

On the Critical Representation of the Tough Jew Ideal in Thane Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke*

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Abstract Thane Rosenbaum's novel *Second Hand Smoke* (1999) depicts Duncan Katz, a son of Holocaust survivors and a federal prosecutor of Nazi war criminals, as an ostensibly tough Jewish man inwardly tormented by rage and distress. This article argues that through its portrayal of Duncan, the novel offers a critical representation of the Tough Jew ideal. Specifically, the novel challenges the Tough Jew ideal for its premises on rage and for its close affinity with gentile masculinity. This article also contends that the novel points to the possibility of subverting the Tough Jew ideal and reshaping Jewish ethnic and masculine identities in the post-Holocaust era.

Key words *Second Hand Smoke*; Tough Jew ideal; Jewish masculinity; Jewish ethnic identity

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Introduction

Thane Rosenbaum is representative of the post-Holocaust literature in the second Jewish American literary renaissance and renowned for his skillful delineation of the strained lives of Jewish American Holocaust survivors and those of their descendants. In *Second Hand Smoke* (1999, hereafter referred to as "*Smoke*"), a

National Jewish Book Award finalist, Rosenbaum depicts the life and struggle of Duncan Katz, a son of Holocaust survivors and a federal prosecutor of Nazi war criminals, who is outwardly rugged but inwardly plagued by emotional turbulence.

Smoke is lauded for its “superb, if deeply disturbing, writing” (Pinsker 10) and for being “fierce, poignant, and mordantly funny” (DeCandido 1156). Critical comments are made on its artistic features such as the frequent flashbacks (Raphael 48; Perkins 185; Lourie 31; Burstein 74), the mixture of comic and impassioned linguistic styles (Raphael 48) and the dramatic plot design (Lourie 31; Steinberg 325). Reviewers remark on how Rosenbaum convincingly and insightfully portrays the toxic influence of the Holocaust on the children of survivors in the post-Holocaust era (Pinsker 10; Berger 6-15) and how Rosenbaum’s own experience with his survivor parents is reflected in this novel (Steinberg 325). Some applaud the artful characterization of Mila, Duncan’s survivor mother, for being “larger than life, but true to life” (Lourie 31) and for its successful reconfiguration of the stereotypical images of Jewish mother (Burstein 73). Others approve of the novel’s impressive rendering of Duncan’s combat “with ghosts of the Holocaust and himself” (Pinsker 10) and of his coping with Mila’s painful legacy of Holocaust (Burstein 74). Yet rarely have critics paid attention to the ethnic and gender politics inherent in the representation of Duncan. As a result, the motivation for Duncan’s hysterical devotion to and his ultimate rethinking of the legacy of the Holocaust cannot be sufficiently explained.

This article aims to explicate how the Tough Jew ideal is dissected and reevaluated in *Smoke*. This article holds that by its portrayal of Duncan as an ostensibly tough Jewish man vulnerable to rage and distress, *Smoke* offers a critical representation and insightful rethinking of the Tough Jew ideal. Specifically, *Smoke* challenges the Tough Jew ideal for its premises on rage and for its close affinity with gentile masculinity. The novel also points to the possibility of subverting the Tough Jew ideal and reshaping Jewish ethnic and masculine identities in the post-Holocaust era with the new historical memories and diasporic experiences.

Challenging Tough Jew’s Premise on Rage at Anti-Semites

With his muscular physique, fiery temper and vengeful spirit, Duncan in *Smoke* is intended by Rosenbaum as a stereotypical Tough Jew. “Tough Jew” is a term coined by the historian Paul Breines to refer to “Jews who fight, who are violent in the public political sphere” (i). Tough Jew is contrasted to either “weak Jews,” referring to “the image of the Jew as victim, as the frail and meek object of anti-Semitic initiatives,” or “gentle Jews,” referring to “those who uphold in theory and

practice the conviction that Jews *must* not be violent” (Breines i). Actually, in the traditional Ashkenazic (Eastern European) Jewish society, it is the gentle, erudite, modest, passive and non-violent *mensch*¹ that is held up as the ideal model for Jewish men, while Tough Jew images are only sporadic phenomena. Towards the end of the 19th century, with anti-Semitism becoming more and more severe in Europe, the thriving Zionist movement in Europe remodeled the Tough Jew images into a zealously promoted political and cultural program, marking “the historic break with the culture of Jewish meekness and gentleness and the beginnings of a tough Jewish counterculture” (Breines 30). Into the 20th century, especially before and during World War II, the Nazi propaganda about Jewish defenselessness and the wartime atrocities against the Jews made the non-violent *mensch* ideal even more problematic. It is by no accident that, in the latter half of the 20th century, against which the story of *Smoke* is set, muscular Judaism and Tough Jew ideal started to spread in full swing.

