Embracing the lived memory of genocide:
Holocaust survivor and descendant renegade memory work at the House of Being

As Holocaust Memorial Day approached, I decided to expand my usual ethnographic circle of Israeli sites of Holocaust commemoration and visit what I was told by one of my Holocaust-descendant informants would be a “refreshingly different” place. My curiosity piqued, I made my way to a small town in central Israel, to a tiny Holocaust memorial museum–pedagogic center that doubles as a survivor geriatric center, a place called the “House of Being.”

As I entered the nondescript cottage, a Holocaust survivor member of the House, who had apparently brought a relative to visit for the first time, was in the process of introducing the woman to Tsipi Kichler, the center’s larger than life founder and manager. As I approached them, Tsipi turned to me, pointed to the survivor member, and jovially asked me, “Do you see this woman? Can you imagine, as fat as she is today, that she hid in a pit during the entire Holocaust? Can you believe that this FATSO could have ever FIT in a pit? Today,” she continued, grinning and shouting, “she wouldn’t be able to get in or get out of a pit!!!” In a gesture recalling Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s (1968) commentary on transfigured bodies and movement in and out of apertures, Tsipi put her arms around the now-obese woman’s waist and pretended to trap her in a virtual pit. Tsipi, herself a generously proportioned middle-aged woman, then doubled over in laughter. Both the newcomer and I were taken aback and stared in shock as Tsipi and the survivor member laughed and hugged. Tsipi then pinched the relative on the cheek and said, “You’ll get used to us, you come join our choir, maybe, creative writing class, here you’ll be loved . . . and have tons of fun.”

A week later, on the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day, I visited the House a second time, expecting a far more reverent and morose commemorative mood. I was most interested in an event advertised as the “Second Generation All-Night Vigil,” hoping to continue my fieldwork on therapeutically framed self-help groups for so-called emotionally troubled children of survivors. However, again, the mood was not at all what I expected. Tsipi was at it again, raucously performing her bizarre antics to a crowd of Holocaust
descendants. After asking the middle-aged descendants to settle down so that “we can begin our festivities for this year’s Holocaust Holiday” (Israelis never refer to it as such), Tsipi, a child of survivors herself, said, “I want to tell you about some interesting phone inquiries I received...about the pedagogic center.” As participants began to giggle, Tsipi continued, “This teacher called me...she said she was an ED-UUU-CA-TOR and asked me in a very important voice, ‘What do you have on exhibit?...’ I want to bring my class to the museum’ [mimicking the stereotypical voice of a tight-laced teacher]. I told her, ‘Well, I strip naked, how’s that for an exhibit?’ The shocked teacher asked, “What do you mean?!!” and Tsipi responded, “‘What’s the problem? My mother stripped in Auschwitz, and I do a reenactment, don’t you want an authentic exhibit?’ She never called back [grinning], I guess she’s dead.” Although the educator in question did not bring her class to the House, with the financial support of the municipal government, national board of education, and private donations, a great many schoolchildren from across the country have spent hours with Tsipi and her survivor witnesses, hearing Holocaust testimonies, embracing the survivors, and, of course, getting a taste of gallows humor.

After Tsipi’s “opening act,” the Holocaust descendants told tales into the night of their childhoods in the shadow of parental suffering. These emotionally moving accounts were intertwined with black humor and Yiddish singalongs, and the mood of the gathering was generally jubilant. The event culminated in a festive candle-lit meal at dawn. If this were not sufficiently baffling to the uninitiated, the room in which the ludic vigil took place was decorated like a circa 1950s (drab) living room, except for members’ prewar family photos—literally hundreds of them—covering the walls (see Figure 1). In contrast to the iconic signification of death and suffering in photos at conventional commemorative sites, the photos in the House bore no textual framing that would signify the fate of the families represented in them. Like the double message of the vigil talk—which combined humor with troubled legacies—the photos too signified an ambivalent duality. While functioning as a taken-for-granted, mundane photographic backdrop to lived experience in the geriatric center, the images of family life at the brink of destruction also constituted a hallowed shrine to an unspeakable past.

When one attempts to make sense of Tsipi’s Holocaust “stand-up” and her unique memorial site—which does and does not represent and sanctify genocidal suffering—numerous questions arise. Is the House of Being an alternative Holocaust memorial that subverts hegemonic monumental forms of commemoration or merely a geriatric center for lonely descendants who hunger for Tsipi’s sincere albeit rambunctious affection? In either case, how can participants partake in humor that profanely banalizes the sanctified deathworld of genocide victims? How can a survivor recount a personal tale of horrors alongside the banality of a living-room card game? How can one explain the dynamic coexistence of the apparently incommensurable dualities of mundane or profane lifeworlds and sacred deathworlds? What are the mechanisms that constitute and sustain this juxtaposition? Finally, what kind of public commemoration emerges out of this “unholy” combination?

I claim that it is precisely the juxtaposition of everyday survivor lifeworlds with traces of Holocaust deathworlds that creates a commemorative site of “lived memory” (Halbwachs 1980) of the Holocaust past. The duality embedded in the institutional agenda, in House decor, and in House activities, alongside humor as House genre, constitutes and sustains the juxtaposition of mundane life with sanctified commemoration. I assert that humor allows participants to explore contradictions between their personal and familial lived experience of the Holocaust and childhood past and the “dead memory” of national monumental commemorative discourse and practice. Echoing this liminal stance between contradictory private and public spheres and life- and deathworlds, the House both departs from and accommodates the mainstream, as it invites the public to partake in its innovative alternative to Israeli hegemonic commemorative practice.

To decipher this alternative site, I turn first to scholarly work on commemoration and on death-related humor, after which I proceed to a contextualization of the House in the Israeli landscape. I then turn to a detailed ethnographic account of commemorative practice and lived experience at the House of Being.

**Representing genocidal pasts**

At the heart of all commemorative projects lies the attempt to transform absence into presence (Handelman 2004).
The simulacra of representation fabricate the experience of renewed presence so that participants may revisit and reexperience what has become absent (Baudrillard 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). As a cultural feat, representation is morally valorized, as it not only honors deeply missed individuals and communities but also provides a strategically potent political and ideological model for the present (Schwartz 1996) while rallying and unifying heterogeneous populations to the call of “imagined” (Anderson 1983) or “collected” pasts (Olick 1999; Young 1988).

Despite the moral and political significance of commemoration, scholars have critically deconstructed the processes and practices of social memory. Beyond the question of fabrication, critique has taken two forms: one focusing on the absence of “lived memory” in the everyday social milieu and the other on the political instrumentalization, or what Michael Schudson (1995) has termed the “distortion,” of memory. Taking up the first of these issues, Maurice Halbwachs (1980) warned that, although all memory is, in fact, a social artifact, a truly collective memory can only be maintained if traces of familial, communal, or national memory are seamlessly interwoven into everyday lived experience. Viewed in this light, monumental commemorative projects, ritualized ceremonies, and museum exhibits can be deemed “dead memory.” Similarly, Pierre Nora (1989) bemoaned the demise among the French of “lived memory” of national history and critically termed monumental ceremonies and “lieux de mémoire” sites of “frozen memory” that austerey encapsulate a past that had all but vanished from everyday life. In the nearly three decades since Halbwachs’s and Nora’s dire descriptions of its demise, there have been almost no ethnographic accounts of lived memory (Kidron 2009; Myerhoff 1980) or of the subjective, familial, or communal experience of the gap between the subjective experience of the past and its collective representations.5

Recent, more self-critical commemorative projects have attempted to bridge the gap between the authentic, or lived, memory of an event and its monumental forms of representation by adopting the “experiential turn.” The return to experience entails the active involvement of the visitor in the commemorative process and the shift from event-based collective history to the subjective and moving personal story. Living-heritage museum reenactment, emotionally jarring audiovisual testimonies, and hands-on activities with surviving artifacts are designed to evoke the senses and engender a personal experience, simulating authenticity and copresence.

The commemoration of genocidal pasts engenders a particularly complex “crisis of representation.” As bemoaned by Holocaust and genocide scholars, the unspeakable suffering of forced migration or mass cultural and physical destruction is beyond representation (Friedlander 1992). Not only is it impossible in such cases to bridge the gap between authentic traumatic experience and its commemorative representation but interactive practices commemorating deathworlds have also triggered critique warning of the banalization of human suffering. The ethical and psychological ramifications of the mass consumption of deathworlds on exhibit have evoked loaded epithets such as “Shoah business” (Cole 1999) and “dark tourism” (Lennon and Foley 2000). Museum-based simulated cattle-car rides to Auschwitz or Israeli school trips to the death camps of Europe have not only triggered associations with theme-park consumption but have also raised debate over the enlistment of children in civil–religious hegemonic politics of memory (Feldman 2008) and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003).

Beyond the ethical dilemmas of dark tourism, sites promoting the experiential turn continue to represent the “past as a foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985), as the visitor sets out to tour a past that is sequestered from, rather than embedded within, everyday life. These commemorative sites remain distant and bounded off from mundane social life, differentiated by votive ritual behavior, consecrated exhibit design, monumental architecture, and professional culture brokers, theme-park performers, or defied survivors (Walsh 1992). When one visits these memory parks, the distance between past deathworlds and present lifeworlds is maintained and the past ultimately remains a frozen, “dead” experience. Again, scholars know little of the process by which personal memory is enlisted to create simulated authenticity or of the emergent gap between lived experience and its monumental representation for public consumption (Wilson 2001).

Taking up the political dimension of monumental commemorative processes, both sociologists and anthropologists of memory have studied the hegemonic construction of the forgotten, silenced, or politically instrumentalized past (Argenti 2007; Goodman and Mizrachi 2008; Olick 1999). Falling victim to the ravages of hegemonic strategic forgetting or the politically instrumental rewriting of national narratives, the past of those who have been subjugated may be selectively silenced (Denich 1994) and the heroic nationalist–reactionary past may be put to work in the name of either the nation-state or the subaltern. Painful pasts, in particular, have been enlisted to rally splintered collectives and to legitimate burdensome or morally problematic policies (Hayden 2007; Wilson 2001). National memorials to ethnic cleansing and mass murder enlist genocide victims to serve the state (Hughes 2003), as their stories provide living proof that only the nation-state has redeemed them (Handelman 2004). Despite growing interest in local memory, few ethnographies have explored those who “passively” resist enlistment in national–hegemonic commemorative projects, either remaining silent in the private sphere (Kidron 2009) or “making do” in communal commemorative settings by sustaining subtle forms of local countermemory (Roseman 1996).5
Ethnographies of more blatant countermemory have explored how victims and their descendants publicly contest hegemonically engineered genocide memory (Argenti 2007; Khalili 2004). Yet these studies have depicted ritual performances or museum exhibits: that is, periodic events or mnemonic sites that are ritually, temporally, or spatially bounded off from everyday life and, thus, do not allow for an examination of lived genocidal memory. Scholars have yet to trace how personal–familial lived memory might make its way out of the private domain into the meso, or public, sphere (Kidron 2005) to create enclaves of lived communal memory that exist alongside mainstream national memory work. As Sharon Roseman (1996) and Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998:127) assert, if we are to move beyond the hegemonic–countermemory dichotomy, it is precisely in situations in which the hegemonic and the local are in forced or mutually strategic dialogue that mechanisms of contestation may be far more subtle and incremental in their impact on collective experience, blurring the difference between compliance and resistance (Roseman 1996). I use the term resistance narrowly here to refer to the emergence of a creative grassroots alternative that calls into question mainstream forms of commemoration without entailing a head-on politically subversive challenge intent on depositing monumental practice. I assume here too that despite (or precisely because of) the emergent cooperation between local forces and national memory, this form of compliant resistance may gradually impact mainstream practice from below.

