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# ***A White African Experience of Identity, Survival and Holocaust Memory***

**Richard Gehrman**

## **Abstract**

This article provides an alternative reading of Peter Godwin's *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, which has predominantly been interpreted either within the genre of white African memoir, or alternatively as a condemnation of Robert Mugabe's government in Zimbabwe. I argue that it could also be critically interpreted in a different context, within the field of scholarship of assimilation to a non-Jewish identity as a family's survival strategy, and of the transmission of Holocaust experience to later generations. This memoir reveals the experience of one man's search for his family's past, as well as the transition from Polish Jewish identity to British Rhodesian settler identity in southern Africa. In becoming aware of his father's Jewish past, the author becomes aware that this is also now his own history.

## **Introduction**

While Jewish identity can be expressed in Jewish languages, this is only possible for authors who speak and write these languages. This option may no longer exist for those who are assimilated or who have been hidden, and writing in another's language can even contribute to obscuring the significance of Jewish identity in a text. In conjunction with the themes of white African memoir and a critique of the excesses of the despotic Zimbabwean government, Peter Godwin's memoir *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* also reveals the Jewish identity of his family. His father was Kazimierz Goldfarb, a Polish Jew sent to school in England before the Second World War. Following the Holocaust he concealed his past, reinventing himself as George Godwin, a British immigrant to southern Africa, and he successfully maintained his British-Rhodesian persona until his late 70s.

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George had concealed his Jewish identity to ensure his children would be spared the slightest risk of ever sharing the tragic fate of his sister and mother in Poland, but the decision to acknowledge his past was motivated by the desire to explain their family origin, and also to have his son Peter search for information on the deaths of George's family in Nazi-occupied Poland. Peter becomes his father's researcher and amanuensis, and finally his legatee, as he imperceptibly realises the story is not just his father's but that of his own new identity.

While the discovery of Jewish heritage was a surprise to Peter Godwin who previously thought of himself as a white African expatriate, there was a strong southern African Jewish community that his father could well have chosen to become part of, and this community has developed and maintained its own particular cultural identity (Shain 2011). Jews played an important part in southern African economic and cultural life, and individual members of the southern African Jewish community have on occasion adopted high profile political roles.<sup>1</sup>

While now statistically insignificant, even in 1969 at the apogee of white Rhodesia<sup>2</sup> the Jewish population was never large in comparison with the far more significant South African Jewish community - Rhodesian Jews numbered only 5,194 in a population of 5 million, and constituted only 2.28% of the white population of 228,296 Europeans (Godwin and Hancock 1995:19). Peter Godwin had never thought of himself as being Jewish, and his previous books had not reflected any interest in the small Jewish minority of Rhodesia or Zimbabwe.

The author Peter Godwin is a New York-based journalist who described his own experiences of growing up in white-ruled Rhodesia in his first volume of autobiography *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa*, and this provides the background for *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*. Godwin was raised in semirural Rhodesia by his politically liberal engineer father and doctor mother, and the opening chapters of this first memoir provide an engaging account of a happy childhood in an interesting locale. His mother's work with African patients and his father's occupation gave him a relatively high degree of exposure to black African life, although this did of course come from the perspective of their membership of the small group of privileged Europeans who were outnumbered by other population groups at a ratio of 21 to 1 (Godwin and Hancock 1995:16).

Under Prime Minister Ian Smith Rhodesia had unilaterally declared independence from Great Britain in 1965, and until 1980 European<sup>3</sup> dominated governments controlled a relatively prosperous country

where the nation's resources were unequally distributed according to ethnicity. European males were conscripted to fight a growing African nationalist insurgency, and although Godwin's parents were politically opposed to Ian Smith's regime, they believed their son should contribute to society by meeting his conscription obligations and serving in the security forces, just as they had in Britain during the Second World War.

Godwin describes his military experiences in an increasingly nasty, brutal, and unwinnable conflict before he departs to study law at Cambridge University at the conclusion of his military service. When his elder sister Jain and her fiancé are tragically killed by government forces at a checkpoint shooting, Peter Godwin returns to Rhodesia, only to be called up for further duty with the security forces. At the conclusion of this second period of military duty, he returns to the United Kingdom and begins doctoral research which contributes to *Rhodesians Never Die*, his co-authored (with Ian Hancock) academic social history of the white Rhodesia community. Godwin works in Zimbabwe as a human rights lawyer during Robert Mugabe's 1980s suppression and massacre of his Ndebele political opponents, before leaving to become an expatriate journalist. His life and experiences are recounted from his perspective as a British–Rhodesian middle-class educated white African of liberal sympathies, with no hint of any Jewish identity.

