

# Leah Thorn

## I Place My Stones

*spotting*

*Jews*

*is what I do*

*every time I enter a room*

*measuring safety*

*in outward manifestations  
of identity*

When I was 16, I bleached my hair a you-don't-look-Jewish shade of blonde, learnt to speak German fluently and told people my parents were Jewish, but I wasn't. Being Jewish was my heritage but of no consequence. Though there was no getting away from it.

*I always knew when the television would go off*

*any hint of the German language*

*any images of wartime*

*any mention of the camps*

*my father would pale*

*be on his feet*

*lunge at the on/off switch*

*whispering, "Shah! Your mother! Shweig!"*

I am known as a Jewish performance poet, in a country where Christianity is the state religion, the word "Jew" can be said in a reverential whisper or with under-the-breath disgust and Jews are believed by some to be in control of the banks and the media. The experience of being an English Jew is one of fragmentation, compartmentalisation and the structure of my work reflects this. Strands of words echo the multi-layeredness of my identity.

I write by way of celebration of continuity. I write by way of memorialisation. And as we Jews in England have become experts at what Naomi Dale calls "the art of disappearing", I write to frame and name what has been hidden and silenced.

Any theatrical expression of politics of identity needs, at some level, to recognise and address past and current injustice and mistreatment, as well as the impact of the oppression on individuals' lives in the present. My political awareness set in my early twenties, when I learnt about the scape-goat role that the Jews have been forced to play historically and I began to see how this informed my sense of myself and how I am in the world. I took on my Hebrew name of Leah and "came out" as a Jew.

The oppression of Jews is not widely understood. The vast majority of white Jews in England are not oppressed in terms of political and economic survival in the way that Black people and other minority ethnic peoples are. We make up approximately 0.5% of the population and seem to have disproportionate influence and power. We can be visible and a second later, invisible. We can “pass”, although the emotional cost of such hiding is hardly acknowledged. It appears that Jews have “made it”.

Anti-Jewish oppression exists, although it seems like it doesn't and that is part of the problem. It is hard to grasp and in England we don't talk about it too much. For my mother, a Holocaust survivor, and for my parental grandparents, who fled Romania at the turn of this century, England has been the place of safety and many of my generation feel grateful, however unconsciously, that we are allowed to live here.

The way anti-Jewish oppression operates is cyclical, periods of terrifying unrest followed by relative calm and safety. Over centuries, Jews have been projected into prominent “middle-agent” positions, only to be turned against when it suits the interests of the ruling powers. The fear of anti-Jewish uprisings and expulsion or genocide is breathed in with the air.

I recently noticed that I don't expect to live all my life in England. Deeply ingrained is the expectation that I will be expelled from my country of birth or forced to leave for my own safety. At times, this pattern of insecurity propels and informs my performance work and leads me to expect very little; to take nothing for granted, neither audience nor funding; to speak out and immediately want to take it back. It has taken quite a time for me to realise that my work is accessible to, and important for, all people, not just other Jews.

*there is no straitjacket  
only the tightness of self-criticism  
and the constant searching for the criticism of others  
to prove*

*I can't do this  
I don't do this  
And then she does*

*I Place My Stones* is one of my ongoing projects, an exploration of what it means to be the English daughter of a German Jewish Holocaust survivor. The title refers to the Jewish tradition of placing stones on the graves of the dead, symbolising the indestructibility of life. The piece is dedicated to my grandparents, Erna and Leo Leyens, who died in the Holocaust and have no grave on which stones can be placed.

*You'd be dead by now anyway*

*Sometimes I hear a knock on the door  
and I pretend it is you  
and there you stand  
cases round your feet*

*and I have grandparents  
and we do grandparent-y things  
sit in the front row at the pictures  
me translating between mouthfuls of popcorn  
days out at Southend-on Sea  
steering clear of the cockle stalls  
and my mother's orphaned eyes brighten  
and the constant searching is for nothing  
and I hear German without flinching  
the day you knock*

The work takes different forms. In 1995 it was a performance piece with musician Arike and dance artist Cloud Blumstein, shown at the Battersea Arts Centre and at the Institute for Contemporary Art, London. Sometimes it is a selection of my poems accompanied by music, as at the Balint



Leah Thorn Photo: Arike

House Community Centre in Budapest with musician David Shepherd. Sometimes it is poetry with back-projected slides.

