

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

The Awakening of Memory
Survivor Testimony in the First Years
after the Holocaust, and Today

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN LECTURE SERIES
17 MAY 2000

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Second printing, March 2004

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THE MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN ANNUAL LECTURE focuses on Holocaust survivors who came to America, and on their families. Born in Poland and raised in Austria, Monna Steinbach Weinmann (1906–1991) fled to England from Vienna in the autumn of 1938. Otto Weinmann (1903–1993) was born in Vienna and raised in Czechoslovakia. He served in the Czech, French, and British armies, was injured in the D-Day invasion at Normandy, and received the *Croix de Guerre* for his valiant contributions during the war. Monna Steinbach and Otto Weinmann married in London in 1941 and immigrated to the United States in 1948. Funding for this program is made possible by a generous grant from their daughter Janice Weinman

Shorenstein. The Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture is organized by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The need to tell our story to “the rest,” to make “the rest” participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs.

— Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

I had my first doubts in 1948, while passing through Germany on a train.

— Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*

Introduction

This lecture grows out of twenty years of interviews and, more essentially, re-interviews with Holocaust survivors. In contrast with work based on one-time “testimonies” or single “oral histories,” my interest has been in the ways survivors’ recounting evolves over time and within sustained conversation. And so I have talked with the same survivors more than once, and with some survivors many times, over the years.¹

Still, I should note that this approach was not all planned from the start. When I began interviewing in the late 1970s, I assumed—perhaps naively—that the process would, in important respects, define itself. That is, I assumed that my own and survivors’ experience in the interviews would suggest, clearly enough, how to proceed and how many meetings would be desirable and productive. And, in fact, the cue often did come from survivors themselves. Certainly not always but often, at the end of an interview, people said in effect: “So, we’ll meet again! You’ll come back next week. We’ll talk some more.” And so we did; in a few cases, our conversation continues today.

I should also say that my questions themselves dictated not imposing too much structure at the start. My interest was not only in survivors’ experiences during the destruction, but also in how survivors *talk about* those experiences, how they retell them: through what kinds of narratives, in what order (chronological or otherwise), and in what sort of relationship with a listener to the extent that survivors were free to structure that relationship. And so I assumed that the kind of relationship and way of retelling that survivors were inclined to create with me would shed light on those issues more generally. At the very least, there would be a basis for comparison: how their recounting in our interviews was like, or not like, their recounting elsewhere. Here too, then, was a reason to keep the process at least relatively open—*so that the form it took could itself be informative.*

Now, of course, this interest in form and process along with content is very much the approach of a psychologist. Unlike my colleagues, the historians, who generally like to get directly to the facts—who? when? where? what?—we psychologists like to hang back: “What did he mean by that?”—the classic psychologist’s question. “Why did she say it in just that way and at just that moment? How does what he said here relate to what he said there?” And so on. And so on.

Although I am a clinician, a therapist, I should emphasize that none of my interviews with survivors were part of any kind of counseling or psychotherapy. Still, one draws on one’s training and habits, which include the central assumption that some important communications take more than one conversation to convey. They may require the opportunity, on both sides, to think about what has already been said. They may require the trust that, hopefully, develops within sustained acquaintance. They may require the experience, for both interviewer and interviewee, of working specifically with each other.² For all of these reasons, then, relying on single “testimony” interviews, as we usually understand those today, has not been my own method.

There was one other important reason as well. What probably influenced the course of my work more than anything was learning how *little* survivors had talked about their experiences—at least outside the circle of other survivors and, in some cases, their own families. This period of public silence is now well known. But to me, in 1978, it was news; and it was implicating news. To be told such memories, and then to be told that they had rarely been told before, created a commitment to the process of listening that I frankly had not anticipated when I began.

Now there is a kind of paradox here, one that brings us to the heart of the topic of this lecture: survivors' recounting immediately after the war, along with their later memories *of* that early recounting. It happens that the period of silence following the war was a lot less uniform than we often assume—and as I also initially assumed. And, indeed, one of the striking things about the survivors whom I have gotten to know well is that almost all of them recall a time, shortly after liberation, when they *did* try to write or talk about their experiences. This does not mean it was easy; it almost never was. Still, recounting went on. For some survivors this was in the context of D.P. newspaper articles or short personal memoirs. For others it was in less formal contexts such as a conversation with a liberating soldier or relief worker. But in whatever form, such instances suggest that the notion that survivors were not ready to “talk about it” so soon after liberation needs, at least, serious qualification.