This article examines his second book of memoir *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*. The memoir's prologue describes the cremation of the author's father, George Godwin, and from this, the reader thinks they know how the story ends, but there is a subtle and unseen dimension to this cremation story that lies dormant until the book's conclusion. This book reviews the decline and collapse of the Zimbabwean post independence settlement, from the relative prosperity of 1996 to the abject poverty and degradation of 2006, interposed with the author's discovery of his father George Godwin's hidden Jewish ancestry.

While the repression of democracy and the multiracial Movement for Democratic Change is a theme of the book, a more significant subject of this work is the government-sponsored land invasions, in which formerly white owned farms were expropriated by landless Africans, so-called war veterans, government supporters and officials.<sup>4</sup> By this time many white Zimbabweans had undergone complex and contested transitions of identity as their sense of being evolved from that of British colonial settlers to Rhodesians and after independence

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to white Zimbabweans (Godwin and Hancock 1995; Alexander 2004; Hughes 2010).<sup>5</sup> The validity of this white Zimbabwean identity would be challenged by government attacks and denunciation. Like many Zimbabweans of all ethnic groups, Peter Godwin has become an expatriate, and the revelation of Jewish heritage adds a further dimension to his already complex hybrid identity, an identity informed by multiple expulsions.

### **The genre of white African memoir**

While the discovery of hidden Jewish identity has been a phenomenon in post Cold War Eastern Europe and in the United States (Kessel 2000; Muller-Paisner 2002), this genre did not frame the critical reception of *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* and an understanding of the genre of white African memoir is important to appreciate the way the issue of Jewish identity and experience were disregarded and marginalised. Within the Zimbabwe and Rhodesian white memoir tradition, writing includes general accounts of life in Africa as well as soldiers' stories<sup>6</sup> of the Rhodesian Bush War or Second *Chimurenga*.<sup>7</sup> This incorporates both soldier experiences of war and an assertion of white African identity, and has been criticised for its retrospective triumphalism and valorisation of a racially hierarchical past. A widely sold and popular account is *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* by Chris Cocks (1997). This, in conjunction with its sequel *Survival Course*, covers the war and civilian life in post-independence Zimbabwe, and addresses post-traumatic stress as well as the white adjustment to independence. Other soldier stories recount the challenges and trauma of the young soldier in a war they no longer believe in, and incorporate direct critiques of the war and the racially structured Rhodesian system (Moore-King 1988; Wylie 2002; Williams 2008). Peter Godwin's first volume of memoir falls into this soldier genre with its perceptive depiction of white society and a morally questionable war, and positions him for his critics in a realm far removed from Jewish identity and the trauma of the Holocaust.

Other texts within the Zimbabwe and Rhodesian white memoir tradition are more clearly separated from the soldier's story,<sup>8</sup> and they narrate the experience of growing up within a white Rhodesia at war and an independent Zimbabwe in relative peace. Alexandra Fuller's bestselling *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2002) and *Scribbling the Cat* (2004) achieved widespread sales in her new home of North America, perhaps to a degree because of the way in which she addressed the issues and guilt of white identity.<sup>9</sup> Another author who

also draws on memories of the 1970s, childhood and the search for a new identity is Lauren St John (*Rainbow's End* 2007). *The Last Resort: A Zimbabwe Memoir* (Rogers 2010) differs from most accounts because it focuses primarily on the post-independence era, and it effectively manipulates humour to describe one family's attempts to survive in an era of farm seizures. While not an autobiography, journalist Christina Lamb's *House of Stone* (2006) is a sensitive and balanced understanding of the dilemmas facing white Zimbabweans who knew that their position in the country was based on past conquests yet who also felt this country was their home. For readers who lived in southern Africa and who share the cultural background of these authors, such memoirs constitute a poignant excursion into nostalgia, as well as a reassertion of their white African identity. For Australian and other western audiences in North America or Europe, these books might provide echoes of a partly familiar childhood (Gehrmann 2006:93). However, they can recycle racist views (Simoes da Silva 2005:475) and evoke memories of white minority rule, racism and South African Apartheid and can make us feel uncomfortable with their reminders of a past era of racial hierarchy that we do not wish to revisit. These easily recognised memoirs constitute an identifiable genre that certainly addresses the complexity of white African identity but again, do not relate to Jewish or Holocaust concerns.