Humor may be considered a creative yet subtle mechanism of such resistance, at once embedded in everyday life and existing ambivalently on the border between opposition and capitulation. Ethnographies of ludic behavior (Overing 2000) have focused on therapeutic catharsis (Pollner and Stein 2001), on carnivalesque social “release” (Babcock 1978), or on the ludic as a component of myth and ritual (Handelman 1990; Lindquist and Handelman 2001). Studies of ludic behavior as a form of resistance (Griffiths 2002) depict it as a discursive tool of the weak but not as the key genre of specific sites. In these studies, scholars primarily examine the sociopolitical or psychosocial what and why of resistant humor and only secondarily the how of cultural ludic processes. Beyond our concern for the macropolitics of identity or memory, without a greater understanding of how ludic processes work on the ground in microsettings, we cannot begin to consider how they affect the hegemonic status quo and serve to sustain or transcend identity-related (or memory-related) discourse or practice (Hatch and Ehrlich 1993).

Although studies of death-related serious humor have highlighted the comic manipulation and transgression of boundaries in the most sacred funerary or commemorative ceremonies, such as Irish wakes (Harlow 1997) and Mexico’s Day of the Dead activities (Brandes 2003), there have been almost no ethnographic accounts of genocide-related ludic behavior. Nicolas Argenti’s (2007) work on clowning among genocide descendants in Cameroon is one of the few. The dearth of scholarship may indicate that ludic genocidal commemorative practice is widely considered to be socially taboo or, more simply, that such responses have yet to be explored. Eyal Zandberg (2006) explains that the Israeli nation-state, dependent on foundational Holocaust grand narratives, cannot tolerate the ludic genre in conventional commemorative practice and thus has marginalized Holocaust-related subversive humor to popular cultural comedic performance. In contrast, literary critics have explored genocidal humor as a microcultural mechanism of catharsis, as passive resistance, and as an exploration into the ambiguities of traumatic lived experience and descendant genocide legacies (Des Pres 1988; Young 1998).

An ethnographic account of the House of Being thus depicts the way humor, as a key cultural mechanism, functions to allow descendants to explore the incongruity between national monumental narratives and the familial lived experience of the Holocaust to playfully weave their own vision of the Holocaust, survivor parents, and their childhood past that at once resists and accommodates hegemonic memory. With the help of humor as the key genre and the no less ambiguous decor, agenda, and activities, the House as communal site of meso–public memory sustains the viable copresence of life- and deathworlds, not as simulated fabrications or dead, frozen memory, but as lived memory.

The Israeli commemorative landscape

The Holocaust has come to be perceived as Israel’s national founding event, legitimating sovereignty in the Jewish historical homeland after 2,000 years of Diaspora (Friedlander 1992). The causal link between Holocaust suffering and national sovereignty gave birth to a grand narrative of “Holocaust and Redemption.” Grafted onto the Jewish traditional narrative of exile and messianic redemption, the modern secular narrative positioned the Holocaust as the climax of centuries of anti-Semitism. The state was portrayed as the great redeemer and the homeland the only sanctuary for the Jews. National redemption and revival, however, was to be dependent on the physical prowess and fighting spirit of the Israeli. Referred to as the “New Hebrew,” the Israeli was culturally constituted as the antithesis of the passive Diaspora Jew, epitomized by Holocaust victims. Survivors were disdainfully labeled “sheep to the slaughter” for having passively accepted their fate (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983).

This hegemonic narrative and the embedded critique of survivors shaped the contours of public and private Holocaust commemoration during the first decades of
statehood. Commemorative ceremonies, museum exhibits, and school curricula focused primarily on the small minority of valiant partisan fighters, engendering another grand narrative of “Holocaust and Heroism,” whereas personal tales of noncombatant survivor suffering were derided or merely relegated to the private domain. Survivors and their children avoided painful verbal references to the Holocaust past, leading to a “conspiracy of silence” (Bar-On et al. 1998). Subsequent to the trial of Adolf Eichmann and Israel’s near defeats in the 1967 and 1973 wars (that destabilized the myth of the New Hebrew), a shift occurred in hegemonic narratives and public opinion, leading to renewed public interest in the accounts of noncombatant survivors. Subsequently, thousands of survivors broke their silence, with their public testimony taking center stage in the growing number of public commemorative practices.

Children of survivors “came out of the closet” on both the private and public fronts. Referred to as “second-generation Holocaust survivors,” descendants began to ask parents about their Holocaust past and to attend public events at which they might explore their unique legacy (Berger 1997). Since that time, a growing number of descendants have participated in therapeutic and nontherapeutic frameworks. Despite their newfound activism, the great majority of survivor families in Israel have shied away from monumental sites, avoiding the public sphere entirely and undertaking only family roots trips, engaging in intergenerational dialogue, or producing literary and artistic works, or, alternatively, forming enclaves of communal memory work on the margins of the national commemorative scene (Kidron 2005). A number of more local sites of memory present subtexts that critique hegemonic narratives while highlighting a more authentic link to the event. Nevertheless, this critique has skirted political dilemmas regarding the use or abuse of Holocaust memory, focusing instead on pre-Holocaust heritage or ethnic-specific (Polish, Greek, etc.) Holocaust memory. Unlike the House of Being, these sites do not double as geriatric or community centers for survivor families and they are not open to the wider non-survivor public. The House is unique, as it sustains a daily intimate lived experience of the past and present while simultaneously opening its doors to members of the wider public so that they too may partake in a critical reading of mainstream commemoration.

I undertook fieldwork at the House of Being from 2004 to 2007 as part of a broader ethnographic study of trauma-descendant memory work in Israel (Kidron 2005, 2009). This work entailed attendance of Holocaust ceremonial activities and in-depth interviews and numerous brief informative exchanges with Tsipi Kichler. I also undertook in-depth interviews with survivor members of the House, with survivor-descendant volunteers, and with descendant members and visitors, and I engaged in frequent brief conversations with survivors, descendants, and non-survivor visitors on Holocaust Memorial Eves and on other occasions.

The House of Being: Commemorative bricolage at a “geriatric center”

In 1999, Tsipi Kichler, a retired schoolteacher and child of Holocaust survivors in her early fifties, founded the House of Being on a quiet cul-de-sac in the Israeli town of Holon, located seven miles south of Tel-Aviv. Established with the financial support of the local municipality, the House was initially intended as a second home for local aging survivors, where, according to Tsipi, they could be “loved, respected and be free to just be.” Rather than establishing, in her words, “a survivor old-age home,” Tsipi aimed to create “a new and different kind of Holocaust pedagogic center.” When articulating the novelty of her agenda, Tsipi discloses a subversive spirit:

What about the sheep? … I’m going to love and give respect to all the sheep, to those who did “MEHT” [protracted bleating sound and laugh]. What about the survivor—who lay in the pit? Does she get loved, respected? So I’ve given her and the other 3,000 Holon survivors … honorary certificates of recognition. I want to hug them, when they visit and testify they’re loved and embraced. Your family, you embrace. I want them to have fun here, to yell, sing, and be angry.

The above agenda clearly resists the hegemonic narrative of “Holocaust and Heroism” and the “sheep to the slaughter” idiom. Tsipi’s immediate battlefield is the survivor community sphere, yet she opens her doors to the public to provide Holocaust pedagogy. Her commemorative arsenal, however, deviates from monumental testimonial practice, as she orchestrates an emotive alternative whereby visitors playfully and lovingly embrace the “humanized” survivor:

We have Holocaust documentation and commemoration here. … but that’s not what we do here. I don’t want to give answers, I want everyone to ask questions. You can’t come here to learn—you come here to feel!!! We have fun together. Kids, teachers, politicians, they get strength from the survivors and feel what happened to a person, feel the danger of hate, and feel the importance of life.

Although Tsipi may appear to be merely incorporating the experiential turn and the interactive spirit of the new museology, her elevation of the emotive experience of the survivor and her marginalization of historical knowledge exceeds the more tempered hybridization of knowledge and feeling.

Since its establishment, the House has evolved into Tsipi’s envisioned alternative site of familial, communal, and even national Holocaust memory. On most days, the
House functions as a leisurely geriatric center for survivors and frequent visiting descendants. Every few days, however, the cottage is transformed into a memorial museum–pedagogic center where visitors are teased and shocked by Tzipi’s grotesque humor critiquing monumental commemorative discourse and practice. A three-day Holocaust memorial period also entails a diverse array of emotively intense and no less provocative memory work. Despite Tzipi’s eccentric pedagogic style and the center’s makeshift commemorative facilities, the House has become the pride of the municipality, gleaning national–governmental and private philanthropic financial support.14

Emergent design and function: Weaving life- and deathworlds

In contrast to prominently located lieux de mémoire, the House is hidden away in a neighborhood park, at the end of a cul-de-sac densely surrounded by apartment buildings. The House itself is a 40-year-old two-and-a-half-room cottage surrounded by a high hedge. One enters the property through an iron gate and walks across the yard to reach the House. In the yard are two statues, one entitled “The Mother,” depicting a woman reaching out for her children, and the other entitled “Two Generations,” depicting a woman survivor carrying her adult child on her shoulders; the child carries a sign reading “Remember and march forward” (see Figure 2). A multicolored “Wall of Memorial Scrolls,” designed in the shape of a figure eight, is dedicated to the memory of relatives of House members who perished in the Holocaust (see Figure 3). At the center of this curving wall, a tall pole carries a sign with the words to be (or being). These fixtures hint at the House’s themes of familial–generational ties, forward vision, and “living” memory.

On entering the house, one finds oneself in a small hall. One wall is covered with photos of Righteous Gentiles, and the other displays certificates from the municipality, the Ministry of Education, and the president recognizing the House’s contribution to Holocaust pedagogy.15 Scattered throughout are photos of Tzipi with VIPs (see Figure 4). Memory-related biblical verses are also displayed next to an Israeli flag—all hegemonic symbols suggesting apparent accommodation to the nation-state. To the left is a fully equipped kitchenette and bathroom. To the right is Tzipi’s tiny office and an additional office seating two volunteers (a survivor and a descendant).