Smoke begins with Duncan’s *bris*, the Jewish rite of male circumcision, where he is tended by many Miami Jewish gangsters who take up the secondary careers such as rabbi and mohel. This is a painful revelation of the reality that the Holocaust has “consumed the best of European Jewry” and ruptured the Jewish tradition (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 6). Now the Jewish Mafia represents a new ethnic and masculine ideal of the post-WWII and post-Holocaust Jewish society, that is, the Tough Jew ideal.

As the brains of the Jewish Mafia at the Miami Beach and a Holocaust survivor, Mila disdains the traditional Jewish values and wants to predicate her son’s Jewish identity on the brute force, mental toughness, and mostly, rage at the anti-Semites. She wants to make a Tough Jew out of her son, who is expected to avenge the Jews lost to the Holocaust and protect Jewish people from the anti-Semitism by violent means. Through painstaking physical exercises in martial arts, football games, street fights and wilderness survival training, Duncan is transformed by Mila into a golem, an “ignoble savage,” an “American Frankenstein” and a “modern gladiator” (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 208-9). In a sense, the Katz’s version of Tough Jew, conditional on the multigenerational trauma of the Holocaust and fueled by the hatred for the anti-Semites, is much more enraged and vengeful than its prototype in the Zionist muscular Judaism.

But *Smoke* is not a novel that extols angry and vindictive Tough Jew. Duncan in his adulthood is always burning with rage, especially when he works for the Office of Special Investigation (“OSI”) as a prosecutor of Nazi war criminals. However, rage is obviously at odds with the nature of his prosecution job that

requires impartiality, imperturbability and objectivity. Moreover, even though Duncan deals with senile former Nazis every day, they are not life-threatening for him. His rage, therefore, often seems pointless. Rage only makes him hotheaded and bad-tempered, turning him into an avenger instead of a prosecutor.

As a law professor and a child of Holocaust survivors in real life, Rosenbaum has mixed feelings about revenge. While he holds the opinion that revenge is one of the ways in which human beings demonstrate their commitment to justice, he also emphasizes the necessity of self-restraint in seeking vengeance. He says:

Justified revenge — moral vengeance — is not possible unless the avenger is able to exercise restraint, has a specific measure of payback in mind, and knows not to take too much. To be an avenger rather than a hotheaded vigilante is to know when to stop, to set limits, to take what one is entitled to and no more. (*Payback* 35-36)

He adds that revenge is not “always animated by anger and rage” and that in some circumstances, “anger doesn’t have to be the guiding principle behind vengeance at all” (48). So, for Rosenbaum, vengeance may make sense, but it would be better guided by moral justice than by unrestraint rage.

Duncan, instead, is so fixated on revenge and so consumed with rage at the anti-Semites that he loses control of himself easily. Alan Berger comments on Duncan’s rage by saying that “[t]o live one’s life full of rage is psychically distorting” (14). The aggressive tendency, if not directed outwards, would be directed inwards and be harmful to oneself. Sigmund Freud contends that “[i]t really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to guard against the impulsion to self-destruction” (*Lectures* 105). He also points out that “any restriction of this aggressiveness directed outwards would be bound to increase the self-destruction” (*Future* 119). From this perspective, it is not hard to understand the reason for Duncan’s rage to turn inward finally. Without many real-life enemies to unleash his aggressiveness onto, Duncan treats himself harshly by working overtime, giving up leisure and enjoyment, and doing excessive workouts in the gym. He is unable to maintain a stable relationship with anyone, including his mother and wife, so much so that he suffers from abandonment anxiety severely.

