

Witnessing Unbound



Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory

Edited by
Henri Lustiger Thaler and Habbo Knoch

European History | Holocaust | Jewish Studies

Primary witnessing—from survivor and bystander testimonies, to memoirs and diaries—inform our cultural understanding of the multiple experiences of the Holocaust. Henri Lustiger Thaler and Habbo Knoch look at many of these expressions of primary witnessing in *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, which is particularly relevant today with the hastening decline of the Holocaust survivor demographic and the cultural spaces for representation it leaves in its wake.

“With contributions from some of the leading scholars on the subject of Holocaust testimony, *Witnessing Unbound* is a marvelous collection that takes up the tension between the witness as tale-teller and the witness as truth-teller. Its contributors take up well-known and previously unexamined texts, documents, and sites in order to better understand the relation between the living and the dead, those who are here and those who are here no longer.”

—Michael Bernard-Donals, professor of English at University of Wisconsin-Madison

“In this moving and insightful book, readers are reminded that the Holocaust is a subject which is far from exhausted. To the contrary, combining examinations of little-known topics with reexaminations of familiar ones, *Witnessing Unbound* enjoins us not only to research and to commemorate but to grapple with the terrible inexplicability that remains after all attempts to speak of the Holocaust.”

—Dan Stone, author of *Concentration Camps: A Short History*

“The unique approach of Orthodox Jews to the Holocaust finally finds its rightful place. By opening up new sources and approaches, *Witnessing Unbound* will reshape the study of Holocaust history, memory, and memorialization.”

—Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, chief curator of the Core Exhibition at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw

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**EDITED BY
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and Habbo Knoch**



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Witnessing Unbound

Dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey Hartman

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Introduction

HENRI LUSTIGER THALER
with the collaboration of Habbo Knoch

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or
tell a story about them.

Isak Dinesen
(quoted in Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition)

This volume brings together a collection of diverse reflections on witnessing and memory. Primary witnessing, in its various forms and genres—from survivor and bystander testimonies to memoirs and diaries—informs our cultural understanding of the multiple subjective experiences of the Holocaust. These personal accounts, however, forecast an external movement, much like a clock's weighted pendulum, swinging back and forth between the rawness of survivors' experiences and the stylization of their voices, or what Berel Lang has called their "representation-as."¹ The multiple expressions of primary witnessing are particularly germane today with the hastening decline of the survivor population and the cultural void it leaves in its wake, in addition to the inevitable search for generational relevancy. At the very least, the multiple logics of representation, its uses and abuses, caution us that the voices and artifacts left to us by primary witnesses, counterposed against what Geoffrey Hartman has referred to as "adoptive and intellectual witnessing,"² may be engaged in the first act of an undeclared if empathetic tension. The trauma of original experience and its reimagination within contemporary frameworks of meaning-making indicate a widening interpretive and risk-filled

landscape from which to make sense of an event that continues to adapt and change metaphorically and globally.

This book is largely about primary witnesses, the voices of the subject, before the temporal and cumulative effects of years of listening, repetition, reification, and even “technical issues of communicability.”³ The essays in this volume are by some of the leading figures on the subject of witnessing as well as by scholars exploring new primary sources of knowledge about the Holocaust and genocide and the multi-layered subjectivities they continue to express through a variety of approaches. These include a focus on the victims, the perished as well as the survivors, and their experiential worlds captured in testimonies, diaries, and memoirs; on peasant bystanders to the terror; on the value of religious historical/meta-historical writing during and after the war, which act as proto-memoirs for destroyed communities; and on the recently opened Soviet archives that now function as an extended actualization of historical memory, or the archive as witness to its own historicity.

Lawrence Langer has been one of the most poignant interpreters of the complexities of survivors’ fragmented selves. In his chapter “The Afterdeath of the Holocaust,” he describes his experience as an eyewitness in 1964 at the trial of SS General Karl Wolff, and later at the Auschwitz Prozess (trials)⁴ in Frankfurt of SS guards and camp personnel. All the perpetrators in these proceedings denied complicity. Langer contrasts the “evasive memory” of the murderers with the “deep memory” of survivors. For Langer, it is only by confronting the dark and cruel revelations of “deep memory” at the very core of the Holocaust that it can enter human consciousness. He explains:

When dealing with the Holocaust, the difficult challenge before us is to identify with the target of deep memory, that intellectual and emotional terrain where the clear borders between living and dying merge and we are faced with the condition of being what I call “deathlife” (the Afterdeath of the Holocaust), a territory we instinctively flee because it is uninhabitable by reasonable creatures like ourselves.