There was, in fact, a significant amount of survivor testimony in the immediate aftermath, although this is a part of the history of recounting that is not often discussed—and so one reason to discuss it here. What is of additional interest is that it may not be discussed, or even initially remembered, by survivors themselves. That is, even survivors who first report that they had not attempted to “talk about it” may recall, in a later interview, that this was not entirely the case (and here one specific example of the advantages of having more than one interview). Further, the very act of remembering early recounting has its own repercussions: most essentially, on survivors' self-understandings—the ways they think about their own efforts and purposes early on. Additionally, I will suggest, the early testimony bears on how we understand the nature and purposes of testimony in general.

In this lecture, then, along with describing aspects of the earliest recounting—its overall scope and the experiences of some particular recounters—I will try to evoke some of its continuing echoes and implications.

Early Recounting

How much early testimony was there? At least for a moment, I will borrow the historian's role:

In the library of the Holocaust research center at Yad Vashem there are two striking posters that hang on the reading room's walls. They were obviously designed to attract attention, and they still so. One depicts a time-line of Jewish history along with the caption, in Yiddish, "Remember what Amalek did unto thee—Collect and write!" The second shows a camp inmate holding up a scroll and the exclamation, "Help write the history of the last destruction!"³

The posters date from 1946 and are two of many that went up in D.P. camps throughout the American zone of occupation in Germany. The project they announce was an initiative of the Central Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany—founded in Munich in 1945 with more than fifty branch offices throughout the American zone. By 1948, the CHC had collected more than 2,500 written testimonies as well as almost 10,000 questionnaires on a range of wartime experiences.⁴

The CHC collection was one of several such projects throughout liberated Europe, most founded and administered by survivors themselves.⁵ Here, I will mention only two. The Jewish Historical Commission in Poland was established in August 1944, in Lublin, and soon opened offices in the major towns and cities of Poland. By 1946, 4,000 testimonies were collected.⁶ Also by 1946 the Jewish Agency in Budapest, in cooperation with the Joint Distribution Committee ("the Joint"), had collected 3,500 testimonies that document the Holocaust in Hungary.⁷ Together with that of the CHC in Germany, then, these projects alone generated more than 10,000 testimonies and the same number of questionnaires in the first few years. And there were many more.

What does this mean? As someone who also works in theater, I know that bright, compelling posters may suggest a community's interest in a project or the fact that not a great many people are expected to show up! Many survivors, of course, were not at all interested in recounting. Some were happy to let others "be the talkers," as is still the case today. Others needed time or less formal conversations among themselves or with a few trusted others for whatever recollecting they were willing to share.

Still, by almost any standard, several thousand registered testimonies in a couple of years is a large number—one that is comparable to the results of the most active subsequent testimony projects. And the participants certainly were not limited to those, such as historians or journalists, who had a professional interest in documentation. Indeed, a good deal of written testimony went on entirely outside these organized projects. Shmuel Krakowski notes:

Hundreds of Holocaust survivors, both the educated and the ordinary folk, set down their recollections immediately after the war, even before they rebuilt their homes. Many of these compositions are hundreds of pages long and relate not only what befell the author and his family but also the history of many communities in the Holocaust.⁸

The great majority of these memoirs were never published; others were brought out only after many years.⁹ Still, even the number of *published* memoirs from the period is significant. One inventory shows that there were more survivor memoirs published between 1945 and 1947 than during any three-year period until the end of the 1970s—the beginning of the contemporary surge of interest in the Holocaust and in testimony. Alain Goldschlager, who compiled the survey, notes the “amazing burst in 45/46/47 which is surprising in view of the practical considerations of displaced persons.”¹⁰ It is that much more surprising, I think, in view of the additional practical difficulties of publication itself.

For some survivors, this first testimony was seen as a direct continuation of efforts to document the destruction while it was still occurring—particularly the writing and recording undertaken within the ghettos. In some instances, the links were direct and personal. Rachel Auerbach, for example, a primary organizer of Ringelblum’s documentary project in the Warsaw ghetto, survived to become a founder of the Historical Commission in Poland. One of her first projects on the Commission was locating and retrieving a portion of the buried ghetto archives.¹¹

Leon Wells had managed to keep a diary during some of his horrific weeks in the Janowska camp. Based upon these notes, he wrote a memoir, *Death Brigade*, that was published in 1946 by the Historical Commission in Lodz (and edited, as it happens, by Rachel Auerbach)—the first version of Wells’ longer memoir that would become well known in its English translation several years later.¹²

Perhaps most essentially, testimony immediately after the destruction and testimony during it often also shared the same overriding purpose: to “let the world know,” based on the assumption that the world did *not* yet know, or was just beginning to know. And thus both were directed toward listeners and readers more anticipated—one must say, *hopefully* anticipated—than actually experienced. Sara Horowitz has contrasted the ghetto writers and survivor-writers (all survivor writers) on the degree of confidence that their voices would be heard “and if heard, [be] understood; and if understood, make a difference.” She notes that those writing *during* the Holocaust were actually more optimistic on all these counts. They

themselves did not yet know the full extent of the destruction, and they certainly did not know what the world knew or how the world would respond.¹³

Now I would suggest that the *first* survivor witnesses occupied a precarious, often contradictory, middle ground. Even after all they had experienced, the destruction itself, there was more they would find out. Within that fragile moment, some, at least, could write for themselves, for the dead, and for a world of listeners still essentially untested.

