

Entangled Memories: Israel, Japan and the Emergence of Global Memory Culture

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In 1973, just months before the Yom Kippur War, Muki Tzur, an Israeli historian, wrote in the introduction of the German translation of “*Siach Lokhamim*” (A Warriors’ Conversation), “[this book] was written by Jewish youths of the 20th century. This century was shaped by two colossal events, two earthquakes in modern civilization: Hiroshima and Auschwitz. It seems that there is no young man in this world who is free from relating to these two events...we (young Israelis) are looking for meaning between these two extremities.”¹ Haim Guri, one of Israel’s leading essayists, took offense at Tzur’s equating of the two tragedies. In a biting critique titled *Al ha-hevdel* (About the difference), Guri dismissed any effort of comparison or connection between Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Guri presented Hiroshima as a tragedy but one that was conducted as part of a war in which the Japanese were the aggressors, while the Jews were not in any way conducting warfare against the Germans. Furthermore, accepting official American interpretation of the events, Guri presented Hiroshima as an “evil with a purpose,” which was the lesser evil by preventing many more casualties, both Japanese and American, in the event of an invasion. Auschwitz was different. “It had no purpose...it was a crime.” Implicitly (and a-historically) condemning the allies, Guri added, “If the A-bomb was dropped on Auschwitz millions would have been saved.” Guri hinted at what was really at stake when he concluded, “the Germans would be pleased with this false confluence of Hiroshima and Auschwitz,”² thus implying that the very comparison served to undermine German guilt. In a forceful reply, Tzur responded to Guri, “I cannot forget

Hiroshima... not because I could identify with its victims to the same degree I could with my own people. Not, also, because I attribute to Truman and his advisers the same motives I attribute to Eichmann or Heidrich. But because Hiroshima has put us under the threat of a total weapon...we must understand the horrible absurdity [which is Hiroshima]; even I as an Israeli cannot release myself from that shadow.”³

Guri’s particularism, which was, and still is, representative of majority opinion in Israel, stands in sharp contrast to the global role Hiroshima and Japan sought for as universal emissaries of peace. This contrast exposes the enormous gap between the two lessons of World War II’s horrors that are frequently drawn, the universal and the particular, which supposedly position Israel and Japan at two opposite poles. Indeed, the two countries are examined here specifically because they seem to represent such extremes. However, as Tzur’s reply demonstrated, and as this paper will argue, this contrast, although very real, obscures the many similarities between the ways these nations dealt with their respective tragedies and the many nuanced arguments in between these two extreme positions. Furthermore, the similarities are largely the result of the two communities being part of an emerging global memory culture. This debate, and others that will be examined here, illuminate the global nature of World War II memory. The war was a world war and as such precipitated global developments and an emerging global memory culture. The histories of war and commemoration are, to use Sebastian Conrad’s words, “entangled

histories.”⁴ Yet memory studies continue to operate with “tunnel vision,” looking at individual nations in isolation.⁵ This paper attempts to go beyond a simple comparison of the two nations in isolation, and instead to examine how both histories were entangled and influenced by similar global developments.

As I demonstrated in greater detail in my manuscript *Hiroshima: the Origins of Global Memory Culture*, perhaps the most prominent of these developments was the emergence of the idea of the survivor and a culture of testimony that drew on disparate sources, both within and outside the Cold War West.⁶ In both communities (and, indeed, many others from Beijing to Vienna) the story told after the war was of a journey from darkness into light, of the nation emerging from the crucible of defeat and victimization to achieve resurrection and national strength. Whether it was the founding of Israel or the reemergence of Japan as a pacifist nation, the recent tragic past was immediately conscripted in service of the present. This journey from victimhood to resurrection was inscribed, literally in stone, in both Hiroshima’s and Jerusalem’s main monuments.⁷



Poster for an assembly against nuclear war and genocide in Tel Aviv, 1962, attended by a Hiroshima Peace Delegation. Source, Comité International D'auschwitz: information bulletin (January 1963).

The victims themselves were transformed into survivors as they used their experiences in the service of the greater communal effort to ensure that their tragedy would never be repeated. In the process, their experiences were nationalized (and internationalized) and put to use for political purposes. It was not the individual survivor who was a victim anymore but the community as a whole.⁸ The “nation as victim” narrative dominated the history of memory (and still resonates) in Israel, Japan and many other places. Yes, it was not without its challengers and it has undergone much historical change over time. It was challenged both locally, by sub groups of victims and globally by activism in international institutions and forums. It was these challenges and dialogues, above and beyond the nation, that constituted the emerging global memory space.

This essay looks at the emergence of this space through three historical stages looking mainly at Holocaust memory in Israel and Hiroshima memory in Japan. The first stage of memory work pertaining to the two nations, roughly from 1945 to 1960, was what I call, transformational narratives and divided memories, as communities sought to redefine themselves in the face of tragedy. The second stage was the emergence of victim narratives and the subsequent nationalization of narratives from the late fifties to the seventies. Finally, the third stage was the coming on the scene of other victim groups that challenged Jewish and Japanese claims for unique victimhood. These were partially overlapping, not clear-cut stages, nor was this process linear. This history was messy, multi-directional and open to many interpretations with numerous counter-examples and exceptions. Nevertheless, looking back from where we stand now, at the seventieth anniversary, and observing the bigger picture, this article aims at demonstrating the existence of transnational trends and the emergence of a global sphere of memory that is shared, with variations, beyond individual nations.

