

The Island on Bird Street: The Story of a Child's Courage

Shalini

Research Scholar (M. Phil English)

Supervisor: Dr. Anil Verma

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lovely Professional University Punjab, India.

Email id: shalinipathania90@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper will analyse the character of the protagonist Alex, how did he face the war and his experiences during the Holocaust. Uri Orlev presents a story of a courageous Jewish boy, who get separated from his father and left alone in the ghetto during the Holocaust and Second World War. This story is about a boy, full of adventure with a happy ending. The courage which Orlev exhibits in the story to survive allows his readers to run away from the realities of war, but on the other side his story is able to present a real picture of the Holocaust. Further, it also analyses that how Orlev through Alex is able to highlight the innocent hopes of children who struggled and survived during the Holocaust and the courage and bravery they showed to tackle the war situation.

Introduction:

Uri Orlev is an Israeli author, who writes for children, he has received the International

Hans Christian Anderson Award in 1996 for his 'lasting contribution children's literature'. In 1931 he was born in Warsaw, Poland in a Jewish family; his father, a physician, who was captured by the Russians, when World War II broke out. During World War II, he lived in Warsaw Ghetto with his mother and younger brother, until his mother was killed by the Nazis and he was sent to Bergen Belsen concentration camp, after the war he moved to Israel. Orlev has grown up under barbaric conditions; he is among those Jewish children who survived in Nazi occupied Europe at the end of the World War II. Orlev began to write in 1976 and most of his writings are often autobiographical, other than Hans Christian Anderson Award for children's literature, he also received the Bialik Prize for literature (jointly with Ruth Almog and Raquel Chalfi) in 2006. Most of his works are for young teens, but they can

be enjoyed by the readers of any age. His childhood experiences can be traced in his works, among them *The Island on Bird Street* is one, and the story of the book is about a Jewish boy and his experiences of war and the Holocaust.

‘Holocaust’ is a word of Greek origin meaning ‘sacrifice by fire’; it is the mass murder of Jews under the German Nazi government led by Adolf Hitler, who took the decision to carry out the systematic mass murder of the Jews. The Nazis Dictator Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 and made Jews life miserable; according to Hitler, the Jews were the true enemies of the German nation. Under the Nazis rule many new laws against the Jewish people were created, like Nuremberg Law, which was created to exclude Jews from most public life. The Nazi government boycotted all Jewish ran businesses under similar laws. The Nazis ordered the Jews to live in specific areas known as ghettos. Later, the Nazis started executing their main plan that is to murder the Jews, which they called ‘the final solution’, by tricking them starts sending deportations from the ghettos by saying that they transferred to another

location to do some labour. Jews were deported by train; they were taken to concentration camps and extermination camps, where life was most horrible. Concentration camps were meant to work and starve prisoners to death, while extermination camps or called as death camps were built just for the purpose of killing large numbers of people quickly. The Jewish prisoners were forced to do hard physical labour other than this they were tortured, and deaths in the camps were becoming common. Even the Nazi doctors test medical experiments on prisoners against their will. Nobody had been able to stop Hitler, his many opponents tried to kill him but in vain. Hitler started to realize that he was becoming less powerful when during World War II allied forces moved across Europe against Germany and starts helping and liberating prisoners of concentration camps. In 1945 Hitler committed suicide, but before that he killed around six million Jews and it is also estimated that among them one million were children.

Holocaust not only gives a traumatic experience to Jewish adults, but it also shatters the innocent world of Jewish children. Jewish children experience the loss

of childhood and adolescence, they live in fear and most of them face separation from their families. Though the percentage of Jewish survivors is small but they experienced the most massive trauma of the history. There are innumerable works dealing with the Holocaust came into notice such as oral histories, psycho-social analyses and diaries. Some of the Jewish child survivors of the Holocaust tell their stories. Orlev is one of them, and his writings incorporate his experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust; *The Island on Bird Street* is a semi-autobiographical work by him, which is set on the background of the Holocaust and World War II, and though this book is a fiction but it gives a true picture of savage treatment Jews experienced in the Holocaust. Orlev shares his personal experiences in the form of a simple story, just like Alex, the hero of the story, Orlev also lives in a ghetto (formerly the restricted quarter of many European cities in which Jews were required to live), in hideouts after his mother's death and separation from his father. This book shows the struggle throughout the Holocaust, which connects it with history and it also shows what people went through during that period. The story really highlights the struggle that people,

especially children, experienced while living in the Jewish ghettos. Orlev wrote this book in Hebrew and it was later translated by Hillel Halkin in English.