The Fragile Moment

What was the personal experience for individual recounters?

Undoubtedly the genuine shock and outrage that followed the first reports from the liberated camps, and perhaps the sheer chaos of liberation itself, contributed to faith in possibilities. For a while, the world *did* seem to care. The newsreels played in theaters, Germany was denounced, and there clearly *were* a lot of details that people did not know.¹⁴ Even as acid an observer as Jean Améry recalled a solidarity that liberation initially seemed to promise. He wrote:

[F]or quite some time there lasted what was for me a totally unprecedented social and moral status, and it elated me to the extreme: being what I was—a surviving Resistance fighter, Jew, victim of persecution by a universally hated regime—there was mutual understanding between me and the rest of the world...I was in tune with the public opinion that surrounded me. I felt just fine in the entirely unaccustomed role of conformist.¹⁵

As all know who have read Améry's extraordinary essay, "Resentments," from which this excerpt comes, his elation did not last long. The world and public opinion moved on. Améry was left with what he said the experience of persecution had always been at its core: "an extreme *loneliness*."¹⁶

Many of the survivors whom I have interviewed likewise recall a fragile hope that liberation first evoked.¹⁷ About his life now, Reuben conveys a grief as constant as any I have heard: "I just can't, I can't get it off. I go out, I work, I run around, go here, go there. But when I sit down, it's always sadness again." Trapped within his sadness, Reuben describes himself as "a *gilgul*," a wandering ghost:

You know what a *gilgul* is?...A *gilgul* is, you know, the Jewish people believe, especially the Hasidim and the mystics, they believe that...the soul sometimes comes back. The same way the Hindus believe, the Jewish mystics believe too. So they say...sometimes a soul isn't that lucky. It doesn't go back in a human being. It just wanders around. It can't get in. So he's lost. And they call it a *gilgul*. He's lost. That's what I'm saying. I'm a lost soul....Not in the old world, or the new.

In fact, Reuben has found terrain precisely on the borders of the worlds he has known. He explains that he has kept his store in a section of the inner city that was itself abandoned to violence and neglect:

My store is in a bad section of the city....I could have moved out...because over there it's very depressed, you know, the boarded-up buildings. From the riots in the city. After the riots...they never did nothing to it...I don't know. It reminds me sometimes of the ghetto. The ghetto—everything's like, a lot like in the ghetto. Everything was boarded-up. And ruined.

Reuben thus finds Lodz in inner-city Detroit. He lives in both; and he lives in neither.

But Reuben did not always live the totality of pain he now expresses. For all his losses, he married soon after the war. His family grew—he has five children—and so did his business in what was then a good neighborhood for the store. Thinking back, he even recalled an early attempt to write about his experiences.

I was liberated in Bergen-Belsen...I met a major...Jewish, in the Polish army....And he was writing for a Yiddish newspaper in England. He asked me...I give him a couple of articles, and he published it...I was young at that time, soon after the war.

I asked Reuben more about this writing. He responded:

It was...like a hopeful, hopeful letters, hopeful articles, you know what I mean. About the survival...like, like giving hope, hope, in the survival. That the Jewish people survived, you know what I mean. They're gonna' keep on probably....Like in Hebrew, they say,...“The eternity of the Jewish people is not a lie.” It's not a lie. It's actually a true thing...a true thing, you know what I mean.

From out of his later pain, it seemed an effort for Reuben even to evoke the messages of hope and survival he had once written. More than elsewhere, he punctuated his reflections with pauses, repetitions, and “you know what I mean”—as though recalling a language in which he had once been fluent without being sure that he *did* still know exactly what it means.

Leon also recalled his young man’s language and hopes. From the perspective of the 1980s, he reflected: “Deeply ingrained within me is the conviction that the world didn’t learn *anything* from the Holocaust.” Although Leon now rarely speaks about the destruction, he also had tried to write about it early on, and I asked him whom he understood as his listeners—both then and later. He responded:

Truthfully, when I was young and naive, I thought the whole world. But it is a good indication of advanced age—of being jaded and cynical, and maybe realism—that I feel defeated before I start. The *world* just doesn’t care. My goal would be more modest: to impress Jewish generations to come on the Holocaust....Do I hope thereby to avoid a repetition of it? This is all futile! At least, at least they will not be caught unaware...as we were, when the Holocaust caught up with us.

