

Remembering the Attic: Space, Memory, and Postmemory in the Holocaust Poetry of Roald Hoffmann

*Among the most significant American literary representations of the Holocaust in Ukraine are Roald Hoffmann's four poetry collections and his autobiographical play *Something That Belongs to You*. Hoffmann writes as a survivor, yet his recollections are shaped not only by personal experience but also by the retrospective perspective afforded by the passage of time and by memories preserved and transmitted within his family. As a result, the boundary between survivor memory and postmemory proves more permeable than is often assumed. This article examines Hoffmann's four published poetry collections as the literary foundation from which *Something That Belongs to You* later emerged. It argues that Hoffmann's reconstruction of the past arises through the interplay of direct recollection and familial memory, mediated by a single remembered space: the attic where he and members of his family were hidden during the German occupation. By tracing the development of this symbolic motif across Hoffmann's poetry, the article demonstrates that his work challenges any rigid distinction between survivor memory and postmemory. His recollections are neither exclusively individual nor merely inherited; rather, they are continually shaped through the interaction of lived experience, family narratives, material traces of the past, and the imaginative possibilities of literary representation.*

Key Words: literary representations of the Holocaust, survivor memory, postmemory, interplay of different forms of memory, places of memory.

American literary representations of the Holocaust in Ukraine remain comparatively few. Among the most significant contributions is the work of Roald Hoffmann, whose sustained engagement with his childhood experiences of Nazi persecution spans four poetry collections before culminating in the autobiographical play *Something That Belongs to You* (first readings in 2009 and published in 2015). Although Hoffmann is internationally renowned as a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, his literary oeuvre constitutes a remarkable and evolving meditation on memory, survival, and the ethical legacy of the Holocaust. Considered together, the poetry collections and the play represent successive stages in an ongoing process of recovering, interpreting, and transmitting experiences rooted in Hoffmann's childhood during the German occupation of what is now Ukraine, then part of Poland.

Hoffmann's literary project occupies a distinctive position within American Holocaust writing by virtue of its grounding in lived experience. This distinguishes it from other influential American representations of the Holocaust in Ukraine, most notably Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). Whereas Foer, a third-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors and victims, approaches the past through what Marianne Hirsch has conceptualized as *postmemory*—the mediated and imaginative relationship that later generations develop to traumatic events they did not themselves experience—Hoffmann writes as a survivor.¹ Yet his recollections are shaped not only by personal experience but also by the retrospective perspective afforded by the passage of time, as well as by memories preserved and transmitted within his family. Consequently, the boundary between survivor memory and postmemory proves more permeable than may be assumed.

Throughout Hoffmann's poetry, memories of his wartime childhood emerge gradually through recurring images, remembered places,

¹ Marianne Hirsch's first mentioned the term postmemory (post-memory in her text) in: Hirsch, Marianne. "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory." *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1992–93) pp. 3–29.

and fragmentary recollections that resist linear or chronological reconstruction. Again and again, the poems return to concealed spaces, family relationships, and ethical questions that later receive their fullest dramatic articulation in *Something That Belongs to You*. Rather than functioning solely as autobiographical testimony, the poetry documents an extended process of remembering in which direct recollection becomes inseparable from memories transmitted through familial narration, particularly those preserved by Hoffmann's mother. His poetic oeuvre thus demonstrates that autobiographical memory and postmemory are best understood not as mutually exclusive modes of engaging with the past but as intertwined processes. Survivor memory itself consequently emerges as dynamic and continually evolving, shaped by intergenerational remembrance as well as by literary representation.

Against this broader literary background, the present article examines Hoffmann's four published poetry collections as the foundation upon which *Something That Belongs to You* was later constructed. The play is therefore not considered as an object of analysis but rather as a projection of a long process of literary engagement with Holocaust memory, whose central motifs, spatial imagery, and mnemonic strategies are already established in the poetry. The article argues that Hoffmann's reconstruction of the past emerges from the interaction between direct recollection and transmitted familial memory, an interaction mediated through a particular remembered space: the attic in which he and members of his family were concealed during the German occupation. As the earliest place Hoffmann can recall from personal experience, the attic occupies a unique position at the intersection of individual recollection, familial remembrance, and literary imagination. It functions not only as the site of childhood survival but as the central mnemonic space through which the themes developed across the poetry attain their fullest literary expression. In this respect, the attic may be understood as a private *lieu de mémoire*: although not a site of public commemoration in Pierre Nora's sense, it constitutes a familial mnemonic space in

which memory is continually reconstructed through the interaction of personal recollection, intergenerational transmission, and literary representation.²

The principal theoretical framework informing this study is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Although Hirsch developed the concept primarily to explain the relationship of subsequent generations to inherited traumatic experience, Hoffmann's writings invite a broader understanding of its interpretive potential. Throughout his poetry, autobiographical recollection proves inseparable from familial narratives, literary reconstruction, and the enduring mnemonic significance of place. Hoffmann's work thus suggests that postmemory can illuminate not only the experiences of descendants but also the ways in which survivors themselves continually reconstruct the past through an ongoing dialogue between personal recollection and memories transmitted within the family.

Before examining Hoffmann's poetry, it is necessary to consider the broader context of his life, as the deeply personal nature of his Holocaust poetry is inextricably linked to his biographical experience. Because he was only five years old when part of his family went into hiding, his recollections emerge from a complex interplay of fragmentary childhood memories, his mother's accounts, other familial narratives, and decades of retrospective reflection. The autobiographical dimension of both the poetry collections and the later play is therefore at once personal and intergenerational, arising from the interaction of lived experience, transmitted memory, and literary imagination.

Roald Hoffmann was born Roald Safran on 18 July 1937 to Hillel and Clara Safran, a Jewish family living in the town of Złoczów, Poland (present-day Zolochiv, Ukraine). His earliest childhood unfolded in a region profoundly transformed by successive occupations and unprecedented political violence during the Second World War.

² Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. *Representations*, no. 26, (Spring, 1989), pp. 7–24.