Continuing from the entry hall into the larger of the two main rooms, one is overwhelmed by prewar family photos (see Figure 1). Volunteers explain that Tzipi asked survivors to bring them in so that “the photos might embrace [Heb. lechabek] them.” Placed frame to frame, the photos vary in
size and content. In general, there is little or no indication of whether those depicted in the photos survived or perished in the war. Many of the House’s survivor members appear in the photos. When I first began visiting the House, a few photos had tiny plaques with engraved family names, but the majority were devoid of textual “referenciality” (Zelizer 1998). At present, there are still no photos of destruction or suffering, solely images of prewar European life. On the wall across from the entrance to the main room hangs a large banner with the House logo and the words “To be and to live.”

In sharp contrast to the museum motif of the photos, the decor is entirely domestic. To the left of the doorway is a lived-in sofa, armchairs, a coffee table, and a damaged piano. Across from the entrance is a curtained window and a television and video player atop a stand with a disorderly collection of cassettes and DVDs. To the right is an assortment of folding chairs, some open. The floor is covered with a tattered Persian rug and, to top off the domestic ambiance, a cat roams the room. The “living room” furnishings, all donated, are circa 1950s Israeli in style, so the space is not a prewar restoration. In the far left corner, hidden from the gaze of the entering visitor, are the only quasi-Holocaust exhibits: a bust of a ghetto partisan and a tiny oil-painted triptych depicting a train pulling into a death camp and the redemption of survivors in Israel. These items create a Holocaust “commemorative corner” in the pre-Holocaust family–heritage space.

The living or heritage room receives almost daily visits by local survivors, who sit together and share meals, drink coffee, chat, play cards, watch TV, and play piano—while surrounded and “embraced” by their families on the wall. The House choir meets in the room weekly to rehearse its repertoire of European folk songs and Holocaust memorial tunes. Other leisure activities include a Bible study group and a creative writing class. After it met a few times, Tsipi canceled the therapeutic support group. Members do not exhibit commemorative–votive body work; there is no self-imposed silence, sadness, or decorum. When I mentioned the homey atmosphere to one survivor, he responded, “This is a home because Tsipi built us a home.” When I asked if they display prewar photos in their own homes, two survivors said they hung photos in their bedrooms, but all others said they kept their photos hidden in dresser drawers or closets. When I asked why they brought photos to the House, their responses reaffirmed the dual domestic familial–commemorative agenda of the House. One survivor explained, “I wanted my family around me here.” Another asserted, “We have to think about what happens when we’re gone.” In response to my query about a conventional museum as an alternative repository for their photos, one survivor explained, “This is not a museum...it’s more personal.” Another survivor said, “Here they won’t throw them out after I die like they would in a museum.” One may ask, then, if the House is not a museum, then what is it?

In an attempt to explore the distinction between conventional museum photo exhibits of prewar Europe and the House’s display, I approached others with the same question. A volunteer survivor explained, “This is my home and I feel good with my family [on the walls] around me.” A descendant member added, “This place is not Yad Vashem!!! [the national Holocaust museum], there are no furnaces on the wall, no horrific images, but instead, it’s family, it’s a place for them to be with their families, like the name of the place—House of Being.” Still perplexed that the images did not trigger associations of genocide, I asked survivors what it was like to enjoy leisure hours surrounded by photos that were previously hidden from view. Taken aback, one survivor answered with a question: “They’re family, what’s the problem?” In contrast to the domestic lifeworld and to conventional museums, the House appears to create a space in which one may “live” with the material presence of the absent dead and the ruptured prewar lifeworld without painful death-related significations or ritualized mnemonic practices.

The living–heritage room, however, also doubles as a Holocaust testimonial hall. My choice of the term doubles is far from arbitrary, as mundane clubhouse activities proceed unhampered by any commemorative “practice” that may go on. For example, testimonial events lack the formal temporal or spatial ritual borders of conventional ceremonies. After a brief training course with Tsipi, survivors testify before schoolchildren, teachers, soldiers, and politicians. In keeping with the House’s novel approach, survivor testimonies too depart from convention in style and content (Young 1988). According to Tsipi, “A good witness doesn’t bore these poor kids, he doesn’t go off on detailed tangents, he needs to tell them something very dramatic...some important lesson he learned about life and...it’s enough and they can go home [long laugh].” Testimonies recount brief dramatic vignettes, devoid of historical or geographical orientation or background on the collective Holocaust story or even the speakers’ personal stories. Only the pathos of survival and the strength to begin life anew are highlighted. The tales conclude not with a warning of evil lurking around the corner, or the very common hegemonic nationalist–Zionist reading of personal–collective redemption (Handelman 2004) but, rather, with a humanist call for kindness and love of life itself. Tsipi resists the uses and abuses of enlisted memory in contemporary Israel, not by openly repudiating the politics of right-wing memory work or by tracing the parallels between Jewish and Palestinian suffering, as is customary in the rare subversive Holocaust ceremonies on the outer margins of Israeli society, but, rather, by, as she explains, “getting at the root of the problem” and supplanting xenophobic Holocaust lessons with humanist values of empathy and dialogue.
Yet the above account does not begin to describe the very distinctive style of testimonial events at the House. During testimonies, Tsipi badgers children and adults: “Don’t you have any questions, why are you so quiet, who died!!!?? [Hebrew slang in response to serious atmosphere], what are you—sheep??? Ask something!!! [almost shrieking].” Although shocked at first, the audience eventually begins to dialogue with the survivors, from whom they are normally distanced by convention. Tsipi recounts an example of the “success” of her pedagogy: “One kid called the witness ‘a heroine.’ I screamed at the kid, ‘Heroine, you must be kidding, she didn’t escape or fight, what’s wrong with you?’ Another kid defended his mate and said, ‘Yes she is, she didn’t go crazy or kill herself.’” When I asked Tsipi about this case, she explained, “I want to make it fun, to shake them up . . . then they come out richer than when they came in.” Tsipi utilizes black humor (“Who died?”) and inversions that challenge hegemonic narratives (calling questionless children “sheep” and survivors—sheep “heroes”) so that the resultant shock “shakes up” the taken-for-granted hegemonic meaning world of her audience.

The power of truly moving testimonies lies in their ability, in the words of a descendant volunteer, to “break down the defense barriers of two meter tall soldiers and cold-hearted politicians.” Illustrating the emotion work at the House, one informant described how, after hearing a survivor testify to her tragic separation from her infant on the selection ramp at Auschwitz, a “macho” soldier raised his hand and said, “I don’t have a question but can I please give you a hug?” He towered over the survivor as he hugged her, bringing the entire audience to tears. This tale has taken on mythic proportions and is retold to visitors as emblematic of the House’s raison d’être. Consistent with Tsipi’s claim that she does not want visitors “to learn . . . what happened but to feel it,” transgressing commemorative decorum and emotive barriers moves visitors from the historical–didactic realm of knowledge to a critical dialogue with hegemonic discourse and thus toward empathic experiential knowledge.

Moving through a doorway on the right wall of the family-heritage room, one enters the second smaller room. Three walls are covered in bookcases, filled with Holocaust history and memoirs and non-Holocaust literature in various European languages. A large wooden table spans the room and a survivor librarian sits at a desk in the corner. In full view of the visitor’s gaze, an array of Holocaust artifacts, including a camp uniform, a yellow star, and a scarf knitted in a work camp, flank the back (southern) wall. The right-hand (eastern) wall of the room is covered in family photos that, according to the librarian, “overflow from the other room” (see Figure 5). In contrast to those in the first room, almost all the photos in the second room have memorial plaques. This room functions as a Holocaust–foreign language library. Survivors do not check out Holocaust literature, but they frequently borrow Polish, Hungarian, and German books. The librarian reported that the Holocaust literature is used by children and teachers. After testimonies, visitors are given a tour of the library. This room is an inversion of the first room, with the primary focus on Holocaust memory work and only a hint of prewar nostalgia.

The nature of their interactions with visitors attests to members’ perception of the House as simultaneously an intimate, domestic survivor center, a prewar heritage museum, and a Holocaust museum. As visitors move into, through, and out of the house, they also move chronologically from present-day Israel (the street) to the European Holocaust past (the yard and entry) and, then, to the pre-Holocaust ruptured past (the first room); they then move forward in time back to the Holocaust past (the second room and yard) and finally back to present-day Israel (the street). However, despite the orderly linear movement, and in sharp contrast to other memorial museums, each space (or temporal experience) spills into the next. The unique overlapping of spaces and temporal experiences enables fluid movement between chronotopes, as visitors move into and out of a past hinting at copresence.21

However, the living domesticity is the most critical component in constituting an alternative chronotopic journey. Domestic decor and practices in the living room and kitchen of the cottage repeatedly shake up the progressive and dichotomous movement between past and present. Mundane practices such as preparing lunch, watching television, or arguing about a library book, alongside “sacred” commemorative work, transform the museum and library into intimate familial spaces where one lives memory intertwined in the everyday social milieu rather than observing or interacting with its exhibited–performed representations.
Holocaust memorial activities at the House of Being

The House organizes a three-day Holocaust commemoration in April of each year. Events include testimonial performances by three local survivor families entitled the “Testimony of Three Generations,” the Holocaust Eve ceremony followed by a “Holocaust fair,” and the Second Generation All-Night Vigil.

On the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2004, the House and the yard were packed with visitors. Folding chairs faced a makeshift stage and podium to the left of the entry and microphones for the survivor choir were set up to the right of the stage. Visitors lit memorial candles at a table to the right of the entry. A large tent was set up alongside the House, where Holocaust exhibits built by schoolchildren were displayed. Holocaust literature was offered for sale at a folding table in front of the House. In back of the house was a podium and microphone for the commemorative practice entitled “Every Person Has a Name,” during which visitors read the names of relatives who had perished (see Diagram 1). Approximately three hundred people wandered around the yard, stopping at the statues, walking around the Memorial Wall, browsing at the book stand, and moving into and out of the House. In contrast to the silent and somber mood of visitors at conventional ceremonies, the noise and laughter were deafening. Survivors, their children, and their grandchildren, many arm in arm, bustled around the grounds. Tsipi was at the vortex of this movement, followed by a camera crew. Dressed in a flashy black dress, her hair dyed a brighter red than usual, she rushed around, screeching at everyone, prodding staff, choirs, and visitors into position. Occasionally she stopped to hug and tease a survivor, laughing boisterously.

