

Asher's Cross to Bear

Suffering and the crucifix in *My Name is Asher Lev*

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

Lineke Kiefte

4148649

Cathelein Aaftink

Simon Cook

May 2016

Content

Introduction	3
Rivkeh's suffering	6
Asher's suffering	12
Crucifixes	16
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	22

Asher's Cross to Bear

Suffering and the crucifix in *My Name is Asher Lev*

It is a common expression that we all have our own cross to bear. We all have our own difficulties in life that we have to overcome. In the case of Asher Lev, the protagonist of Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, his cross was his gift, a gift for art. Potok's novel describes the life of Asher Lev from the age of four to young adulthood. In this time he transformed from a young, devout Hasidic Jew to an aspiring artist with a bright future ahead. His journey to fame, however, meant that he had to sacrifice the connection with his family. The story is a post-World War II novel, situated in Brooklyn and starts off with the tragic death of Asher's Uncle, Yaakov, his mother's brother. Because of Yaakov's death his mother, Rivkeh, first gets ill and has to go to the hospital. After her stay in the hospital she gets depressed for a while, until she decides to finish her brother's work and study Russian at the university. In the meanwhile Asher has a hard time at school and at home, because his teachers and his father do not understand his gift and fear it comes from the *sitra achra*, the devil, because his gift distracts him from his schoolwork from the yeshiva where he learns about the Master of the Universe, in other words, he is distracted from God. Eventually, his father, Aryeh, who travels for the Rebbe, has to move to Vienna when Stalin has died and Europe is a safer place for Jews. The fear of moving to Vienna causes Asher cling to his gift and emerge in it even more than he did before, until the point that he starts hating his gift and drawing without consciously realising it. In the end Asher does not have to move to Vienna and his father moves to Vienna alone while Asher and his mother stay in Brooklyn. It is in this time that the Rebbe arranges painting lessons for Asher from the famous Jewish artist Jacob Kahn. Asher can finally develop his gift and also starts selling his paintings and making money from his gift, but for this development he also has to paint nudes and crucifixes which only widens the gap between him and his father. They keep drifting apart and his mother is

stuck between her husband and her son, until eventually the breach becomes final when Asher exhibits his paintings *Brooklyn Crucifix I* and *Brooklyn Crucifix II*. His mother and father are both shocked by his paintings and the Rebbe asks Asher to move to Paris, because he is hurting too many people in New York. The entire story is narrated by an older version of Asher Lev. He begins the story with: “My name is Asher Lev, *the* Asher Lev, about whom you have read in newspapers, about whom you talk so much at your dinner affairs and cocktail parties, the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*” (9).

Many critics have already looked into this fascinating novel. Several academics have mainly focussed on the Jewish culture and art in *Asher Lev* (Uffen; Pinsker; Barkess) which seems like the most logical approach for this story. Others, like Lillian Kremer and Warren True chose a less standard approach. Both Kremer and True compared Potok’s *Asher Lev* to James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, because they feel that Potok was inspired by Joyce. Identity seems to be a recurrent theme as well. Eva Richter and Bailing Song assessed the broad concept of identity in Potok’s novel, whereas Ellen Schiff focussed on identity in ethnicity and Shelly Regenbaum focussed on gender. Henry Ahrens, on the other hand, searches for the mythological, or archetypal, source for Potok’s *Asher Lev*. An entirely different approach to the novel, however, comes from Tonya Huber-Warring and Stella Bergman. They managed to create a framework for teachers to teach about religious pluralism based on *Asher Lev* and another novel. No critic, however, has written about suffering in *Asher Lev* yet. This is remarkable, because suffering is a central theme to this story. Suffering is what lies at the heart of everything that happens. This thesis will explore the ways in which Chaim Potok represents the theme of suffering in his novel *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Discussing the theme of suffering in the novel of a Jewish author, it seems logical that collective suffering of the Jewish people will play a large role. Especially since this novel

plays around the time of Stalin's death in 1953 and since Stalin's death is the cause of many events in this novel. Potok, however, portrays suffering differently. He mentions the collective suffering briefly, but it is not his main focus. Potok focuses on personal suffering in this novel, the suffering of Rivkeh and Asher. This does not mean, however, that Potok completely disregards collective suffering. The young Asher shows much interest in everything that has happened to Jews in Russia by the hands of Stalin. The spokesperson of these Jews is Reb Yudel Krinsky, a Russian Jew who is saved from Russia and brought to America by Asher's father, Aryeh Lev. Yudel Krinsky tells Asher many stories about Russia:

