

Research Note

After the Witness

A Report from the Twentieth Anniversary Conference of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale

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Twice during a recent conference at Yale on “The Contribution of Oral Testimony to Holocaust and Genocide Studies” (6–8 October 2002), Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Witness” was invoked. In this short text, Borges envisions the death of the last survivor of pre-Christian England: “Before dawn, he will be dead, and with him, the last eyewitness images of pagan rites will perish, never to be seen again. The world will be a little poorer when this Saxon man is dead.”¹ With the time fast approaching when there will be no more eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, Borges’s exercise of the sympathetic imagination cannot but resonate. For in “The Witness,” as in the Yale Archive, history and memory are inextricable. It is not enough to preserve a factual or artifactual record of the past. Rather the writer seeks to archive the survivor’s very memory—not only what he has seen, but how he sees, how he remembers.

Yet after the Holocaust we also know that remembering and bearing witness are not self-evident processes. “What if the tragedy of the messenger is that he could not deliver his message,” asked Elie Wiesel in his keynote lecture. “Worse, that he forgot the message. Worse, that he forgot he was a messenger. Or worse, that he delivered the message and nothing changed.” As Wiesel’s parable reminds us, survivors of the Holocaust faced, and may continue to face, troubling barriers, internal and external,

when they seek to recall and narrate their past. Next to Borges's regret for the lost images of the last Saxon, a regret that signals an inherent belief in the value of memory, let us place the words of Auschwitz survivor Isabella L.: "I feel my head is filled with garbage: all these images, and sounds, and my nostrils are filled with the stench of burning flesh.... And it's too much; it's very hard to get old with such—so ungracefully, because that has anything but grace, those memories, you know."²

What does it mean to attempt to record and preserve such testimony? How do such images affect our understanding of the past and our relation to the future? What is the role of the survivor's voice and image in shaping Holocaust history and memory? Initiated in 1979 as the Holocaust Survivors Film Project and established two years later at Yale, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies has been at the forefront of the massive effort over the last two decades to record eyewitness accounts of the Shoah in the United States and internationally. Now housing over 4,200 testimonies (approximately 10,000 hours of video), it continues to interview surviving eyewitnesses, according to archivist Joanne Rudof and cofounder and project director Geoffrey Hartman, who together organized the conference. At the core of its mission has been the effort to "allow survivors to speak for themselves"; it is no coincidence that the project first emerged as a reaction to the 1978 made-for-TV series *Holocaust*.³ Concomitant with this effort, the Archive has actively sponsored both theoretical and practical reflection on methodological and pedagogical questions surrounding the collection and dissemination of testimonies. This has been done in a series of conferences, educational outreach programs and through participation in the production of the documentary film and accompanying book, *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*.⁴

The twentieth anniversary conference, however, marked a pivotal moment in the Archive's history. As reflected in presentations by more than two dozen scholars representing a variety of disciplinary perspectives, formerly dominant discussions of the practical and ethical dimensions of recording testimonies—what is the impact of testifying on the witness? what is the responsibility of the archive and of the listener to the survivor?—must now yield to questions concerning the future of the archive. For although it is now widely accepted that such testimonies constitute a crucial, even necessary, resource for historical understanding and pedagogy, exactly how and why this is the case remain subject to debate.

These questions are hardly simple ones, for, as Antwerp-based literary critic Vivian Liska observed in her closing remarks, if the testimonial archive works, on one level, to document history in the words of the eyewitnesses, it also binds historical understanding to the claims, and vicissitudes, of memories that often challenge or disrupt normative modes of historical interpretation. Consequently, the attitude of professional historians toward survivor testimony has been “as a general rule more than circumspect: it hovers between frank distrust, even rejection, and radical skepticism,” as Yannis Thanassekos and Sarah Timperman of the Fondation Auschwitz in Brussels observed in their contribution. But the exclusion of testimony, they argued, detrimentally confines the historian to sources that can be “either cruelly mute, or insufficiently documented, not to mention biased and self-serving.” Israeli historian Dahlia Ofer demonstrated this point by contrasting the picture of health and medical conditions in the ghettos that emerges from contemporary written sources with an account supplemented by survivor testimony. Survivor testimony, she showed, is especially important for interpreting Jewish documentation of ghetto life, which was often deliberately falsified—for instance, in reporting causes of death—in order temporarily to stave off further deadly Nazi actions. In a similar vein, NYU historian Jan Gross reflected on the importance of oral testimony for his book *Neighbors*, whose account of a Polish town’s murder of Jews was only made possible once the author gave up his disciplinary prejudice against statements from the “injured party.” For Gross, oral testimony not only can provide a different version of documented events, but can also reveal realms of fact otherwise invisible to historical research. “The greater the catastrophe the fewer the survivors,” he writes in *Neighbors*. “We must be capable of listening to lonely voices reaching us from the abyss.”⁵