### **Critical academic reception of *Crocodile***

By the time *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* was published, critics were accustomed to the regular appearance of white African memoir,<sup>10</sup> seen by some as perhaps a technique for white African writers to exploit Western fascination with their plight (Pilosof 2009:623). Given that Godwin's earlier works were situated in the world of the white Rhodesian and Zimbabwean community, it was only logical that most reviewers should interpret his next book primarily within the same frameworks. An additional consideration was that educated opinion in the West is generally uncomfortable with the past white minority worlds of southern Africa and this further shaped the perspective of many reviewers.

When evaluating the academic critiques of *Crocodile*, it was clear that most reviewers saw the Jewish dimensions of this book as of limited significance. One analysis regarded Peter Godwin's discovery that he was a minority within a minority and the book's Jewish background as matter of fact issues, going even further to argue that George Godwin's concealed identity is an action taken to avoid the

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racial prejudice of Anglo-Saxons (Windrich 2007:1409), an assessment that is difficult to support after any close reading of the text. Wylie saw Peter Godwin as white rather than Jewish, and interpreted George Godwin's actions as being undertaken "largely to avoid thinking about the loss of his own mother and sister in Treblinka" (2007:160).

This assessment is at odds with George's own stated intent, and seems to downplay an incredibly complex experience. Research clearly shows that Holocaust related trauma does indeed shape lives for decades (Maclean, Abramovich and Langfield 2007:27). Marianne Hirsch has also discussed the issue of postmemory, in which the generation after an event considers the traumas transmitted to them from the previous generation with these traumas become a memory in their own right (Hirsch 2012:5-6). Here, memory is something that is based on the deep connections that the second generation have to their parents' survival stories. Peter Godwin's work provides a challenge to this debate as his mission is to understand his father's experiences and their impact upon him, largely because his father's memories were kept from him.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Godwin's connection of his family's suffering under Nazism to his parents' growing insecurity in Zimbabwe was an area of concern to several critics. It might be thought that for Holocaust survivors and their families, associations of trauma and insecurity need no explanation, but this appears to be less important to critics for whom George Godwin's assumption of white African identity has apparently obliterated his Jewish identity, and cut all links with the trauma of the Survivor's experience.<sup>12</sup> After considering *Crocodile* as a white memoir, Linfield separately addressed the Jewish component of the book as almost a detached story, correctly pointing out that there was no comparison between the death of a tiny number of white farmers in Zimbabwe and the events of the Holocaust. She saw this as a failing of the book in literary and structural terms (Linfield 2007:98). Similar concerns were expressed by Pilosof, whose telling critique of the romanticising and mythologising of Africa by white writers also interpreted Peter Godwin's associations between whites in contemporary Africa and Jews worldwide, and the dispossession and socio-economic collapse engendered by the Zimbabwe land reforms to the Holocaust as false, "trite and facetious" (2009:633).

The author himself rebutted such critiques directly in an interview, where he pointed out that the contentious phrase "A white in Africa is like a Jew everywhere" (Godwin 2006:266) was a statement about

human insecurity rather than an attempt to make direct comparisons between Mugabe and Hitler (Kachka 2007).

Simoès da Silva (2011) was more sympathetic, and in exploring George Godwin's Jewish identity understood his decision to conceal his identity as an action designed to protect his family in the future. Yet Simoès da Silva also saw the device of using Jewish identity in the book as one that allowed white Zimbabweans to be positioned as victims. Other reviewers praised the book but saw the Jewish component as being of lesser interest than the denunciation of Mugabe's regime, with the Jewish identity issue passed off in dismissive terms - "one isn't really interested in his father's back story" (Cowley 2007).