The self-destructive tendency of Duncan can be best evidenced by his mental breakdown in the Polish concentration camp towards the end of the novel, where the delirious Duncan imagines that he is physically and mentally humiliated by

neo-Nazis and locked up by them in a barrack in the concentration camp, and that he defecates in his pants and totally loses his physical strength and will power to fight back. By this, the novel clearly shows that the rage at anti-Semite inherent in the Tough Jew ideal may have further confirmed Duncan's Jewish identification in the post-Holocaust world, but it also undermines his physical health, clouds his judgment and disturbs his mental equilibrium. Even worse is that the whole meaning of his existence as a Jew collapses once the rage is dissolved, since his Jewish ethnic identity is a tumbling building founded solely on the base of rage at anti-Semites.

The novel not only demonstrates that the Tough Jew ideal with its overemphasis on rage can be devastating for individuals, but also reveals the harmful influences of basing Jewish identification on rage and retribution at the collective level. The novel questions the validity of linking the Jewish rage at the anti-Semites to the confirmation of Jewish identification in the post-Holocaust era. Tough Jew ideal implies that the more a Jew resents the anti-Semites, the more he is identified as a Jew and aligned with Jewish community. But the novel unravels at least two loopholes in this logic. On one hand, Jewish people's obsession with resenting the anti-Semites only prolongs and even aggravates the harm the Holocaust has done to them. Just as Alan Berger aptly points out, for children of survivor parents such as Duncan, "a life twisted by rage is — in its own way — granting Hitler a posthumous victory" (14).

On the other hand, there is a self-deprecating and even self-hating undertone of the Tough Jew ideal that is reliant on rage. It has been a not-uncommon phenomenon for supporters of muscular Judaism to sever the post-Holocaust Jewish people, including themselves, from the prewar Jewish tradition that is said to blame for generating passive victims. As Yitzchak Mais notices, the neglect of Jewish past in both popular and scholarly works of Holocaust studies has generated self-hatred among contemporary Jewish people:

Scant attention is paid to Jewish life in Europe before the Nazi assault. Thus we know the Jewish primarily as victims, with little knowledge of who they were. [...]. A disturbing consequence of this lack of knowledge is that often, in very subtle ways, Jews themselves are blamed for being victims. (18)

Therefore, if appropriate degree of introspection is necessary for Jewish people to reflect on the Holocaust, to overdo the self-criticism would undoubtedly have catastrophic effects on them.

To avoid this mistake, *Smoke* offers a more reasonable alternative to the Tough Jew ideal, that is, the gentle Jew ideal represented by the characterization of Isaac, who is Duncan's long-lost brother in Poland. As a caretaker of Jewish cemetery in Poland and a saintly Jewish figure worshipped by both Polish Jews and gentiles, Isaac has "no bitterness" and "no rage" towards the anti-Semites (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 212). Rather, he chooses to return to the root of Ashkenazic Jewish culture and carry on the tradition. If the Holocaust is designed by the Nazi to annihilate the whole Jewish race and its legacy, what better countermeasure can the post-Holocaust Jewry adopt than tenaciously committing themselves to sustaining their valuable legacy of Jewish religion and culture?

At the end of the novel, Duncan decides to live without Holocaust temporarily. Though it is still unclear how he is going to live on with Holocaust after that, it is true that Duncan wants to go beyond the rage that defines the Holocaust survivors and their children. According to Rosenbaum, his post-Holocaust trilogy, i.e. *Elijah Visible* (1996), *Smoke* (1999) and *The Golems of Gotham* (2003) deals with loss, rage and "repair and redemption" respectively by design, so as to illustrate his point that "[a]fter loss comes rage, and after rage there is the hope for rescue, repair, and even redemption" (qtd. in Royal 6). To control one's rage, therefore, is the antidote provided by the novel to the toxic influence of the Holocaust. Rosenbaum points out that:

The Holocaust is nothing but a black hole to me. But the post-Holocaust, while not an overlay of the original, nonetheless offers the possibility for something else, something that is alive and lasting, something that can endure, precisely because Holocaust memory requires survivors, and the post-Holocaust demands that the memory of the Holocaust not prevent the forward march into the future. (qtd. in Royal 4)

Therefore, this novel distinguishes Jewish people's collective memory of the Holocaust from their common hatred of or rage at the anti-Semites. Holocaust can facilitate Jewish identification not in the sense that Jewish people become more united for their shared feelings of hatred or common desire for revenge, but in the sense that it has become a collective memory of the survivors and their descendants, keeping them always alert to the threatening danger of the anti-Semitism and reminding them of the important mission of carrying on the age-long Jewish tradition into the future.