My work is often placed within a context of the politics of the Holocaust, where the main focus is on information-giving as an exhortation against such genocide re-occurring. I have been involved in educational and arts programmes accompanying the exhibition, *Anne Frank: A History for Today* and in projects such as *Courage* a workshop, installation and work-share directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo of Aspect Theatre Company. An international multi-racial, multi-cultural cast comprising of actors, a dancer, a cellist, a percussionist, a set designer and a photographer explored their responses to the notion of courage.

The workshop was stimulated by the desire to continue artistic exploration of the Holocaust and its meaning today for Rwanda and Bosnia.

At the moment I am fundraising to make a short art video based on the text of *I Place My Stones*, with film maker Jini Rawlings and singer/musician Anne Marie Rapold. Once the funding is found, filming will take place on location in Schwanenberg and Erkelenz, my mother's last homes in Germany.

*I Place My Stones* is ever-evolving. I am continually writing new text and I am not sure the piece will ever be "finished". The project is emotionally demanding and requires that I address many questions, the responses to which are also ever-evolving.

*How honest can I afford to be and how much responsibility do I have to protect those still living?*

I do not want to pathologise myself or my mother or her mothering of me. I have gained many strengths from being my mother's daughter. Yet her devastating loss as a young woman cannot have helped but colour her experience of the world and hence distort my own.

I was the first-born, born just after the end of the Second World War. My unspoken job in life was to make up for all that had happened, to give my mother joy and hope and a new life. I was named after my grandparents and was designated to be what Diana Wardi has called a "memorial candle".

One of my most significant tasks was to protect my mother from her pain. And now, after she has spent her adult life trying to pretend nothing happened, I am publicly pointing out that it did. After she has spent her adult life trying to look the same as everyone else, I am publicly pointing out her difference.

*disappointment lives in the inside pocket  
of my mother's imitation leather handbag  
sounds like an urgent inbreath  
tastes like bitter herbs at Pesach  
smells of the kreplach we are too full to eat, but eat, eat  
feels like the pincer grip of my mother's  
don't-leave-me fingers on my upper arm  
intones "Ach, was kannst du tun?"  
disappointment looks like my mother's eyes*

I have never formally asked my mother for permission to expose her in this way. And she has never seen the performance or read the poems. We collude. I have never invited her to a performance and she has never asked me to come. I intend to change this.

*How can I play with the heavy reverence*

*surrounding the Holocaust without alienating an audience?*

In England we "deal with" the Holocaust with restrained sensibility. In one or two of my poems, I deliberately choose to use a poetic form and rhythm that jars with the content.

*I'm a Holocaust junkie  
and I need my fix  
can't get no high  
won't get no kicks  
till I hear those stories  
till I see those pics*

*gimme gimme horror  
gimme gimme gore  
emaciated bodies  
piles galore  
stripy pyjamas  
and eyes that implore*

Despite, or because of, the directness and seeming insensitivity of the poem, it works within the context of the whole piece. But in order to really inhabit the words I need to be able to make a human connection with the audience. This means working in intimate settings, greeting the audience as they come in, introducing the performance and putting it into a personal framework, being available for informal contact after the performance.

On those occasions when I feel unduly vulnerable, I adapt the piece. For example, recently a small group of concentration camp survivors introduced themselves to me minutes before the performance and proceeded to sit in the front row. That evening I left out a few phrases that I felt would be hard for them to hear and hard for me to say to them.

When you write and perform your own words, there is no place to hide.

*How can I ensure that I am not using the act*

*of writing and performing solely as a means for personal therapy?*

When unresolved emotional experiences are denied, problematised or distorted, there can be a pull to talk about them compulsively and to seek out any opportunity that looks like it promises an emotional outlet.

As an artist I am aware of the urge to share my stories widely in the hope that by having them witnessed, the pain will be diminished. When I have given in to that urge, or have seen other artists do so, it has felt unsatisfactory, ineffective communication. And I don't think it makes for good theatre.

My way of dealing with my emotional needs is to take them to Re-Evaluation Counselling sessions, a peer model of counselling. Once I've explored where the emotions originate, they no longer exert a strong negative charge on me. This does not mean I am cold or devoid of emotion when I perform but I am more able to articulate painful emotion and keep my attention on what I'm doing rather than focussing on the unresolved pain.