Leon thus finds a smaller circle for his retelling—future “Jewish generations” and, more particularly, his own children. But it is a far more “modest” circle than the one he once anticipated, and it is surrounded by a far more terrible futility.

Histories like Reuben’s or Leon’s or Jean Améry’s are obviously more complex than such sketches can convey. One could ask, for example, whether Reuben might have fallen into his grief, Leon his cynicism, Améry his resentment whatever their later experiences, perhaps as the fuller impact of the destruction, and their own losses, set in? One could wonder whether their search for a world that was sufficiently responsive could ever have been satisfied in the long run?¹⁸ In one form or other, the survivors raise such questions themselves—in Leon’s own description of himself as “young and naive”; Reuben’s apologetic, almost shamed, recollection of his postwar affirmations; Améry’s ironic reflections about the “extravagant moral daydream,” as he put it, that was at the heart of his resentment.¹⁹

The most essential point, perhaps, is that it *was* “naive” and “extravagant” to harbor such hopes after such destruction. To imagine a “whole world” as one’s listeners, to assert eternal Jewish survival, to indulge in a celebration of solidarity in the wake of the Holocaust

were unrealistic to the core. This is true whatever further reasons for disillusionment were to come. And perhaps the most intriguing thing about the immediate post-liberation period—what helps explain its characteristic swings between giddy exuberance and radical uncertainty—may be precisely the fact that such “moral daydreams” *could* be indulged, even fostered, at this time. With more bitterness than he is usually credited, Elie Wiesel said of the first recounters: “How guileless they were, those surviving tellers of tales. They sought to confer a retroactive meaning upon a trial which had none.”²⁰ It is precisely within that contradiction, that absurdity, that I think we should locate the testimonies and memoirs that emerged so soon after liberation. It is also within that contradiction, I will suggest, that we should locate all the testimony that still goes on today.

Agi's Retelling

I turn now to one more particular instance of a survivor's early recounting, that of Agi Rubin. Agi's experience is especially instructive because her first listeners were actual and not only imagined—a group of Allied soldiers who had been prisoners-of-war in a *Stalag* where Agi found herself at liberation. (A remnant from Agi's death march had been left there by the Germans, fleeing before the advancing Soviet army. The Germans also had abandoned the *Stalag* itself.) Further, Agi kept a diary during the first weeks, and periodically afterward, in which she wrote about her experiences at this time.²¹ It is possible, therefore, to follow the fate of her recounting, and her associated reflections, as these actually unfolded. Finally, Agi is one of those people whom I mentioned at the start who initially reported that she had *not* spoken about the destruction early on. Reviewing her diary, therefore, became her own opportunity to recall efforts she had forgotten she had made—and to assess, from the perspective of today, the yearning that lay behind them.

“I hid it from myself, for many years,” said Agi in our first interview. She was thus surprised when, in our third interview, she reviewed diary entries she had written during the first days after liberation, literally within forty-eight hours (forty-eight hours!) of having survived a death march. Then fifteen years old, Agi wrote in 1945 about the extraordinary care with which she and a few other Birkenau survivors were received in the former prisoner-of-war camp in which they happened to be liberated:

The men look at us with astonishment. We are still in our dirty camp clothes, so it is not surprising they are shocked by our appearance....We don't speak each other's languages, but we do understand their kindness and compassion....

The room fills with inquiring Frenchmen, Yugoslavs, Britishers...They are soldiers, former prisoners-of-war, who had not seen anyone like us before. They are interested in our fate....

Even at this moment, the crematorium remains our nightmare. We are telling everybody about it, whether we want to or not. Our stories are only about the crematorium, whether we want to or not. Because either in my dreams or when I am awake, I can only see the flames in front of me. And the vision never fades.

Too much talk is tiring. The visitors are courteous. They would like to stay longer, but the doctor makes them leave.

Even when Agi did not want to talk about it, she talked about it. Her entry suggests retelling as the “elementary need” that Primo Levi described.

Despite the nightmare that continued to consume her, Agi recalled this time immediately after liberation as one of the most confirming of her life. She was surrounded by a care that was scarcely conceivable after the degradation she had just escaped, and she responded with hope. In the next day’s entry, she wrote: “We talk about the past and the future. And the future and the past. Now good will come....I think we could get back very fast to a regular life—a normal, human way of life—as we were used to years before.”