I. Transformational narratives/ Divided memories

In the first decade after the war, in both Japan and Israel, and, indeed globally, transformational narratives which concentrated on overcoming hardship initially overshadowed commemoration.⁹ Although these narratives possessed a distinct positive and future oriented outlook, Japanese and Israeli narratives were very different from these of the Americans or other allies. It was difficult for both communities to treat defeat and atomic annihilation or the loss of more than half of one's people to genocide as any sort of triumph. And not only for these communities - people everywhere could not grasp the horror of the A-bomb and the camps. The celebration of Allied victory in the war soon gave way to widespread

anxiety. Initially, there was much relief over the end of the war, and, in the US, a very high approval rate for dropping the bomb. But there were also, from as early as August 1945, very different voices. Even in the US, a small but significant minority pronounced themoral uneasiness even criticism of the mass killing of civilians caused by the bomb.¹⁰ The writer Dwight MacDonald said of Hiroshima, immediately after the bombing, "This atrocious action places 'us', the defenders of civilization, on a moral level with 'them', the beasts of Majdanek. And 'we', the American people, are just as much and as little responsible for this horror as 'they', the German people."¹¹ This was as radical a statement then as it is now. MacDonald, a Trotskyist, was certainly not representative, but the implications of the bomb and the cruelty of killing hundreds of thousands with the flick of a button did cast doubts on who exactly was good in this last "good war." As Paul Boyer has noted, for many on both sides of the ideological divide, the bomb forever shook their faith in progress and the whole structure of liberal and socialist theory.¹² In its extreme form, this mood led Mary McCarthy to write of Hiroshima as "a hole in human history."¹³ Auschwitz and the horror of the camps led Theodore Adorno to a similar conclusion about the fate of human culture in light of the Holocaust and the bomb.¹⁴ These were horrors beyond our grasp, beyond humanity.

These impressions took some time to crystalize, yet, from the very beginning, efforts were made to fill the hole and counter despair. This was particularly true in the affected communities. In both places there was a need on both very personal and community levels to ascribe meaning to the suffering and to integrate these unfathomable events into a familiar history. In both communities, narratives of redemption and transformation emerged to give meaning to the tragedy. The nation having suffered now emerged changed, even hardened by the experience. The two events became

touchstones for a new, or rather a reinvented national identity for both communities, as a phoenix rising from the ashes towards a new, bright (and modern) future. This was a familiar story everywhere postwar as nations dealt with the legacy of defeat, destruction, and civil war and sought to redefine the war as a crucible from which the nation emerged triumphant and stronger.¹⁵ At the same time, what these large narratives tried to mask was a deeply divided and fragmented memory of the war as different groups vied for influence over the emerging cultures of commemoration.¹⁶ These divisions were the result of both local and global struggles, whether ethnic divides or the Cold War, which produced dynamic and often fractious debates over memory.

In Japan, the work of explaining the war started almost immediately. In the “Jeweled voice” radio broadcast of 15 August 1945 the Showa Emperor presented Japan’s decision to surrender as his magnanimous act, explaining that the bomb and American scientific mastery was what brought about the end of the war, not some failure on the part of the elites or of the *yamato damashi* (spirit of Yamato or of the Japanese race) narrative. In what would become a staple of certain sections of the later peace movement, by being A-bombed and overwhelmed materially, Japan actually won morally as it acquired the peculiar cachet of being the only country to experience the bomb.¹⁷ Furthermore, the great sacrifice of the Japanese people was now seen as what brought peace (and later on would be seen as the basis for prosperity). This narrative, to an extent, also served the purposes of Americans who saw the bomb as a necessary evil that brought peace and, as Truman would claim, saved many American and Japanese lives by ending the war. Furthermore, the American decision to keep Hirohito on the throne facilitated a narrative in which the lost war could be blamed on the “military clique.” The alignment of interests between occupiers and Japanese elites worked for everybody at the time, placing the blame for

the war on a few militarists while letting the Emperor and the people off the hook.¹⁸ Especially after 1947, in Japan the word “peace” became ubiquitous, adorning everything from the constitution to a leading cigarette brand. There was much optimism and belief in the new democratic Japan and in the immediate postwar period even the communists hailed the US as an army of liberators.

Underneath the optimism there was, of course, much conflict. As Franziska Seraphim has demonstrated, war memory developed as part of the democratic discourse, involving both civil society and international groups.¹⁹ These groups clashed intensely over the meaning of the war and what Japan’s path in the postwar will be. One major difference between Japan and other countries was that the state backed away from memorialization, leaving the field to competing groups. Whether communists, liberals or conservatives, war veterans, bomb victims (not necessarily *hibakusha* - A-bomb victims - at this stage), or refugees from Manchuria, the groups (and sub groups within these) competed over projecting the “right” interpretation of the war.²⁰ Whether the war was remembered as an aberration, a war of Asian liberation against the West, or a senseless crime against Asian and even Japanese people, depended very much on where one stood on the ideological spectrum.

Positions changed rapidly and were influenced by both international and domestic developments. The trajectory of Hiroshima's memory demonstrates this trend. During the period of American occupation censorship, Hiroshima, as a result of collaboration involving American and European Christian and pacifist supporters, emerged as a supreme symbol of the international peace movement. Before the 1954 Bikini incident (with the exception of a short period around the start of the Korean War - more on Bikini below) Hiroshima's “peace,” was quite inoffensive for Americans at this stage. For reasons I explore

elsewhere, Hiroshima developed a peace culture that emphasized reconciliation and presented itself as a forward-looking modern city.²¹ This Japanese initiative was welcomed by the Americans and after some pressure, also the Japanese conservative government. But the reinvention of Hiroshima as a city of peace, as the city was officially proclaimed by American and Japanese elites in 1949, did not keep up with events on the ground as Hiroshima's potential for subversion and ambivalence of US foreign policy priorities would surface almost immediately. In 1950, with the Korean War and the threat of World War III, the peace narrative took on urgent new meaning. That year, however, Hiroshima's newly founded Public Safety Committee, on GHQ orders, banned the August Sixth ceremony commemorating the bombing, which had started as early as 1946.²²

Some Japanese would come to see Hiroshima in very different terms. Nakasone Yasuhiro, the figure most responsible for the launching of Japanese atomic energy in the mid-1950s had witnessed the Hiroshima blast. "I still remember," he wrote, "the image of the white cloud... That moment motivated me to think and act toward advancing the peaceful use of nuclear power." Nakasone believed that if Japan did not participate in "the largest discovery of the twentieth century," it would "forever be a fourth-rate nation."²³ Thus, the bomb was projected as a spur for Japan to catch up with the US and ensure it shared in the nuclear technologies that would ensure its reemergence as a world power not by acquiring atomic weapons but by unleashing atomic energy for peaceful development. Although they did not employ the language of national power, the Japanese left, and even A-bomb survivor organizations, also rallied to the cause of nuclear power, calling for, "using atomic energy for life rather than death."²⁴