Siberia is the home of the Angel of Death. This is the place where the Angel of Death feeds and grows fat. No one should know of it, Asher. No one. Not even my worst enemies, all of whom, thank God, I left behind in Russia. Only Stalin should know of it. But even he should know of it only for a little while. (64)

Yudel Krinsky gives voice to the collective suffering of the Jews and their fears. Especially the fear of abandonment by God: "Sometimes I think the Master of the Universe has another world to take care of, and He neglects this world, God forbid" (102). This specific fear, the fear of abandonment, also returns in the personal fears of both Asher and Rivkeh. In this way Yudel Krinsky, Asher and Rivkeh all represent the collective suffering of the Jews and they show that this collective suffering constitutes shared personal hardships. In other words, Potok deconstructs collective suffering in his novel, but he does not completely disregard it. With his deconstruction he follows the approach of Susan A. Crane, who wants to separate collective memory from historical memory by bringing the collective memory back to the individual (1375). Crane's view on collective memory follows Jan Assmann's view on cultural memory. Assmann stated that cultural memory has a limited temporal horizon of about eighty years (127). This is just about the lifespan of an average human being, which could very well be explained by Crane's opinion that cultural memory is created out of individual memory. Noa

Gedi and Yigal Elam had already stated before that “All "collective" terms are problematic - and "collective memory" is no exception - because they are conceived of as having capacities that are in fact actualized only on an individual level, that is, they can only be performed by individuals” (34). Even though Potok wrote his novel about twenty years before these academics wrote their articles, he does implement their theories in his novel. Potok knows that collective memory and thus also collective suffering is built up out of individual memory and he uses individual memory to convey the collective memory to his audience.

This thesis first discusses Rivkeh’s suffering, because her anguish is the cause of Asher’s suffering. Then the second chapter discusses Asher’s suffering. The third chapter is about the crucifix symbol in this novel, because it is the symbol of the crucifix that brings the two lines of suffering, Rivkeh’s and Asher’s, together and this symbol is the cause of the realisation of their fears. Then the final chapter presents a conclusion on how suffering is represented in *Asher Lev* and poses suggestions for further research.

Rivkeh’s suffering

Both Rivkeh’s and Asher’s suffering can be divided into three main aspects: a fear of loss, being haunted by the dead and suffering because of the difficult relationship between Asher and his father, Aryeh. At the end of the novel their fears are also realised, which is the climax of their suffering. Before all this, however, it is important to define another aspect of their suffering: it is infective. At first it is just Rivkeh who is suffering, but she quickly infects her son with it.

Rivkeh’s hardships start when her brother dies in a car accident. She is struck with grief and falls ill because of it. So ill that she has to be taken to the hospital and when she comes back from the hospital she is no longer the same person. The older narrator-Asher says: “At first, I did not know who she was. I thought that there had been an error, that somehow they had sent back the wrong person” (19). At home Rivkeh suffers catatonically, she is

unable to do anything: “For the first few days, she remained in her bed. Then she came out and moved spectrelike about the apartment in her nightgown, her eyes dark dead pools, her short dark hair uncombed and uncovered by a wig. She would not speak to anyone” (19-20). This catatonic suffering eventually leads to the neglect of her husband and son, Rivkeh’s sister notices this and confronts her sister with it: “Rivkeh, you have a husband and a son. How can you neglect them? You have a responsibility,” she also tells her sister that she cannot mourn in this way, that this way of mourning is forbidden by the Torah, but her confrontations eventually does not have any effect (23). Rivkeh’s intense mourning only ends when she takes action. She realises that her brother’s work is unfinished and she wants to finish her brother’s work, she pleads with her husband: “Aryeh, it’s wrong for my brother’s work to remain unfinished. I want to finish his work” and he finally gives in (46). Rivkeh was suffering greatly and ended this suffering by taking action at a time when Asher was very young and impressionable. It is not strange then that Asher also takes action when he is afraid that they might move to Vienna (90). The fact that Asher really has been infected with suffering by Rivkeh also stems from the fact that the other types of suffering that Rivkeh has are also types of suffering that Asher has to deal with: fear of loss, being haunted by the dead and suffering because of the difficult relationship between Asher and Aryeh.