Following the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939, the local Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish populations were subjected to sweeping political repression, while the Ukrainian political, cultural, and intellectual elite became particular targets of arrests and executions, culminating in the NKVD mass prison massacres of June 1941. Within days, however, Soviet rule gave way to German occupation following the invasion of the Soviet Union. For Zolochiv's Jewish population, this transition marked the beginning of an escalating campaign of persecution encompassing pogroms, forced labour, deportations, and mass murder, ultimately resulting in the near-total destruction of the town's Jewish community. These events provided not only the historical context for Hoffmann's literary work but also the traumatic landscape from which his poetry and, ultimately, his dramatic writing emerged.

Against this background of intensifying persecution, the Safran family was confined to the Lackie forced labour camp established on the outskirts of Zolochiv. In 1942, after the camp was relocated to the nearby village of Uniów (present-day Univ), Hoffmann's father arranged the escape of Roald, his mother, and several relatives. Their escape marked the beginning of approximately fifteen months in hiding—a period that ensured their survival while also giving rise to the memories that would later become the emotional and imaginative centre of Hoffmann's Holocaust writings.

The family found refuge in Univ, where they were sheltered by the local schoolteacher Mykola Diuk and his wife, Maria. Although the Safrans contributed financially to their upkeep, the Diuks assumed extraordinary personal risks in concealing them, despite having three young children of their own and despite the severe penalties imposed by the German occupation authorities on those who aided Jews.³

³ "We paid them. But they hid us at great risk to their life. They could have been shot, and they had three small children." Peter Johanns (Interview). "Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann." USC Shoah Foundation. 20.11.2012. 1:55:39. URL:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_1q2alQihQ&t=689s.

Initially, they sheltered Hoffmann, his mother Clara, and an aunt and uncle; later, they also concealed another uncle who had escaped from a partisan unit operating in the surrounding forests. The Diuks occupy a central place in Hoffmann's recollections, not merely as rescuers but as embodiments of the ethical values—compassion, courage, and responsibility for others—that recur throughout his poetry before receiving their fullest expression in *Something That Belongs to You*.

For much of this period, the family remained concealed in the attic of the village school before later being transferred to a ground-floor storage room and, during moments of extreme danger, to a hidden bunker beneath it. The attic nevertheless retained a singular significance. As the earliest place Hoffmann could recall from direct experience, it gradually acquired a symbolic meaning extending beyond its historical function as a site of refuge. Throughout his Holocaust poetry, the attic reappears as a privileged site of memory—a confined yet imaginative space in which fragments of childhood perception, family stories, fear, hope, and gratitude converge. Long before it became the principal setting of *Something That Belongs to You*, the attic had already emerged as the central spatial image through which Hoffmann's poetry organizes its engagement with Holocaust memory.

Hoffmann's recollections of the attic remain remarkably vivid despite his repeated acknowledgement of the inherent limitations of early childhood memory. In his interview for the USC Shoah Foundation, he recalled two windows in the attic, "one covered and one open, with slats pointed downward, looking out into a yard."⁴ Such concrete impressions contrast with his memories of Zolochiv more broadly, which he consistently recognizes as having been reconstructed largely through his mother's testimony and other family narratives.⁵ The attic therefore occupies a distinctive place within

⁴ Peter Johannis (Interview). "Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann."

⁵ "The story that I tell you is in part a firsthand story, just a piece of it, said Hoffmann, who is 84-years-old and was just five-years-old at the time of World

Hoffmann's remembered world. It is one of the few locations grounded primarily in personal recollection while simultaneously shaped by decades of reflection and familial remembrance. This convergence of immediate experience and later reconstruction became one of the defining features of his Holocaust poetry, in which remembered places repeatedly function as repositories of both individual and inherited memory, blurring the boundaries between autobiographical recollection and postmemory.

The Diuks were not the only inhabitants of Univ who risked their lives to rescue Jews. Nearby stood the historic Holy Dormition Lavra of Univ, where Archimandrite Klymentiy Sheptytsky, hegumen of the monastery and a prominent figure in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, organised the concealment of numerous Jewish children as part of a broader rescue network. The coexistence of these efforts situates Hoffmann's personal story within a wider history of moral courage during the Holocaust. This ethical dimension resonates throughout his literary work, which situates Holocaust memory within a broader moral landscape: while preserving the reality of persecution, cruelty, and suffering, it also emphasizes the significance of acts of compassion, solidarity, and moral responsibility. In particular, *Something That Belongs to You* extends this ethical inquiry by presenting these moral concerns as complex dilemmas that resist easy resolution.

In a later reminiscence, Hoffmann reflects that it was not until 1980 that he discovered that one of the children sheltered at the Univ Lavra—whom he may have seen playing outside from the attic—was Adam Daniel Rotfeld. In 1941, Rotfeld's parents entrusted him to the care of the monks at the Univ Lavra for protection before they were

War II. But a larger part is what my mother told me and what I've reconstructed." Carlin Reyen. "Returning, Remembering, Forgiving: Survivor Shares His Story to Commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day." *The Cornell Daily Sun*, 28.04.2022. URL:<https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2022/04/returning-remembering-forgiving-survivor-shares-his-story-to-commemorate-holocaust-remembrance-day>.

murdered in 1943. Rotfeld would later become a prominent Polish statesman, serving as the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs. He has subsequently written extensively about his childhood experiences and, like Hoffmann, has returned to Univ, creating a postwar connection between two survivors whose childhood experiences were shaped by the same place of refuge.⁶

With the Soviet advance westward in 1944 and the retreat of German forces, the Safran family was finally able to leave their place of concealment. After briefly returning to Zolochiv, they travelled through Przemyśl before settling temporarily in Kraków. Hoffmann offers relatively little explicit reflection on the renewed Soviet occupation; however, one brief recollection captures the uncertainty that accompanied liberation: "And in December '44, we moved to what we were sure would not become the Soviet Union."⁷ The remark encapsulates the instability of the immediate post-war period, when survival did not immediately restore a sense of home but instead marked the beginning of another phase of displacement and the reconfiguration of identity.