Orlev uses simple terms in his works, as he is an author who writes for children, but without describing bloodshed and murders it is impossible to write Holocaust fiction, and it can be traced in his book *The Island on Bird Street*. The terrible time which Holocaust survivors have experienced can be well understood by going through Orlev's work. *The Island on The Bird Street* tells a story about a Jewish boy Alex, and his courage to survive alone in a ghetto during World War II. Alex, being a boy of just eleven years, shows extreme bravery and courage in the barbaric condition of the Holocaust and war. Alex has hope that his father will come to take him away, he has a hope for survival and he overcomes many obstacles and show real courage in dangerous situations. The whole story revolves around Alex, i.e. how he makes it through tough conditions and also waits for the arrival of his father. It is about Alex's fight, with the fears and about his courage to get out of the unsafe situation

which he is facing everyday in the Nazi occupied ghetto.

Alex, the hero of Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street*, is a boy of just eleven years, who gets separated from his father and has to survive alone in the ghetto in a ruined building. The story begins with Alex and his father living in the Warsaw ghetto during the Holocaust and World War II. Alex is left alone when one day Nazis arrive there to evacuate the ghetto in which Alex and his father is living. Alex successfully escapes to the nearby deserted building, all this happens according to the plan of his father and father's friend Boruch. Alex goes on waiting for his father's return in that ruined building. When his father doesn't come back, so for survival, he learns to fend himself while remaining in hiding from looters and Nazi police, at the same time kept looking for food in the abandoned homes. He spends many months alone in the deserted building and during this time he saves a young girl being kidnapped and a wounded man as well. After five months of living alone, his wait gets over when he hears his father's voice in the same building he is hiding. Orlev's character Alex is portrayed as an intelligent, creative and

hardworking, his knowledge keeps him alive during the time he is alone in the ghetto. His personality characterized by optimism; he is obedient, brave, trustworthy, kind and compassionate, a keen observer, good listener and learner too. His love for his family keeps him driven by the hope to keep fighting. Alex's story is full of adventures just like the story of *Robinson Crusoe*; as Alex has to survive alone in the deserted building, though he has people around him but he can't talk to them and can't take their help. Alex alone deals with the reality of war and the experience of Holocaust, just with a hope that his father will return to him one day, "No matter if it takes a week, a month, or even a whole year" (24) he is very determined to wait for his father, and this hope and determination gives him courage to survive.

The Holocaust leaves Jewish people with a very traumatic experience; Orlev's character Alex in the story has overcome that traumatic experience and struggle for his life. He first gets separated from his mother, later from his father and is finally left alone to struggle for life with his pet mouse Snow. After getting separated from his father, first of all he decides to bring

back Snow from his old hideout, though action appears a little childish, but it indicates his kindness towards his pet mouse. He is aware of the possible dangers outside the building; and when he walks through the streets, he feels even more afraid of ghosts in the dark, he said “To tell the truth, I don’t know which frightened me more, Germans or ghosts” (36). He really shows courage to face the odd conditions outside the building just for Snow. On reaching his destination, he hears the squeaking of Snow which makes him happy, “If he hadn’t been so small I would have given him a big hug” (38). The relationship between Alex and Snow is really delightful, Snow is the only companion of Alex in the deserted building, with whom he talks and shares his emotions as well as future plans and his secrets too. After getting Snow back his next worry is to collect food for him and for Snow as well. Initially, he didn’t find food in the nearby buildings which led him to stay hungry. Then he comes out with an idea that is with the help of Snow he could reach the hidden in the abandoned buildings. So he let Snow sniff in the buildings and followed him, with this trick once he finds the food, but a family comes over there and snatches his food. This incident also

highlights the real situation of the Holocaust, where people do not find food to eat and if they, then they used to hide it or store it in their hideouts and even fight for it. The man refuses to give Alex a little food; he said “He’ll be caught soon anyway. And we can hold out till the end of the war if only we find enough to eat” (54). But Alex faces that family keeps his fear aside and gets little share from the food. He makes certain venture out in the search of food; finally he collects the food from the bunker, which is in the same building he is hiding in.

During the Holocaust, Jewish children faced lack of education and schooling; the basic education was given by their parents. Alex attends school in ghetto but all important and basic learning he has taken from his parents and uncle Boruch, “The three of them were my teachers. Not that I didn’t have teachers in school, even in the ghetto, but all important things I knew I’d learned from mother, father, and Boruch” (30). His father taught him how to use a pistol, according to his father these lessons will help him to save his life, his father is very well aware of the Jewish condition and the war situation, so for his son’s safety he taught him to shoot. In the