After her brother’s death, Rivkeh suffers from a fear of loss. She is afraid that she will lose her husband or her son and this results in having to wait. Rivkeh is described as waiting many times in this novel. After Asher has come home very late for example: “My mother was at the door. Her small face was pale and frightened ... ‘Asher what am I going to do with you? I was ready to call the police’” (112-13), or the next time Asher did not come home without telling where he went “‘Asher, Asher, what are you doing? You went out of the school in the middle of the day and disappeared. Your father isn’t home and you disappeared. What are you doing?’” (124). Rivkeh does not only wait for her son, but also for her husband:

“She missed my father. I would sit with her sometimes in the evening and watch her studying, and I would see her put down her pen and raise her eyes to the window and look out at the street and the sky” (139). Her watching out of the window seems to become a routine whenever Aryeh is away from home, Asher observes this: “She stood by the window staring out into the street and chanting Psalms by heart” (160). Her fear of losing her son and husband also becomes clear from the way she says goodbye to them. Asher describes how his mother says goodbye to his father: “‘Have a safe journey, my husband,’ I heard my mother say. She was crying ... Then he disappeared into the crowd of passengers. ‘Have a safe journey, my husband,’ my mother kept saying as we stood near the doors. ‘Have a safe journey, my husband’” (132). Asher’s mother keeps repeating the same phrase, probably just to ensure herself or because she thinks that saying it over and over again might help to keep her husband safe. For whatever reason she says it, it is clear, however, that she is afraid that her husband will not have a safe journey. At the end of the novel she also has to say goodbye to Asher and she does this in the same way: “My mother began to cry ... ‘Have a safe journey, my Asher,’ she kept saying. ‘Have a safe journey’” (320). The fact that these two goodbyes are so similar to each other suggests that she is also afraid that she will lose Asher.

Next to a fear of loss, Rivkeh is also haunted by the memory of her dead brother. This started a few days after she got home from the hospital. Little Asher caught her speaking to her dead brother: “I heard her talking in the living-room late one afternoon and found she was talking to herself. ‘You had to go?’ She was saying. ‘Yes? Why did you have to go? How will I cross the street?’” (20). Asher may have thought that she was talking to herself, but from the conversation it clearly stems that she was talking to Yaakov, her dead brother. This is not the only time Asher hears her talking to Yaakov: “‘Yes,’ I heard her say, her voice muffled by her arm. ‘Yes, yes, Yaakov’ I took my hand from her shoulder. ‘Yaakov, I will pass the examination,’ she said, moving her lips against her arm. She talked in Yiddish. ‘Do not worry

yourself Yaakov” (70). Perhaps she talks to him regularly or perhaps only at times when she is nervous, like when she was nervous for her exam or when Aryeh was away and she was worried about him: “‘Yaakov, do not let anything happen to Aryeh,’ she said softly in Yiddish. ‘Yaakov, are you listening? This is your sister. Do not let anything happen to my Aryeh. Are you listening to me, Yaakov? Please. Yaakov. Please’” (160). This last time, however, is different from the other two. This time it is like she is praying to her brother, she calls out to him and asks him to protect her husband. A link between the last two examples is that in these instances she is talking in Yiddish. The other times it is mentioned that they are talking Yiddish it is mostly related to their religion, when they are talking to the Rebbe or at Asher’s Jewish school for example. When Asher talks to his parents, however, he usually just talks English. This may mean that Yiddish is a language that is mostly used for religious purposes which would back up the theory that Rivkeh is praying to her dead brother. This could be a plausible explanation for Potok’s explicit mentioning that Rivkeh was talking Yiddish with her brother, but in order to make a good statement about the use of Yiddish in *Asher Lev* more research is required.