From the Jewish perspective, the Shoah is not a back story but a central aspect of modern Jewish identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Jewish dimension of *Crocodile* was really only fully explored in Jewish-based reviews, and these were not in the academic sphere. Kirchick reviewed it in the New York-based Jewish daily *The Forward*, and identified the central aspects of the Jewish content of the book and Peter Godwin's journey that was clearly one of self-discovery through his attempt to become more aware of the disaster that European Jews experienced as he starts to discover the fate of his own family. There was no question that for George Godwin, hiding identity was a way of escaping trauma and terror (Kirchick 2007). In her blog site *Compelling Stories: Jewish Lives Lived*, Bird began by noting that the author's Jewish roots was only one aspect of the book, but clearly situated this short but effective review from within the framework of Peter Godwin's search for his family's past and for his own Jewish identity (Bird 2010).

### **Revelation of George Godwin's secret Jewish past**

The revelation of George Godwin's past makes compelling reading, and layers of identity are peeled back as Peter visits and revisits his increasingly aged parents in between journalistic assignments in Africa. Peter's father George has a heart attack, and as his father lies in hospital, Peter tries to imagine his father's obituary and reflects on what little there is that he knows of his father. He knows that George was born in England (location unknown), that he was educated in an unknown school (possibly in Scotland), that in the Second World War he joined the British army (in an unknown unit), all facts of which Peter is unsure. Indeed, Peter's more concrete knowledge of his father's past begins with his study at London University and his immigration to Africa.

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During his ruminations, Peter wanders around the house and casually absorbs the fact that all the family portraits and memorabilia, some of which go back to the mid-19th century, are of his mother's rather than his father's family. Aimlessly looking through his father's workshop, he finds a hidden photograph of three unknown strangers, a dated image of a middle-aged couple and a 12-year-old girl. Feeling a sense of discomfort at his prying, he puts the old photograph back in its hiding place (Godwin 2006:17-20).

Peter's father survives the heart attack, but five years later he is badly beaten up in a carjacking attempt and it is after this narrow escape that Peter again encounters the picture his septuagenarian father has just placed on the wall. His mother responds to Peter's queries and explains that these are his father's parents and younger sister. Peter realises it is the first time he has ever seen any pictures of his father's family, and he becomes aware that the girl in the old photograph looks strangely familiar - in fact, she looks like him. He questions his mother further as he wants to know more about the picture, and why his father has finally put it up, after half a century of concealment.

'Listen,' she says in a hushed voice so as not to be overheard by my father, 'I'm afraid we haven't been entirely honest with you. Dad's family wasn't from England. They were from Poland. He's from Poland. They were Jews.'

'Jews?'

'Yes, Polish Jews. Like him. He's a Jew. He changed his name.'

For a moment I still can't quite grasp what she is saying. My father, as I know him – George Godwin, this Anglo-African in a safari suit and desert boots, with his clipped British accent – is an invention? All these years, he has been living a lie? His name – my name – is not our own? (Godwin 2006:113-114).

I find myself looking at him differently – shorn now of his cover, his assumed identity. He seems to look different, more ... mittel-European. His handlebar moustache no longer looks like a Victorian English accessory, but a Slavic one. Stalin as rendered by Peter Ustinov. I find myself examining him for stereotypical Jewish features (Godwin 2006:114).

George Godwin refuses to speak to his son about the past, and Peter returns to New York with his questions unanswered. For Peter and his surviving sister Georgina, the revelation of their father's secret Jewish heritage explains aspects of his remoteness. It seems to offer an explanation for curious quirks of his character, such as why he only ever took Georgina to the cinema twice, on both occasions to see movies, both about the 1976 rescue of hijacked Jews at Entebbe in Uganda (Godwin 2006:117). Peter's journey to understanding his father's past increases after the September 11 attacks. While covering news stories from Ground Zero, he eats at the nearby cafeteria of the New York Museum of Jewish Heritage and on visiting the museum experiences a new comprehension of a Holocaust that now has a very personal reference to him, most tellingly as he reads the testimony of a Survivor with whom he shares his Jewish surname.

With some reluctance, George Godwin opens up to his New York-based son and sends him their family tree. The manner of this communication reminds the reader how deeply George Godwin has hidden his Jewish identity, as although the family tree covers five generations it has names with footnote numbers but no details, and no name linking George Godwin to this incriminating document. Indeed, where George Godwin's name should be are the enigmatic letters GG, with the birth date carefully omitted to ensure George's continued anonymity and safety. The footnotes that provide the details are deliberately sent in a separate letter to reduce the chance of their interception by an outsider. Even though Nazi Germany had been defeated half a century earlier, George Godwin was still being very careful:

Even now, in his moment of candour, he cannot bring himself to use his original name. It goes against all that he has struggled to hide for half a century, his self-imposed witness protection programme (Godwin 2006:123).