Yet even as survivors’ voices have attained a central role in historical accounts of the Shoah, British historian Tony Kushner argued, historical writing, as well as film and television documentaries, tend, even at their best, to enlist victim testimony as an “illustrative device” employed to corroborate other evidence or to give a Jewish perspective on an interpretation of history still largely focused on Nazi actions. With such approaches, Kushner suggested, “the testimony itself . . . is rarely allowed to have space to reveal its own internal dynamics, especially in relation to the rest of the person’s life story.” Historiographic uses of survivor

testimony may then conflict with one of the Yale Archive's founding goals, which was to answer the demand issued by many survivors to tell their story in their own words. Indeed, the interviewing protocols of the Archive, which discourage the interviewer from challenging a survivor's account of events, promote this goal even if it means that a testimony might contradict the extant historical record. "The listener must be quite well informed if he is to be able to hear—to be able to pick up the cues," writes Dori Laub, one of the founders of the Archive, in his pathbreaking book *Testimony* (coauthored with Shoshana Felman). "Yet knowledge should not hinder or obstruct the listening with foregone conclusions and preconceived dismissals, should not be an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information."⁶ In a controversial example of the conflict between history and memory, Laub describes how certain historians at another conference quickly discounted a survivor account of the uprising in Auschwitz because it exaggerated the number of crematoria chimneys that had been destroyed. Laub suggests that the historians, armed with knowledge of the defeat of the uprising, fail to see that the very inaccuracy of the survivor's account might ironically reveal a different dimension of historical truth, one pertaining not to factual truth, but to the truth of how the prisoners may have experienced this moment of revolt.

At issue in the anecdote of the Auschwitz chimneys is not simply the valuing of remembrance, but also the ways in which the techniques and conditions under which testimony is elicited affect its significance. The oral testimony projects of the last decades, it was frequently noted, differ substantially both from earlier models of oral history, based on anthropological methods, and from models of legal testimony. But approaches to video testimony have also displayed significant differences. In a deliberately provocative attempt to define a "genuine interview," Sidney Bolkosky, reporting on work done in collaboration with his University of Michigan colleague Henry Greenspan, asked a group of survivors who had been interviewed multiple times, by various researchers, video projects and journalists, for *their* evaluations of different interviewing methods. Too often, Bolkosky asserted, interviews with survivors turn into interrogations or, on the other extreme, the survivor delivers "the usual spiel," "a speech delivered to an audience of one." Absent from both these models, Bolkosky claimed, is a "shared sense of collaborative labor":

“The relationship between [the witness and the interviewer] is where the interview happens if, indeed, it *is* an interview, and that is the relationship that matters.”

Bolkosky expressed an undercurrent present in many of the presentations, a discomfort with the mass production of testimony—especially by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History project founded by Steven Spielberg, which reached its goal of 50,000 testimonies in 2000 (and has now discontinued interviewing). What the Survivors of the Shoah archive will yield remains unclear, since access to its holdings has been extremely limited thus far. But interviewing protocols involving lengthy questionnaires, and encouraging survivors to conclude their testimonies by hugging family and friends on camera, run contrary to the open-ended, non-interrogatory methods advocated by the Yale Archive, as in its Israeli testimony project directed by Nathan Beyrak where, he reported, the average interview lasts eight hours over three sessions, creating “a feeling of a shared journey in time between the storyteller and the listener.” Drawing on his extensive study of the Yale Archive, cognitive psychologist Robert Kraft further argued that this journey “releases painful emotion but does not diminish it,” just as distance in time seems, paradoxically, to make the Holocaust only more immediate and distressing for some survivors. “It’s *more* painful. It’s *more* alive rather than less so,” reports Eva B. Will certain types of narratives—say, those familiarly American ones of “healing” and happy endings—win out over such disturbing truths, despite the crucial work of scholars such as Lawrence Langer, who has thrown into question all affirmative accounts of survival and remembrance and sought instead to develop a typology of anguished, unheroic memory?