Kraków marked the beginning of this process of rebuilding. There, Clara Safran married Naftali Margolias, himself a Holocaust survivor who had lost his first wife during the war. In preparation for the family's eventual emigration to the United States, Margolias obtained documents under the name Paul Hoffmann, through which Roald Safran likewise became Roald Hoffmann. This transformation represented far more than an administrative change of identity; it signified the beginning of a new life while leaving intact the memories that continued to shape Hoffmann's literary imagination. Decades later, his poems would repeatedly return to memories of the atrocities

⁶ The role of the monks of the Univ Lavra in hiding Jewish children, including Adam Daniel Rotfeld, is detailed in: Yuriy Skyrda. *Poklykani: Monakhy studiiskoho ustavu ta Holokost (The Called: Monks of the Studite Order and the Holocaust)*. Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2019.

⁷ Peter Johanns (Interview). "Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann."

in Zolochiv, the attic in Univ, the individuals whose courage made survival possible, and the fragile continuity between childhood experience and adult remembrance. While *Something That Belongs to You* represents the culmination of this long process of remembering, its foundations were laid much earlier in the poetry collections through which Hoffmann first explored the relationship between childhood experience, familial memory, and Holocaust remembrance.

Although Hoffmann began writing poetry only in his early forties (c. 1977), his first collection, *The Metamict State*—its title referring to the altered crystalline structure of a mineral damaged by radiation—did not appear until 1987, when he was fifty years old. The relatively late emergence of his poetic voice is itself noteworthy, particularly given the prominence he had already attained as a scientist. Anticipating that readers might regard such a debut as unusual, Hoffmann reflected on the relationship between poetry and maturity:

Actually, there's something interesting: poetry requires some maturity. There are no children who are great poets. It is not like math or music in terms of talent. It requires some maturity and making connections between things. I find that very encouraging. I think people can begin to write at various stages. Some people write from childhood and some people begin in midlife, like me.⁸

This observation offers an illuminating perspective on Hoffmann's literary development. Rather than presenting his delayed turn to poetry as accidental or belated, he understands it as the result of a form of intellectual and emotional maturity that enables the creation of unexpected connections across experience, memory, and knowledge. Such an understanding is particularly relevant to a writer whose poetic imagination would increasingly return to events that had remained largely unarticulated for decades. Hoffmann's gradual integration of Holocaust remembrance into his verse highlights the complex

⁸ María Luján Tubio. (Interview). "Perspectives on Science and Literature Interview with Roald Hoffmann: Poet, Playwright, Scientist and Nobel Prize Winner." *Comunicación, Cultura y Política*, no. 5, (2016), p. 65.

psychological and representational challenges involved in writing trauma. Reflecting on this delayed creative process, he notes: “So I didn’t write about my childhood in the first six or seven years. It was only about six or seven years later that, at an artist colony in the ‘80s—yeah, I was around 50 almost, that I began to write some poems which went back to that childhood time.”⁹ The temporal distance between experience and articulation thus does not indicate the absence of memory but rather the gradual emergence of a form through which traumatic recollection could be transformed into literary expression.

Hoffmann’s first published poetry collection, *The Metamict State* (1987), comprises forty-eight relatively brief poems whose subjects range widely across science, art, philosophy, and reflections on the material world. In comparison with his later collections, however, the volume is striking for what it omits. Given the circumstances of the poet’s childhood, titles such as “Nightmare,” “If Anger,” and “Flag of Poland” might initially invite expectations of autobiographical engagement with wartime trauma. Yet the collection contains no explicit reference to Hoffmann’s persecution during the Holocaust or to the experiences of hiding and survival that would later become central to his writing. Any connection between these poems and his wartime past remains indirect, implicit, and largely dependent upon retrospective interpretation.

This relative silence is not a silence of forgetting or denial; rather, it reflects the gradual emergence of a literary language capable of engaging with traumatic memory. Rather than indicating an absence of Holocaust memory, it marks the beginning of a gradual process through which autobiographical experience entered Hoffmann’s poetic imagination. *The Metamict State* thus occupies an important position within the trajectory of his oeuvre. It reveals a poet whose characteristic concerns with memory, identity, ethical responsibility, and the relationship between inner and outer worlds are already emerging, even if they have not yet assumed the explicitly

⁹ Peter Johanns (Interview). “Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann.”

autobiographical form that would define his subsequent collections. Read retrospectively, the volume anticipates rather than suppresses the sustained engagement with Holocaust memory that unfolds throughout Hoffmann's later poetry.

The Metamict State was followed by three further collections: *Gaps and Verges* (1990), *Memory Effects* (1999), and *Soliton* (2002). Among these, *Gaps and Verges* occupies a pivotal position within Hoffmann's literary development, as it marks the first sustained and explicit incorporation of Holocaust memory into his poetry. Although the collection continues the philosophical and intellectual concerns of the earlier volume—bringing together reflections on science, art, history, and the natural world, generally through longer and more meditative poems—it also introduces autobiographical material drawn directly from Hoffmann's childhood and his family's wartime experiences. Personal remembrance is thus placed in dialogue with broader historical and ethical reflection, establishing a pattern that would characterize his subsequent poetry.

Several poems engage with the Holocaust without directly recounting Hoffmann's own experiences. In "Stretch Marks," for example, the poet reflects on the paradox of birth amid destruction, juxtaposing the arrival of new life with deportation trains bound for Dachau: "what a time to know! And then ... a time to be born."¹⁰ The poem exemplifies Hoffmann's tendency to approach the Holocaust through ethical and philosophical reflection rather than through personal testimony alone. Elsewhere, however, autobiographical memory enters the poetry more explicitly, introducing episodes in which personal recollection, familial transmission, and historical reflection begin to converge—episodes that would later reappear in *Something That Belongs to You*.

The poem "June 1944" contains the earliest literary representation of the attic in which Hoffmann and his family were concealed:

¹⁰ Roald Hoffmann. *Gaps and Verges*. Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1990, p.21.