Langer raises important points in our continued understanding of, and grappling with, the transmitted *lebenswelt* of the primary witness, the survivor: what residue of memories of the perished and survivors do we want

readers, students, museum visitors, now and in the future, to absorb about the Holocaust? What is the level of discursive sanitization that occurs as the modern history of the Holocaust is fragmented into multiple themes and subjects in scholarly research, in arts and letters? How can the brutality of the core details of the Holocaust compete with other phases of its historical trajectories and contingencies that are much more palatably absorbed? What form does “evasive memory” take today when the horror of how mass slaughter was meted out exists alongside the very limits of human understanding in history and literature, “offering us,” as Langer argues, “no exit from the trap of this darkest secret of the Holocaust.”

Annette Wieviorka, in her chapter “Witnesses and Witnessing: Some Reflections,” examines the multiplicity of experiences captured in survivor testimonies. She exposes the everpresent tension between a historian’s quest for historical truth and overly authored survivor testimonies. Yet regardless of this phenomena of “self-representation,” which may indeed indicate a variety of subjective truths that compose the meaning of a given event, she clearly acknowledges the importance of drawing the witness experience methodologically closer to problems of historical writing.⁵ The testimonies of survivors, she argues, contain the concealed and untold story. Wieviorka notes that during an evacuation march from the camps at Auschwitz, Simone Veil and other prisoners found themselves in a vast camp. Veil is unwilling to fully recount the historical event. She explains: “Those who, for one reason or another, had had some responsibilities at the camp or still had some strength would start to launch into a bit of blackmail: ‘I have not seen a woman in years. . . .’ Meanwhile in another part of the camp a selection was taking place and the SS were continuing their deadly task. . . . Few of us lived through the experience but it did take place and it is very difficult to talk about it.”

In the immediate postwar period, the collective consciousness of Europe was replete with conflicting symbols of victory. In Israel, the ascent of the “new Jew” and decline of the “diasporic Jew” were dominant and powerful tropes for modern Jewish renewal in the post-bellum period. In Eastern Europe, Soviet collectivist ideologies and their resonance in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) supported the heroic nature of the victorious battle against fascism. These political/cultural contexts left little space for Jewish memory within the immediate postwar period. In spite of this, survivors of the Holocaust, immediately after 1945, created

historical commissions in Germany, France, Poland, Austria, and Italy. They focused on exposing the crimes of National Socialism, demanding legal and moral redress as well as creating a basis for future historical research on the Holocaust. They consciously related this investigative work within the Jewish tradition of *khurban-forschung* (destruction research) utilized by Eastern European Jews to document antisemitic atrocities in the early twentieth century. As Laura Jockusch has argued, “On a more abstract level, the commission workers viewed their accumulated documents and chronicles of the past as ‘memorials’ or ‘gravestones’ for their dead.”⁶ Survivors and their families—certainly after 1950, with the closing of the displaced persons camps and the new State of Israel—were virtually alone in commemorating the genocide of European Jewry. In the postwar Orthodox world, rabbis and talmudic scholars offered a variety of ontological reasons and theological responsa in face of the sheer scale of the mass killings. Memory in its various expressive, liturgical, and literary forms and genres—both religious and secular—circulated largely amongst survivors. The postwar silence of survivors had been overstated in Holocaust literature.⁷ Survivors were not quiescent. Rather, the cultural contexts of listeners in Europe and America were not yet developed and hence largely absent. Early attempts to elicit testimony from survivors, such as David Boder’s interviews in 1946, did not lead to additional oral histories.⁸ The work of the historical commissions and eyewitness accounts written shortly after 1945 disappeared from the public sphere a few short years after the liberation: world attention looked elsewhere, but not for survivors. The displaced person camps of Europe became unique sites of rebirth and reflection for the still raw experiences of the war years.