In Israel, David Ben Gurion, Israel's founding father, had a similar but darker reasoning when he set out, from as early as 1948-1949, to

acquire the bomb to prevent another Holocaust.²⁵ This was a quite different path than Japanese' conservatives and others who campaigned to acquire nuclear power but the logic was similar, with nuclear technology as the ultimate guarantor of national strength. This trajectory was very much related to Ben Gurion's and Palestinian Jews' feeling of helplessness in the face of the Holocaust. Ben Gurion and others of his generation had lived through the Holocaust while in Palestine, seeing and hearing of the slaughter of their people in Europe but helpless to prevent it. The feeling of helplessness and even shame, in a society that prided itself on its activism, was translated after the war into the common sense understanding that "never again" meant displaying and deploying strength. Publicly, the commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel, from as early as 1942 when the first plans for memorials were initiated - when most Jews were still alive, emphasized direct action and armed resistance as means to ensure the survival of the state.²⁶ The victims of the camps and of deportation were seen as having failed to achieve this ideal by going like "lambs to the slaughter." Yet, underneath all this talk there was deep existential anxiety. "They [the Arabs]," wrote Ben Gurion to a survivor, "could slaughter us tomorrow in this country ... We don't want to reach again the situation that you were in. We do not want the Arab Nazis to come and slaughter us."²⁷ Particularly, given the feeble response of the allies to Hitler's extermination of the Jews, so the argument went, Israel would have to be self-reliant.²⁸

But here as well the transformation narrative masked a struggle over the meaning and interpretation of the Holocaust. Religious interpretations clashed with secular ones. While religious Jews wanted to emphasize martyrdom and incorporate the Holocaust into a tradition of memorialization of pogroms and other religious persecutions dating back to the crusades, seculars wanted to push for decisively nation-centered actions to assure

military strength with the atomic bomb as its ultimate symbol. For the first decade and a half after the war, major commemorations took place on Mt. Zion and in the *Shoa* basement, which was a privately run religious site, rather than in the emerging national complex of Yad Vashem (*Rashut ha-zikaron la-Shoah vela-gevurah Yad va-shem* or in its English name, Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, which was established in 1954).²⁹ Mt. Zion and *Shoa* basement were small sites located in Jerusalem's holy basin, connected firmly with traditional Jewish commemorative culture, and featured burned Torah scrolls and other religious artifacts from Europe. Yad Vashem also had a bitter rivalry with Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot, the latter representing the Partisan and left-wing groups' clash with other survivors and research-oriented institutions over issues of representation and commemoration. While Yad Vashem wanted to emphasize instances of resistance, such as the Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion, the latter wanted to commemorate the loss of communities and the gruesome realities of the camps. Then there were the internal Jewish memory wars between Israel and the diaspora. When compensation money came from Germany in the mid fifties, the Claims Conference, the US based Jewish organization responsible for handling German compensation funds, withheld money from Yad Vashem for what they saw as an overtly nationalistic emphasis on "gvura" - resistance to the Nazis - that overshadowed the rest of the survivors.³⁰ Survivors' organizations themselves were torn between the former supporters of the *Judenrats* and others; the Kastner affair and Kapo trials examined by Tom Segev and others illustrate this point.³¹ There was no silence on the Holocaust in Israel but constant discord. The individual stories of the survivors themselves, however, were marginalized, though some, with larger claims of resistance or religious piety, made much more noise. This only changed with the Eichmann trial of 1961-1962 and the start of testimony culture.³²

Elements of this story could be seen in numerous countries before the 1960s. In France and other European countries across the ideological divide, the main war heroes were political prisoners and resisters.³³ Nowhere did Jewish survivors occupy center stage. Big themes of redemption were everywhere - Poland again serving as the Christ of nations, the great patriotic war in the USSR, and the triumphant Communist Party redeeming China from a hundred years of humiliation (emphasizing China's new strength while forgetting and even silencing the actual victims of Nanjing - in a similar way to how Holocaust survivors were sidelined in Israel). One could also find similarities between the narrative of Japanese people as victims and Austria's myth of victimization. There too, a complex history was papered over with a myth of national victimhood.³⁴ The same was true of Belgium, Yugoslavia or Singapore, where ethnic tensions were hidden behind the façade of national victimization and martyrdom. In all these diverse national settings, the "nation" was in fact an amalgamation of recently (and still) feuding ethnic groups. In Singapore, for instance, Malay, Indian and Chinese groups were on opposite sides of ethnic tensions and colonial violence (whether during the Japanese occupation or the "Malayan Emergency"). Singapore's new ruling party preferred to silence these recent memories in favor of building a new Singaporean identity.³⁵ Everywhere, whether in East or West, postwar struggles were recast as a continuation of the war. The capitalist West turned into fascists in the eyes of Soviet propagandists; the Nazi and Soviet repressions blurred into each other. What's more, in Asia, from the Korean Peninsula, through China, and Vietnam to Indonesia, the guns did not fall silent as the end of World War gave rise to Civil wars and anti-colonial insurrections.

Finally, Ideologically as well, elites the world over, whether East or West, had to deal with the huge disruption that the bomb, the camps

and the war as a whole caused to the narratives of progress and national redemption that dominated the twentieth century. This was doubly felt more intensely in the communities directly affected by the tragedies. If science and patriotism were supposed to lead Israelis and Japanese to the Promised Land, how could one explain the camps, fascism, the Holocaust or the bomb? National and personal tragedies had to be explained and imbued with meaning; that was done in various locations through the large themes of liberation, redemption and reassertion of capitalist or socialist narratives, both based on the idea of progress. Thus, the bomb and the camps were not presented as failures of the progressive narrative but as aberrations, mistakes, or as the result of the mistaken doctrines of the other side.