Rivkeh also suffers from the difficult relationship between Asher and Aryeh. Her son and husband cannot get along, because of Asher’s gift. All Asher wants to do is paint, but his father fears that his gift comes from the *sitra achra*, from the devil. They are too different and their opinions are too divided on this subject. Rivkeh is stuck between the two of them and torn apart because of her love for both her husband and her son. She keeps trying to bring them together, but it does not work. Asher has already started drifting apart from his family, when he started to become a successful painter, and Rivkeh tries to bring them together again:

‘Can you spend some time with us this summer, Asher?’

‘I need all my time for painting, Mama.’

‘Two weeks, Asher.’

‘Would Papa let me paint?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I need every minute, Mama.’

‘Your father is trying very hard to understand you, Asher. It would help if we could all be together this summer.’

I said nothing.

‘Asher,’ she said. ‘Asher. You have no idea what it’s like to be standing between you and your father.’ (261)

This is the only time that Rivkeh speaks about her feelings of being torn apart, but even this honesty about her feelings cannot bring Asher and his father closer together. Eventually Asher does not stay with his parents that summer. After some quiet time in Paris, however, Asher finally realises his mother’s suffering:

Now I thought of my mother and began to sense something of her years of anguish. Standing between two different ways of giving meaning to the world, and at the same time possessed by her own fears and memories, she had moved now towards me, now towards my father, keeping both worlds of meaning alive, nourishing with her tiny being, and despite her torment, both me and my father ... Trapped between two realms of meaning, she had straddled both realms, quietly feeding and nourishing them both, and herself as well ... But I could begin to feel her torment now as she waited by our living-room window for both her husband and her son. What did she think of as she stood by the window ... And I could understand her torment now. I could see her waiting endlessly with the fear that someone she loved would be brought to her dead. I could feel her anguish. (283-84)

Asher does not only realise his mother's suffering that is caused by his difficult relationship with his father, but also her suffering that is caused by "her own fears and memories," (283) which are the memories of Yaakov's death and the fears of losing someone she loved. The three main types of suffering that have determined Rivkeh's life are all mentioned here.

It is quite ironical that after Asher realises all of his mother's suffering, he is the cause of her greatest anguish, that her fears are realised. After the realisation of his mother's suffering, Asher wants to paint a picture to honour his mother, he wants to capture her anguish on canvas. In the end instead of one painting he makes two paintings that complement each other, because the first painting felt incomplete. The first picture showed his mother waiting behind the window of their Brooklyn apartment, but the window was shaped like a crucifix. The second painting was also of their living-room window which was again shaped like a crucifix, but this time his father and himself were standing on either sides of his mother:

We were looking at my mother and at each other. I split my mother's head into balanced segments one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upward. The torment, the tearing anguish I felt in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs. (287)

Asher dedicates this painting to his mother: "For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torments of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you" (287). Asher is right to assume that his picture of pain will cause his mother even more anguish. When this picture is exhibited his parents finally come to one of his shows and there they find out that their son has painted them in a picture that also features a crucifix, which is not just the symbol of the Christians, but more importantly the symbol of

the man in whose name many Jews have been killed throughout history. Asher's parents leave the gallery:

My mother kept staring at me in astonishment and disbelief ... 'Mama –'
 'There are limits, Asher' Her voice trembled and her eyes were wet.
 'Everything has a limit. I don't know what to tell you. I don't want to talk to
 you now.' (313-14)

Rivkeh tells Asher that he has crossed a line. These paintings are the end of everything she has tried to accomplish. Through these paintings Asher has forever ruined his relationship with his father. The Rebbe also thinks that Asher has crossed a line and that this is the end of all the efforts of bringing this family together:

What you have done has caused harm ... Your naked women were a great
 difficulty. But this [crucifixes] is an impossibility ... I will ask you not to
 continue living here, Asher Lev. I will ask you to go away ... You are too close
 here to people you love. You are hurting them and making them angry. They
 are good people. They do not understand you. It is not good for you to remain
 here ... You have crossed a boundary. I cannot help you. You are alone now. I
 give you my blessings. (318)

Asher has to leave his family behind and is moving back to Europe, which makes Rivkeh's greatest fear come true. She loses her son.