Problematizing Tough Jew's Similarity to Gentle Masculinity

Since the end of the 19th century, Tough Jew has not just become an ideal for Jewish ethnic identity, but also a desirable model of Jewish masculinity. Tough Jew differentiates itself from traditional Jewish masculinity that emphasizes Jewish men's gentleness, intellectual skills and academic scholarship. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the gentle Jew is indigenous to Jewish tradition, whereas the Tough Jew is actually foreign to it. Daniel Boyarin finds that "[t]he East European Jewish ideal of a gentle, timid, and studious male — *Edelkayt* — moreover, does have origins that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud" (2). While Jewish men do have a martial tradition, Boyarin argues, diasporic Jewish culture has little interest in the biblical warriors and ancient fighters and pays much more attention to male scholars, so in modern discourse "the 'Jewish' heroes, whether of the Bible or modernity, are all transformed into mimics of gentile heroes" (273). So, notwithstanding the sporadic Jewish tradition of violence, the popularity of Tough Jew among Jewish American community is more or less a modern phenomenon. Paul Breines warns against the striking resemblance of Tough Jew to gentile heroes such as James Bond and even to mythic Aryan heroes propagated by Nazi Germany (61-68). The root of this uncanny similarity between Tough Jew and gentile masculinity, as John Hoberman indicates, can be traced back to "Nordau's view that Jewish male dignity is to be achieved by adopting the predominant Western masculine norms", the norms emphasizing "force of character and the physical abilities that allow a man to conquer both his women and his enemies" (175).

In *Smoke*, Duncan is depicted as a typical Tough Jew in the sense that his masculinity greatly resembles that of the gentiles. For instance, he looks tall and muscled and excels at gentile sports like football. He does not take after his Jewish parents in appearance and can easily pass as a gentile. His brother Isaac thinks he is a big one like Arnold Schwarzenegger, a famous body-builder and Hollywood action movie star (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 208). His Jewish godfather Larry calls him Rambo, a macho character played by Sylvester Stallone in several US action films (134). In the eyes of Maloney, a former Nazi guard whom Duncan tracks and investigates, Duncan does not look like a Jew at all, who is "no doubt an American, with a kind of self-assured native presence and decidedly Protestant features" (100). All of these depictions of Duncan's so-called masculine looks bring to notice the paradoxical stance of the Tough Jew ideal embodied by him.

If Duncan's resemblance to gentile macho man is what qualifies him as

a “tough” Jewish man, then what makes a Tough Jew such as Duncan Jewish anyway? This is a difficult question to answer, mainly because the politics of ethnicity and gender intersect in the Tough Jew ideal. To a great extent, the “toughness” in the Tough Jew ideal is synonymous with the idea of violence advocated by muscular Judaism, according to which, being tough or violent is not just manly, but also Jewish. Or to put it in another way, it is the manliness in being tough or violent that the Zionists want to incorporate into their version of Jewishness, which may begin anew in and more adaptable to the social and historical circumstances towards the end of the 19th century. In that sense, “toughness” in the Tough Jew ideal functions as the essential means of realizing a brand new model of masculinity for the Jews, so as to modify and improve upon the traditional Jewish ethnic identity. This logic is self-contradictory without doubt. In *Smoke*, the ambivalent ethnic nature of the Tough Jew ideal is thus elaborated:

It was about time that Jews grew them as big as Goliath, when they no longer had to rely on David’s crafty slingshot, or the cleverness of Solomon, or the permanence of Samson’s hippie haircut. No more need for gimmicks or cunning or finesse; with Duncan it was all reducible to brute force. In the modern era the Israelis were certain setting a good example of creating an altogether new ethos of the badass Jew, but Duncan’s destiny was to finish the job. (Rosenbaum 36)

Therefore, toughness (or “brutal force” in the excerpt) is the key to unlock the mystery of masculinity, and the adoption of a new Jewish masculinity based on toughness is the ladder leading up to an “optimized” Jewishness. But the story of Duncan unravels the flaw in this argument, that is, Duncan does not become more Jewish for being a Tough Jew. His toughened masculinity has not made him more identified with Jewish ethnicity. Rather, it is his rage at anti-Semites and the multigenerational trauma of the Holocaust he receives from his survivor parents that keep him painfully aware of his own Jewishness.