II. The victims emerge

The new stories the postwar states told about themselves changed during the fifties and sixties and the changes necessitated new heroes. Changes occurred for various reasons, whether because of the nature of the disaster, which made sustaining simple heroic narratives difficult, or other developments, such as the rise of peace movements, which brought victims to center stage. In Japan, with the end of the US occupation and a third instance of nuclear victimization, this change came slightly earlier in the form of popular national pacifism. In 1954 and 1955, following the 1954 Lucky Dragon Five incident, when a Japanese fishing vessel was exposed to lethal radiation from American testing, and the consequent radiation scares, the anti-nuclear movement in Japan surged (the radiation that irradiated the boat crew and its catch also caused radioactive rain in Tokyo). Millions of Japanese signed petitions, marched and showed solidarity with Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Lucky Dragon victims. The victims of the bombing, the *hibakusha*, took center stage. The movement was the springboard for the unification of the major victim associations and brought the victims to

the stage to tell their stories for the first time to audiences of tens of thousands of Japanese. The appeals by the *hibakusha* galvanized the movement. Pacifists discovered the force of emotional mobilization and witnessing. Soon the *hibakusha* were going around the world speaking as the face of the anti-nuclear movement.

Ben Gurion and the Israeli state discovered a comparable power during the Eichmann trial, which took place in 1961 bringing Holocaust issues to the center of world attention. This was the first time Holocaust witnesses were widely broadcast and it resulted in a transformation to survivors' status in Israel as well as international awareness. Most of these survivors were not the partisans or other public figures of the fifties; they were "ordinary" people. It was only after the Eichmann trial that stories like theirs became popularly appreciated. The trial marked a turning point in Holocaust memory in Israel, moving from "divided memory" into the "nationalized memory" of the sixties.³⁶ Ironically, these personal stories of survival led to a nationalization of victimhood; a process that would peak before the Six Day War of 1967. It was before this War and again after 1973 when Israelis, faced with the real possibility of military defeat, felt most vulnerable and the identification with and the use of the victims of the Holocaust entered the mainstream.³⁷

The rise of victim narratives also occurred in Japan at the time. This is demonstrated by the Eichmann trial itself, when, by equating the nuclear bomb and Nazi terror, the Japanese likened themselves to the Jews as victims of war. Most Japanese coverage of the trial connected the past horrors of the Holocaust and the A-bomb, presenting both Japanese and Jews as victims of humanity's worst horrors (while completely overlooking Japan's own crimes).³⁸ Just as the Holocaust is now recognized as a crime, wrote the *Asahi*, "[Now] the entire world should recognize the use of

nuclear weapons as cruel.”³⁹ A caricature in the *Yomiuri* that week, made the comparison even clearer. It showed four figures with missiles for heads representing the four nuclear powers marching in Nazi uniforms, goose-stepping in a Nazi salute and casting a shadow in the form of a swastika, with the caption “Eichmann’s replacements.”⁴⁰ Some Japanese liberals went further and implied that the Japanese were more “noble” than the Jews as they turned to peace and reconciliation rather than to “the eye for an eye” attitude of the vindictive Jews. Inoue Makoto, in the *Asahi* newspaper, went perhaps farthest, equating the Israeli court with Nazi crimes: “I can find no more words to defend the Israeli court than I can for [Eichmann’s crimes]. The psychology in this Kangaroo court is the psychology that makes war possible... [and] will lead humankind to destruction.”⁴¹

With the Vietnam War and the new peace movement, another generation challenged this view of Japanese as victims. This is demonstrated by the work of the novelist and activist Oda Makoto. Oda was the leader of *Beheiren* (*Betonamu ni heiwa o shimin rengo* — Citizen’s League for Peace in Vietnam) and was one of the first major public figures to confront the fallacy of Japanese victim consciousness and to insist that it blinded the Japanese to their own responsibility for past (and present) crimes of war. The Vietnam War revealed Japan’s complicity in contemporary aggression on the continent. *Beheiren* and other student and citizen groups vehemently opposed blanketing these historical and political realities under the usual abstractions. Oda and other activists directly challenged Japan’s victim narrative. When the ruling LDP endorsed anti-nuclearism with the three non-nuclear principles (while covertly colluding with America over breaking these very principles) and for the first time sent Prime Minister Sato Eisaku to Hiroshima, the students stormed the ceremony and fought a pitched battle with the Hiroshima police.



The Japanese Defense Forces’ 13th Division tanks parading down Peace Boulevard, Hiroshima 1965 (source: the Chūgoku Shinbun, 27 October 1965)

On the other hand, the resurgence of the right wing with a stronger Japan led to strange sights such as the Self-Defense Force marching down Peace Boulevard in Hiroshima, which they did annually from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, until protests stopped this practice in 1975 (those parades were initiated by local politicians and JSDF in order to promote patriotism).⁴² Right-wing groups also turned out in force in Hiroshima and elsewhere, and fought with students and others quite regularly on August 6 and other occasions. All of this represented a generational shift, as well as an economic and cultural one, which could also be seen also in the 1968 moment in Europe. Significantly, this change also coincided with a rise in awareness to the Holocaust. Suddenly, young German and French students were chanting, “We are all German Jews.” The Auschwitz and other trials, as well as the 1967 War and the Munich 1973 massacre were among events that brought the Holocaust and the Jews to world attention. Similar developments in awareness in the US, with the use of the Holocaust by both liberal and conservative Jewish groups also brought the Holocaust and its survivors to center stage.⁴³

III Privatization, Americanization, and

competing victimhood

The third and most recent stage of this history came with the Americanization and privatization of narratives in the late seventies. With the 1978 television series *Holocaust*, Claude Lanzman's work and various video presentations at this time, survivor stories took on a different meaning. Between 1954, when both Yad Vashem and the Hiroshima Memorial Museum were founded, and 1978 both memorial sites served mostly national agendas. But, from the late seventies on focus was gradually shifting to the private stories of the survivors, on one hand, and increasingly global conversation, on the other.⁴⁴ Older survivors who no longer feared discrimination upon their retirement came out and told their stories. The video camera and television made testimony much easier and more acceptable. At the same time, due to the work of activists, greater access to debates and examples from other parts of the world and some geo-political shifts, the voices of victims other than Jews and Japanese emerged. Thus, together with privatization came increasing competition among victim groups. Koreans, Chinese and others in East Asia, and Palestinians in the Middle East discovered the power of memory work and sought to establish their own memorials and memory culture. Inspired (or alarmed) by Jewish and Japanese groups fight for recognition and compensation, these other groups challenged the victimization claims of the older groups