Asher's suffering

Asher has been infected by his mother's suffering at a very young age. As said before, this can be seen in that he shows the same three main types of suffering as Rivkeh: a fear of loss, being haunted by the dead and suffering from his difficult relationship with his father.

Asher's fear of loss starts when he hears that they might move to Vienna. He is afraid to leave everything that he knows behind, he is afraid that he will lose everything that is

familiar to him. When Asher takes up drawing again it takes on the form of an obsession. He even draws a picture of the Rebbe in his prayer book without realising it. This drawing is also clearly related to his fear of losing the things he knows:

The Rebbe looked evil; the Rebbe looked threatening; the Rebbe looking out at me from the Church seemed about to hurt me. That was the expression he would wear when he decided to hurt me. That was the expression he had worn when he had told my father to go to Vienna ... I was frightened at the picture I had drawn. I was especially frightened that I could not remember having drawn it. (110)

Asher has subconsciously been thinking about the Rebbe telling his father that he had to go to Vienna and he has drawn him on the first piece of paper on his table, his prayer book. His obsession with painting becomes even more apparent when Asher leaves school after this scene and when he goes to the shop of Yudel Krinsky in order to get oil colours. He does not talk in a normal way anymore, it seems like he is stuck in some kind of daze:

I will never have enough money to paint in oil colours. How can anyone paint in oil colours if it costs so much money? I do not feel well. I think I will go home and lie down. Did I tell you I drew the face of the Rebbe in my Chumash today? I told you. Good-bye, good-bye. (112)

This obsession with the oil colours and with painting again stems from the fear of moving to Vienna, because Asher wants to capture the image of his street as accurately as possible before they have to leave: “What month is this? I thought. April, May, June, July, August, September, October. Six months. I can draw and paint some of the street in six months” (120). Asher wants to capture what is known and familiar to him, because he is afraid that he will lose it. Next to this fear he is also afraid that he will lose contact with his family. When his father is working in Vienna, Asher lives in Brooklyn with his mother and one day she brings

home an art book for him. Asher reads in the book that “every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race” and the next morning he tells his mother: “I don’t think I want to free myself that way” (178).

Asher also suffers from being haunted by the dead, or more specifically, he is haunted by a mythical ancestor, his father’s great-great-grandfather:

I was told about him so often during my very early years that he began to appear quite frequently in my dreams: a man of mythic dimensions, tall, dark-bearded, powerful of mind and body ... That great man would come to me in my dreams and echo my father’s queries about the latest bare wall I had decorated and the sacred margins I had that day filled with drawings. It was no joy waking up after a dream about that man. He left a taste of thunder in my mouth. (10)

The mythic ancestor is a metaphor for Asher’s father. His father travels for the Rebbe, just like his mythic ancestor did and the mythic ancestor also echoes Aryeh’s anger towards Asher. Asher keeps being haunted by his mythic ancestor throughout his childhood, but he slowly disappears. Until Asher remembers him when he is living in Paris as a young adult:

I remembered my mythic ancestor ... [I] wondered if the giving and the goodness and the journeys of that mythic ancestor might have been acts born in the memories of screams and burning flesh. A balance had to be given the world; the demonic had to be reshaped into meaning ... I began to paint my mythic ancestor. Over and over again, I painted him now, in his wealth and in his journeys, in the midst of fire and death, a weary Jew travelling to balance the world. (281-82)

Asher has been haunted by his mythic ancestor all his youth, but now in his young adulthood he finally begins to understand what his mythic ancestor was doing, why he was travelling

and why his father is always travelling: to bring balance to the world. These paintings of his mythic ancestor mark the end of his suffering from seeing his mythic ancestor in his dreams. Now that Asher understands a bit more from his mythic ancestor and from his father he is no longer haunted by him.