The memorial ceremony began with conventional commemorative practices: an opening address by the mayor, the lighting of a memorial torch, a brief, pathos-filled survivor testimony, and choir renditions of commemorative melodies. In contrast, however, to monumental ceremonies, the event was conducted almost exclusively by House survivor members and their families. The ceremony also did not include the usual backdrop of gruesome photographs of Holocaust victims (Handelman and Shamgar Handelman 1997). When the ceremony started, survivor families and nonsurvivor visitors who were wandering the grounds did not immediately enter the ceremonial space or even attentively observe at a distance but continued to noisily explore the nearby exhibits in disregard of what was the only monumental–reverent portion of the program at the House. About ten minutes into the ceremony, Tsipi shifted instantaneously from diva to somber moderator, and as she took her place at the podium, visitors stopped to listen. She recounted that, as a small child, she had overheard her mother telling a neighbor that “she saw ‘them’ burning babies in front of their mothers in Auschwitz”: “I didn’t understand what she said but I felt I had been there with her. A knife cut through my heart for fear that they would take her too...[her voice falters], every night I was afraid.” Turning to the survivor who had just testified, she continued, “I hold them in my heart [she places her hand on her chest] and [her voice falters again and she pauses] I treasure them and contain them [she begins to cry]. All of us...[raises her voice] hold our relatives in our hearts and we can smell the houses they were torn from—from the House [pauses for composure]. I call upon the world to stop all destruction.”

Following Tsipi’s moving account, a survivor read the names of murdered school friends, ending with, “You continue to play with me and within me...I am your living
monument.” The short ceremony culminated with a reading by a granddaughter of survivors from the travel journal she kept during her class trip to Poland: “I was in the gas chambers and I felt my grandma’s hand holding mine, telling me, ‘It’s okay, it’s over.’ And I said to her, ‘I did it grandma, I came here for you . . . for the six million.’” The ceremony ended with the national anthem. The central themes of the ceremony were the rupture of the mother–child bond, the restoration of the generational chain, the enfolding of the past, and vital movement toward the future. Despite the burden of embodied memory, the message went, the same wounded heart could “hold” and “contain” and metaphorically reunite all the mothers and their children. Having legitimated her role as collective carrier, Tsipi called on the audience to share her lot and become carriers of the dead. Visceral imagery intensified, and chronotopic boundaries blurred; Tsipi and her audience could “smell the burning houses . . . from the House,” which, like Tsipi’s heart, contained the “present” dead. The ceremony ended with the forward-looking third-generation descendant bridging the past and the present, as she too crossed chronotopes to viscerally feel her grandmother’s hand, dialogue with the past, and promise to carry it into the future.

Within seconds, the mood in and around the House was again noisy and chaotic. The demarcated temporal–spatial ritual borders of the very brief Holocaust ceremony dissolved as the crowd scattered in all directions. In contrast to commemorative decorum in museums, visitors did not line up to get into or out of the space but pushed and cut their way through and around others. Movement was cumbersome as visitors moved in family units or groups of two or three survivors. Tsipi’s mood shifted back to joviality. Followed into the house by the camera crew, she teased and hugged members and ribbed me as “her full-of-hot-air anthropologist.”

Following visitors around the house, I overheard bizarre dialogue between survivors and their families. One survivor grabbed her daughter’s hand, pulling her into the house and saying, “Let’s visit the family.” Another survivor grabbed her daughter’s hand, pulling her into the yard and in the library and tent area, yet it does not infiltrate the living–heritage room. There survivors “visit the family” and “introduce” their families to grandchildren and visitors, with no signs of mourning—engaging, rather, in what appears like an extended-family get-together. The pre-war photo images often include the survivor alongside lost family members and so serve as surviving traces of familial totality. As reflected in my informant’s playful request to identify him in his family photo, the survivor is still an integral part of the whole of which he was a part. Although incommensurate with the Western sequestration of death (Mellor and Shilling 1993), the room’s design and survivor talk and practice imply that, echoing the House banner, members enter the room “to BE and to LIVE” with, and be contained by, their families and not merely to commemorate them.23

One may ask the inevitable question, is the act of “being with” one’s family and sensing that they are virtually
“alive” experienced as metaphoric, or has the House created an experiential portal into an alternative chronotopic “reality” (Krauel and Bilu 2008)? Could the words on the banner (and all House publications) imply that by allowing survivors to be with their families, their deceased relatives come “alive”? Could this explain one descendant’s comment that “only in the House can the survivors be as they cannot be anywhere else”? My questioning of members regarding their visits to this alternative “reality” elicited one particularly powerful response:

Everyone comes to visit their family, their parents, they come for warmth, here they come and laugh, hug and kiss. I don’t remember what my parents looked like, I brought their picture here, it’s holy to me, but still it’s not a cemetery here, I don’t mourn them, I keep them with me. I see this place as something living... I don’t feel anything in a cemetery. It’s an empty story. Here, people come joyously, not like to a sad place or to a cemetery. This is not a connotation of home, it is a home. But without the pictures, it would not be home. This became a house that was destroyed, that was robbed, that was burnt to the ground.

The heritage room is not experienced as a commemorative deathworld. The survivor insists the room is not a place of mourning, like a cemetery, but a place of joy and familial affection. The photo display elicits countless familial tales, “full stories” of childhood, as person–photo interaction (Hirsch 1997) ushers visitors back into their pasts to the point of actual reimmersion–containment in it. As evident in the informant’s reactions to my question about siblings coming “alive”? Could this explain one descendant’s comment that “only in the House can the survivors be as they cannot be anywhere else”? My questioning of members regarding their visits to this alternative “reality” elicited one particularly powerful response:

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But how can the joyous reunion with the living dead subsist alongside ceremonial representations of the Holocaust dead? How can visitors shift, within seconds, from a mournful ceremony, commemorative wall and sculptures, and recitations of the names of the dead to a joyful reunion with those they have just commemorated? Are commemorative practices and death itself experienced differently here? The mood, movement through space, and content of talk on Holocaust Eve point to the evocation of an alternative relationship with and alternative presence of the dead. The formal ceremony asserts the experiential feasibility of being viscerally present in the past. The speakers constitute intimate generational connections that facilitate access to the past and “reanimate” the dead, who continue living and playing within the hearts of those who treasure them and who visit the House and “smell their homes.” Although movement around the yard, sculptures, memorial wall, and books signifies the loss of life, it simultaneously resurrects and enfolds the dead, housing them among the living. The sculpture positions the child as rehabilitated mother of a new generation that is inseparably linked to the past, a container for the dead while she progresses forward into life. The memorial wall represents those who died while it playfully resurrects them via color and layout and through the placement of their names along a fixture that forces circular movement, creating a unifying living container for those names while pulling them into life-giving forward motion. Finally, the crowd’s repeated circular movement within and around the House grounds, in and out of its experiential core, echoes the symbolic act of “taking in” and containing the House and its images.

At around 10 p.m., survivors exited the House, leaving behind only descendants. Tsipi bustled into the heritage room, where children of survivors began to arrange chairs in a circle in preparation for the Second Generation All-Night Vigil. Tsipi turned to a few remaining survivors, shrieked, “My SCH-NITZOLIM, you have to leave now, it’s our turn, you’ve been here long enough,” and then laughed hysterically. Schnitzolim is Tsipi’s term of endearment, a play on words combining the Hebrew nitzolim (survivors) and schnitzel (Ger. fried meat cutlets). She humorously, lovingly, yet grotesquely creates the image of the survivor deep-fried in oil. Kicking the survivors out, Tsipi blasphemously hinted at their impending demise and at the generational changing of the guard (Katnrel 1997).

Tsipi began the vigil with 25 descendants as follows: “Well, shall we begin our discussion for this year’s Holocaust Holiday?” A descendant responded, “Oh yes, this is my favorite holiday.” Tsipi added, “Yes, we can set up our Mengalim for Holocaust Holiday [Mengalim is a play on words, merging the Hebrew mangalim (barbecues) and Mengale, the name of the notorious Nazi doctor who performed medical experiments on inmates in Auschwitz], and place our shnitzolim on the fire [a reference to the Independence Day celebratory practice of barbecuing, never practiced on Memorial Days].” After much laughter, another participant joined in: “Yes, we’ll pull out that last piece of kindling wood saved from the fire [a metaphor for the few survivors miraculously saved from the extermination camp furnaces].” The participants joined in raucous
laughter while I and other newcomers looked on in disbelief, as the jokes, which appeared integral to in-group behavior, were far more transgressive of Holocaust “etiquette” than any Holocaust satire we had previously heard.

Tsipi then asked the participants to present what they had prepared for the Holiday. One participant suggested, “Let’s all sing ‘The Town Is Burning’ [Yiddish song “S’brennt” by Mordecai Gebirtig recounting the burning of the Warsaw Ghetto],” again triggering a round of laughter. Tsipi turned impatiently to one of the participants and said, “Okay…now read your poem.” Shifting instantaneously into a serious mood, the participant read her poem entitled “They Were Heroes,” praising the emotional heroism and endurance of survivors and challenging the traditional master narrative of Holocaust and combative heroism. The descendant declared her admiration of her parents while emotionally glancing at the floor. After a round of applause and congratulatory compliments from the others, Tsipi added seriously, “This is the vision of the House, challenging the glorification of Warsaw Ghetto fighters, we know they were all heroes.”

After a few moments of silence, the poet-participant suddenly yelled out, “Yah yah, I know I’m sarut [slang, lit. scratched or touched], we all are.” After more laughter, a woman in the corner asked, “When can we eat?” The crowed laughed again, and someone brought in a bowl of chips from the kitchen, saying, “Sorry, we’re all out of potato peels [the starvation diet during the Holocaust], es es mein kind [Yid. eat eat my child, but also a pun on SS, the abbreviation for the Nazi Schutzstaffel, or Protective Squadron].” Again, the crowd laughed. Another descendant commented, “You know we are not original, this humor was transmitted to us from our survivor parents [participants giggle at the parody].”

The original joke and its retelling at the vigil clearly point to the way irony subversively “shows up the sway of deep and disconcerting forces [survivor incarceration and suffering in the camp] on the trivial events of daily life [touristic entrance fees]” (Antze 2003:102–103) and thereby allows descendants to resist the univocal and fabricated presence of the past and to insist on disclosing the intensity of the underlying experience.

Tsipi stood in the middle of the circle and screamed, “I want to tell you about some interesting calls I received for our pedagogic center.” As participants giggled in the background, she related the story presented at the beginning of this article as well as the following one:

This other teacher called, a real religious teacher—she asked if she could bring her girls to my museum… she wanted to know if the place was appropriate for religious girls. I told her that at the entrance we have furnaces and we shoved the kids in, because Hitler, as our first pedagogic administrator, did not distinguish between religious and nonreligious kids, he killed them all. I never heard from her again either [pause] she died too.