One year later, however, Agi expressed a very different mood in her diary. She was now far from the group she had known at liberation, and she felt isolated and frustrated, unable to share her memories or her distress. “God, what’s wrong with me?” she wrote. “I’m choked with my own cry. I’d like to cry but I can’t. Today I came home all angered, for no reason.” In a related entry she suggested more about why she may have choked her cry and why she was so angry. “It’s hard to be smart,” she noted, “But it’s harder yet, with a smart head, to live as though ignorant.”

However she acted outwardly, Agi did not hide her thoughts from her diary. Indeed, the diary was becoming more and more important as an alternative, private context of remembering. In the absence of other listeners, Agi recounted to herself or to God or to the imagined other of the diary itself. In April, 1946, she awakened from an Auschwitz nightmare and recorded her reflections. She gave a title to this particular entry, calling it “Auschwitz: The Endless Haunting.” In 1946, “endless” meant one year.

The voice on the radio tells me it’s twelve o’clock. I’m sitting and I’m thinking back. The sound of the music tears at my heart because it always takes me back

and makes me remember. Remember what? Don't ask. I shouldn't even write it. It's Auschwitz. Auschwitz and its flames and its electrified barbed wire....

God, you took my mother away, and my little brother. Where did you take them? To the fire?

I'm looking into the fire. And I think I would go completely crazy if I thought that You, God in Heaven, You are looking upon all of this. And You have not gone crazy...

This cannot be true. That I am here, on this earth, all by myself. That there is fire. That there are people. That there are bones. That there are the suffocated innocents. This is impossible. That ours, that mine, are there.

So perhaps it is good that I can only think rarely. And rarely do I come to my senses. For it seems like now, at these moments,...I can think clearly. I can see the whole truth....

My thoughts have started to wander again. They are wandering to Auschwitz. They are visiting the flames. They are in Heaven and talking with God. And who knows where else they are wandering?

Four years after this entry, Agi expressed greater uncertainty about the place of remembering and about the ways her thoughts were wandering. Having arrived in the United States two years earlier, in 1948, she was now twenty years old. So this is April, 1950, Agi writing on the fifth anniversary of her liberation, in Philadelphia:

Five years. It's not long to write it down. And it's easy to pronounce it. But when I remember, I am carried back even more clearly than before. But why?

I don't know what I am. I don't know when I'm doing right or wrong. Am I right when I'm thinking? And *for what* I am thinking? Many times I think I was just born for trouble. To be a burden and sorrow to everybody, because I cannot laugh. They say, "If you laugh, everybody laughs with you. And if you cry, you cry alone." Yes my diary, here I am—in America!...

But nobody's right and nobody's wrong. Only the truth is right. But that is so rare. Now I'm pushing the years back...Time elapses. But the impossible does not fade from my eyes.

Looking back at these entries more than thirty years later, Agi expressed mixed feelings. “It scares me to think how angry I was then, how desperate and how frustrated.” But she was also relieved by what she had discovered. She noted: “Now I look back. It’s frightening. But I am able to realize that I still had feelings. I wasn’t dead altogether. There was a soul deep down that wanted to come to the surface.” This was also the context in which Agi first spoke about the silence more and more imposed on survivors:

I had to really suppress it. To me, I was right...But the other side would say, Keep it to yourself..Because everybody lived, “This is to forget!”...

Also, we were ashamed...made to feel ashamed... We had to survive again, in a new country. We tried to get along, you know, “I’m an American too!”

Agi’s style is not to complain outwardly. She speaks of learning to cope, to “improvise,” one of her favorite words. And so she spoke that way about her constricted recounting:

I decided, well, I can still do it for myself...And it was helpful. I always had people in my life that I could really write to...For many years, I scribbled to myself in the diary. Or I scribbled to them....It was a comfort. We carried on an interesting correspondence! It was there! It existed!

“It was there. It existed.” But, as for Leon, clearly it existed in a more modest space, and on a more limited scale, than Agi and her “smart head” had anticipated many years before.

Conclusion

Agi’s improvising—scribbling to friends or to herself—continues a process of negotiation and renegotiation that began at liberation itself. The overarching questions were the same for almost everyone: What could still be hoped for? What still remained? Uncertainties about recounting—to what listeners and with what effect?—took their place among survivors’ other questions about what faiths could be salvaged and which were lost forever.

The evidence suggests that, notwithstanding the destruction then so recently enacted, there was a brief period in the immediate aftermath when many survivors answered more hopefully than they would even a few years later. Perhaps this was because the interest of listeners had yet to be tested and the full impact of the terror had yet to set in. Perhaps it also expressed the more general exuberance of liberation itself. Whatever the reasons, “extravagant moral daydreams” had their moment, and were reflected, I have suggested, in both the quantity of testimony and in the qualitative experience of individual survivors.

Strangely, almost absurdly, it was still possible to be “young and naïve,” to believe one might “get back very fast to a regular life,” to affirm “the eternity of the Jewish people,” to anticipate the interest of a “whole world.”