A testing ground for these questions has been the classroom. Walter Reich, former director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, recounted how he invited Norman Salsitz, author of the memoir *Against All Odds*, to visit his class at George Washington University in an attempt to contest what he called the “Schindlerization of Holocaust memory,” which may suppress stories that refuse life-affirming and heart-warming conclusions. During his visit, Salsitz told the story of his father’s murder by Germans, and of his father’s dying words: “*Nekuma! Nekuma! Nemt nekuma!*”—“Revenge! Revenge! Take revenge!” When asked by the students whether he in fact did take revenge, Salsitz told that class: “They killed 21 members of my family, and I killed 21 of them. And then I stopped counting.”

While for New Haven area high school teacher Betty Lou Blumberg, responsible teaching demands, ultimately, the maintenance of a secure, protected environment, Reich's assertion that it is necessary to confront students with disturbing truths found an echo in the presentation by historian Mary Felstiner. Felstiner worried that her students at San Francisco State crowd her courses on genocide in order to inoculate themselves against horror by studying it. It took events that broke the frame of the classroom—a student's virulent anti-Semitism, the San Francisco earthquake, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo—to disrupt their "defensive distance," though with unpredictable, disconcerting consequences. The Kosovo question, for example, created an unanticipated and unresolvable conflict for the students between their opposition to US military intervention and their "belief in all-means-necessary opposition to mass murder."

As Felstiner's anecdotes imply, the question of the future of memory turns out to be very much a question about the efficacy of memory. About this ethically loaded question the conference did not offer much reason to be optimistic. Geoffrey Hartman opened the conference by asserting unambiguously that "the Holocaust has not turned out to be the genocide to end all genocides." In his summation, Jewish studies scholar Alvin Rosenfeld echoed Hartman and asked whether we *expected* that the Holocaust would indeed be the genocide to end all genocides. Answering his own question, Rosenfeld replied that "naively, yes," such were the hopes of the early generations of Holocaust researchers—that study of the Nazi genocide and dissemination of knowledge about it could prove a bulwark against future terror. We cannot speak of a "prophylactic knowledge," Rosenfeld now concludes, but at least past genocides have not been forgotten.

Rosenfeld's refusal to claim too much for memory is admirable, and yet the question of what is remembered and how remains a crucial realm of ethical consideration. What does it mean that after barely more than a half century the Holocaust is, as Rosenfeld also stated, "the most copiously documented crime in history"? While the exploration of histories is not a zero-sum game whereby too much attention to one blocks out attention to others (and perhaps the contrary is the case), there are real dilemmas that emerge here. Robert Perks of the British Library's National Sound Archive ended a presentation about his library's resources with the

admission that he could no longer dedicate himself to the task of collecting Holocaust testimonies. While the British archive contains interviews with approximately half of all survivors and refugees living in England, other experiences pertinent to British history remain underdocumented or even undocumented.

Although its ecumenical title stressed the contribution of oral testimony to both Holocaust studies and genocide studies more broadly conceived, the Yale conference focused primarily, but not exclusively, on the Nazi genocide. Lectures associated with the conference by Leona Toker and Patricia Klindienst discussed the relationship between Holocaust and Gulag literature and between responses to the Native American and Cambodian genocides, respectively, but in the absence of Philip Gourevitch, who was slated to speak on the Rwandan genocide, there was only one non-Holocaust-related talk in the conference proper: the writer Peter Balakian's moving account of growing up in the wake of the Armenian genocide.⁷ Like the second generation after the Holocaust, Balakian grew up in a haunted dreamscape in which fragments of the traumatic past were "smuggled in" to his otherwise comfortable suburban childhood. The problem of how to deal with this postmemory (to use Marianne Hirsch's term), this shadow of a past not one's own, demonstrates that even when the histories themselves are quite different from each other, problems of memory cut across the range of historical experiences.