The moralistic tale satirically critiqued separatist religious practices and mores by recalling Hitler’s inclusive handling of his victims. It evoked smirks from those present, and heads nodded in agreement. At this point, I was certain that such tales were either figments of Tsipi’s rich imagination or part and parcel of her own very eccentric pedagogic style and agenda to disseminate humanist ideals. Later, I was told by volunteers that they had overheard the conversations.

After her comic rendition of her role as “curator” of the House, Tsipi turned to the participants, screaming, “Enough jokes, we better start introducing ourselves.” The first participant introduced herself and said what a pleasure it was to be back with Tsipi on “Holocaust Holiday.” She then provided her yichus [Yid. pedigree] as a child of a survivor who had gone into hiding, thereby positioning her parent and herself on the “hierarchy of suffering” (Danielli 1998), known at the House as “Tsipi’s ladder of suffering.” Children of “hard core” camp survivors heckled her story, screaming, “You think that’s suffering, that’s a vacation.” Another participant introduced himself as a descendant of a ghetto survivor. Again, others screamed, “Ghetto, what’s a ghetto—it’s just the third grade [Heb. kita gimmel, G is for ghetto].” The participant was allowed to recount his mother’s fragmented tale of fear and hunger, again adding his avowal of pride in her ability to start a new life. Another participant told of her parent’s experiences as a partisan. She could not get through her first sentence without being shouted down: “No, no, you’re not even on the ladder,” at which point Tsipi added, “Yes, you don’t belong to the sheep.”

Another participant began, “My father was in Auschwitz…” and was interrupted by jubilant screams, “Finally—someone who has a B.A. [Heb. boger, or graduate, of Auschwitz].” Smiling, the participant told his mother’s tale of separation from her parents and of how he repeatedly tried “to imagine how she must have been so alone and terrified.” He closed with his admiration of her “heroic” survival. The mood in the room had shifted smoothly from laughter to serious attention, yet, as the narrator completed his tale, a descendant of Polish origin yelled, “Wait a minute, you’re from Hungary! I’m sorry, you people were also on vacation, what’s a year in school, we were there for three” (Polish Jews were sent to camps in 1943, Hungarian Jews in 1944). After a round of laughter, the next participant began, “My father was from Greece.” Tsipi screamed, “Oh no, another partisan fighter.” The participant shrieked back.
at Tsipi, smilingly but adamantly, “What, shoveling bodies in Auschwitz isn’t good enough for you Poles?”28 She then recounted a short horrific tale and added, “But he was a wonderful father and we had a great childhood, with lots of love and joy, not like you pathetic Ashkenazi survivors.” Echoing Yehuda C. Goodman and Nissim Mizrachi’s (2008) findings regarding hegemonic memory and the positioning of ethnoclasses in Israel, the descendant then looked at Tsipi and said, laughingly, “I’m tired of you Poles pushing us Greeks aside, I insist on being as sarut (touched) as you.”29

Continuing around the circle, a narrative pattern emerged. Participants began with their names and their parents’ position on Tsipi’s “ladder of suffering.” After receiving an “academic degree” from the group, followed by cynical comments about their “education,” they continued to tell either a tragic parental tale or a childhood tale of empathy with parental suffering. They ended their tale with a joke. The participants’ Holocaust narratives were thus framed by two jokes, one through which they entered the past and one through which they exited it. The mood of the session shifted accordingly from joviality to somber attention and back instantaneously.

Only two participants challenged the fluidity and homogeneity of the narrative structure and ludic genre. One participant began her turn by saying, “You all know me, I can’t do what you do, I’m sorry it’s just… [long tearful pause] too hard for me to joke.” Tsipi approached the participant and said softly, “Try, please try, it’s very important… we’ll help you.” Smiling shyly at Tsipi, the descendant positioned herself high on the “ladder of suffering” and then told her parents’ tale, adding what a “great legacy” she was given by her parents, who were the “strongest people.” Tsipi capped off the tale with a joke: “That’s wonderful, but next time try to be more convincing!!” evoking laughter. The second participant indignantly exclaimed, “I am a teacher, I am truly shocked by what you are doing. I have always taken the Holocaust very seriously, and I’m not even a child of a survivor!!! I came here to commemorate. I’m shocked, the only reason I stayed was because I thought eventually I would figure out what was going on. Can you tell me how you could joke this way?” After shouts of laughter, infuriating the teacher, a participant explained the vigil’s carnivalesque reversal: “We don’t come here to cry… if that’s what you want, forget it, every day is Holocaust Day for us, today we celebrate.”

At 2 a.m., descendants asked Tsipi about the “festive meal.” Again to my surprise, they set up a table in the middle of the room and brought in party food from the kitchen. A participant yelled, “We need candles for the holiday!!!” as she “sacrilegiously” lit two memorial candles on the table. Groups of descendants informally chatted and caught up on lost time.30 At 3 a.m., Tsipi yelled for us to sit down, saying, “It’s my turn to tell my story.” She recounted asking her mother, as a young child, why she screamed in her sleep.

When one of the newcomers jokingly asked her, “Which degree do you have?” all turned with shocked and fearful looks at Tsipi, no one breathing. Tsipi venomously said, “When I tell my story no one jokes!!!”31 She recounted that her mother said she screamed because she was afraid of “Amon Goeth and his dog”; Goeth was the sadistic commandant of the Plaszow Camp, who had never “left her side”:

It was me and my mother, Goeth and that dog, every night in bed together. I grew up with them in my bed. I was there in Plaszow and they were here in Israel. Years later I was in the Plaszow museum, and I suddenly stood dead in my tracks when I stood face to face with a photograph of the bastard and his dog. There they were, I knew them so well, my old companions, my old enemies.

Tsipi told us of her search for Goeth’s daughter and her eventual emotional meeting with the woman to discuss their “common” legacies. Her search for closure was unsuccessful, as her “step sister in suffering” would not renounce the skeleton in her familial closet. Cynically ending her tale, she added, “The woman was so impressed by the family atmosphere at the House that she converted to Judaism, calling her grandson David Goeth, can you imagine!!!” After a round of laughter, Tsipi showed a video of her meeting with Goeth’s daughter, and at 4 a.m., all left the House.32

Discussion: Memory work at the House of Being

If serious humor saturates everyday life at the House of Being, the vigil presents even more blatant forms of blasphemous satire and carnivalesque reversal of hegemonic memory work. The event prompts the questions posed above regarding the irreverent juxtaposition of humor and sanctified commemoration, but it also raises new questions. Why would descendants hold an all-night vigil to satirize their “common” legacies. Her search for closure was unsuccessful, as her “step sister in suffering” would not renounce the skeleton in her familial closet. Cynically ending her tale, she added, “The woman was so impressed by the family atmosphere at the House that she converted to Judaism, calling her grandson David Goeth, can you imagine!!!” After a round of laughter, Tsipi showed a video of her meeting with Goeth’s daughter, and at 4 a.m., all left the House.32

Joking behavior at the House, as in other supportive group settings (Pollner and Stein 2001), may provide cathartic relief, releasing built-up tensions and facilitating the expression of repressed issues.34 However, in contrast to sites where humor plays only a supplementary role to psychosocial or nostalgic narratives, in the House humor is a dominating mechanism, central to almost every speech act. As seen in Tsipi’s plea to the descendant who resisted humor and in the defense of humor in response to the teacher, humor has a purgative effect, but theories of catharsis cannot sufficiently explain the ludic framing at the House.

The vigil is certainly a carnivalesque ritual of reversal (Babcock 1978), as evident in the unabashed renaming
of Holocaust Memorial Day as Holocaust Holiday. The response to the teacher verifies that the event’s timing and location are conscious reversals of the national social order. The reversal of roles of hegemonically valorized partisan fighters and stigmatized sheep–passive survivors (and Polish or Hungarian and Greek survivors) is a recurrent pattern. Beyond reversal, joking behavior recalls carnivalesque grotesque improvisational banter. Descendants irreverently poke fun at sacrosanct survivors (as fried or barbecued meat), at iconic symbols of suffering (potato peels), at cultural idioms of suffering (kindling salvaged from fire), and at commemorative practices (museum reenactments). Core components of national master narratives and embedded hierarchies that derive passive capitulation in favor of combative bravery (components still so central to contemporary state hegemonic precepts) are also satirized and thereby censured. Israeli mainstream society and the survivor ingroup are satirized for constructing a hierarchy of survivor suffering. Psychological discourse and practice are also parodied. Descendants perform confessional narratives only to be ribbed, ranked, and often silenced in the midst of their “talk therapy.” Participants partake in self-parody when comparing their’ srita (Heb. emotional “scratch” or wound). The final blow to psychological discourse is the double-edged reference to humor itself as an intergenerationally transmitted “symptom,” which playfully derides the construct of generationally transmitted PTSD and legitimates ludic behavior.

Joking behavior at the House, in general, and vigil dialogue, in particular, are also acts of resistance to conventional testimonial practice, therapeutic practice, and national hegemonic hierarchies, engendering in their stead an alternative form of “local memory work.” In contrast to those who offer testimony in conventional hegemonic sites and who produce therapeutic trauma narratives, descendants at the House do not tell a linear history of the survivor’s past or of their own childhood past. Descendant core narratives depict, instead, only discrete emotive moments that conjure the unique feeling tone of survivor lifeworlds, devoid of the historiography characteristic of monumental settings. These moments and relations are not framed as symptoms of PTSD-related transmitted dysfunction, as emotional burdens, or even as a legacy of suffering but, rather, as the normative and intimate experience of survivor family life. In great contrast to national hegemonic testimonies deriding the survivor, glorifying the state as redeemer, or embedding militant messages, descendant core narratives end by highlighting the heroism of parental “passive” endurance, resilience, and even humor. In their humorous, self-deprecating references to their own “touched” selves, descendants do not blame parents or seek psychological healing but merely trace a generational connection via shared emotional markers. As powerfully seen in Tsipi’s final tale, rather than calling for liberation from the burdensome past, separation–individuation from the parent, or enlistment in monumental commemorative projects, descendants perform their own alternative commemoration. Their alternative, like Tsipi’s pedagogic raison d’être, is the recollection of loving and proud embraces of survivors (despite shared wounds) and the resultant restoration of ruptured generational ties that might facilitate an emotive containment of a “living” Holocaust past—in the descendant self, in the House, and in the wider collective.