story Alex uses pistol first to save Martha and a second time to save Henryk and Freddy, where he shoots a German soldier, for Alex it is hard to kill a man, “My mind felt blank. I acted without thinking” (98). His intelligence gets reflected when he hides the truth about the pistol from Martha, as he promised his father that he will not reveal the secret of pistol to anyone and he also understands that revealing anything about the pistol can bring danger to him; these acts also reveals his promptness and bravery. He also remembers the lessons of Boruch when he plans to make a rope ladder to reach the third floor of the building, to make it his hideout, “Whenever you pick a hiding place, always make sure that it has an emergency exit” (30), so he made an emergency exit in his new hiding place. To make the hideout he requires ropes from the factory where his father and Boruch worked. He had learned to tie all kinds of knots in the factory from Boruch; getting ropes from the factory is really hard, but he manages to enter the factory and waits for the right time to carry the sack of ropes with him. Very creatively he makes the rope ladder and manages to shift to the third floor of the building. He remembers his mother’s advice whenever he meets strangers, “Trust people and appeal to

the good in their hearts, and they’ll never do you any harm” (69). Alex is portrayed as a brave boy and intelligent too, and he always remembers the advices given to him, and his bravery helps him to survive in the ghetto, he represents the picture of all those kids who shows bravery during the Holocaust for their survival.

On the other side of the ghetto, life is normal, whereas in the ghetto where Alex lives, life is too depressing. Alex notices how children of the Polish side go to school and are living a normal life, but he overcomes all this and continues with his struggle for survival. Alex characterizes a keen observer, when he goes to the Polish side to the Doctor for injured Henryk, he knows exactly what to say to the doorman, which he notices from the air vent of the ruined building and very bravely he tackles the doorman, like an adult, he also notices the right time to go there, and very smartly he enters the Polish side, so that nobody could suspect him. Later when he gets the chance to play with the Polish children, just like any other kid, he forgets all the tensions of war and starts playing with them. Once he returns from the Polish side, he bursts into tears, which shows the actual sentiments of a

lonely child. He has overcome all these emotions because of the hope that one day his father will come for him. On the Polish side his attachment towards Stashya reflects his need for love and company; he reveals to Stashya that he is a Jew as he understands that love depends on trust.

Alex faces certain dilemma in the story, initially when Grynn offers him to stay with them, though he wants to stay but he rejects. Same dilemma he faces when Bolek and his wife asks him to stay with them, he very sadly rejects “I can’t stay” (128). Freddy also offers him to come with him in the jungle, even then Alex wants to join the uprising, but he promised Boruch to wait for his father until he comes for him. Alex attains a lot of maturity in those five months; he acted wisely though he faced many problems, and he attains the ability to take quick decision whenever required. He lives independently in the building, and also takes the responsibility of wounded Henryk.

Alex is very optimistic he believes that his father will definitely come for him. He also dreams about what will happen after the war, and decides to meet Stashya after the war. Though he is optimistic, but as the time passes and when Polish people start

moving to the ghetto his hope starts getting shattered, so when his father returns to him, he “couldn’t believe it” (159), it takes some time for him to believe that his father is there in the building. At the end of the story father and son meet each other, and it is really an emotional and touching part of the story, when a brave child who struggles and bears hardship all alone, hugged his father. The entire book depicts approximately a period of five months, but in those months readers can judge a very quick development in Alex’s character, even his father noticed the same that five months ago, he left his son as a child and now he seems to be a grown up.

Conclusion: This story is about a brave boy; Alex’s compassion, hope and courage are a true inspiration for everyone to keep going in difficult times. Orlev presents a real picture of the Holocaust, how children suffered during that time and what was the problem. As *School Library Journal*, states “Alex, entirely on his own in an empty ghetto... struggle for life” (1). This story also helps us to understand Orlev’s fear, unusual situations, loneliness and longing for family. Children during the Holocaust without parental protection experienced the

pain of loneliness and for them survival means suppression of feelings. But children like Alex never lost their creativity and imagination appropriate to their ages. They would play even in the ghettos; children's hopes and necessities are different from adults and even precious too because they are innocent. It is their hope only which makes them courageous and brave to survive in a dangerous world. The story of Alex reflects the courage and bravery of Jewish children who survived with their innocent hopes.

[7] <<http://www.izieu.com/index.html>>

[8] "Uri Orlev." *Wikipedia*. MediaWiki, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2015.

References:

[1] "Adolf Hitler The Holocaust."

Auschwitz.dk. n.d. Web. 22 Jan 2015.

[2] <<http://www.auschwitz.dk/hitler.htm>>

[3] "Introduction to the Holocaust."

United Holocaust Memorial Museum. n.d. Web. 20 Jan 2015.

[4] <<http://www.ushmm.org/>>

[5] Orlev, Uri. *The Island on Bird Street*.

New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1984. Print.

[6] "The Holocaust Children."

Izieu.com. n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2015.