In Japan, global debates on war memory took place around the 1985 and 1995 anniversaries of the bombing, when the 1989 death of Hirohito and the end of the Cold War brought war memory forward as a distinct political problem. The problem surfaced in the eighties in the context of the Yasukuni shrine and textbook issue (when Asian countries protested the adoption of denialist textbooks), and exploded with the debates over 'comfort women' and the Nanjing Massacre. The

reasons for this were complex. Firstly, there was the rise of China and Korea as more assertive economic powers. Especially in China, where communism was no longer emphasized to justify CCP rule, nationalism emerged as even more important. And with Japanese technology and loans less important than in the 1970s, memory issues focusing on the war with Japan came to the fore. With the rise of Japanese neonationalism in a more confident and (in the nineties) fearful Japan, there were vicious cycles of escalation, with Japanese politicians' seemingly unlimited ability to make outrageous remarks adding fuel to the fire (recent examples of which are Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Toru's denial of the comfort women suffering and Kawamura Takeshi, Nagoya's mayor 2012 denial of the Nanking massacre.)⁴⁵ The rise of historical revisionism was countered by the reemergence of an assertive and internationally minded civil society (and the demise of the old left associated with the Socialist Party), who with its commitment to historical justice and pressure on the government added to this explosive mix of China-Japan conflict.⁴⁶ The comfort woman issue, which was exposed by Japanese historians and journalists in the 1990s, was highlighted by an international coalition of NGOs, in which Japanese activists were quite prominent. Such commitment, however, was often overlooked as war memory turned into a political issue with the nuances of Japan's own struggle with war memory falling victim to crude diplomatic squabbling.

A more internationally minded Japanese scene and the rise of the Holocaust as the paradigm for dealing with the war made an impact on Japan as well. In Hiroshima there were three different Holocaust exhibitions in the seventies and a serious effort at organizing a Holocaust memorial.⁴⁷ That last attempt, which I examined in my manuscript, involved finding a permanent place for objects and other materials, including victims' ashes that were brought to Hiroshima from the sixties on by

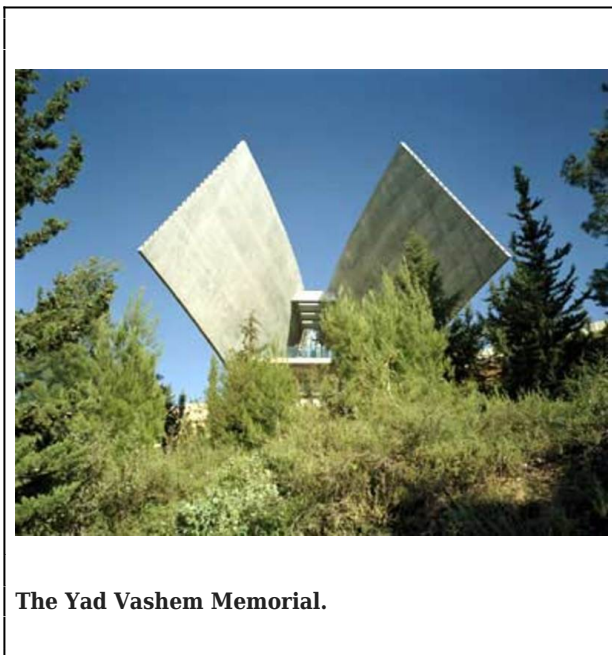
groups seeking to connect Hiroshima and Auschwitz.⁴⁸ These groups were energized by the activities of a new generation of activists but also challenged by them. Furthermore, now, more than before, events in one global location immediately affected others. From the eighties onward, one could see the expression of numerous memories challenging official narratives: African Americans and other minorities in the US; Homosexual victims of Nazi persecution in Germany; Koreans in Hiroshima, Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews in Israel, women everywhere, to name a few, all sought to bring forward a suppressed past at a time when both the Holocaust and Hiroshima were seizing public attention. These global developments reflected on Japan. The effort to commemorate Auschwitz in Hiroshima, which seemed to many commonsensical in the 1970s, now drew much criticism. Efforts such as the Hiroshima-Auschwitz group proposing grand transnational solidarity did not survive the eighties. Kai Hitoshi, a prominent film director and left-wing activist, wrote on Auschwitz and Hiroshima. “There is something that bothers me [in this affair]. Why does Hiroshima qualify for a connection with Auschwitz? If you look at history, don’t Nanjing or Seoul have better qualifications for connections with Auschwitz? After all, there is something that no one has said so far: Hiroshima was on the side of the aggressor (was an aggressor city).”⁴⁹ This was written in the context of debates over Japan’s role as a perpetrator in the Asia-Pacific War and criticism of the Hiroshima museum’s overemphasis on victimization, which raged in Hiroshima through the nineties.⁵⁰ Progressives argued that the Hiroshima museum needed to add an “aggressor corner” (*kagaisha kōna*) on the history of Japanese aggression in Asia. The right and some survivors reacted with indignation. “The conspiracy to classify our fellow countrymen as victimizers,” argued one city councilman “would leave a deep scar on Japanese children.”⁵¹

In Israel, as well, challenges to established

narratives led to the affirmation of the victim narrative. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin used Holocaust rhetoric when he bombed Saddam Hussein’s nuclear reactor and invaded Lebanon in 1982. When after the 1979 Peace treaty with Egypt, settlers were forced to leave the Sinai and evacuate their homes; protestors used terms like *Judenrein* (Jewish free - a Nazi term used for areas where all Jews were exterminated or deported) to describe the evacuation. This caused fierce debates in Israel.⁵² Historian Boaz Evron wrote an article, “The Holocaust - a danger to the nation,” challenging the notion of the Holocaust’s uniqueness and urged the nation to forget it. Holocaust memory, argued Evron, was fast becoming a tool of the nationalist right in justifying ever more adventurous military and other policies in Lebanon and the occupied territories.⁵³ The thesis that the Nazis murdered Jews while the world remained silent, argued Evron, while basically true, was used by Jewish leaders from Ben Gurion onward to gain political leverage through the mobilization of Western guilt.⁵⁴ Such critiques became even more pronounced as the war progressed. When Prime Minister Menachem Begin said that Israeli forces entered Lebanon “because the alternative was Treblinka, and we decided there will be no more Treblinka,” author Amos Oz wrote to Begin, “Hitler is already dead prime minister...he is not hiding in Nabataea or Beirut.”⁵⁵