Asher also suffered from his difficult relationship with his father. This began with his father's absence. When he was young he said "I wish Papa wouldn't travel so much" (55) and the older narrator-Asher tells us: "I missed my father" (135). At first their relationship must still have been good, because otherwise the young Asher would not have missed his father, but the combination of his father's absence which provided a larger freedom for Asher to use his gift and his father's disapproval of his gift made their relationship much more difficult. One time when Aryeh is back for a short time from Vienna they have a conversation about it:

'Please don't be angry at me, Papa. I can't help it.' They [Aryeh and Rivkeh] looked at each other. Then they looked at me again. 'An animal can't help it,' my father said. 'A human being can always help it.' 'I can't help it, Papa.' I said. 'A man has a will,' my father said. 'Do you understand me Asher? The Ribbono Shel Olom gave every man a will. Every man is responsible for what he does, because he has a will and by that will he directs his life. There is no such thing as a man who can't help it. Only a sick man can't help it.' ... 'I have a will, Papa. It makes me want to draw.' 'That's an evil will. You must fight that will. That will comes from the other side.' (154-55)

This conversation clearly illustrates the difficulties between Asher and Aryeh. All Asher wants to do is paint, he has to do it, there is an irrepressible urge in him to paint, but Aryeh thinks that his gifts distracts him from the Ribbono Shel Olom, from God, he thinks that Asher's gift comes from the other side. When Aryeh's brother tries to defend Asher by saying that "he cannot help what he does", Aryeh's response is again that "only an animal cannot

help what he does” (240). Aryeh and Asher’s relationship becomes even more difficult when Asher starts exhibiting his paintings and when there are also nudes, which his father does not approve of, among his paintings. His mother tries to convince Asher not to exhibit the nudes: “‘Will there be paintings of nudes?’ ‘Yes’ She was silent. ‘Why, mama?’ ‘Your father wants to come. But he won’t go if there are nudes’” (255). A year after that, shortly before the exhibition she tries is again: “‘Why do there have to be nudes? There are so many other great paintings you have.’ ‘They’re important to me as an artist.’ ... ‘You’ll hurt your father, Asher. He won’t come’” (262). Asher clearly suffers from their difficult relationship when he wonders whether he should tell his father about the two crucifixes in his final exhibition:

I did not know what to do. I could not sleep. In the synagogue that Shabbos morning, I prayed for a miracle, for an idea, for anything that might help me ...

Yes. I’ll tell my father. I’ll sit him down and talk to him. This afternoon. (306)

Eventually Asher does not tell his father about the paintings, which causes the climax of both his and Rivkeh’s suffering. His father is shocked when he sees the two crucifixes at the exhibition:

His face wore an expression of awe and rage and bewilderment and sadness, all at the same time ... Who are you? The expression said. Are you really my son?

He had not spoken to me. He did not speak to me now. He took my mother’s arm and led her through the crowd. He walked slowly and with dignity. (313)

After this, Asher is sent back to Europe by the Rebbe and his fear of breaking with his family is realised.

Crucifixes

The crucifix is a powerful symbol in this novel. Eventually it causes both Asher’s rise to fame in the art world and his disconnection with his family. Asher’s *Brooklyn Crucifix I* and *II* are the cause of the climax of both his and Rivkeh’s suffering. Painting these crucifixes was the

line Asher had to cross to become a truly great painter, but it was also the line he should not have crossed if he wanted to stay connected to his family. In order to understand this dilemma it is important to know what the crucifix means in both the art and the religious world.

In the art world the crucifix is the symbol for suffering. Asher Lev had already discovered that at a very young age, when he was copying crucifixes in the Parkway museum: “I needed the expression, Mama. I couldn’t find that expression anywhere else” (151). Asher also realises that he has no choice but to use a crucifix for his painting in which he wanted to capture his mother’s suffering, which is a sacrifice just like the sacrifice of Jesus. He explains his painting in this way:

For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torments of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other’s throats. For the Master of the Universe, whose suffering world I do not comprehend. For dreams of horror, for nights of waiting, for memories of death, for the love I have for you, for all the things I remember, and for all the things I should remember but have forgotten, for all these I created this painting – an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mould in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment. (287-88)