These documents give Peter Godwin his first real understanding of his father's loss, for in the detailed family tree it becomes apparent that 16 of the 24 family members living in Poland were killed in the Shoah. As he ponders on the information his father has sent, Peter Godwin realises how little he actually knows about the details of the Holocaust that has now started to become personal to him and is slowly becoming part of his own changing identity. There is so much he does not know about being Jewish, the Holocaust and also about

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his family history, and his father's revelation of these is a task that is hard to undertake and that can only be done gradually.

He is finally trying to discard a mask, and yet it seems that when he peels it off he cannot easily access what's underneath. The mask, the superimposed visage that he has shown the world, this concocted exterior, has become his only reality. It is more than just a mask; it is a suit of armour that hasn't been shed for so long it has fused onto the milky body within, the body it was fabricated to protect. (Godwin 2006:126).

George Godwin's comfortable middle-class early life in central Warsaw as Kazimierz Jerzy Goldfarb is eventually revealed. The child of secular parents, his father Maurycy's work as a shipping agent keeps the family in comfort, and his mother's law degree is a further reference to their middle-class status. His holidays include overseas travel to Norway, Germany and France, and as a non-Yiddish speaker who has never attended a synagogue he sees himself as a Jewish Pole rather than a Polish Jew (Godwin 2006:130-132).

Sent to study English in Britain in the summer of 1939, the 15-year-old youth finds himself stranded at the outbreak of the Second World War and his life changes irrevocably. His service in the Polish army in exile leads to fighting in Normandy, Belgium and the Netherlands. During the war he receives only three letters from his father, and he loses touch with his family. At the end of the war he finds that his mother and sister were caught by a Nazi patrol in late 1942 and had not been seen since. A sporadic exchange of letters with his father occurs before the descent of the Iron Curtain ends the now remarried Maurycy's hope of joining his son in England.

Kazimierz studies engineering as George (Jerzy) Goldfarb, becomes engaged to Helen, a British medical student, and once naturalised marries her after a complex process of having her drop her third name, to allow him to adopt it as his new surname, completing the process of assimilation and concealment of identity (Godwin 2006:151). He moves to Africa to work, and becomes a Rhodesian.

When he emigrates to Africa, he is George Godwin. A new man. A man fleeing racial persecution and war, mayhem and genocide. And with him, a woman who will keep his secret, even from their own children (Godwin 2006:151).

George's erasure of identity and reinvention as a colonial British white African is so complete as to demand the concealment of part of his life usually highly valued by former soldiers, particularly those in British middle-class society. Upon his father's death, Peter is sorting through his father's effects when he realises something is missing. He finds his maternal grandfather's First World War medals, his mother's Second World War medals and his father's medals commemorating his part-time military service in the Rhodesian war, but no other medals acknowledging his father's intense fighting in the Second World War. These medals do exist. Having been issued with the now incriminating name of Kazimierz Jerzy Goldfarb, for fifty years they wait unclaimed in the Ministry of Defence in London (Godwin 2006:323).

So is it problematic for Peter Godwin to make the connection between whites in Africa and Jews everywhere, "on sufferance, watching warily, waiting for the next great tidal swell of hostility"? (Godwin 2006: 266). Again, this is a connection he has defended in interviews, indicating that this is not his authorial point of view, but his rendition of the sentiments and experiences of his father, who speaks from Holocaust and Jewish experiences of his own family and of himself. Peter Godwin emphasises that he was not suggesting an imminent holocaust in Zimbabwe, but events such as the 1994-95 genocide in Rwanda and the Zimbabwe government massacres in Matabeleland in the mid 1980s make it clear that Africa is no stranger to state-sanctioned mass murder. He points out that the association between white Africans in post independence southern Africa and Jews in interwar Europe was a comparison of

...ethnically and racially identifiable people, often better off than the average citizen in the country they inhabited, often doing well, often part of the upper middle class, but often part of the elite. Essentially, in those situations, when there is an economic downturn and the leader tends to populism or fascism, they look for groups like that and export the politics of envy, and perhaps even an incipient resentment and they sort of exploit that. So you're always vulnerable as a group – that's the kind of insecurity that he senses is there (Zuarino 2007).