The woman leads her brothers across a ditch.
They lean on her, their muscles too weak for walking
after fifteen months hiding in an attic...¹¹

The poem traces the family's emergence from hiding as Soviet forces approached Univ and offers Hoffmann's first poetic recollection of the attic itself:

The wind was new to the boy.
In the attic one brick, end-on, was out of the wall.
He watched children play outside through this rectangular
mask...¹²

These lines mark an important moment in Hoffmann's literary treatment of memory. The attic ceases to function only as the historical site of concealment and instead becomes a mnemonic space through which childhood experience is imaginatively reconstructed. Details that appear to derive from direct sensory recollection, yet are inevitably shaped by decades of reflection—the missing brick, the restricted field of vision, the child's observation of life beyond the attic walls, and, elsewhere, the sack of dried peas serving as a pillow—transform a physical refuge into a symbolic locus of remembrance. Many of these images would later reappear, elaborated and dramatized, in *Something That Belongs to You*, where the attic becomes the principal setting through which memory is staged.

A similarly restrained mode of remembrance characterizes "Two Fathers," a poem that reflects on Hoffmann's mother's two marriages and the death of his biological father during the Holocaust. Significantly, the account is narrated in the third person and employs deliberately understated language:

My mother sometimes told these stories... My father was killed
in an attempt to organize a mass breakout from the camp. I was

¹¹ Roald Hoffmann. *Gaps and Verges*, p. 21.

¹² Roald Hoffmann. *Gaps and Verges*, p. 21.

five when the news came to us in the Ukrainian's attic, and I cried, because my mother cried.¹³

The emotional restraint of this passage is striking. Rather than foregrounding grief, Hoffmann adopts an almost documentary mode of narration that creates a degree of distance between the narrator and the remembered event. Yet this distance is never complete. The concluding sentence shifts briefly into the first person, allowing emotion to emerge indirectly through the child's response to his mother's sorrow. This interplay between narrative detachment and emotional immediacy becomes one of the defining features of Hoffmann's Holocaust writing. Personal testimony and historical reflection are therefore held in careful balance, enabling memory to remain both intensely individual and capable of entering broader ethical and collective conversations.

More broadly, *Gaps and Verges* establishes the compositional pattern that Hoffmann would maintain throughout his subsequent poetry. Holocaust memory and family history are not isolated as discrete subjects but are interwoven with poems concerned with science, art, ethics, and the wider human condition. This juxtaposition resists treating the Holocaust as an experience detached from the rest of intellectual and emotional life. Instead, personal and collective trauma become part of a broader meditation on memory, moral responsibility, and the search for meaning. Hoffmann himself explicitly rejected any strict separation between these different spheres of experience:

I try not to separate my worlds too much; so the poetry touches on all the things in my life. Perhaps that is why writing in general and poetry in particular are so nice; they allow me to compartmentalize less. In the science I can't talk about those wartime experiences.¹⁴

¹³ Roald Hoffmann. *Gaps and Verges*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). "Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffman." Literature and Science Hub. University of Liverpool. January 2006. URL: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/literature-and-science/archive/poetry-and-science-hub-archive/interviews/roald-hoffman/>.

This observation illuminates the organizing principle of Hoffmann's poetry. Holocaust memory is consistently integrated into broader reflections on scientific inquiry, ethical responsibility, artistic creation, and human existence rather than being treated as an autonomous thematic domain. The poems thus invite readers to understand remembrance not as an isolated act of historical recovery but as an integral dimension of lived experience, one that continually shapes—and is shaped by—other ways of understanding the world.

Although the present study interprets Hoffmann's poetry through the lens of memory studies, there is little evidence that he consciously considered his own writing in such theoretical terms. His interviews instead reveal a greater concern with the lived experience of remembrance than with its theoretical categorization. This orientation is already apparent in *Gaps and Verges*, where no explicit distinction is drawn between direct recollection and inherited memory. Instead, memories grounded in personal experience coexist seamlessly with those mediated through familial narration, a relationship that would become considerably more self-conscious in *Something That Belongs to You*, where questions of who remembers—and how—assume central dramatic significance.

This tendency is evident in Hoffmann's response when the scholar and playwright Magda Romanska asked whether he was familiar with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Hoffmann replied: "I don't know the concept of post-memory, but as a Jew, I can understand it well. Two millennia of exile and persecution left their mark in the collective memory of my people." Rather than engaging with postmemory as a theoretical construct, Hoffmann invokes the longer historical experience of Jewish collective memory. His response suggests that remembrance is, for him, primarily a lived cultural inheritance rather than an abstract analytical category. Yet this perspective does not diminish the interpretive value of Hirsch's concept. On the contrary, it suggests that Hoffmann's writings broaden the scope of Hirsch's concept by demonstrating that survivor memory itself may incorporate inherited narratives and collective

historical consciousness, thereby blurring the distinction between autobiographical memory and postmemory.

A comparable understanding of literary creation informs Hoffmann's reflections on Theodor Adorno's well-known dictum concerning the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz. Recalling the composition of *Something That Belongs to You*, he remarked: "Remember Adorno's dictum that one could not write poetry after the Holocaust? Well, I didn't plan it that way, but every 1943 scene, in that dark attic, turned out to be a poem."¹⁵ The comment is revealing. Rather than entering into a philosophical debate with Adorno, Hoffmann emphasizes the organic emergence of poetry from remembered experience itself. The attic once again appears not simply as the setting of historical events but as the imaginative space from which literary expression emerges. The remark also underscores the continuity between Hoffmann's poetry and his later dramatic writing, suggesting that *Something That Belongs to You* does not abandon the poetic mode but instead extends it into dramatic form, with the attic continuing to function as the imaginative source from which memory is articulated.