Asher Lev explains what his crucifixes mean to him. His crucifixes represent all the pain and suffering of his mother, it represents the sacrifices she had to make because of her love for both her husband and her son. His painting represents the anguish his mother must have felt when she was waiting in front of the window. Through a crucifix Asher Lev is able to capture all the hardships from his youth. He has tried to find another symbol in his own religion, but he was unable to find anything that represented suffering in the way the crucifix did. Another

Jewish painter who could not paint a painting of ultimate suffering without a crucifix was Marc Chagall. His painting *White Crucifixion* shows Jesus Christ, who suffers on the cross, surrounded by suffering Jews during the second World War. It shows Nazis who are chasing Jews and setting a synagogue on fire. Jesus Christ in the middle of the painting has become the symbol of the suffering Jew for Marc Chagall. Ingo Walther and Ramer Metzger say that this painting is Chagall's counterpart for Picasso's *Guernica* "which feels its way into that same suffering" (62). Picasso's *Guernica* was also a painting of ultimate suffering. It represented the suffering of Picasso's people, the Spanish, when the village Guernica was bombed during the Spanish Civil War. Knowing this it is hardly coincidental that the first painting Jacob Kahn asks Asher to study is *Guernica*. In order to become a great artist Asher had to understand this type of anguish and he had to find his own way in which he could represent this. To both Asher and Marc Chagall this was best represented through the image of the suffering Jew.

In order to understand why the crucifix symbol was such a painful and forbidden symbol for the Hasidic Jews it is important to know the religious meaning of the crucifix. First of all, the crucifix is a Christian symbol. It shows Jesus Christ on a cross. It shows a suffering man who dies as a sacrifice for humanity. Many Roman Catholics also pray in front of crucifixes. To the Hasidic Jews, however, the crucifix means something else. It is still the symbol of the Christians, but to them it is also the symbol of the man in whose name many Jews have been killed throughout history and anyone who approves of this symbol is associated with these genocides and is considered a traitor. When Asher went to the Parkway museum with his mother he asked her to explain the crucifixes they saw. His mother explained it to him: "They were about a man called Jesus... He said he was the moshiach... 'Was he the moshiach, Mama?' 'No. He was not the moshiach. The moshiach has not yet come'", but she does not like it that they talked about Jesus: "I don't begin to understand it,"

my mother said... 'Where your painting has brought me, Asher. To Jesus.' She shook her head" (149). It is important to note that Rivkeh states that the moshiach, the messiah, has not yet come to the world. The coming of the moshiach would indicate a new beginning, a time in which the world would be better for the Jews. If Jesus was the moshiach, however, this new beginning would come with a lot of radical changes. First of all the new world in which everything would be better would not just be for the Jews, but for everyone and secondly their entire behaviour would have to change, all their religious customs, everything they knew and valued would suddenly be unnecessary. Seen from this perspective, the Jewish disapproval of the crucifix can also be seen as a fear of loss. Later Asher starts copying the crucifixes, but his father makes it very clear to him that he should not do this and why he should not do this:

He kept talking about my drawings of 'that man.' He would not pronounce the name. Did I know how much Jewish blood had been spilled because of that man? Did I know how many Jews had been killed in the name of that man during the Crusades? Did I know that the reason Hitler had been able to slaughter six million Jews without too much complaint from the world was that for two thousand years the world had been taught that Jews, not Romans, had killed that man? (152)

The crucifix is still the symbol of Jesus Christ for the Hasidic Jews, but the association with Jesus is a very bad association to them. Jesus Christ is the man whose followers have caused major genocides of the Jews.

In this novel, however, the crucifix is a symbol for suffering. Not just the symbol for suffering which Asher Lev chooses as the only symbol that can represent his mother's anguish, but also the symbol that Potok has chosen to connect the suffering of Asher and Rivkeh. Both of them suffer throughout this story and both of them suffer in very similar

ways, but it is the crucifix that finally intertwines their suffering. It is the crucifix that causes the climax of the novel, the moment their fears of losing each other are realised.