He goes on to place this in the context of our historical understanding of the suppression of Jews, of pogroms and repressions that appear and then disappear, only to reappear again, and in this he reflects a

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sense of the history that pervades the experience of Jews living as a minority among the Christian majority. There are of course historical differences as unlike Jews, today's white Africans inherit the legacy of past racial suppression of others. Godwin's viewpoint goes far beyond nostalgic depictions of Africa by displaced white African expatriates, and creates an empathetic understanding of the experience of being identified as a member of an ethnic group who are the objects of state vilification, a point that is not developed by reviewers who conflate the writing of Peter Godwin, the journalist son and the lived experience of George Godwin the hidden Jewish father.

A critical reviewer could well ask what percentage of *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is a Holocaust or Jewish tale and from this question how much the experience of the Holocaust and Jewish identity drives the book. In purely mathematical terms only part of the book is about Jewish identity. While there are recurrent one to three page discussions of the Jewish aspects of the Godwin family's past, the experience of social decline and political chaos in Zimbabwe is the book's central focus, and George Godwin's upbringing and experiences in Jewish Poland and his experiences of the Second World War are covered in only two chapters. The greater part of another chapter recounts the concentration camp death of his mother Janina and sister Halina. But this in itself is both telling and terrible, as it illustrates how very little George Godwin knew about his own past, and how little he knew about the horrors that Nazism inflicted on his family.

This lack of the past, and the lack of any links to the past is brought home after his death when his widow Helen recounts how just before the war, George's mother Janina had sent a package of Polish delicacies to England, a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. George Godwin had saved a piece of the string and carried it around with him for years as "the last contact he had with his mother before she was killed by the Nazis. The last thing that she had actually touched." (Godwin 2006:307).

One of the reasons George revealed his Jewish past to his son Peter was because he wanted Peter to find out what happened to his mother and sister. Peter discovers the few details he can of their arrest and subsequent death at Treblinka, but finds it hard to tell this aged dying man of how his mother Janina and sister Halina would have died.

'From all the details of the research I've done, the books I've read, it would have been quick, Dad. They wouldn't have suffered much.'... I can see, though, that he is just pretending to believe

me. He knows that they probably did suffer terribly. But he wants me to believe that I have successfully reassured him. I am lying, and so is he. We are lying to each other (Godwin 2006:281).

Both men have fought in unpleasant and nasty wars, and they know the brutal reality of war, and wish that others could have been spared such horrors. This is the tragedy of these two men who each fought in a war but have both had a sister die, needlessly and tragically. For George the problem is magnified as the war dead include his mother Janina, his sister Halina and his daughter Jain.

### **Realisation and acknowledgement of Peter Godwin's Jewish history**

Ambiguity and ambivalence are perplexing, uncertain, discomfiting and unsettling, and yet these themes contribute to making Peter Godwin's account so interesting. Holocaust memories, the analogies to war and political repression and the legacy of this violence have devastating impacts on many lives. The use by the father of his son as a researcher, and the repositioning of Peter as his father's amanuensis overshadows the fact that this account is also one of Peter's discovery of his own Jewish heritage. This is a difficult journey, and a gradual process. He is both a writer and a public intellectual, and while he is recounting his father's story, this book also constitutes his own personal discovery of his Jewish ancestry, and of a possible Jewish identity. His linkage to this ethnicity is tied up with his connections to these people from the previously unknown past, and it reaches out to him when he follows his father's request to initiate a Red Cross search for information about Halina and Janina. While filling out the Holocaust and war victims tracing and information enquiry forms, he matches the required information about these women, such as "Last Contact With Sought Person"... "Disappeared from a Warsaw street in 1942/43". When looking over the form he realises he has not answered the very first question and records for posterity that the person he is seeking is not some anonymous stranger but is his own Aunt.

Only then does it really sink in. This is not just my father's history; this is my family too, these *are* my people ... this Holocaust is reaching forward in time to snag me with its icy claw, to confound me with its counsel of despair. But still I want to resist this inherited burden. My father's antique associations have nothing to do with

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my life. These are not my fights. That was there, then. This is here, now (Godwin 2006:124-125).

