothers who are survivors and of their daughters who long to rediscover them. The film begins with the daughters commenting on their expectations before the visit, portrays the visits themselves, and closes with goodbyes between the two generations. In other words, the film uses linear time as an important intervention in interpreting the timelessness for its viewers. Yet the "shalom" in the beginning and the "shalom" in the end complicate such easy definitions of time. In this film, the familiar doubling of "shalom"—both hello and goodbye—resonates uncannily with the survivors' experience, symbolically encoding another kind of time—one without beginning and ending: "She never could recover" is what we are told about the woman who speaks in the opening segment of the film, the woman who repeats: "Then I found myself in a mental hospital to be healed. I couldn't forget."

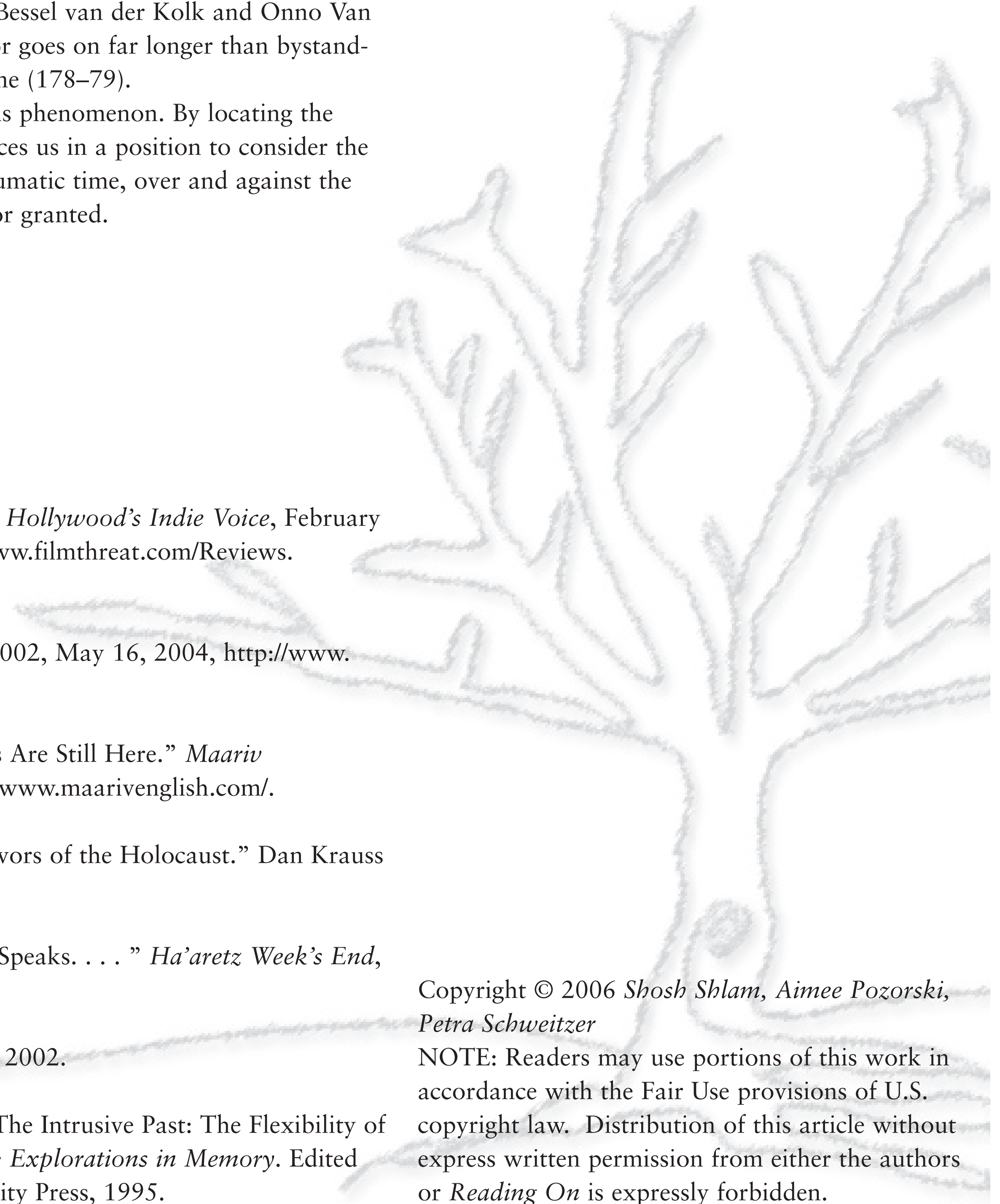
Josephina, a resident of Shaar Menashe, embodies the impossibility of forgetting or of recovering from the devastation of the Holocaust. Josephina lost two children during the Holocaust and was committed to a psychiatric ward after giving birth to the daughter who remains anonymous in the film. This daughter visits her regularly but does not tell her family where she goes. Josephina repeatedly draws figures of two children while her daughter narrates: "She kept talking about the two little kids she had left behind." Her daughter connects the drawings of the two children with the ones the woman "had left behind" during the Holocaust. This repetition, of both the drawings and verbal references to her two children, reveals that the traumatic past of the Holocaust involves not only the experience of nearly dying but also the experience of surviving—of coming out of death. The children are identical in each depiction, since they do not exist in time but rather are the expression of Josephina's repetition compulsion, in which she returns to a moment in the past in an attempt to capture the separation that came too soon initially. "Did you draw today?" her daughter asks. She is "referring to the routine of the elderly woman who for many years has spent her days drawing and painting two children, always in the same slightly complicated manner—face and body surrounded by a dotted line that forms a circle, which Josephina draws with painstaking care" (Milner, 2). The use of the word *today* seems improper—even gratuitous—since Josephina experiences all days the same way: still subject to the specter of the Holocaust and the horrible memory of leaving behind her children.

As viewers learn from the hostel staff, Josephina does not want to "try a different kind of line"—the word *line* privileging the idea of a linear progression of time. The never-changing drawings are an homage in the present to an ongoing past. For Josephina, leaving the time of these drawings is uncomfortable, even impossible. The watercolors she is given as an alternative, for example, are not pleasing to her; they do not offer the connection to the two children she "had left"—or, more precisely, was forced to leave. The watercolors locate Josephina in time but cannot bear witness to her past.

This idea of trying adequately to bear witness to the past also emerges in the dedicated, sensitive speech of what appears to be a hostel volunteer who is himself a survivor. After describing his connection to the residents of Shaar Menashe, he explains, "They were thrown into all kinds of dumps. . . . These people are still in a concentration camp." Again, on the surface, it may appear as if the volunteer is speaking literally of the hostel, comparing it physically as a "dump" to the concentration camps of the past. A more sensitive reading, however, may locate "the concentration camp" in the psyches of the residents, in the endless drawings of Josephina's children who were once with her in the camps, in the fear that the Germans would come back, in the impossibility of healing, and in the difficulty of returning to historical time with its beginnings, middles, and endings. With no sense of appropriate beginnings and endings, traumatic experience neces-

sarily complicates a person's experience of time. As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart have emphasized, the "event" for a survivor goes on far longer than bystanders or scholars or secondary witnesses dare to imagine (178–79).

Last Journey into Silence bears witness to this phenomenon. By locating the residents of Shaar Menashe in space and time, it places us in a position to consider the otherwise inexplicable: empty time, lost time, or traumatic time, over and against the linear time of our daily lives that we so often take for granted.



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