Conclusion

The theme of suffering may be considered the main theme in Chaim Potok's *Asher Lev*. Potok represents suffering in various ways. Unlike other Jewish American authors he does not focus on collective memory and collective suffering of the Jews after the second World War, even though his novel fits into that timeframe. Potok chooses another approach and shows how personal suffering may lie at the basis of collective suffering. Potok shows his readers the importance of personal suffering and not just on the battlefield or hardships of refugees in the midst of a war, but a specific kind of suffering which all takes place in a domestic environment. Potok chooses to describe a particular kind of infective suffering that moves through two generations in a very similar way. Both Asher and his mother suffer from a fear of loss, from the difficult relationship between Asher and his father and they are both haunted by a dead relative. Further research to the use of the Yiddish language in this novel and in other novels by Potok may provide an even more interesting insight into Rivkeh's conversations with her deceased brother Yaakov. The nature of suffering in this novel does not seem like a very severe kind of suffering, because next to Yaakov no close relatives or good friends die and there is no other physical suffering either. The suffering Potok describes is of a psychological nature. This psychological kind of suffering, however, is not necessarily less severe than any physical form of suffering. In the end both Asher and his mother have every cause for grief and throughout the novel they are both far from comfortable and are truly suffering.

Potok uses the symbol of the crucifix to connect the two beams of suffering in this story. They come together in the centre and cause a climax to Asher and Rivkeh's suffering which makes their greatest fear come true and causes their final and worst suffering, the loss

of each other. The importance of the crucifix is already stressed in the very beginning, by the older Asher-narrator when he says: “My name is Asher Lev, ... the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*. I am an observant Jew. Yes, of course, observant Jews do not paint crucifixions” (9). This first introduction of himself already stresses the importance of the crucifix to this story. Something has brought this observant Jew (a Jew who is not just culturally Jewish and not just religiously Jewish, but who also carries out the religious practices the Jewish faith requires) to painting a crucifix. And that something is suffering.

Works Cited

- Ahrens, Henry. "Tale From an Archetypal Ocean: Potok's "My Name is Asher Lev"." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 12, 1993, pp. 42-9.
- Assman, Jan. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, no. 65, pp. 125-133.
- Barkess, Joanna. "Painting the Sitra Achra: Culture Confrontation in Chaim Potok's Asher Lev Novels." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 17, 1998, pp. 17-24.
- Bergman, R. "Tharp's Funnel: A Conceptual Framework for Teaching about Religious Pluralism in Potok's "My Name is Asher Lev" and Zakariyah's "If I Should Speak"." *Multicultural Perspectives*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2007, pp. 48-53.
- Chagall, Marc. *White Crucifixion*. 1938. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
- Crane, Susan, A. "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 5, pp. 1372-1385.
- Elam, Yigal and Noa Gedi. "Collective Memory – What is it?" *History and Memory*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 30-50.
- Kremer, S. Lillian. "Dedalus in Brooklyn: Influences of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" on "My Name is Asher Lev"." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 4, 1985, pp. 26-38.
- Picasso, Pablo. *Guernica*. 1937. Oil on canvas. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.
- Pinsker, Sanford. "The Crucifixion of Chaim Potok/The Excommunication of Asher Lev: Art and the Hasidic World." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 4, 1985, pp. 39-51.
- Potok, Chaim. *My Name is Aher Lev*. Penguin Classics, 2009.

- Regenbaum, Shelly. "Art, Gender, and the Jewish Tradition in Yeziarska's "Red Ribbon on a White Horse" and Potok's "My Name Is Asher Lev"." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 7, 1988, pp. 55-66.
- Richter, Eva, and Bailin Song. "Translating the Concept of 'Identity'." *Translation and Cultural Change: Studies in history, norms and image-projection*. Ed. Eva Hung. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005, pp. 91-110.
- Schiff, Ellen. "To Be Young, Gifted and Oppressed: The Plight of the Ethnic Artist." *Oppression and Ethnic Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, pp. 73-80.
- True, Warren R. "Potok and Joyce: the Artist and his Culture." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 2, 1982, pp. 181-90.
- Uffen, Ellen Serlen. "'My Name Is Asher Lev': Chaim Potok's Portrait of the Young Hasid as Artist." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 2, 1982, pp. 174-80.
- Walther, Ingo F. and Rainer Metzger. *Chagall*. Taschen, 2012.