One solution for the mainstream to counter both extremes was to affirm the transformation narrative and turn the memorial sites into sacred spaces. Significantly, both memorials were opened almost simultaneously in July and August 1954 and both inscribed in stone the “pilgrims’ progress” from the darkness of mass death and tragedy to the light of the new (or reinvented) nation. Such narratives were maintained almost religiously in both places up to the present. Peace education in Japan, especially in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is rarely critical and often

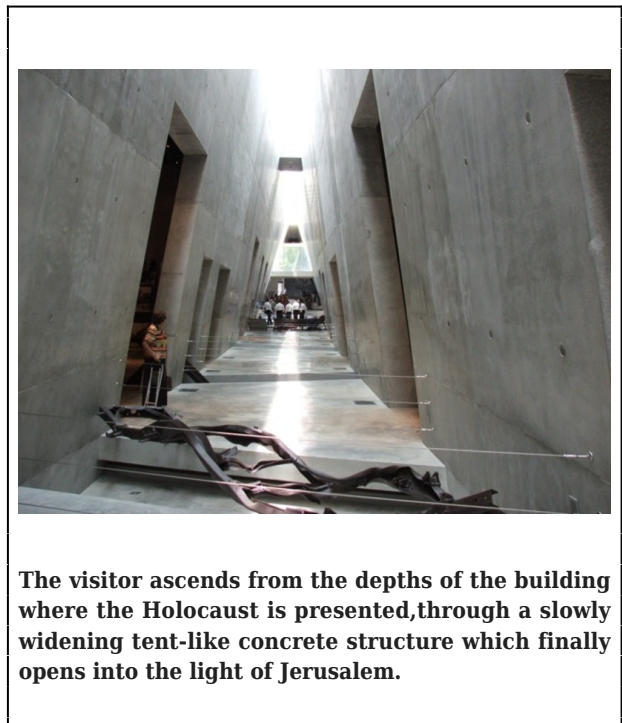
emphasizes Japan's own victimization. Challenges to this narrative by progressive educators are often met with vehement opposition from the right. The memorial itself, as the *kagaisha kōna* issue demonstrated, did not escape such controversy. In Israel, as Amos Goldberg pointed out, the Yad Vashem memorial encourages a very particular Zionist reading of the Holocaust and blocks more nuanced understandings of the tragedy.⁵⁶ Holocaust education is a significant portion of patriotic education in Israel and it privileges the accepted national notions of sacrifice and resurrection. Despite decades of criticism and challenges - including from within the establishment, memorial days, commemoration sites and organized school trips to the site of European camps, still privilege a national, even nationalist reading of the past.



The Yad Vashem Memorial.

In Yad Vashem, especially since its redesign in 2006, the visitor literally has no escape from the course imposed by the memorial's architects and is forced to move from the dark recesses below the mountain of memory until the end when the monument opens up into a spectacular view of Jewish Jerusalem and its mountains. Thus, the monument forces the visitor to take the journey from the destruction

of the Jewish people to Zionist resurrection. In Hiroshima, a similar path takes the visitor from the A-bomb dome, preserved in its shocking state as it was on 6 August 1945, through the Park, in a straight line which leads the visitor into the cenotaph and then to the ultra-modern (at the time - 1954) concrete building of the museum. Here as well, the architect charts a journey for the visitor from destruction to resurrection. In both places, however, ambiguities and ironies abound.⁵⁷



The visitor ascends from the depths of the building where the Holocaust is presented, through a slowly widening tent-like concrete structure which finally opens into the light of Jerusalem.

The Hiroshima Peace Park was built on land, whose residents - many of whom were bomb survivors of Korean descent, had to be evicted by force, while Hiroshima itself was a major military center for Japan's war in Asia.⁵⁸ As Lisa Yoneyama noted, the A-bomb Dome - the ultimate symbol of Hiroshima's sacrifice was also the site where colonial modernity was on display before the war (the building served to promote Hiroshima's trade with the colonies).⁵⁹ Furthermore, one could also take the journey backward from the museum to the dome; thus, making destruction the end result of modernity. No such freedom is allowed in Jerusalem, where the visitor has only one way to go, but

what most visitors do not know is that the gorgeous Mountain View they see when they exit the memorial also includes the site of Dir Yassin, where Jewish militias massacred hundreds of Palestinians on April 19, 1948. The Jews, consequently, were not the only victims and this history, for some, did not have a happy ending. In both places the story is actually not of darkness leading to light but of light and shadow intersecting and history and memory entangled with current politics and struggles.

Indeed, the entangled quality of both events with the Cold War, modernity and with each other, points to the messiness and impossibility of making a strict comparison. Comparison, however, is necessary, albeit not of the events themselves. Guri, his blistering rhetoric notwithstanding, did have a point. One could not compare the Jews and the Japanese as victims or these particular events of mass killings themselves without entering a moral minefield. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima was a deliberate mass killing of the civilian population of a Japanese city, but it was not genocide. The bombing should be understood in the context of Japan's aggressive role in the Asia-Pacific War and the US campaign of terror bombing of Japanese cities. The Jews, in contrast, were innocent and not participants in World War II. Many Holocaust survivors, on the other hand, soon took sides in the savage 1948 war between Jews and Palestinians, which complicates the Zionist reading of Holocaust history. The existence of Korean, Chinese, and even American *hibakusha* similarly complicates Hiroshima's picture much more than Japanese textbooks have ever acknowledged. This does not mean that the comparison of mass killings is impossible, just that it requires prudence. In any case, what is compared here is the aftermath of the event as it figures centrally in historical memory in national and international perspective.



The August 6 Ceremony, Hiroshima. Notice the Axis leading from the Dome through the Cenotaph and into the place of the photographer (on top of the museum building).