Times changed. Survivors’ goals grew more circumscribed; the early period became a distant past, sometimes forgotten entirely. Survivors adjusted—“when you laugh, the whole world laughs with you.” They became “Americans too.”

Times changed again, and in the last two decades there is renewed interest in the Holocaust and in survivors. Still, there is much to recall from the earliest retelling that remains relevant to our task.

Certainly the early recounting should not be exaggerated. Many survivors did not talk about it. As always, there were impulses to turn away from, as well as toward, the destruction. Still, what is striking in looking back on the recounting that did take place is its essential straightforwardness—how unadorned by now familiar rhetoric and abstraction. When Agi looks back, she discovers not “triumphant human spirit,” but simply the fact that she “still had feelings,” that she “wasn’t dead altogether.” When Reuben looks back, he discovers what is simply true: that he is *not* a “*gilgul*,” *not* a ghostly symbol of destruction, without substance or locale. He wrote Yiddish articles and expressed Jewish hopes. The deaths he recounts are agonized exactly because they are specific and because they are lived—no less now than then.

Something similar could be said about the first listening. As Agi especially describes, for those survivors lucky enough to have a good experience at liberation, the response of their first listeners was direct and unstudied. “We don’t understand each other’s languages,” wrote Agi, “but we do understand their kindness and compassion....They are interested in our fate....They would like to stay longer, but the doctor makes them leave.” These listeners wanted to know simply because they wanted to know. And it is hardly necessary to say that nobody then was talking about celebrating the witness or making a legacy for the future generation or teaching tolerance or the various other projects with which survivor testimony is now associated. The (mostly young) soldiers and survivors *were* the future generation; liberation (for those who could celebrate at all) was celebration enough; “tolerance”—and, indeed, “Holocaust survivors” as a construct—were not yet part of the discussion. Instead, there was overwhelming destruction and death. And there were the few who somehow remained.

At its best, the first listening expressed simple solidarity with those few—the fellowship of conversation itself. “You were there? What was it like? What did you see?” On one side, the survivor trying, somehow bearably, to describe it. On the other side, the listener trying, somehow bearably, to hear it. On a personal level, for most survivors, this was enough. And I will take the liberty of suggesting that for most survivors, on a personal level, it is *still* enough.

But there was also another level. Whatever a survivor’s individual experience—talking about it or not, finding listeners or not—there was the hope invested in the collective impact of their testimony. And that hope, I have suggested, was anything but modest. The world would hear. The world would understand. And—how immodest can you get?—the world, somehow, would change. We have grown shy about such expectations, embarrassed by their scope and their utter lack of realism. But there is, in fact, no more “modest” way to state them.

And so the first testimony brings us finally to the question of what *does* constitute being “realistic” in the face of the Holocaust: The sentimental insistence that humanity will listen, must listen, or the determination—perhaps equally sentimentalized as maturity—to lower, to “nuance,” one’s expectations? When Jean Améry looks back, he savages his naivete but not his principles, which were the foundation of his resentment in the first place. He reminds us that it is perfectly possible to hold fast to the rightness of a claim, even while knowing it has virtually no chance of realization.²²

Such insistence does, indeed, deny the lessons of the Holocaust and its aftermath, almost all of which are lessons in futility. But who among us who teach and write about this history do not do so with the *same* denial, the *same* “moral daydream,” absurd and extravagant as it is, absurd and extravagant as we know it is.

That we do so is cause neither for congratulation nor ridicule—neither for us nor for those first recounters. Perhaps the most that can be said is what Agi said, looking back. It simply suggests that we are “not dead altogether.”

Notes

1. The most complete summary of this work can be found in my *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

In this lecture, I use the words “testimony,” “recounting,” and “retelling” interchangeably. In other contexts, however, I have suggested that “testimony” is a narrower term. Reflecting its roots in judicial or religious contexts—formal declarations of witness or of faith—“testimony” suggests a fixed and finished quality of remembrance that does not well describe either the process or the outcome of survivors’ retelling within sustained acquaintance. Therefore, I typically use “recounting” or “retelling” to describe survivors’ recollecting in general, understanding “testimony” to be one of its specific forms. See *On Listening*, pp. xvii–xviii.

2. There are important methodological and substantive consequences that follow from having multiple interviews. Most obviously, I was able to review the tapes between meetings (I did my own transcribing) and thus to follow-up with specific questions or clarifications. At times, I brought the previous tapes with me so that the interviewee and I could listen together to relevant portions. In many instances, this collaborative listening and re-listening led to results that would not have been conceivable through either one of us working alone. A single example is the story of Leon’s repeated story and our shared reflections about its significance, described in *On Listening*, pp. 156–61.