Clearly, Peter Godwin resents this identity that is being placed upon him. The transition to his association with a Jewish identity is a gradual thing, and after at least one active spoken rejection of Jewish self identity, he finds himself about to buy a flat in New York from a Polish Jewish rabbi. The flat is occupied by Polish immigrant Jews and members of a radical green Jewish environmental group, and to Godwin the place is permeated with Jewish diversity. There is still ambivalence in his identification of himself as a Jew, an act he consciously undertakes to boost his chance of buying the flat, but this is a public statement of Peter's personal discovery and growing sense of Jewish identity and ancestry.

Whether or not Peter Godwin is Jewish, at least one observer understands the conflicts implicit in this Jewish heritage and identity;

'Like my father before me I am rejecting my own identity. I am committing cultural treason,'

Godwin writes, referring to his decision to leave Zimbabwe and move to America. Yet this admission evinces not simply the guilt of a man who witnessed grave suffering in his country and feels impassive in its enormity, but also of a conflicted Jew who suddenly feels some ineffable – yet ultimately elusive – connection to a people (Kirchick 2007).

George Godwin hides his Jewish identity, tries to erase his past and suppresses this facet of his existence, but his actions are not unique. As Peter researches his father's history, he eventually discovers the existence of his father's Aunt Sophie, whose erasure of her own Polish Jewish existence to become French, and her revelation of her Jewish history to her family in old age is a chilling replication of George's experience (Godwin 2006:267). Of course, hidden Jewish identity is not extraordinary, and has long been a feature of the Jewish experience in Spain. The conversos in Belmonte were discovered by the Polish Jew Samuel Schwartz in 1917 after centuries of hiding, and he found them to be maintaining dual religious practices that he saw were neither Jewish and Christian "though inspired by both religions" (Yovel 2009:379). However it is not easy to coexist with a perpetual constructed manner of living in two worlds simultaneously, with two adopted mentalities (Melammed 2004:145).

In Australia, some survivors of the Holocaust who acknowledged their Jewish identity but suppressed their stories and did not share their trauma with their families remained silent for years to put this past history behind them in order to make a new life (Langfield 2012:76). But for George Godwin assimilation goes beyond this issue of seeking refuge from trauma while remaining Jewish, rather it also becomes a path to hiding and assimilation, to prevent a repetition of the past.

Peter, having been raised as a white, middle-class British Rhodesian African, has no conception of the complex depths of his father's Jewish past, and initially views his father's Jewish identity more as an interesting piece of family history.

'Why did you conceal this Jewish stuff anyway, Dad?' I ask.

He looks at me as though I am being deliberately obtuse.

'Why?' He says. 'For my children. For you. So that you could be safe. So that what happened to them,' he nods towards the photo of his mother and his sister, 'would never happen to you. Because it will never really go away, this thing. It goes underground for a generation or two, but always re-emerges' (Godwin 2006:173).

Peter Godwin wonders if his father is right, but he cannot know his father's experience, but can only try and understand it. At what stage is it safe to reveal a hidden identity? In studies of hidden Jews in the southern United States and Mexico, it has been suggested that it might never be safe, with the memory of the Inquisition like the Holocaust remaining "deeply embedded in the consciousness of individuals descended from Spanish Jewry" (Jacobs 1996:99).

## **Conclusion**

Is this highly readable book a white African memoir or a memoir of Jewish identity? Peter Godwin's first autobiographical account, *Mukiwa*, is a white African memoir, yet it is also a memoir of military experience. The same can obviously be said of other Rhodesian Zimbabwean memoirs such as the works of Cocks, Williams, Wylie and Moore-King. A memoir can have multiple purposes and it seems undeniable that *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is both a memoir of white African experience and a memoir of hidden Jewish identity. Both genres are present, and both are interwoven in the narrative in a manner that is particularly telling in the conclusion. This is a memoir

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partly concealed within a memoir, and the account of Jewish identity and the Holocaust is used to contextualise the tragedy of political repression and human misery in Zimbabwe.

This is an African story, but it is also pertinent to Australia. Issues of southern Africa are increasingly linked to Australia as the pattern of southern African migration shows (Louw and Mersham 2001; Tatz, Arnold and Heller 2007; Lucas, Jamali and Edgar 2011). The story is important because of the message that it conveys to a new audience, and this message is the same as that collected in Australia.