In this history, as in so many others, ambiguities and different readings exist side by side with similarities. The global framework that was responsible for much of these similarities, and has been presented here, can be traced both to the simultaneity of the reaction, which happened after the world war across the globe, the context of the global Cold War, and the shared commitment, in Israel, Japan and beyond, to a nation-state centered and progress-oriented view of history. Ironically, with an emerging global memory space increasingly altering and challenging these nation-centered views (and one can look at recent debates over the comfort woman issue as a case in point), clashes over war memory intensify. Consequentially, with the growing strength of the right in both Israel and Japan, the "nation as victim" narrative is enjoying a revival of sorts. This move is much clearer in Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dedicating a significant portion of his last Holocaust Remembrance Day speech to Iran and the Holocaust used almost daily to show the world's supposed hypocrisy in criticizing Israel. In Japan, the memory of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki is often used by its leaders as a way of not talking about Japan's own past aggression. Indeed, in this seventieth anniversary year of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the question remains what balance, if any can the Abe government strike between national politics and the norms of global memory culture.

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Notes

I would like to thank Miriam Intrator for reading a draft of this paper, as well as Mark Selden and other readers at the Journal for their insightful remarks and help with improving the paper.

¹ *Davar*, 29 January 1973. The book was translated into English as *The Seventh Day*. It was a popular post 1967 retelling of dialogues among war veterans, mostly of the left wing Kibbutz movement, debating the morality of the Six-Day War and the experience of combat. Recently a number of unpublished tapes of these conversations turned up where the soldiers also spoke on alleged war crimes and atrocities they witnessed, including the killing of POWs and civilians. These revelations were censored from the original book. See [here](#), accessed August 7, 2015.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Davar*, 25 July 1973. Tzur was no pacifist. He was rather critical of a group of Jewish-American students who told him that the "Jewish people chose justice over the politics of force." Tzur argued that, in the face of destruction (as in 1930's Europe or the present Middle East), "not to be strong is immoral."

⁴ Sebastian,” Conrad, “Entangled Memories: Versions of the Past in Germany and Japan, 1945-2001,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Redesigning the Past (Jan., 2003), p. 86.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

⁷ Because of limitations of space I will focus only on Hiroshima and will only mention Nagasaki briefly. Hiroshima’s status was much more prominent both nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, although there are many parallels between the cities, Hiroshima should not stand for Nagasaki. For more on Nagasaki see Chad Diehl, “Envisioning Nagasaki: from ‘Atomic Wasteland’ to ‘International Cultural City’, 1945-1950,” *Urban History*, Vol. 41, no. 3 (August 2014), pp. 497-516.

⁸ The fact that many Japanese were indeed victims of firebombing arguably contributed to the wide sense of identification with Hiroshima as a national tragedy. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima overshadowed the bombing of Nagasaki and, also, the firebombing that destroyed 64 Japanese cities. Yet perhaps that wide experience of bombing throughout Japan facilitated the emergence of Hiroshima as a national symbol of victimhood. Significantly, when Hiroshima first applied for reconstruction funds it was told by the Japanese government to “wait its turn” like all other war ravaged cities across Japan. See Zwigenberg, p. 46.

⁹ John W. Dower uses tragic narratives. I chose to focus on the positive side of these same narratives. “Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1, 1995): pp. 1124-1135.

¹⁰ To the best of my knowledge, no comparable

moral revulsion was prompted by the annihilation of Japanese civilians by firebombing which took a larger toll in lives than the two atomic bombings. The firebombing of Germany, however, did provoke some strong responses in both the UK and the US. See A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: is the Targeting of Civilians in War ever Justified?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 156, 174-177.

¹¹ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1985). p. 232.

¹² Ibid., p. 235.

¹³ Quoted at John Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (University Of Chicago Press, 1996), p.27.

¹⁴ Adorno famously wrote, “Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1967) p. 34.

¹⁵ See Pieter Lagrou, “The Politics of Memory: Resistance as a Collective Myth in Post-war France, Belgium and the Netherlands, 1945-1965,” *European Review* 11, no. 04 (2003), pp. 527-549.

¹⁶ Jolande Withuis and Annet Mooij, *The Politics of War Trauma: The Aftermath of World War II in Eleven European Countries* (Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ The emperor himself would reiterate this when he visited Hiroshima on the very significant date of December 7th 1946. Here the emperor affirmed the very American equation of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima as comparable actions.

¹⁸ The classic account of this is John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 489-490.

¹⁹ Franziska Seraphim, *War Memory and Social Politics in Japan, 1945-2005* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), p.5.

²⁰ As I demonstrate in my book, it took at least a decade for *hibakusha* to start organize as *hibakusha*. At the beginning they organized together with other bombing victims in other cities. See Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima*, pp. 73-74.

²¹ Ibid. Especially chapter 1.

²² This day [August 6th],” went the committee’s declaration, “should be [a] day for silent prayer and not, as the peace movement tried to make it, a cover for anti-occupation activities.” The committee further called on residents, “not to participate in these anti-Japanese criminal activities.” See Hiroshima Shi, “Shimin no mina sama he,” Hiroshima Memorial Museum Archive, Kawamoto Collection, Folder 37. See also Hiroshima-ken, *Genbaku Sanjūnen: Hiroshima-ken No Sengoshi*, Dai 1-han. (Hiroshima-shi: Hiroshima-ken, 1976), p.198.

²³ Quoted in Ran Zwigenberg, ““The Coming of a Second Sun”: The 1956 Atoms for Peace Exhibit in Hiroshima and Japan’s Embrace of Nuclear Power,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 10, Issue 6 No 1, February 6, 2012.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Avner Cohen, “Before the Beginning: The Early History of Israel's Nuclear Project,” *Israel Studies*, Volume 3, Number 1, (Spring 1998), p. 114.

²⁶ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: the Israelis and the Holocaust*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 428.

²⁷ Mordechai Shenhabi, who went on to

initiated the Yad Vashem idea, first proposed a memorial in September 1942. Tom Segev, *Ha'milion ha'shviai: yisraelim veba'shooa*, (Tel Aviv: Domino Publishing, 1991), p. 369.