3. I am indebted to Yaacov Lozowick and Naomi Halpern of Yad Vashem for calling my attention to the early testimony projects and for providing me with the opportunity to look at some of Yad Vashem’s collections of early testimonies when I was in Jerusalem in 1998. The translations of the posters’ Yiddish captions were suggested by Naomi Halpern.

4. Many of the early testimony projects, including that of the CHC, have been inventoried in Shmuel Krakowski’s essay, “Memorial Projects and Memorial Institutions Initiated by She’erit Hapletah,” in *She’erit Hapletah, 1944–1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle* (Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, October, 1985), ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), pp. 388–98.

I have relied on Krakowski’s essay, but there are occasional small discrepancies between his numbers and those in the *Index to the Yad Vashem Archives*. For example, Krakowski

(p. 391) refers to “some 2,250 testimonies” collected by the CHC, while the *Index to the Yad Vashem Archives* notes that “during the three years of its existence the CHC gathered about 2,550 testimonies taken from Holocaust survivors” and then lists 2,536 registered testimonies (*Index*, record group M-1/E, p. 55). It seems likely that the number in Krakowski's essay reflects a typographical error.

The CHC's questionnaires are listed in the *Index to the Yad Vashem Archives* in record groups M-1/L, M-1/PC, M-1/Q, M-1/S. The majority of the questionnaires sought quantitative data about the number of Jews living in various communities before the war, as well as the range and frequency of experiences during the destruction itself. Others had more specific foci, such as the 428 questionnaires in record group M-1/PC, which were specially designed to elicit the experiences of children during the destruction.

Finally, it is important to note that virtually all the early testimonies were written rather than electronically recorded. Some were structured by a list of questions, but most were written in whatever form and length was chosen by individual survivors. Although American psychologist David Boder used a wire recorder for his own 1946 project, and gathered just over one hundred testimonies that way, electronic recording of survivor testimony did not become general practice until a decade later, in the 1950s. See David Boder, *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949) and Donald Niewyk's edited collection of some of Boder's transcripts, *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Recently, the transcripts and summaries of many of Boder's interviews have been made available over the internet through a wonderful project initiated at Illinois Institute of Technology. The can be accessed at <http://voices.iit.edu/interviews.html>.

5. See Krakowski, “Memorial Projects,” for a good overview. Besides the three projects mentioned in the body of the lecture, early efforts to gather or use survivor testimony included projects of the Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center in France, the Center for Documentation of the Jews in Prague, the Documentation Center of the Central Association of Jewish Communities established in Bratislava, Simon Wiesenthal's Documentation Center and Tuvia Friedman's Jewish Historical Center for Documentation in Austria, and the longer-term efforts of Yaacov Ball-Kaduri whose collection focused on the experiences of German Jews who had reached Palestine between 1933 and 1945.

For a further summary of the work of the early historical commissions, of which gathering testimony was only one facet, see Philip Friedman, “European Jewish Research on the

Holocaust,” in Philip Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust* (New York and Philadelphia: Conference on Jewish Social Studies and The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), pp. 500–34. Another outstanding essay that concerns, in significant part, the early testimony is Annette Wieviorka, “On Testimony,” in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 23–32.

6. Krakowski, “Memorial Projects,” p. 389.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 393. The *Index to the Yad Vashem Archives* describes this collection, record group O-15, as comprising “3,534 statements” that “were recorded immediately after the liberation” (p. 53). Here, too, there is a small discrepancy with Krakowski’s summary, which refers to 3,543 testimonies in this collection.

8. Krakowski, “Memorial Projects,” p. 395.

9. The cases of Primo Levi’s memoir of Auschwitz and Richard Glazar’s of Treblinka are illustrative of the challenges to publication in the first years. As is well known, Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz (If This Is a Man)* was almost lost after a small print run in 1947. Levi summarized:

...I felt compelled to write as soon as I returned to Italy, and within a few months I wrote *Survival in Auschwitz*. The manuscript was turned down by a number of important publishers; it was accepted in 1947 by a small publisher who printed only 2,500 copies and then folded. So this first book of mine fell into oblivion for many years: perhaps also because in all of Europe those were difficult times of mourning and reconstruction and the public did not want to return in memory to the painful years of the war that had just ended. It achieved a new life only in 1958, when it was republished by Einaudi, and from then on the interest of the public has never flagged (Primo Levi, “Afterword: The Author Answers to His Readers’ Questions,” trans. Ruth Feldman, translation copyright 1986, in Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoirs* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), p. 375).