A similar conception of literature emerges in Hoffmann's reflections on Jacques Derrida. Distinguishing poetry from therapy, he observes: "Poetry may be therapeutic for the writer, to be sure. But it is written out of yourself, for others ... Poetry, and science, are, as Derrida said of writing, 'the message that abandons.'"¹⁶ The remark clarifies Hoffmann's understanding of literary communication. Although poetry arises from profoundly personal experience, it is conceived not as a private act of healing but as an ethical act of address directed toward others. The same principle informs *Something That Belongs to You*, where autobiographical memory is transformed into a shared space of remembrance. Read in this light, Hoffmann's work

¹⁵ Magda Romanska. (Interview). "Between Art and Science: A Conversation with Roald Hoffmann." *The Theatre Times*, June 16, 2014. URL: Between Art and Science: A Conversation with Roald Hoffmann.

¹⁶ Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). "Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffman."

does not so much challenge Hirsch's concept of postmemory as broaden its interpretive horizons. Across his poetry and drama alike, survivor testimony emerges as a dynamic and dialogic process in which personal recollection continually intersects with familial remembrance, demonstrating that autobiographical memory and postmemory are not discrete categories but mutually constitutive modes of engaging with the Holocaust past.

This integration of diverse intellectual and personal concerns continued in Hoffmann's next two poetry collections, *Memory Effects* (1999) and *Soliton* (2002), both of which preceded the composition of *Something That Belongs to You*. Like the earlier volumes, these collections bring together poems on science, art, history, ethics, and Holocaust memory, further consolidating Hoffmann's characteristic refusal to isolate traumatic experience from the broader contexts of intellectual inquiry and human existence.

During this period, Hoffmann also articulated his understanding of the relationship between science and poetry in a number of essays and interviews. In "On Poetry and the Language of Science," he argues that the two disciplines are not opposing modes of thought but complementary ways of engaging with the world:

As for myself, I have no problems doing research as a scientist and trying to write poetry. Even if these activities are most often not in the same space-time. Both science and poetry emerge from an attempt to understand the universe around us—and from a wish to share that understanding with others in words.¹⁷

This formulation is particularly significant for the present study. Rather than viewing scientific inquiry and poetic expression as fundamentally distinct pursuits, Hoffmann conceives of both as communicative practices motivated by a common desire to understand experience and to share that understanding. This conception provides an important context for Hoffmann's literary engagement with

¹⁷ Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). "Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffman."

Holocaust memory, which likewise seeks not only to preserve personal recollection but to transform it into a form of shared ethical understanding.

At the same time, Hoffmann consistently expressed a striking modesty regarding his literary achievements. Fully aware that his international reputation rested on his work as a theoretical chemist, he regarded poetry not as a competing profession but as an additional vocation through which to explore dimensions of experience beyond the reach of scientific discourse alone. As he characteristically observed:

First of all, I am a chemist, of the theoretical subspecies... Second, I have a modest career as a poet.... It's much easier to make a living as a chemist... so the poetry is perforce a part-time vocation. So, so far I've escaped attention as an object of literary studies. I keep my fingers crossed.¹⁸

The irony of this remark is evident. Although Hoffmann presents his literary career with characteristic self-deprecation, his poetry and, later, *Something That Belongs to You* reveal a sustained and sophisticated engagement with memory, identity, ethics, and literary form. Read together, these works constitute one of the most significant American literary explorations of the Holocaust in present-day Ukraine and merit greater attention within Holocaust and memory studies.

If *Gaps and Verges* marks the emergence of autobiographical Holocaust memory, *Memory Effects* deepens and complicates that engagement by shifting increasingly from historical recollection to the processes through which memory itself is preserved, transmitted, and reimagined. Of the eight poems in *Memory Effects* that refer explicitly to the Holocaust, three are intensely personal. The first of these, "June 1943," marks a significant departure from the third-person narration that characterizes much of Hoffmann's earlier Holocaust poetry, adopting instead an intimate first-person voice. It is also noticeably

¹⁸ Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). "Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffman."

longer than the average poem in his first two collections. Here the speaker addresses his dead father in a dream-like meditation:

Others had come back long after
the war was over, so I was sure
you had not died, father.
As they marched you through town,
probably you just broke free,
ran. They'd shot another
in your place. One day
you would come,
gaunt, threadbare, to tell stories
from the marshes where you hid.¹⁹

The imagined return of the father is immediately followed by the abrupt intrusion of reality:

And when you failed me
and didn't come, I asked my mother
to tell me one more time
what had happened.²⁰

Here the speaker explicitly acknowledges that his knowledge of his father's death derives from his mother's repeated retelling of the event. What remains deliberately ambiguous, however, is the temporal perspective from which the poem speaks. Is the speaker recalling what he heard as a five-year-old child in 1943, or is he remembering later retellings of the same story? The phrase "tell me one more time" implies repeated acts of narration, yet the poem never specifies when these occurred. This temporal indeterminacy is significant. Rather than distinguishing between direct recollection and inherited memory, the poem allows the two to merge, suggesting that the memory of the father's death exists simultaneously as childhood experience and as a narrative repeatedly transmitted within the family.

¹⁹ Roald Hoffmann. *Memory Effects*. Chicago: Calhoun Press, 1999, p. 3.

²⁰ Roald Hoffmann. *Memory Effects*, p. 3.

The second poem in the collection to draw directly on Hoffmann's personal history, "Games in the Attic, 1943," transports the reader to the attic of the village school in Univ. Despite its physical harshness and the bitter cold of winter, the attic emerges as one of the central symbols of warmth, security, and survival in both Hoffmann's poetry and his later play. In a lecture at the 2011 World Science Festival, Hoffmann described the attic as a "cocoon."²¹ Elsewhere, in interviews and essays, he repeatedly characterised it as a place of love and protection: "In my case, the survival was made easy by an environment of great love in this group right around me."²² The poem recounts one of the imaginary journeys that Hoffmann and his mother devised to pass the endless hours of concealment. Beginning in Univ, their imagined itinerary gradually extends across occupied Europe before ultimately reaching San Francisco:

To get from Uniow to San Francisco,
this is what you do, mammi; first
you walk out to the road that ends
near the church, you wait a while
for a peasant to give you a ride,
for a few kopeks, to the main road,
the one where you said father
built the bridges. There you wait
for the bus. In Zloczow you catch
a train (maybe we could visit
Grandma Sabina, when the Nazis go)
to Lemberg, wait a few hours, on
to Warszawa, still by train to Gdansk.²³

²¹ "Chemistry on Canvas: A Revealing Portrait of Monsieur and Madame Lavoisier." The Met. 05.06.2011. 59:49. URL:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc7B03U356s>.

²² Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). "Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffmann."

²³ Roald Hoffmann. *Memory Effects*, p. 10.

These games served a practical purpose. Living in complete secrecy, Hoffmann and his mother had to remain silent to avoid detection, thereby protecting not only themselves but also the Diuk family who sheltered them. Recalling this period, Hoffmann remarked:

“There were atlases. I was very good at geography. She [my mother] would invent endless games, endless games to play with me to keep me quiet. I must have gotten frustrated, but I was a quiet child”.²⁴ The poem continues:

Out to the North Sea, the English Channel,
out to the Atlantic. Then, because
we have time, like here in the attic,
we can sail the longer way (do you
want me to tell you all the names
of the islands we pass, mammi?)²⁵

The poem therefore reverses the spatial logic of concealment. Although the family remains physically confined within the attic, memory and imagination move freely beyond its walls. The attic thus functions not only as a place of survival but also as the point from which the child’s imaginative geography unfolds, allowing remembered experience, family narratives, and future possibility to coexist within the same mnemonic space.

Whether coincidental or not, these imagined journeys are strikingly reminiscent of the verbal games played by Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, itself written in the aftermath of the Second World War. Although there is no evidence that Hoffmann consciously alludes to Beckett, the imaginative journeys enacted in “Games in the Attic, 1943” invite comparison with the verbal strategies through which Vladimir and Estragon sustain hope while awaiting an uncertain future. In both texts, language becomes a means of inhabiting suspended time, transforming waiting

²⁴ Lesley A. Iwanejko. (Interview). “Seeking Answers: An Interview with Roald Hoffman.”

²⁵ Roald Hoffmann. *Memory Effects*, p. 10.

from passive endurance into an imaginative practice of survival. Repetitive conversation functions as a way of enduring prolonged uncertainty while sustaining the possibility of deliverance, even when that deliverance may never arrive.

This parallel acquires additional resonance in light of Susan Sontag's celebrated 1993 production of *Waiting for Godot* in besieged Sarajevo. As commentators observed, Beckett's play seemed uncannily suited to the circumstances of the city:

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was an obvious choice. That play seemed as if it had been written for Sontag to stage in wartime Sarajevo. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the play's central characters, waiting for a mysterious "Godot" who never arrives, Sarajevans waited in vain for the West to take some action to prevent the daily slaughter in their city and country. After a year and a half of the siege, every day was exactly like the one before, the only variable being the number of dead and wounded.²⁶

The waiting depicted in Beckett's play thus offers an illuminating parallel to the enforced waiting in the attic at Univ, where hope itself became an essential strategy of survival. In both cases, imagination does not erase the reality of confinement; rather, it provides a means of enduring it.

The third personal memory poem in the collection, "My Haunt," continues the shift toward first-person narration while once again placing the narrator's father at its emotional centre:

The photos saved from the attic. A man
and a waking child, framed in a patch
of stark sun, the door opening.
His case of drafting instruments,
the field-worn lid. His fingers
snapping the case shut.

²⁶ Gordana Knezevic. "Susan Sontag's Lasting Gift To Sarajevans Under Siege." Radio Free Europe. April 05, 2017. URL:<https://www.rferl.org/a/susan-sontag-siege-sarajevo-waiting-for-godot/28412155.html/>

His hand on the compasses.
In my brain, the neurons
that once remembered how
he patted my head in early 1943.²⁷

The warmth of this remembered paternal gesture is accompanied by a motif that recurs throughout Hoffmann's poetry and autobiographical writings: the photograph as a repository of memory. Recovered in 1944 from the ransacked Hoffmann family home in Zolochiv after the family's return from Univ, these surviving images became silent witnesses to a family history that the Holocaust had nearly erased.

The photographs reproduced in publications about Hoffmann are overwhelmingly family images: Hoffmann as a one-year-old child with his father; with his mother, Clara, in 1937; in Warsaw in 1945; and his 1944 identity card, among others.²⁸ These are not photographs of camps or scenes of atrocity but carefully composed family portraits whose meanings derive not from visible content alone but from the historical and familial contexts that surround them. Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* provides an especially productive framework for interpreting the role of such images in Hoffmann's work. Discussing a photograph of her husband's aunt, a Holocaust survivor, Hirsch observes: "There is nothing in the picture that indicates its connection to the Holocaust: Frieda does not look emaciated or deathlike. On the contrary, she looks very much alive and 'normal.'"²⁹

Drawing on the work of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Marguerite Duras, Hirsch argues that Holocaust photography encompasses not only images of persecution and death but also

²⁷ Roald Hoffmann. *Memory Effects*, p. 13.

²⁸ Jeffrey I. Seeman. "Why Hoffmann? The Person and the Young Chemical Physicist." *The Chemical Record* 22, no. 11, 26.11.2022.

²⁹ Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p.19.

ordinary family photographs whose meanings are transformed through historical and familial knowledge:

In the broad category of Holocaust photograph, I include ... those pictures which are connected for us to total death and to public mourning. Pictures of horror and also ordinary snapshots and portraits. Family pictures connected to the Holocaust by their context and not by their content.³⁰

Hoffmann's own reflections offer a striking illustration of Hirsch's argument. Writing to Jeffrey Seeman after a family visit to Univ in 2006, during which his son Hillel saw the attic where his father had survived in hiding, Hoffmann recalled: "Hillel said that he will never be the same again, that now the photos in the album my mother lovingly put together for me had meaning."³¹

The photographs themselves had not changed; what had changed was the experiential framework through which they were interpreted. The encounter with the attic transformed ordinary family images into material sites of remembrance. Place, image, and narrative thus converge to produce the postmemorial transmission that informs Hoffmann's poetry. The attic, the family photograph, and the stories repeatedly told by Hoffmann's mother constitute interconnected mnemonic loci through which individual recollection is continually mediated by familial remembrance. Like the attic, the photographs do not preserve the past in a transparent or complete form; rather, they become meaningful through acts of interpretation, narration, and return. Memory in Hoffmann's work is therefore never located in a single medium; rather, it emerges from the continual interaction of lived experience, narrative transmission, and the material traces of the past.