One scene depicts how Duncan stands over the grounded opponents in the football field, imagining “the uniform rising, the SS armband returning to the huddle, the battle still unfinished” and picturing himself as a post-Holocaust gladiator in war with the Nazi army (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 36). It is not hard to notice that in this scene Duncan attempts to construct his Jewishness and masculinity at the same time. His violent and merciless combat with opponents provides a way for him to construct his masculinity then and there in the sports

field, but the configuration of his Jewishness is without any substantial support, because the sports field is not battlefield and his opponents are not Nazis. Thus the novel challenges the validity of Tough Jew ideal by laying bare its problematic Jewishness and restoring its masculinity to its gentile origin.

But the novel not just calls the Jewishness in tough Jewish masculinity into question, threatening to cancel out the boundary between Tough Jew and gentle masculinity, but also casts grave doubt on the macho of Tough Jew, for the simple reason that it is in fact Duncan's mother Mila, not his father Yankee, that makes a tough man out of him. In the Katz family, the gender roles of the parents are almost reversed. Yankee's sphere is limited within the family. He is the silent type and has a gentle personality, having little authority at home and leaving most important decisions to his wife. Mila, instead, takes up many male-dominated occupations in the public sphere, such as the brains of the Jewish Mafia in Miami and a card shark. Stern, apathetic and autocratic as she is, she withholds all her maternity in rearing Duncan and assumes the paternal function of disciplining Duncan in the toughest manner. If the usual pattern of boy's growth to be a man is to identify with his father, or anyone impersonating the paternal function, then in the Katz family, it is not Yankee but Mila that cultivates masculinity in Duncan.

In general, Mila chooses an irregular path for Duncan. She forces him to practice martial arts and encourages him to fight as an animal in the street fight and football games. She prohibits his involvement in "effeminate" activities or behavior such as playing piano and taking medicines. Through all these prohibitions and discipline, Duncan is cultivated to be a special kind of Jewish man, "a very different conception of the standard Jewish prince," "[a] Frankenstein experiment gone right this time" and "a modern-day golem from Miami Beach who could defend any Jewish ghetto anywhere, anytime" (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 36). This explains the conflicting subjectivity of Duncan. He is as strong as iron without but as fragile as ice within. His rage is more like a defense mechanism that prevents him from feeling the emotions that will soften him. Therefore, Duncan's masculinity is based on a paradox: he learns how to be a man from his mother, and he has to identify with her in order to differentiate himself from her in gender. This paradox becomes a destiny that he fights against in vain.

Reshaping Jewish Ethnic and Masculine Identities

Duncan has to learn how to be a Jewish man from his mother, not just because of his father's discharging of paternal responsibilities, but also because of the fact that the ancient Jewish tradition has been ruptured by the Holocaust. It is thus described

in the novel:

But Auschwitz had shattered such time-honored traditions. Since the oldest people in the ghettos and the camps were also the most vulnerable – and generally the ones who died the soonest — there was a severe shortage of grandparents after the war. (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 10)

Now that the best of the European Jewry have been killed in the concentration camp, there is a severe shortage of esteemed Jewish men to impart Jewish knowledge or implement Jewish rituals and practices. In the novel, Jewish Mafia in Miami takes over these honorable jobs, but performs rather poorly and awkwardly.

As the novel shows, the Holocaust is not the only reason for the decline of Jewish tradition in the post-Holocaust world. Cultural assimilation and commercialism are also to blame. For example, Howard Minskoff, a minor character in *Smoke*, is an Americanized Jew, who revels in his dissipated life with gentile supermodels, non-kosher wine and drunken orgy. When attending the party Howard throws for the Seder, the feast commemorating the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, celebrated on the first two nights of Passover, both Duncan and Isaac feel uncomfortable with the unrestraint merrymaking and even debauchery at the party. Isaac comments that the party is “spiritually empty” and he cannot help worrying “[w]hat will happen to Holocaust one day” (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 292). As the novel evidences, the WWII Holocaust has already been subject to the lethal influence of emerging commercialism in Poland, which is the motherland of Eastern European Jewry, the ancestors of Jewish Americans like Duncan and Isaac. The novel narrates that the infamous Nazi concentration camps in Poland such as Auschwitz become tourist sites, charging fees for car parking and selling tickets to visitors. A painful trauma of the Jew now turns out to be a commercialized product for sale and for show.