The traditional message from survivors at the end of their video testimonies is 'Don't forget you are Jewish' or 'Don't let it happen again' (Langfield 2012:76).

The assumption of such assertions is that to avoid it happening again, the story has to be told and absorbed, and if it can be told and absorbed by those reading a white African memoir, this is indeed an act of good fortune. Isabel Wollaston has pointed out that a strength of Elie Wiesel is the ability to give access to an East European world that the Holocaust destroyed, to provide access to a lost and possibly alien culture "in a manner that is accessible and non-threatening" (Wollaston 2005:163). The revelation of George Godwin's concealed identity also opens up the past for a new range of readers.

This article's introduction made reference to the book's prologue that describes George Godwin's funeral cremation. The final pages of the book are an exact repetition of this prologue with a word for word description of Godwin's cremation as a notional Hindu, in a Zimbabwe where the expense of the cremation is impossible unless this is prescribed for religious purposes. The same words of the prologue appear at the end of the book, but for the reader the meaning of these repeated words has now become entirely different. The cremation of George Godwin / Jerzy Goldfarb is no longer the cremation of an elderly white African, but is an act that undeniably evokes thoughts of his sister's and mother's cremation in the fires of Treblinka. Surely this allusion demands recognition of the book as a self-consciously Jewish narrative.

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## **Endnotes**

1. Sir Roy Welensky was Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. In South Africa, Joe Slovo and Ruth First were significant African National Congress leaders, Helen Suzman and Harry Schwarz were notable as long-standing opposition politicians, while Nadine Gordimer and Johnny Clegg achieved success in the literary and music fields. For further accounts of the South African Jewish community see Mendelsohn and Shain (2002), Shimoni (2003), Tatz, Arnold and Heller (2007), and Sakinofsky (2007).
2. The country was named Rhodesia until 1979, then Zimbabwe Rhodesia, and after majority rule in 1980 became Zimbabwe.
3. The 1969 Constitution included Asian and those of mixed-race as Europeans (Godwin and Hancock 1995).
4. For a detailed account of the social and political factors that drove this complex event, see Sachikonye (2004).
5. Whites who had not adapted saw themselves as “Rhodies” (unlike “Zimbabweans” who had adapted), and those who had emigrated to South Africa and lived in the past with their references to “when we were in Rhodesia” were disparagingly referred to as “when-we’s” (Fisher 2010:151).
6. Soldiers’ memoirs include both accounts by participants who write retrospective critiques of the conflict in southern Africa, and attempts by participants to justify and explain their position. A survey of the second perspective is provided by Minter (2007), while Chirere (2005) gives an overview of one example of popular pre-independence white Rhodesian war writing.
7. The war (also referred to as the War of Liberation) began in 1964 and lasted until 1980, and these names are used by participants from different sides.
8. De Mul (2009:47) argues that there is a clear difference between male war accounts and female memoirs of this period.
9. Partly to redress what her mother (understandably) felt were misrepresentations in the first book, Fuller went on to write a more empathetic account of her mother’s African experiences in *Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness* (2011).
10. This form of writing has become focused on questions of identity post-emigration, and reinvention or reassertion of identity, which Primorac sees as an attempt to belong in a world of multiple exile that reproduces a sense of colonial ambivalence about home, belonging and Africa (2010: 202-203).

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11. Peter Godwin has inherited a memory gap, rather than the postmemory he might have expected to inherit. This concept of the trauma memory gap has been explored in the framework of the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose work draws on the idea of a trans-generational phantom (Rand 1994). The Holocaust is a silence in their writing yet as Holocaust survivors themselves, their memories are informed by this experience (Johnson 2013: 122-124). Space precludes examination of this issue here, but in-depth exploration of intergenerational trauma transmission in the context of Godwin's experience constitutes a further research topic.
12. George Godwin's experience places him in the categories of a Jew who has consciously assimilated, and a Jewish child who escaped the Holocaust and was an indirect witness to his family's suffering. As such, he represents both first-generation and second generation experiences. While Holocaust survivors who emigrated to the United States, Canada, Israel and Australia had better mental health care than those who remained in Europe (Lis-Turlejska, Luszczynska, Plichta and Benight 2008), it is clear that trauma remains a reality for those who were separated from their families at a young age, and those whose families died. This is particularly the case for children who were separated for their parents and hidden in Europe (Fohn and Heenan-Wolff 2010).

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