Hoffmann's fourth poetry collection, *Soliton*, was published in 2002. Of its thirty-eight poems, four engage directly with family history, and

³⁰ Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p.19.

³¹ Jeffrey I. Seeman. "Why Hoffmann? The Person and the Young Chemical Physicist." *The Chemical Record* 22, no. 11, 26.11.2022.

three of these return to the attic of the village school in Univ. Together, they demonstrate that by this stage of Hoffmann's literary development, the attic had become an established imaginative locus through which childhood experience, familial narratives, and poetic reconstruction could be explored. No longer merely a historical site of concealment, the attic had evolved into a central mnemonic space where personal recollection and inherited narratives converged.

The poem "Cupping" continues Hoffmann's characteristic movement toward first-person narration while retaining passages in the third person that introduce a degree of reflective distance. It briefly recalls a tense night in the attic when Hoffmann's uncle Frank secretly arrived from the surrounding forests to join the family in hiding. The episode refers to a real event from Hoffmann's wartime experience: Frank had previously supplied weapons to Hoffmann's father while the family was imprisoned in the Lackie forced labour camp before returning to the partisan movement. Although "Cupping" does not mention that Frank also carried a pistol into the attic, this detail appears elsewhere in Hoffmann's poetry, most notably in "June 1944" from *Gaps and Verges*. Hoffmann has recounted this episode on several occasions, including in two extended interviews:

Uncle Frank from the forest. He had a gun. I didn't know that till afterwards. I think the gun was intended to kill ourselves if we were discovered, kill us. It never came to that.³²

This recollection illustrates one of the central ambiguities of Hoffmann's autobiographical writing. He does not explicitly claim to remember his uncle's arrival in the attic as a direct childhood experience; rather, he emphasizes that he learned only later about the presence and purpose of the weapon. The episode therefore occupies an uncertain position between personal recollection and subsequently acquired knowledge. As elsewhere in Hoffmann's work, the poem does not attempt to establish a definitive boundary between what

³² Peter Johannis, (Interview). "Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann."

was directly remembered and what was transmitted through family narratives. Instead, it allows these two forms of remembrance to coexist within the same autobiographical framework, suggesting that survivor memory itself is shaped through the ongoing interaction of experience, narration, and retrospective interpretation.

The multilayered poem “Homecoming” develops this interaction between past and present through a more symbolic mode of remembrance. It begins with the deceptively simple declaration of the end of a war:

“The day the war ended we came home to Ithaca
found our children safe, toys still in the closet...”³³

The title inevitably evokes Homer’s *Odyssey*, yet the setting simultaneously recalls Hoffmann’s own home in Ithaca, New York, where he had lived since 1965. The poem thus superimposes several frameworks of return: the mythical homecoming of Odysseus, the personal experience of rebuilding a postwar life, and the broader cultural imagination of survival after traumatic experience. Unlike Odysseus’s Ithaca, however, Hoffmann’s homecoming is shadowed by the knowledge that return cannot restore the world that existed before violence. It may also indirectly evoke the cultural atmosphere of the Vietnam War era, perhaps by its title recalling associations with Hal Ashby’s film *Coming Home* (1978). Rather than referring to a single historical moment, Hoffmann layers multiple literary and historical associations in order to explore the complex meanings of existence after violence, displacement, and loss.

The attic reappears in the second half of the poem, transformed from a specific historical location into a symbolic space of unresolved memory:

In the middle of the night
I awoke, and thought – what
if other children hid here,

³³ Roald Hoffmann. *Soliton*. Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2002, p. 57.

during the war, wandered
in, hid by themselves,
in the closets, in the attic...³⁴

Here the remembered experience of hiding in Univ intrudes upon the apparent safety of the family home in Ithaca. Past and present collapse into one another as the adult speaker fears other children may still be concealed within the domestic space, awaiting rescue from the aftermath of war. The imagined presence of unknown children transforms the attic from a private site of survival into a space of ethical identification with victims beyond Hoffmann's own experience. The attic therefore ceases to function solely as a remembered place and becomes a psychological and ethical space in which traumatic history continues to inhabit the present. Temporal distance does not erase the past; rather, memory repeatedly transforms contemporary spaces into extensions of earlier sites of vulnerability and survival.

The collection's final return to Univ occurs in "Fields of Vision," perhaps Hoffmann's most sustained poetic meditation on the attic before *Something That Belongs to You*. Here he adopts a detached third-person perspective, observing the child from the position of adult reflection. The poem records with almost documentary precision the boy's limited field of vision as he looks through the slatted attic window:

From the attic the boy
watched children playing, but
they were always running
out of the window frame...³⁵

The passage incorporates several details that correspond closely to Hoffmann's autobiographical recollections, including the downward-slanting slats, the children visible in the schoolyard, and the severely restricted visual perspective imposed by concealment. Other elements—the fat goose, the embroidered Carpathian vest,

³⁴ Roald Hoffmann. *Soliton*, p. 57.

³⁵ Roald Hoffmann. *Soliton*, p. 58.

and the named village children—do not appear elsewhere in his autobiographical accounts. Whether these details derive from partially preserved childhood impressions or from poetic elaboration remains impossible to determine. Their significance, however, lies precisely in this uncertainty. They reveal Hoffmann's understanding of poetry as a mode of remembrance in which recollection and imaginative reconstruction are not opposing processes but mutually constitutive ones.