And yet, there are obvious differences as well between the significance of the memorial cultures surrounding the Holocaust and the significance of those surrounding the Armenian genocide. In confirmation of Hitler's well-known pronouncement that it had already been forgotten, the Armenian genocide continues to be denied by the Turkish government, while its memory is repressed by Turkish society and its history largely ignored outside of Armenian communities. The efficacy of memory, we are forced to recognize, has more than a little to do with the politics of memory—that is, with the interests, institutions and conceptual frameworks that mediate what we know of the past.

How these frameworks have shaped the historical, pedagogical and political meanings of Holocaust testimony was the subject of several presentations. As both French historian Annette Wieviorka and Yale sociologist Jeffrey Alexander observed, figures such as the "survivor" and the "perpetrator" become recognizable social identities only in relationship

to particular cultural, historical and legal contexts. For Wieviorka and others, the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, in which survivors were put on the stand as witnesses even when written documentation would have sufficed for conviction, marks the advent of the survivor as the “bearer of history,” transforming the Shoah into “a succession of individual experiences with which the public is supposed to identify.” Focusing on the United States, Alexander also emphasized the importance of identification with the victims and traced the emergence of the survivor as a social identity to changes in the American political landscape: whereas early narratives of World War II dramatized celebratory notions of “ascending progress” in stories of victory and liberation—central to these narratives were the GIs liberating the camps, with survivors appearing, as a *New York Times* caption put it, as “freed slave laborers”—the Vietnam war era and the social unrest of the 1960s brought with them a revised narrative of history focusing on suffering and blocked progress, a narrative for which the survivor became representative. For Alexander, the Eichmann trial also dates the emergence of the *perpetrator* as a universal figure—a banal “everyman” who can be found in a range of discourses, from the famous Milgram experiments to Christopher Browning’s influential account of the perpetrators as “ordinary men.”

In his discussion of the Klaus Barbie trial in France, Henry Rousso, director of the French Institute for the Study of Contemporary History, also used the Eichmann trial as a point of reference. Not only did the Barbie trial involve the testimony of the exact same number of survivor witnesses (111, a number that seems to insist on the singularity of those counted), but also, like the Eichmann trial, it was conceived both as a judicial process and as a pedagogical tool in the crafting of collective memory. It was the latter goal, for instance, that justified the legally immaterial testimony of twenty-nine “witnesses of general interest” who had no direct knowledge or experience of Barbie’s crimes but who were called to provide “general context” and a “historical lesson,” one that at the time of the trial was transmitted through newspapers and the public appearances of the witnesses in the media, since the courtroom itself was closed. Rousso’s presentation suggested that the trial, rather than an exception, has broadly influenced French law, for instance by making it possible for victims, rather than the prosecutor, to initiate legal actions. The example of the Barbie trial demonstrates not only that Holocaust

memory is often framed by political interests, but that, once mobilized, memory can have a social and political impact of its own—as indeed the Israeli organizers of the Eichmann trial intended in the first place.

In cautioning us against seeing survivor testimony as providing direct and unmediated access to history, these projects insist that Holocaust history cannot be pursued without a simultaneous inquiry into the conditions of memory and representation within which this history is produced and received. Indeed, as Aleida Assmann observed, confirming Saul Friedländer, the recent explosion of scholarly work on the Holocaust chronologically follows the growth of popular and even mass cultural Holocaust memory.

If Wieviorka, Alexander and Rousso drew attention to the shaping of Holocaust memory and testimony by powerful social and institutional forces, another group of presenters drew attention to the tendency of memory and testimony to break through the frames that inevitably surround them. As the education scholar Roger Simon argued, testimony not only contributes to the “fullness” of the historical record, it can also disrupt our very means of understanding history. Paul Gilroy made a similar point about sociological knowledge. While the discipline of sociology has not been very successful in coming to terms with the horrors of the twentieth century, Gilroy proposed that taking Holocaust testimonies seriously could help catalyze a “reconstituted, reinvigorated sociological practice,” one that, in opposing the “racialization of the world,” could create a “sociology of hope to complement the sociology of atrocity.”

