

Hushed silence

Sharon Hart-Green's first novel revolves around a Holocaust survivor and the daughter of survivors – both coming to grips with history

• ATARA BECK

Over the past several decades, a plethora of literature – fiction and non-fiction – has been written about survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants. Indeed, the extreme trauma experienced by the actual survivors of the greatest horrors imaginable had to affect their offspring in a profound way.

Come Back for Me, a recently published novel by Canadian author Sharon Hart-Green, set in the 1960s and spanning three continents, is yet another work of fiction focusing on an extended family of survivors and their children. However, each piece of literature on the topic is a treasure.

Hart-Green has a PhD in Judaic studies from Brandeis University, has taught Hebrew and Yiddish literature at the University of Toronto and is the author of two scholarly works as well as short stories, poems, translations and reviews that have appeared in several publications.

A page-turner – I read it in two sittings – *Come Back for Me* is the author's first work of fiction.

There are two protagonists: Suzy Kohn, a teenage girl and daughter of survivors growing up in Toronto, and Artur Mandelkorn, a Hungarian survivor who lived in Israel and the UK after the war and was determined to build a life while haunted with memories of his family and obsessed with the unrealistic hope that his beloved sister had survived. The novel, written with depth, switches back and forth between the two characters, and it works.

Hart-Green spoke to *The Jerusalem Post* in a recent interview about the novel.

Are you a child of survivors?

I'm not a child of survivors. However, I grew up with many survivors as neighbors and they always fascinated me.

Did the fact that you were acquainted with many Holocaust survivors inspire you to write this novel?

That's a difficult question to answer, since writing this novel was not entirely a conscious or deliberate project. It just kind of emerged. At the same time, I do recall that from the youngest age, I seemed to have been fascinated by survivors; in fact, as a child, my best friend was the daughter of survivors, and I spent an enormous amount of time with her and her family.

Perhaps my fascination also stemmed from the fact that there was so much hushed silence surrounding survivors of the Shoah. Since I tended to be an overly sensitive child (often to my detriment), I was likely drawn to the "unspoken" even more than to the revealed. Yet it was



THE AUTHOR says she 'was baffled by the fact that so many survivors seemed to be able to lead happy and productive lives.' (Baz Ratner/Reuters)

something else as well. I was baffled by the fact that so many survivors seemed to be able to lead happy and productive lives (at least on the surface). How did they manage to achieve this after experiencing such horrors?

There are stacks of novels written about people whose lives were devastated by the Shoah. I suppose that I wanted to explore the question of why certain individuals manage to transcend their suffering, while others cannot.

Were you influenced by any particular writers or by your academic studies?

I've been influenced by many Hebrew and Yiddish writers whom I have taught over the years at U of T – especially S.Y. Agnon and Aharon Appelfeld in Hebrew; and Isaac Bashevis Singer and Chaim Grade in Yiddish. In English, my reading varies from American writers such as Saul Bellow and Cynthia Ozick to classic British writers such as Dickens and Jane Austen. However, I can't say that any one of these writers inspired me to write the novel. As I suggested earlier, the novel seemed to write itself.

Suzy Kohn is exasperated by her parents' contradictory attitude toward Jewish tradition... on Hanukka they would take out the menorah, but fail to light it. Does this imply that her parents are merely neglectful, or is there something deeper at play?

I think I was trying to convey a little bit of both. In some ways, they are typical of those whose sole identity as Jews is rooted in historical trauma; hence, they do not feel safe with anyone but their own – despite

the fact that their fondest wish is to achieve full acceptance in modern society. Such people also tend to harbor fears that being too overtly Jewish will arouse antisemitism, so it's best to shed any Jewish practices that make them "different." So yes, they are neglectful, because they are in the habit of rejecting Jewish practice as obsolete, or, at best, as a quaint relic of the past.

At one point in the novel, Suzy Kohn hides her Jewish identity from Tom Fletcher, the young man she meets at university. Does the novel imply that children of survivors are more prone to hiding their identity than other Jews of her generation?

No, I do not think that I was trying to show that children of survivors are any more prone to hiding their identity as Jews. I think it's symptomatic of most Jews in the Diaspora to keep a low profile, no matter what their background. There are of course many exceptions to this – especially among Jews who live in self-contained communities.

In Israel for the first time, Suzy Kohn delights in the fact that the Israelis she meets feel no need to hide their Jewish identity. There is a sense of belonging. As an author, are you trying to convey a uniquely Zionist message?

I don't think there is an overt attempt to convey a Zionist message as this is not a political or ideological novel. That said, I do think that *Come Back for Me* might well be the first novel in many years to portray Israel as a redemptive force in the life of the Jews. ■

COME BACK FOR ME

By Sharon Hart-Green
New Jewish Press
304 pages; \$20