Hoffmann himself acknowledged this relationship between memory and imagination when reflecting on the origins of his Holocaust poetry:

I was around 50 almost, that I began to write some poems which went back to that childhood time. And I began writing, and I was worried because I couldn't remember. But had I talked to a psychologist, they would have said, write and you will remember. But also, when I wrote and I imagined, I must have been writing from some basic memory because when I read them to my mother, she said, that's exactly how it was.³⁶

This reflection is central to understanding Hoffmann's poetics of remembrance. Rather than presenting imagination as a departure from historical truth, he describes poetic creation as a process through which fragmentary recollections are recovered, reshaped, and confirmed through dialogue with familial testimony. From this perspective, the distinction between autobiographical memory and postmemory becomes less a matter of opposition than of interaction: both participate in the continuing reconstruction through which the past becomes narratable.

"Fields of Vision" concludes by bringing childhood and old age into a single visual image:

Still later, he watched
his mother, whose eyes were
failing, move her head, the

³⁶ Joanna Rose, (Interview). Roald Hoffmann. The Nobel Prize. 17.01.2005.

way he did, to catch
 oh a glimpse, the smallest
 reflecting shard of light
 of our world, confined.³⁷

The mother's failing eyesight recalls the child's restricted vision through the attic slats. The two moments, separated by decades, are brought into intimate relation through the shared gesture of turning toward a fragment of light. As in "Homecoming," past and present are not represented as separate temporal stages but as mutually illuminating dimensions of experience. The attic therefore endures not only as a historical location but as Hoffmann's central familial *lieu de mémoire*: a mnemonic space where personal recollection, inherited remembrance, and literary imagination continually converge.

In his talks, interviews, essays, and other public reflections, Roald Hoffmann has engaged with an exceptionally broad range of intellectual, ethical, and personal concerns. Among these, the memory of his own past, the history of his family, and the collective experience of Jewish persecution occupy a central place. Across these diverse forms of expression, Hoffmann emerges not only as a chronicler of lived experience but also as a profound interpreter of memory, continually exploring the ways in which the past persists within individual consciousness, familial narratives, and collective historical understanding. Although he has never written a conventional autobiography or memoir, he has repeatedly observed that fragments of his life story are dispersed throughout his literary work:

"I have not written an autobiography, a memoir. I have written pieces of it here and there, probably most prominently in my poems... which speak of my childhood, some an attempt to remember"³⁸

³⁷ Roald Hoffmann. *Soliton*, p. 58.

³⁸ Peter Johanns. (Interview). "Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Prize-Winning Chemist Roald Hoffmann."

As a prelude to an examination of Hoffmann's most comprehensive literary exploration of Holocaust memory in *Something That Belongs to You*, this article has argued that the conceptual and imaginative foundations of the play are already established in his earlier poetry. Across four collections, Hoffmann's poems reveal a gradual movement from indirect engagement with traumatic history toward an increasingly sustained exploration of the processes through which memory is recovered, transmitted, and transformed. The recurring image of the attic hiding place emerges as the central spatial metaphor of this development. More than a historical site of concealment, the attic becomes a liminal mnemonic space in which childhood recollection, familial narration, and imaginative reconstruction converge.

By tracing the evolution of this symbolic motif, the article has argued that Hoffmann's poetry complicates any rigid distinction between survivor memory and postmemory. His recollections are neither purely individual nor simply inherited; rather, they are shaped through an ongoing dialogue between direct experience, stories preserved within the family, material traces of the past, and the creative possibilities of literary representation. The attic, the family photographs, and the narratives transmitted by his mother all function as interconnected sites through which fragments of the past become meaningful and communicable.

Seen in this context, *Something That Belongs to You* represents not a departure from Hoffmann's poetic engagement with Holocaust memory but its culmination. The play's central concerns—the ethics of remembrance, the relationship between personal and inherited memory, and the enduring presence of childhood experience—are already deeply embedded in the poetry that preceded it. Hoffmann's literary trajectory therefore reveals memory not as a fixed recovery of the past but as a continuing process of interpretation, transmission, and ethical engagement. His work demonstrates how survivor testimony can itself become a dynamic form of remembrance, one in which the boundaries between memory and postmemory, experience and imagination, remain productively and necessarily open.

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Роман Веретельник

Пам'ятаючи про горище: простір, пам'ять і постпам'ять у голокостній поезії Роальда Гоффмана

До найважливіших американських літературних репрезентацій Голокосту в Україні належать чотири поетичні збірки Роальда Гоффманна та його автобіографічна п'єса «Щось, що вам належить». Гоффман пише як людина, що пережила Голокост, проте його спогади формуються не лише безпосереднім досвідом, а й ретроспективною перспективою, яку відкриває плин часу, а також пам'яттю, збереженою й переданою в родині. Відтак межа між пам'яттю того, хто пережив Голокост, і постпам'яттю виявляється значно проникнішою, ніж це зазвичай прийнято вважати. У статті чотири поетичні збірки Гоффманна розгля-

нуто як літературне підґрунтя, на якому згодом постала п'єса «Щось, що Вам належить». Обґрунтовано, що реконструкція минулого у творчості письменника виникає внаслідок взаємодії безпосередніх спогадів і родинної пам'яті, опосередкованої одним ключовим локусом пам'яті — горищем, де він разом із членами своєї родини переховувався під час німецької окупації. Простежуючи розвиток цього символічного мотиву в поезії Гоффманна, автор доводить, що його творчість проблематизує будь-яке жорстке розмежування між пам'яттю того, хто пережив Голокост, і постпам'яттю. Спогади Гоффманна не є ані суто індивідуальними, ані лише успадкованими; вони безперервно формуються у взаємодії особистого досвіду, родинних наративів, матеріальних слідів минулого та художніх можливостей літературної репрезентації.

Ключові слова: літературні репрезентації Голокосту, пам'ять того, хто пережив Голокост, постпам'ять, взаємодія різних форм пам'яті, місця пам'яті.