In addition to one-to-one sessions, I am in a Re-Evaluation Counselling support group for working artists from different disciplines, in which we support each other towards our economic, political and emotional liberation as artists.

*How can I talk about the aftermath of the Holocaust and the distresses it has left on myself and my people, without fuelling anti-Jewish assumptions and beliefs?*

On the one hand, I choose to take the risk of being "Too Jewish", synonymous with "Too Much", a pushy Jewish woman.

When I first showed *I Place My Stones*, it was the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The televi-

sion and papers were full of accounts and pictures of the Holocaust and one venue promoter mentioned riley that the country was suffering from Holocaust "overkill". Comments are not always this overt but I often catch a whiff of "We've done that. Why are they always going on about it?"

On the other hand, there are ways to minimise the possibility of Jews becoming isolated and scapegoated as victims. Performance poetry has the power to "give voice", to add testimony and I frequently run workshops to support other people to develop their creativity, especially those who believe they cannot write poetry. These workshops enable participants to express their responses, not only to the Holocaust but to other experiences of injustice in their lives and the lives of their people.

One of my favourite venues for running workshops is the Holocaust survivors' Centre in North London. The Centre was set up in 1992 by Jewish Care and World Jewish Relief to provide recreational, cultural and social facilities for survivors. The membership at the Centre includes camp survivors, partisans, Hidden Children, Kindertransportees and refugees. Esther's response is common:

*The first poem I wrote was in a children's home when I was fifteen and very homesick. Everybody was in the same position so I couldn't talk to anyone. Now I use writing instead of talking. By coming to the poetry group, I found myself writing about far more cheerful subjects and I'm looking at life and nature with open eyes.*

I often run performance poetry workshops in school on issues related to the Holocaust and the young people write poetry that they then perform for other students and make into booklets. Recently I ran a session at

Mundella community college in Leicester. The young people, predominantly Asian, had seen the Anne Frank exhibition and wrote group and individual poems.

Each act of genocide has its uniqueness and its similarity with other events. I do not want my work to be shown in a political vacuum, but rather to be placed on a political continuum amidst diversity of identities and experiences. For too long we Jews have been distanced, and have distanced ourselves, from others who could be natural colleagues and allies.

As a contradiction to this cultural isolation (and because I love doing so), I work in collaboration with performance poets from other heritages. I am currently working with African poet Uzoamaka Okafor, Maori poet Jillian Tipene and Celtic poet Margot Henderson to devise a theatre piece, *Tracing the Lines of Our Palms*, a celebration of us and our peoples. And recently I ventured into new territory when I performed with Egyptian dancer and poet Rosemary Yonathan alongside *Collected Memory*, an art exhibition by Arab and Jewish women living in Israel/Palestine. This was yet another opportunity to explore my identity as a member of the oppressor group:

<i>apologising</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>terror dissipating</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>lies evaporating</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>into the unknown</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>

<i>from the core of me</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>woman to woman</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>unconditionally</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>with my life</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>shalom aleichem</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>salaam alekhum</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>salaam alekhum</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>
<i>shalom aleichem</i>	<i>I come towards you</i>

<i>This is the way I come</i>	<i>towards you</i>
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I write for performance rather than for the page because I consider my physical presence an integral part of my work. My being, my tone of voice, my facial expression, my reaching for the audience are all contradictions to the potential bleakness of the words and the images. Rather than claiming a "victim" identity, I hope my work is an affirmation of survival and a stating and a taking of my space as a woman and as a Jew.

<i>I can't trust</i>	<i>she says</i>
<i>I don't trust</i>	<i>she says</i>
<i>Then she does</i>	

<i>Life was never meant to be like this</i>	<i>she says</i>
<i>I wasn't supposed to be close to you</i>	<i>she says</i>

<i>I can't love</i>	<i>she says</i>
<i>I don't love</i>	<i>she says</i>

*And she does*

LEAH THORN (Britain) is a performance poet based in London, England, and presents her work in theatres and poetry venues nationally and internationally. Her poetry is featured in media as diverse as the Jewish Women's Poetry Anthology *The Dybbuk of Delight*, Children's television, the US Jewish Cultural Revolution magazine *Davka* and on the promotional T-shirt for the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. She leads performance poetry workshops for adults and young people.