Why, then, do they not merely recount the emotive moments of their childhood, praise their parents’ heroic survival, and openly challenge conventional discourse? What is the contribution of serious humor? Terrence Des Pres provides an insightful reading of Holocaust humor, asserting that, whereas “tragedy is mimetic of tragic events, affirming the authority of their existence, elevating what is” (1988:220), the comic mocks what is, deflating its authority. Monumental memory work elevates not only the tragic Holocaust past but also the messages embedded in its enlisted narratives and representations. In contrast, as echoed in the vigil’s satire of national Holocaust “etiquette,” the ludic representation of events is “hostile to the world depicting and subverting the reverential manner on which representation depends” (Des Pres 1988:219). Des Pres asserts that, as carnival laughter revolts against solemn hierarchical order, it draws “from a utopian hunger” containing a “fearless affirmation of life . . . celebrating the regenerative powers of life in the face of death” (1988:223). It is precisely the fusion of death with life that engenders the possibility of a “renegade” lifeworld that replenishes the social order from “a communal underworld.” Des Pres’s reading of carnivalesque resistance facilitates a more profound understanding of serious humor (and everyday life) at the House as a manifestation of the renegade spirit of survivor families. Serious renegade humor not only allows for phoenix-like resilience but also revivifies hegemonic memory work from the “communal underworld” of the House’s marginal yet still consequential position within the wider Israeli commemorative landscape. Resistance, then, to mainstream commemoration is reconfigured as a potentially constructive, rather than a subversively deconstructive, process.

Although born of survivor renegade life, the House (as Tsipi’s creation) and the vigil (as descendant memory work) nonetheless constitute what James E. Young (1998:699) might term the “afterlife” of memory. As Young demonstrates in his analysis of Art Spiegelman’s (1968) Maus comics—the Holocaust allegory replete with Nazi cats and Jewish mice through which Spiegelman’s father related his own Holocaust tale—children of survivors cannot remember the past “outside of the way it was passed down to them” (1998:698). Their own sense of narcissism, their positioning of themselves center stage, ambiguously accompanies their charity toward the survivor and their embrace of their
legacy. The vigil may be understood as a wakeful and devotional watch over the emergence of their own very present empathic memory of parental suffering and resilient familial ties, at the same time that they also await the crystallization of their own commemorative agenda and social status. All of these factors are ambiguously positioned—distanced from and at times at odds with the survivor lifeworld—but are still in conflict with hegemonic Holocaust representations. In the absence of authentic memory or immediacy, descendants celebrate what Young terms (1998:670) the “mediacy” of the Holocaust past as transmitted—mediated experience. As ways of defining this legacy, caricature, exaggeration, and irony interrogate the ambiguity and contradiction of mainstream categories (Lambeck 2003), between what is accepted and rejected in the hegemonic and what is authentic and fabricated, so that descendants may reposition themselves vis-à-vis the survivor source and the collective past? Beyond authenticity, Holocaust discursive frames and commemorative practice present other ambiguities. Contemporary discursive frames pathologize, stigmatize, rank, and deprecate survivor parents’ experience and descendants’ own childhood experience and are incommensurate with children’s more ambivalent experience of their parents’ well-being and their own emotional health. Are they proud or ashamed of their parents? How can they proudly relate themselves into the childhood and parental past, which they recount from “within” their experience. Having humorously deconstructed deprecating and univocal discursive frames, they create alternative family-specific meaning worlds that signify pride and shame, emotional wound and strength, and backward- and forward-looking familial links, worlds that are now viable despite their ultimate ambivalence. The juxtaposition of playful parody and intimate narratives functions as a riddle does (Handelman 1996), positioning incongruent realities side by side to provide a space where ambivalence, duality, and paradox may be explored and tolerated as copresent.

I propose that humor is used here as an exploratory bridge into and out of paradox-ridden descendant selfhood, legacy, and commemorative carrier status. Humor explores, holds congruent, and enables one to live with (or be with) multiple contradictory dualities (Lachmann 1988–89:124). The dynamics of play at the heart of humor access tacit experiences while reconciling the paradoxes of authenticity, survivor-family stigmatization, and descendant carrier status. From the liminal position of paradox, from the point of “yes and no,” play opens a “passage” through which the player is propelled into an alternative reality in which contradictory paradoxes may be temporarily reconciled (Bateson 1972; Handelman 1992). From their liminal position as authentic and inauthentic, valorized and stigmatized, and well and ill, descendants may playfully satirize all that is sacrosanct (Kidron 2006). By playfully juggling the dualities of their Holocaust experience, they propel themselves into the childhood and parental past, which they can recount from “within” their experience. Having humorously deconstructed deprecating and univocal discursive frames, they create alternative family-specific meaning worlds that signify pride and shame, emotional wound and strength, and backward- and forward-looking familial links, worlds that are now viable despite their ultimate ambivalence. The juxtaposition of playful parody and intimate narratives functions as a riddle does (Handelman 1996), positioning incongruent realities side by side to provide a space where ambivalence, duality, and paradox may be explored and tolerated as copresent.

Joking behavior at the end of the descendant narrative is as important as the opening humorous frame. As one descendant explained, “The jokes help us get back into our past, but they also help us get out again.” Just as movement in and out of the House and in and out of the living past, humor allows movement in and out of the past so that it may be at once accessible, temporally copresent, and sufficiently commensurate to be recounted while still allowing one to “march forward into the future.” It is precisely in the cotemporal chronotopic space of the living-heritage room that Tsipi humorously moves descendants in and out of their familial pasts. Echoing their paradoxical pasts, the room weaves the past ruptured life- and death-world into the present mundane lifeworld, creating a reanimated copresence.

The agenda, decor, praxis, talk, and ludic genre of the House juxtapose incommensurate dualities. The significations of past–present, life–death, and mundane–profane are set up side by side to facilitate fluid movement between

At the heart of descendant commemorative practice lies the final paradox of its relation to public Holocaust presence and absence. If descendants agree to carry familial memory, will they not be eventually called on to relieve their private burden by relinquishing it to a psychosocial or monumental public commemorative site? If descendants performed private memory in the public domain, would it remain intimate “living” family property or would it be appropriated into the collective whole of “dead memory” and reinterpreted in the language of suffering and stigma? Despite their apparent challenge to mainstream commemoration, at the heart of the vigil’s and the House’s endeavor lies the contradictory reality that descendants are publicly commemorating the past (as their events are open to the public) albeit in a resistant form and with resistant content. Thus, the above ambiguities raise the question, can memory be both resistant and enlisted, valorous and shameful, therapeutic and pathologizing, living and dead, private and public?
the “absent” temporal–spatial and visceral experience of the prewar lifeworld and deathworld and the present. This duality and movement utilize the same logic that humor does in juxtaposing the dualities of descendant experience. By allowing descendants to perform their paradoxical selves, the House permits them to “be and live with” these dualities and with the copresence of the past and present. In the House, both a copy of all absent houses and a container of cotemporal presence, where literal and figurative movement enables envelopment of the past, the descendant may hold at bay otherwise untenable contradictions.

Despite the virtual cotemporality of past–present and death–life at the House, the site is nonetheless fully engaged in everyday reality–actuality. In contrast to conventional readings of ritual, the activation of copresence at the House is not conditional on discrete ritual boundaries or the autonomy of ritual praxis (Handelman 1990). Instead, virtuality is maintained precisely by the perpetual porosity of House borders, by the seepage of mundane present daily life and the entry of nonsurvivors into the House. The virtuality of the living presence of the past is sustained by mundane interaction with surviving artifacts that resist the pastness and the status of commemorative display by functionally and aesthetically remaining embedded in a domestic setting still very much in use (Kravel and Bilu 2008).

It is in this dual context of mundane and intimate domestic–geriatric center and sacred public pedagogic center that copresence engenders a lived experience of the past and facilitates Halbwachs’s conceptualization of a lived memory intertwined in the dynamic social milieu of everyday life. This juxtaposition of lifeworlds–deathworlds, and mundane–ritual practice, calls for a reformulation of scholarly understanding of how, where, and to what end commemorative practice is undertaken and what qualifies as a ritual of memory or as memory itself.

Beyond the passage into the virtual past, the House also facilitates the passage over a concrete sociopolitical threshold, namely, from the private–domestic “silent” domain into the meso–public domain of testimonial voice. For the majority of members interviewed, the House is the first and only place in which they have given voice to the Holocaust past and shared their tales with others. It is also the only sanctuary where material traces of pre-Holocaust domesticity may be revivified by a loving gaze or touch, having made a parallel passage from hidden drawers to a “domestic” living-room wall, where they are positioned ambiguously in the public sphere. It would thus seem that by creating a more intimate communal “home” for the virtual living presence of the past (as a viable alternative to testimony or display in monumental sites), Tsipi and others like her are facilitating a dialogue between those who were previously silent and the Israeli visiting public. As Olick and Robbins (1998) point out, local countermemory interpenetrates creatively with hegemonic landscapes. As long as House visitors are willing to interact with survivors and the past on Tsipi’s transgressive terms, and to walk a tightrope with her between local countermemory and “making do” (Roseman 1996) with the benefits of partial public enlistment and accommodation, Tsipi will contribute to the national commemorative landscape.

Tsipi’s long-term agenda is to “shake up” a growing number of visitors, progressively impacting the statist commemorative landscape and even fostering national humanist policies from below. As attested to by the small metal memorial plaques recently attached to the “living photos” on the wall (reading “Blessed be their memory”), however, Tsipi and her survivors may be paying a price for increasing involvement in Israel’s memory industry. Although the use of serious humor allows members to expose incongruities between the private lived experience and national discourse and practice and also guarantees their renegade position on the borderland between these worlds, increased media attention, national and municipal governmental support, and the growing number of consumers seeking innovative Holocaust representation serve to bring these distant worlds into closer encounters of the kind that may ultimately compromise the House’s unique spirit. It remains to be seen if Tsipi’s renegade form of commemoration will resist “fall[ing] into structure” (Turner 1969) or if, even in the best of times of postmodern multiplicity, inviting Holocaust consumers into the “privacy” of the House of Being to commemorate with her will ultimately lead to further capitulation, collective enlistment, and even nationalization. Perhaps in the ludic spirit of paradox and ambiguity, Tsipi and her volunteers will continue to do both—to resist and capitulate. A growing number of genocide survivor–refugee enclaves around the globe are spontaneously forming sites of communal living memory or are enlisted to do so by NGOs, truth commissions, or mental health professionals. How they situate themselves in their respective hegemonic landscapes should be fascinating to observe.