Facing the decline of Jewish tradition due to the Holocaust, assimilation and commercialism, one may resort to the Tough Jew ideal for a stable source of Jewish ethnic and masculine identification. But the reality is hardly positive. It is aforementioned that the Tough Jew ideal is more or less a stress reaction of the Zionism to the increasing anti-Semitic movement at the end of the 19th century. Tough Jew ideal is meant for self-preservation of the Jewry against anti-Semitism, even by means of necessary violence. But *Smoke* shows that despite the existence of the neo-Nazi punk like Arthur Schweigert and former Nazi such as Maloney in the post-Holocaust America, they pose no real threat at all to the safety of Duncan

and other Jewish-Americans. Even in Poland that is rumored to be the base of neo-Nazis, Duncan only encounters neo-Nazis of his own imagination. Thus the toughness in Tough Jew ideal seems out of date and even like a burden that keeps weighing Jewish men like Duncan down.

Rather, the novel shows that Tough Jew is something to be sublated, meaning to be negated, lifted up and preserved as a partial presence in the new synthesis of Jewishness.² In other words, Tough Jew ideal is not the truth or essence of Jewishness, nor is it the truth or essence of the Jewish masculinity. Both its ethnic and gender premises should be carefully critiqued and seriously criticized before the constructive part of it can be incorporated into the new Jewish identity in the post-Holocaust age.

If Tough Jew ideal cannot shoulder the heavy responsibility of providing the sources for Jewish ethnic and gender identifications, can the reclamation of Eastern European Jewish tradition suffice to make up for the broken link in Jewish-American identity politics? Alan Berger notices that “[i]n Poland, Duncan begins to reconnect with the religious dimension of his Jewish heritage; a knowledge that was denied him by his mother’s obsession with vengeance” (14). By “religious dimension of Jewish heritage,” Berger means Jewish religious practices like attending synagogues. But Duncan does not just reconnect with his Jewish root in religious ways, but also in secular ways. Isaac, who is Duncan’s nonreligious half-brother known as “caretaker of the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery” and “Poland’s most sought-after yoga master and spiritual mystic”, exerts decisive influences on Duncan by imparting the lost Jewish and familial traditions to him and opening his eyes to more possibilities of Jewishness (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 167).

Isaac’s resemblance to Mila in appearance symbolizes that Isaac is Mila’s legacy left to Duncan. Isaac is optimistic, forgiving and caring, standing for the normal state of Duncan’s personality, had the Holocaust not devastated Duncan as such. Isaac’s character opens a window for Duncan to their mother’s remote prewar past, when she was still humane, feminine and even maternal. It enables Duncan to rebuild the lost familial link between himself and his parents and to acknowledge his abnormal ethnic and gender identity as “an anomaly, a genetic mutation, a giant among the broken-down remains of Auschwitz alumni” (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 208).

Isaac also represents an important aspect of the Jewish tradition lost to the Holocaust, that is, the *menschlichkeit*³ that the Katz family and the Miami gangster clan cannot impart to Duncan. In this sense, Isaac functions as a link for Duncan to his past, tracing back to the medieval Ashkenazic Jewish culture and tradition once prosperous in Poland. Though he is not a religious scholar like his ancestors,

Isaac miraculously obtains Jewish *menschlichkeit* through his work in the Jewish graveyard and through the oriental philosophy of yoga.

Isaac's spiritual pursuit began when he was thirteen. Upon his bar mitzvah, Isaac found the grave of his great-grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Lewinstein, who was one of the most prestigious Talmudic scholars in Warsaw, Poland. From then on, Isaac worked in the graveyard to take care of the graves of his great-grandfather and the families slaughtered in the Holocaust. It is among the ghosts of a lost generation that Isaac rebuilds his connection to the Jewish past and cultivates himself into an esteemed Jewish saint, resembling his great-grandfather and all the other honorable *mensches* in Ashkenazic Jewish tradition. It is through the connection with Isaac that Duncan is able to transcend the limitation set forth by the toxic legacy of the Holocaust inherited from his parents and to enter into the realm of the once splendid and prosperous Ashkenazic Jewish tradition which was nearly annihilated by the Holocaust. This *menschly* tradition represents an alternative definition of Jewish masculinity that can possibly save Duncan from his abyss of despair and rage.