Testimony’s capacity to break through and disrupt that which tries to contain it—and, in so doing, to foster a capacity for hope—is what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer of Dartmouth College call the “point of memory”: “The sharpness of a point pierces or punctures: like Barthes’ punctum, points of memory puncture through layers of oblivion, interpellating those who seek to remember.” What emerges from the layers of oblivion is not, of course, the whole story, for “a point is also small, a detail, and thus it can convey the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past that come down to us in the present.” In a discussion of artifacts related to Hirsch’s family history in Romania, Hirsch and Spitzer poignantly illustrated these “points” with a carefully wrought leatherbound book of drawings, measuring just one inch long and a half inch wide, given to Hirsch’s relative Dr. Arthur Kessler as a token of gratitude for

the medical services he administered to his fellow prisoners in the Vapniarka concentration camp in Transnistria. This tiny book bears witness, Hirsch and Spitzer argued, not only in the images it contains, but also in its miniature form, which allowed it to escape detection and to preserve a “small core of privacy” amidst the dehumanizing conditions of the camp.

Hirsch and Spitzer’s paper gave reason for optimism that some forms of memory can be passed down across generations. Other papers, however, drew attention toward the darker side of memory’s disruption of available modes of transmission—the traumatic flashes that signal the inability to move beyond an overwhelming past. Whereas the visual testimony of Hirsch and Spitzer’s miniature book elicits an interpretive, active response, the “visual imprint” of traumatic memory, according to Dutch cultural critic Ernst van Alphen, imposes itself in fixed, inassimilable form: “Since the Enlightenment the observation of the visual world has had a privileged epistemological status: it is a precondition and guarantee for knowledge and understanding.... This link between seeing and comprehension, however, has been radically disrupted in the experiences of Holocaust victims.” For Van Alphen, the most powerful testimony to the trauma of the Holocaust—whether oral or written—concerns precisely this disruption of seeing, a disruption he found represented especially in Charlotte Delbo’s trilogy of memoirs, *Auschwitz and After*. Patricia Yaeger, a literary critic from the University of Michigan, also focused on Delbo’s writings in order to illustrate the impossibility for a non-traumatized audience to put itself in the place of extremity. Delbo uses jarring figures of speech, Yaeger suggested, to prevent her readers from coming too close to—and potentially appropriating—the experiences of the camps. When the blood of a dying inmate lying in the snow at Auschwitz is described as “bloom[ing] like a discolored sea anemone,” the very inappropriateness of the simile reminds us that, in Yaeger’s words, “we cannot be the guardians of this experience.” Delbo will not let us form a “community of comfort” with the dying, but her testimony pierces us with the knowledge that a wound has been inflicted—and not just in the immediate victims—that will not easily heal.

And yet, Geoffrey Hartman writes in his recent *Scars of the Spirit*, it is precisely the formation of some sort of community that the Yale Archive attempts: “The interviewers—indeed, all the persons associated with the project—form a provisional community and become representative of a

larger community, one that does not turn away from but recognizes the historical catastrophe and the personal trauma undergone.”⁸ Not a community of comfort, then, but a provisional community bound by memory and the recognition of trauma. We would want to think of this provisionality not as a shortcoming, but rather as constitutive, as something that elicits or invites the responsibility of the other. For if one crucial aspect of the Archive is the priority it gives to the survivor’s face and voice, another crucial aspect—and a distinctive one—is that the testimonies in the Archive do not simply record accounts of the past. For unlike a traditional archive that gathers and preserves preexisting material, the Yale Archive (and similar projects) is involved by its very nature in producing its own documents, which are therefore not only documents of the past, but of the moment of their collection. They record—as an essential and necessary aspect of their production—the formation of a “provisional community” through the shared act of bearing witness. And to the extent that this community remains provisional, it also makes space for, even as it depends upon, the recognition of a future viewer. This is why, although forged in proximity to death, the Yale Archive is, and will remain, a living archive.

NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York, 1988), 311.

2. Isabella L., Holocaust Testimony (HVT-1270), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library. Cited in Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, 1991), 53–54.

3. Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Learning from Survivors: The Yale Testimony Project,” in idem, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington, 1996), 133–50.

4. For more information on the Archive and on *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*, visit <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/>. The proceedings of the tenth anniversary conference are published as *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

5. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, 2001), 140.

6. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*,

Psychoanalysis, and History (New York, 1992), 61.

7. Other associated events included talks on Holocaust literature by Aharon Appelfeld, E. L. Doctorow, Irving Feldman, Susan Gubar, and Thane Rosenbaum.

8. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity* (New York, 2002), 76.