The House also problematizes the assumptions of the “crisis of representation” that many associate with the Holocaust. Although relatives are clearly deceased and photographic images and material traces of the Holocaust past are, in fact, detached from their original living contexts, scholarly conceptualizations of the limits of representation and fabricated authenticity underestimate the revivifying force of “living” contexts that undertake emotive or ludic memory work. Within the living context, participants may be ushered across porous boundaries into a space where they experience not the fabricated representation of the past but the very “real” ambiguity of the liminal representation of that past and the ambivalence of their personal bond with and commitment to it. Old and new museology also aims to manipulate contexts that frame strategically constructed simulations and vicarious identity work, but these contexts remain devoid of a living experience or a
personally salient sense of humorous ambiguity. At best representing or reenacting previously lived experience, they maintain the gap between participants’ present lifeworld and the distant past, failing in Tsipi’s terms to “shake up” and enrich the visitor. As the House appears to normalize the presence of the dead and the traces of the traumatically ruptured past without evoking sorrowful mourning, its study problematizes Western “death work.” Mainstream commemorative practice not only sequesters the dead from everyday life, policing the boundaries of what therapeutic discourse has determined to be normative brief periods of mourning but it also marks the absolute separation of the living from dead loved ones to create closure with respect to personal and collective benign or traumatic pasts. The juxtaposition of the living and the dead at the House implies that the phenomenological experience of trauma, mourning, and loss may leave room for a far more fluid and nonpathological movement between the living and the dead they remember, and between everyday experience and the surviving traces of the past. From the perspective of House members, if the dead and their lifeworlds are not culturally “absenced”—not lost to the cemetery or relegated to frozen monumental institutions—their absence need not be mourned but, rather, their presence may be celebrated.44

The normalization of death work entails implications regarding the illness and wellness of victims of traumatic loss. In light of descendants’ parody of transmitted PTSD and their lay self-diagnosis as “touched,” one might critically ask if trauma-related therapeutic discourse and practice have not hastened to pathologize rather than explore alternative yet normative survivor–descendant lifeworlds generated by the unique experience of genocide. Considering the fun-loving embrace and familial containment of survivors at the House, this case study calls on scholars to consider the efficacy of alternative cultural practices that promote healing and wellness.

Finally, this case study raises questions regarding the often-overshadowed phenomenon of serious humor and its core components of ambiguity and paradox. Further ethnographic examination of the role of humor in identity work may contribute to a more profound understanding of liminal states, boundary work, hybridity, and emergent subjectivities. An exploration of play-related behavior among those who are destined to exist on the border would shed light on identity work that aims not to resolve or transcend ambiguity but, rather, to creatively “be and live with” the inherent contradictions of everyday life.

Notes

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1. Management, staff, and members do not refer to the House of Being as a museum, memorial site, or even a geriatric center, although it does perform the functions of each of these institutions. In an interview, House founder and manager Tsipi Kichler outlined her dislike of the narrow and what she thought of as the stigmatic institutional identity of a geriatric center. She and the staff occasionally refer to the site as a pedagogic center. However, on the whole, all those affiliated with the site refer to it as the “House” or the “House of Being,” and the ambivalent and multifaceted institutional “identity” of the site is part and parcel of its uniqueness. In response to anonymous reviewer comments and popular conceptions of the aged (Hazard 1994), I use the term *geriatric center.*

2. Tsipi has requested that I use her name in all publications.

3. The dense layout of photos recalled Yaffa Eliach’s installation of photographs of Holocaust victims in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, entitled “The Tower of Life.” Yet, in contrast to the signification of death in the museum photos, the association of the photos at the House of Being, given the absence of references to genocide, death, and suffering in the “living room” space, was one of domestic family nostalgia. They recalled Marianne Hirsch’s (1997) description of domestic photographic narratives above a mantel or along a staircase—chronicling the fondly remembered yet taken-for-granted family past that is tightly interwoven into the heart of domestic practice. According to Hirsch, such a display acts as a mundane albeit meaningful backdrop to everyday life, as the family’s self-representation of its own constitutive history.

4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for formulating the relationship in this way, which perfectly captures the heart of the process.

5. Stephan Feuchtwang (2007) describes the way the Jewish past remains present or absent in the lives of those of mixed descent and the way such individuals create lines of kinship and belonging in the face of wartime disruption. His nonethnographic study focuses, however, not on the everyday, mundane presence of the past interwoven in the domestic sphere or communal public site of memory but, rather, on the way in which what he terms the “lived self” (Feuchtwang 2007:170) idiosyncratically draws the lines of complex heritage as part of identity work.

6. Classic ethnographies of local memory include Herzfeld 1991 and Seremetakis 1994 on Greek memory; Swedenburg 1989 on Palestinian memory, and Cattell and Climo 2002 on Holocaust
memory. I refer here not only to genocidal memory but also to the enlistment of personal memory and the gap between the personal and the national. Wilson 2001 provides a fascinating account of the enlistment of testimony before truth commissions in South Africa and the tensions that arise around competing religious-cultural conceptions of justice.

7. The appeal to humor in response to death and dying is, of course, culturally pervasive (Narváez 2003). For a general overview of humor in ritual, see Apte 1985, which explains how and why ritual provides opportunity to laugh at forbidden topics. See Thursby 2006 for an examination of how humor fills gaps in ambivalent situations—of tension, anxiety, and formality during funeral festivities in the United States, including those related to the Day of the Dead. However, as Stanley Brandes (2003) notes, this kind of funerary humor is ephemeral and is rarely the key rhetorical genre of the event. Although less pervasive, even personal and collective traumatic death engenders gallows humor and “disaster jokes,” despite, as Peter Narváez (2003) points out, the shocking nature of the ambiguity and the poor taste. I do not attempt to demonstrate the “novelty” of ludic behavior as a response to traumatic death and dying but, rather, to explore the far more unusual and intriguing use of humor as key genre within permanent (and not ephemeral) genocidal commemorative sites and ongoing practices.

8. Until the 1980s, the attribution Holocaust survivors (and its lay definition and understanding) in Israel and North America signified those who were incarcerated in death or concentration camps or in forced labor camps, who were confined in ghettos, or who were driven into hiding in extreme conditions of isolation and facing the imminent threat of death. With the shift in Israeli Holocaust discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, and concomitant growing interest in and valorization of noncombatant Holocaust survivorhood and victimhood, the social classification of the survivor was expanded to include those who were not incarcerated, ghettoized, or forced into hiding but who, nonetheless suffered forced flight—migration or forced adoption—conversion while remaining within Nazi occupied territory from 1933 to 1945. This expanded definition vastly increased the number of Holocaust survivors and descendants in Israel and abroad. The attribution Holocaust descendants in Israel refers to either children or grandchildren of one or more Holocaust survivors (broadly defined). When planning my wider research project (Kidron 2005), I utilized more conservative criteria of survivorhood—interviewing only those whose parents were in camps, in ghettos, or in hiding—to access data with a narrower experiential foundation that is unequivocally valorized by a broad base in Israeli society and because such descendants are assumed to have been exposed to what is still culturally defined as a highly “traumatic” legacy, regardless of the diversity of viable familial responses. The academic literature and some popular cultural references in Israel and elsewhere haphazardly utilize the attributions trauma survivors and descendants when referring to individuals or groups whose very distant ancestors (multiple generations removed) experienced the traumatic event, sometimes without attempting to trace the processes of transmission or the nature of the resultant legacy. For a discussion of the question of social classification of survivorhood, see Danieli 1998 and Berger 1997. Holocaust survivors and children of survivors are particularly sensitive to the attribution of survivorhood to those who have not suffered the more extreme conditions outlined above.

9. Although the term memory work has been used in the literature to refer to various therapeutic or sociopolitical forms of work on or with memory, my understanding and use of the term in the present study emerges from Michael Lambek and Paul Antze’s pioneering volume Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory (1996), whose contributors explore the cultural processes, practices, and identities emerging from personal and collective memories of trauma. In that volume, memory work refers to the culturally mediated practices of personal and collective remembering and how they are constituted and invoked. Lambek and Antze unpack the term when outlining the difficult hermeneutic distinction at the heart of their volume between “memory as unmediated fact or process” and “the culturally mediated acts, schemata and stories—the memory work—that comprise our memories and the way we think about them” (1996:xv; emphasis added).

10. My personal background as a child of Holocaust survivors facilitated backstage access to House activities, and I myself felt very much at “home” at the center.

11. Tsipi is divorced and the mother of two grown children, one of whom spends time at the House, chatting with survivors and descendants and singing and performing with the survivor choir. Also gifted with a sense of humor, he often picks up on his mother’s one-liners and continues her humorous improvisation.

12. Tsipi formulated, designed, and produced honorary certificates that were given to Holon’s survivors at the House’s first Holocaust ceremony. The central design of these “Certificates of Love” is a blooming mustard plant with a butterfly pollinating one of its flowers. The text of the certificate reads, 

Granted to:—
Holocaust survivor, resident of Holon in the State of Israel
For the rehabilitation of life and establishment of family toward the continuation of the Jewish People in their State. We view this as a great human achievement and we salute you.

The certificate is signed “the Mayor.” On the top of it is the logo of the city of Holon encaptioned “The Ministry of Education and Culture, the Department of Communal Centers and Youth.” The butterfly and plant motif has become the House’s logo, a partial appropriation of another heritage museum’s symbol of survival in the ghetto and labor camps. The key valorized theme of the certificate is clearly the importance of restoring respect for the survivor. The metatext is pointedly the revision of the concept of “heroism,” as encompassing not only the more frequently recognized act of perseverance but also the rehabilitation of one’s life and the establishment of a family serving the Jewish people and the state. This text both presents subversive reformulations of grand narratives and channels the “restored” survivor into the service of hegemonic national dictates. The municipality of Holon also created a certificate for presentation to “Righteous Gentiles,” non-Jews who risked their lives to save House members. It reads, “We in Holon recognize and value the greatness of your acts to save Jews while endangering your lives and the lives of your family during the years of the Second World War.” Below is a picture of a hand holding a plant seedling sprouting out of black earth. Next to the picture, the text reads, “To your height perhaps we will not reach but we will walk in your path.”

13. Tsipi and volunteers alike seem aware of the apparent paradox in this approach or, at least, of the deviation from the norm that pedagogy is didactic—that teaching involves imparting positivist knowledge rather than just emotive responses to the past. As a first-generation volunteer told me, “This is an educational institution, we don’t teach Shoah here. We feel Shoah through the personal story, the live testimony.”

14. Municipal and national governmental support has included monetary backing and has also provided the site with the legitimacy necessary to attract VIP visitors, school day trips, and media coverage, all of which are highly important to Tsipi and her staff. Tsipi is paid by the municipal board of education for her work at the
House. This support, however, has required her to partially accommodate her practices to the mainstream commemorative canon, as I detail subsequently in the text. Tsipi’s tricksterlike strategic maneuvering along the tightrope between accommodation and resistance came up frequently in my interviews and casual conversations with her, but, for obvious ethical reasons, I cannot disclose specific comments.

15. The House of Being has “adopted” a number of Righteous Gentiles and their families, some of whom have emigrated to Israel. Some of these individuals volunteer regularly at the House, and Tsipi and the other members make it a point to ensure that they feel just as much at home there as the survivors.