It should be noted that Isaac incorporates the philosophy of yoga into his pursuit of *menschlichkeit*. From the novel, one can learn that the social and cultural environment in Poland is hardly favorable for Isaac's self-cultivation of *menschlichkeit*. For example, the Nozyk Synagogue their great-grandfather once worked in is now dilapidated and near-empty. There is no rabbi there and a few old men having survived the Holocaust are "like a class without a teacher, had for years led their own services, alternating among themselves" (Rosenbaum, *Smoke* 225). Isaac has to resort to something else to fulfill his pursuit of *menschlichkeit*. Interestingly, the philosophy of yoga shares some important similarities with *menschlichkeit*. *Menschlichkeit* is mainly about the defining qualities of being a respected Jewish man in Ashkenazic Jewish society. There are such important qualities for *menschlichkeit* as truthfulness, trustworthiness, respect, peace, lovingkindness and wisdom.⁴ In Orthodox Jewish communities, studying the sacred texts and honoring God are also indispensable to being a mensch. Yoga, on the other hand, is a holistic worldview and comprehensive system of self-cultivation, comprising of moral restraints, internal observances, body training, breath control, meditation and so forth. Its moral restraints include nonviolence, truthfulness and not stealing, and its internal observances include the study of sacred texts and devotion to God (the guru).⁵ These requirements of yoga are very similar to those of *menschlichkeit*. Though both know about Asian practices of self-cultivation, Duncan's knowledge is limited to the fighting techniques of Asian martial arts, but

Isaac relies on Yoga to train his consciousness for a state of perfect spiritual insight and tranquility. Duncan utilizes (or is forced by Mila to utilize) the Asian martial arts to define his tough Jewish masculinity, while Isaac applies the Asian wisdom to his cultivation of *menschlichkeit*. It is under Isaac's instruction that Duncan learns to cast away his rage and reclaims his *menschlichkeit*. Yoga may not be the orthodox way to Jewish *menschlichkeit*, but its physical and breath trainings heal Duncan's trauma and open the way to his further self-cultivation of *menschlichkeit*.

Thus *Smoke* provides a possible solution to the reconfiguration of Jewish ethnic and gender identities in the post-Holocaust era. Instead of asking the Jewish people to look back into history to reclaim something ancient and never-changing, the novel points to the possibility of looking forward, at a new possibility of Jewish identification that is more inclusive and open to changes.

Conclusion

Thane Rosenbaum's novel *Smoke* demonstrates the changing view of contemporary Jewish Americans on the Tough Jew ideal in the post-Holocaust era. Some Holocaust survivors like Mila base their descendants' Jewish ethnic and masculine identities on the rage at the anti-Semites and the violence that characterizes American gentile masculinity, as a response to the atrocity against Jews in WWII. But Duncan's spiritual plight proves that the ethos of Tough Jew with vengeful spirit and violent means can only bring further harms to Jews either as individuals or as a collectivity. Though its critical representation of the Tough Jew ideal in the characterization of Duncan, the novel reveals that to be a Jewish man in the post-Holocaust world requires one to inherit the ancient Jewish tradition of *menschlichkeit*, to confront placidly the historical memories of the Holocaust, and finally, to embrace the newly incorporated experiences of Jewish people in the process of diaspora. In this novel, this new experience takes the form of yoga. It may have only been the wishful imagination of Thane Rosenbaum as a novelist, but it does unravel the fact that Jewishness is not static, but always in the process of becoming. The novel demonstrates that in the post-Holocaust era, neither *menschlichkeit* nor the Tough Jew ideal is the ultimate answer to Jewish identity politics, which can always incorporate new elements, be it Oriental or Occidental, that are beneficial to the configuration of a stronger, more persistent and more elastic version of Jewish ethnic and masculine identities.

Notes

1. The word “mensch” (or *mentsh* in Yiddish) denotes a decent and humane person, a good human being.
2. For more information about the concept of “sublation”, see Bunnin and Yu, 664.
3. “*Menschlichkeit*” (or *mentshlekhkayt* in Yiddish) refers to the ideal masculinity of the traditional Eastern European Ashkenazic Jewish society.
4. For more information about the basic qualities of *menschlichkeit*, see Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg’s book *Raising a Mensch*.
5. For more information about the components of yoga, see Brian Smith, 2510-12.

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