In his foreword to Richard Glazar’s *Trap with a Green Fence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), Wolfgang Benz notes that Glazar “wrote this account immediately after the end of the war, before his return to Prague. Because no publisher could

be found for the Czech manuscript, it remained unpublished for more than four decades” (p. viii). The first publication was in German by Fischer Taschenbuch-Vlg. in 1992.

Interestingly, David Boder faced the same problem in the United States as he tried to get some of his collected testimonies into publication. Donald Niewyk summarizes, “Editor after editor told Boder that the public was surfeited with information about Nazi atrocities and that books such as those he was proposing did not sell” (*Fresh Wounds*, p. 5). This was in 1947.

10. Alain Goldshlager, personal communication, February 14, 1997. Goldschlager emphasized that the exact number of published memoirs in the first years was still to be determined, but there is no doubt about the “amazing burst.”

11. Both Krakowski (“Memorial Projects”) and Wieviorka (“On Testimony”) note connections between the earliest survivor testimony and the documentary efforts that took place during the destruction. Meanwhile, as David Roskies has taught us, the gathering of eyewitness narratives *both* during and after the destruction reflects still earlier Jewish sacred and secular traditions. See David Roskies, “The Library of Jewish Catastrophe,” in Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance*, pp. 33–41.

12. See Leon (Welizcker) Wells’ own report on this publication history in *The Death Brigade* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1978), pp. 286, 291–92. Originally published in English by the Macmillan Company (New York) in 1963 as *The Janowska Road*, an updated edition was published under that same title by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1999 under the Holocaust Library imprint. After leaving Poland, Wells himself worked with the CHC in Germany. I thank him for the recent opportunity to talk by phone about his memories of this period.

13. Sara Horowitz, “Voices from the Killing Ground,” in Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance*, p. 51.

14. This lecture emphasizes motives in the early testimony rather than content. Thus, I have not discussed whether the substance of the early testimonies differed, in any essential ways, from testimonies that came later. In part, this is because I have not reviewed enough of the former to go beyond first impressions. Still, the points made about the postwar denunciation

of Germany and the public's lack of specific knowledge about the destruction are relevant, and so I offer the following *as* first impressions:

What I have found *most* striking about the early testimony is, in fact, how little it differs from testimony later, even much later (e.g., videotestimonies gathered during the past decade). For example, the early testimony does not seem to be appreciably more detailed, although one might expect that it would be. Nor does it appear to be *differently* detailed—for example, differently emphasizing acts of resistance, or particularly horrific experiences, or help given or withheld by onlookers. Again, I find this lack of difference to be most noteworthy and remarkable.

Of differences that *do* suggest themselves, I would note the following:

First, there is a kind of *documentary insistence* that runs through the early testimony I have seen—an expression of survivors' knowing that they might well be the sole witnesses to certain events (or at least the sole witnesses likely to recount them), and thus their enormous responsibility to make known names, dates, places that have not been known before. There are some striking moments in the Boder interviews, for example, when one sees how intent the interviewees are that Boder “get it right”—and their urgently correcting him when he does not. In one interview, for example, Boder confuses Belzec with Belsen (about which, of course, he had heard much more), and it takes the interviewee more than one attempt to clarify the mistake.

Second, there appears to be more outrage expressed in the early testimony, perhaps echoing the wider public condemnations of Germany at this time with which survivors, realistically, could feel solidarity. The topic of outrage in testimony, its early appearance and later disappearance, has been interestingly discussed by Naomi Seidman in an essay about the first and later versions of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. See Naomi Seidman, “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3:1 (1996) 1–19.

15. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 64–5. This work was reissued in 1998 by Indiana University Press, published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 70 (emphasis in original).

17. A number of the interview excerpts that are included in this lecture are also included in *On Listening*. Other excerpts appear here for the first time. In keeping with my previous practice, the names of the survivors (“Leon,” “Reuben”) are entirely pseudonyms, but there is one exception: Agi Rubin, who has been identified as “Paula” in earlier writing, wished to be identified by her actual name here. Agi did all of us the honor of attending this lecture, and she responded to questions during the discussion period that followed.

18. Cf. Nanette C. Auerhahn and Dori Laub, “Holocaust Testimony,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5:4 (1990): 447–62.

19. Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, p. 79.

20. Elie Wiesel, “One Generation After,” in *One Generation After* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 14.

21. A few excerpts from Agi’s diary appear in *On Listening*, but the bulk of it has not been published. Agi is now completing a memoir, tentatively to be entitled *Reflections*, which will include her diary along with present-day reflections—thus, she looks back at herself, looking back.

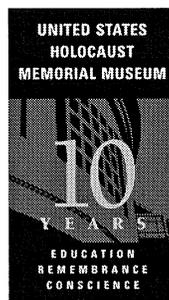
22. Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, pp. 70–72.

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