16. Since my first visit (2004), more families have added memorial plaques to their photos, and a few more conventional Holocaust artifacts have been brought in by survivors and placed on display in the “heritage” room (e.g., a sweater knitted in a ghetto and a time line depicting Holocaust history from 1933 to the establishment of the state in 1948). It is difficult to determine if these additions reflect acquiescence to hegemonic commemorative practices or an internal House decision not to decline any request by survivors to display their mementos. My attempt to bring the subject of the plaques to the attention of Tsipi and other volunteers has evoked confusion and at times even denial that a shift in practice has occurred.

17. Considering that Tsipi makes frequent subversive references to the idiom “sheep to the slaughter,” the display of the bust is ironic, as Abba Kovner, the individual represented, coined the phrase to describe survivors and thereby glorify his fellow partisan fighters who did not passively acquiesce.

18. The House of Being is almost devoid of dark-touristic images (Lennon and Foley 2000). Thus, the exhibition of hundreds of prewar photos without accompanying death-related imagery allows the visitor to experience the prewar past in a nonmournful manner, perhaps without explicitly signifying death and the destruction of family frameworks and communities. The nostalgic heritage frame rather than the mournful commemorative frame is more in keeping with Tsipi’s agenda of creating an embracing and fun familial living space for survivor leisure time.

19. See Carsten 2007:18 for a discussion of the power of domestic furnishings that integrate the past and the present to allow memory work to be both regressive and regenerative.

20. See Chaitin and Steinberg 2008 for an interesting discussion of Holocaust memory and empathy in Israeli society.


22. The survivors and their families do not require photographic representation or documentary evidence of the horrors of Shoah to evoke their otherwise distant dead (Handelman and Sharam Handelman 1997). See Young 1990 for discussions on Holocaust Memorial Day practices and Handelman and Sharam Handelman 1997 for a discussion of degrees of absence and the challenge of commemoration. The ceremony at the House is filmed for internal use; Tsipi adds the film to her stock of public-relations materials, to show to visitors, on trips to Germany, and also to House members.

23. A number of important ethnographies discuss the ritual presence of the dead among the living. Battaglia 1992 discusses the segataya exchange in Papua New Guinea, specifically, the use of mortuary objects to represent the “presence in absentia” of the dead and the practices of secondary burial that mark the importance of family relations while simultaneously facilitating the cessation of obligations and death-related limitations. In that case, as in the House, the past is embedded in relations and in artifacts. Lambek 1996 discusses a case in Madagascar in which the presence of the dead is ritually embodied by the living in periodic ceremonies. In contrast, I assert that, at the House, memory preserves a permanent albeit virtual presence rather than ritually containing or limiting a chronotopic presence.

24. The term night vigil (Heb. leil-shmarim) is borrowed from the religious practice of studying the Torah and other Judaic texts all night on the eve of the holiday of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the handing down of the Torah at Mt. Sinai and the transformation of the Jewish people into a nation. As the association implies, descendants at the House of Being anticipate a devotional vigil and formative event.

25. Shmitzolim may also imply the consumption and embodiment of survivors prior to their demise to allow for the passing of the torch to descendants (personal communication Erica Lehrer, December 15, 2008).

26. This interaction between Tsipi and the last remaining survivors in the room discloses underlying intergenerational tensions and competition between survivors, as authentic sources of testimonial legitimacy (and of transmitted wounds), and members of the second generation, who are presently in the process of forming their own no less legitimate place in the commemorative pantheon. Paradoxically, as loving container of memory, the House is dependent precisely on the restoration of ruptured ties that facilitate its transmission, and Tsipi, in particular, has made her mark on the national landscape as embracing the degraded and silenced survivor. See Tamar Katriel’s insightful analysis of how a kibbutz settlement museum becomes “an enclave where intergenerational tensions can be simultaneously articulated and smoothed out in performative acts of narration” (1997:74).

27. For a comprehensive review of the literature on trauma, see Kirmayer et al. 2007. For a critical deconstructivist approach to PTSD, see Young 1995. For a review of the psychological literature on intergenerationally transmitted PTSD, see Danielli 1998.

28. Although Greek Jews were commonly partisans, many who were incarcerated in concentration camps were given one of the most horrific jobs there—serving as Sonderkommando, shoveling bodies into the crematorium.

29. Clearly, the House and the Holocaust Memorial Eve event become an occasion to explore and resist multiple hegemonic discourses and reified hierarchies that subjugate those on the bottom of the Israeli social ladder (Goodman and Mizrahi 2008). Here the Greek Sephardic Jew of oriental descent critiques the Ashkenazi (Jews of European descent) regarding their monopoly over Holocaust discourse and practice, silencing the less baleful expressions, yet no less tragic experiences, of the Greek, Bulgarian, and Libyan past.

30. Many descendants approached me for more information regarding my research, and about half of the participants asked to be interviewed, usually accompanying the request with a joke about their “being especially touched.”

31. Tsipi’s role as a symbolic type, taken for granted as condensing the meaning of the site and its processes and thereby wielding great power over participants, is central to her achievement.

32. See Lehrer 2007 for an enlightening account and analysis of the interdependency between the Polish non-Jew in postwar Poland and the visiting Jewish tourist, as together they weave their identities through morally loaded, ambivalent interaction.

33. Almost all my attempts to question Tsipi or participants regarding the meaning of joking behavior at the House evoked responses such as “Should I cry instead?” or “What’s wrong with humor?”

34. Literature on humor during the Holocaust also highlights the therapeutic effect of joking behavior (Des Pres 1988; Lipman 1991). Exploring the retention of humor in the worst of conditions may
be seen as part of the trend to widen the themes of Holocaust representation and commemoration. Rather than focusing only on suffering and loss, literature, museum exhibits, and even film now highlight the positive life-giving potential of art, play, and humor. This upbeat theme, however, has not made it into monumental commemoration.

35. Even the Holocaust theater established by Tzipi and performed by three generations of three local families (the "Testimony of Three Generations") does not in any way perform Holocaust history or "train" descendants to testify to the Holocaust past. Instead, echoing all House activity, survivors testify to the love and redemption they found in their families and in House relations, and descendants testify to the importance of intergenerational ties, mutual support, and respect for survivor parents and grandparents. Tzipi herself emphasizes these ideals in her testimony at the Holocaust Eve ceremony, calling on participants to carry an emotive memory of the past and the dead in their hearts rather than carrying a historical tale that might be disseminated and performed publicly. Even survivor testimonies at the House before schoolchildren do not pedagogically disseminate history (as Tzipi herself explains) but, rather, engineer emotive and empathic relations with the past and with the survivors of that past and work toward the dissemination of moral messages of empathy and humanism.

36. However, unlike the "temporary anti-world" of Des Pres's (1988) theater productions and literary works, life and humor at the House of Being are part of a permanent site perpetually feeding mainstream visitors from without.

37. This recalls Norman K. Denzin's (1993) and Melvin Pollner and Jill Stein's (2001) findings that ludic behavior at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings facilitates "doubling," or the creation of a dual position on the border, from which the speaker may reflexively relate him or her difficult past while commenting on it from the incongruent present position of the critical and recovered alcoholic. As Pollner and Stein state, the experience of narration is not merely cathartic or didactic for the speaker and the audience but, rather, is transformative, allowing all in the group to move into and out of their painful pasts from a new reflexive stance.

38. Recalling Michael E. Brown's (1996) critique of ethnographies of resistance, I assert that failure to explore the cultural processes embedded in serious humor as a key mechanism of resistance would elide the subtle ambiguity of descendant identity and memory work, which enables House members to juggle their embrace of and accommodation to personal and collective legacies with their opposition to them.

39. Although I have argued against classifying the room simply as a Holocaust memorial exhibit, that is one of its functions. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) reading of such displays is particularly cogent. She asserts that "exhibits do for themselves what the lifeworld cannot do for itself by bringing together artefacts never found in the same place at the same time and showing relationships that cannot otherwise be seen" (1998:169). As suggested by the visiting families gazing together at the mass of photos of their animated-deceased relatives on Holocaust Memorial Eve and by descendants playfully articulating otherwise tacit "relationships" while completely surrounded by the photos-objects from the past, the alternative lifeworld at the House of Being seems to emerge from the density of presence not found outside the House. This density shows familial relationships and temporal relationships "otherwise not seen." Yet I would claim that the paradox of domesticity and publicity and of mundane and sacred in the House as quasi-home creates a more intimate and vital space than the museum offers, allowing for the experience of these relationships to be sustained for a much longer period of time than the average museum visit does. In addition, the experience is not passively under-

taken, as occurs when one tours or even interacts with exhibits in a museum. I would claim this is why one respondent asserted that the House is not a museum and that a survivor asserted it was not a cemetery but the "House that was destroyed and burnt."

40. Scholars offer multiple readings of the terms and experiences of virtuality and actuality. Bruce Kapferer (1997) asserts that rituals may at once condense the indeterminacy of the everyday lifeworld but allow for the imposition of control and ultimately deterministic boundaries in which transformation may occur. Ritual, for Kapferer, thus remains a virtual rendition of the actual, despite the totality and boundedness of the event. In contrast, in the House, the commemorative vigil and playful and ambiguous daily life also allow for movement between the mundane and the sacred, between transgressive humor and valorized remembrance. Thus, the boundary is blurred between the virtuality of the presence of the past (and the dead) and the actuality of the absence of past (and death).

41. Victor W. Turner's (1974) conceptualizations of the liminal-limnoid may provide insight into the passage into the space, and the lived experience of being, betwixt and between past and present and life and death with all its indeterminacy, processuality, loosening of limits around identity, relaxed behavior, and perhaps even certain components of communitas. However, the House departs from this conception in important ways. First, everyday life never ceases to saturate almost all of the most intense ritual moments, so that one may not really speak of an entirely alternative or bounded temporal-spatial ritual experience. Second, although the concept of "limnoid" may be helpful when considering members' transgressive behavior, emerging continuously on the margins of the social order, House "ritual" behavior, hierarchy, and even humor retain clear links to everyday structure. Finally, far from the social leveling of communitas (from even normative communitas), the often tense survivor-descendant relations and competitive interdescendant ethnic-historical relations, epitomized in Tzipi's hierarchy of Polish versus Hungarian or Greek suffering, are antithetical to Turner's ideal.

42. Despite the great increase in the number of testimonies provided by survivors in the public domain (since the Eichmann trial), the majority of survivors resist participation in public forms of commemoration.

43. As I expand on in a broader study of survivor and descendant commemorative practices (Kidron 2005), the very great majority of the 55 Israeli descendants I interviewed expressed total disinterest in enlistment in national monumental commemorative sites and practices. Yet a growing number of children of survivors are attending meso-public heritage centers that function as survivor-family niches of communality similar (in size and meso positioning if not in ludic content) to the House of Being.

44. For a discussion on the sequestration of death in Western culture, see Mellor and Shilling 1993.

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