²⁸ See *ibid.* Also, Yoel. Rappael (ed.) *Zikaron galui - Zikaron Samui: Toda'at ha-shoa be medinat yisrael*, (Tel-Aviv: Massuah, 1998); Idith Zertal, *Ha'auma vehamavet: historia, zicharon, politika*. (Tel Aviv: Dvir Press, 2002).

²⁹ Doron Bar, “Holocaust Commemoration in Israel During the 1950s: The Holocaust Cellar on Mount Zion,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 1 (2005), p. 16. Mt. Zion was traditional place of worship and mourning Jews. In here and the *Shoa* (Holocaust) basement the commemoration was done mostly by religious communities and emphasized the loss of communities and synagogues rather than individuals or the “nation.” Yad Vashem, was the official state sanctioned memorial.

³⁰ Roni Stauber, *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory* (New York: Valentine Mitchell, 2007), p. 122.

³¹ Segev, pp. 259-262. *Judenrat* was the name given by the Germans to the Jewish self-government that managed Jewish ghettos before the extermination campaign. Kapos, were the Jewish superintendents who supervised other prisoners in the camps. Those serving on these bodies were accused of being traitors to the Jewish people after the war. Trials of Kapos and others were started in Europe by community courts and continued in Israel. Rudolf Kastner, a particularly prominent Hungarian-Jewish leader, was put on trial accused of saving a small number of privileged people, including his family, in a deal with the Germans, while the rest of the community was sent to Auschwitz.

³² Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, (Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 72.

³³ Lagrou, “The Politics of Memory. Resistance

as a Collective Myth in Post-war France, Belgium and the Netherlands, 1945-1965.”

³⁴ Sonja Niederacher, “The Myth of Austria as Nazi Victim, the Emigrants and the Discipline of Exile Studies,” *Austrian Studies*, Vol. 11, ‘Hitler’s First Victim’? Memory and Representation in Post-War Austria (2003), pp. 14-32

³⁵ Ran Shauli, “Massacres and Political Amnesia: On the Political Value of Memory of Massacres in the Chinese Communities of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore (1941-1998),” Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Haifa (2008).

³⁶ Cited in Hanna Yablonka, “[Mishpat Eichmann ve'ha'yisraelim: me'ketz 40 shana.](#)” (accessed 12 February 2011).

³⁷ Daniel Gutwein, “The Privatization of the Holocaust: Memory, Historiography, and Politics,” *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 36-64.

³⁸ Zwigenbrg, *Hiroshima*, pp. 182-188.

³⁹ *Asahi Shinbun*, 12 April 1961 .

⁴⁰ *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 11 April 1961.

⁴¹ Quoted in David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (Lexington Books, 2000), p. 152.

⁴² The JSDF 13th Division commander told the press, “the current Japanese think about the world, or about themselves as individuals. In between, there are, the family and the nation, and I want people to appreciate this and teach more patriotism.” *Chūgoku Shinbun*, 1 November 1965. The ceremony that concluded the march was held in Hiroshima’s local Defense-of-the-Nation Shrine (*gokoku jinja*). These shrines which were set up during imperial times to honor those who died in Japan’s wars were officially separated from

state control in 1945 to be run by a supposedly private body “The Shrine Shinto Association,” which was formed after the war. The Association, however, retained powerful connections with the ruling party and continuously promoted conservative and nationalist values. Like the JSDF as a whole, the Association, and especially the National Defense Shrine connection to the military, is constitutionally suspect of having a history of covert right-wing agenda. For an overview of the issue see Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). For a history of the Association see Seraphim, *War Memory*. In Hiroshima itself the issue was even more sensitive as the site of the shrine was also the site of the former Imperial Headquarters, which served Emperor Meiji in the first Sino-Japanese War.

⁴³ See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000); Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (University of California Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ For Hashimoto see [here](#) (accessed 30 July 2015); For Kawamura Takashi, Nagoya’s mayor, see [here](#) (accessed 30 July 2015).

⁴⁶ Yinan He, “History, Chinese Nationalism, and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (February 2007), pp. 1-24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-256.

⁴⁸ Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima*, p. 257.

⁴⁹ *Asahi Shinbun*, 16 February 1990.

⁵⁰ Akiko Naono, “Hiroshima’ as a Contested Memorial Site: Analysis of the Making of the Peace Museum,” *Hiroshima Journal of*

International Studies, Vol. 11 (2005), pp. 229-244.

⁵¹ Noaono , p. 234.

⁵² Segev, *The Seventh Million*, p. 477

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Boaz Evron, Hashoa -sakana la'auma, Iton 77, No. 22 (May-June 1980), p. 13; the letter is reproduced (in English) in Boaz Evron, "The Holocaust: Learning the Wrong Lessons," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (Spring, 1981), pp. 16-21.

⁵⁵ Idith Zertal, "ha-shoa besiach ha-yisraeli; mabat acher," Yimiyahu Yuval and David Shechem (ed.) *Zman yehudi hadash: tarbut yehudit be-idan hiloni: mabat exnziklopadi*, Vol. 4, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), p. 308.

⁵⁶ Amos Goldberg, "The 'Jewish Narrative' in the Yad Vashem Global Holocaust Museum," *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 14. No. 2, (June 2012), p. 187.

⁵⁷ Kenzō Tange, who was responsible for Hiroshima's postwar city plan, as well as the building of the Hiroshima memorial museum, saw his work as one of spiritual transformation. Spiritual renewal would come through "the making of Hiroshima into a factory for peace" (*heiwa wo tsukuridasu no tame kōgyō de aritai*). Le Corbusier, Tange's inspiration, famously used the phrase a "machine for living." See Kenzō Tange, "Hiroshima heiwa kinen tōshi ni kankei shite," in *Kenchiku zasshi*, (October, 1949), p. 42. Le Corbusier used the phrase a "machine for living."

⁵⁸ The Korean hibakusha presence was noted only decades later in a small memorial outside the peace park. The memorial was moved inside the park in the 1990s. See Lisa Yoneyama, "Memory Matters: Hiroshima's Korean Atom Bomb Memorial and the Politics of Ethnicity," in Laura Elizabeth Hein and Mark Selden, *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age* (M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 202