Henri Lustiger Thaler, in “Halakhic Witnessing: The Auschwitz Memoir of Berish Erlich,” examines an Orthodox survivor’s memoir, written in early 1946 in the Landsberg displaced person camp in the American Military Zone of Occupied Germany. The memoir illuminates a radically different form and subjective context for cultural memory and witnessing. Lustiger Thaler examines “the relationality of being” between faith-based Jews and rabbis during the Holocaust, through what he refers to as “halakhic witnessing,” as a counterpoint to Primo Levi’s dictum of “speaking in another’s stead.” Erlich’s memoir has two sections: life in the Warsaw ghetto and his internment in Auschwitz. The Auschwitz portion of the memoir is published in its entirety for the first time in this

book. It was written in three languages, Yiddish, German, and English, triptych-like, in a small US Army-issued notebook, as part of an English lesson in the Landsberg displaced person camp. In examining the memoir, Lustiger Thaler provides intersecting and fragmented biographical information on Erlich, culled from the files of the International Tracing Service of the International Red Cross. He explains how a reading of the memoir, through symbolic codes associated with Orthodox Jewish perspectives, provides new methodological instruments to decipher the cultural meanings of witnessing at the intersection of religious beliefs, its embodied comportment, and everyday life in the ghettos and camps.

Esther Farbstein is a key contributor to the relatively new area of Orthodox Jewish historiography. She examines scholarly rabbinic writings of wartime experiences in her chapter "Memoirs Not Forgotten: Rabbis Who Survived the Holocaust." These writings took the form of prefaces to rabbinic texts. Farbstein demonstrates how such introductions to scholarly rabbinic works were the chosen genre for discourses on suffering and Jewish tragedy from the Orthodox perspective. Hence, in this form of Jewish historiography, dilemmas encountered amongst the faithful are viewed through the lens of the rabbi, the communal spokesperson. Farbstein argues that the "forgotten memoirs" embedded in rabbinic prefaces underscore their search for the meaning of events in liturgical texts and offer new knowledge about faith-based survivor perspectives, largely ignored until now, or given token reference under the rubric of "spiritual resistance."

Varied cultural understandings of witnessing, its presence in the archive and scholarship, have emerged as objects of theoretical reflection, as well as an alternate source for methodological inquiry and source for historical writing.⁹ The specificities of different forms of witnessing are today matters of intensive research, based on a deepening understanding of the cultural and political backgrounds of the perished and survivors. Leo Spitzer's chapter, "'Solidarity and Suffering': Lager Vapniarka among the Camps of Transnistria," is based on witness testimony and memoirs. They juxtapose the historical evidence of the Romanian Holocaust against solidaristic networks that developed in Lager Vapniarka in Transnistria. In the midst of mass poisonings, starvation, forced labor, disease, and deprivation, clandestine networks of association developed amongst the inmates. An underground political committee took control

of everyday life in the camp. Spitzer reconstructs the surreptitious life of prisoners exchanging stories, precious food, information from the front, and the bribing of guards. In so doing, Spitzer draws upon resistance—the *Vita Activa* of the inmates—and their agency as witnesses to the terror of their internment.

Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest, is on a singular and unique mission: to find the mass graves of Jews murdered in the former Soviet Union. In so doing he examines the peasant bystander as witness. Henri Lustiger Thaler interviewed Father Desbois for this book. Desbois and his team have gathered the testimonies of peasants in the remote villages of Eastern Europe. As he explains, “My point of view is from the farm. So of course it’s not perfect. A farmer sees a killing in his role as a neighbor.” He defines the village bystander as a witness of a particular sort. Individuals become witnesses, he argues, because we listen to them. Before Father Desbois arrived, the last inquiry about the massacres in these remote villages was associated with the Soviet Commission of 1946. Using data from these interviews, Father Desbois is able to contrast bystander witness testimonies that he gathers today with witness testimonies that appeared in early skeletal form in the Soviet Commission reports.

The Soviet archive as a knowledge-based repository of a neglected history provides a yet different mode of witnessing. Paul Shapiro’s chapter on the Jewish refugee and evacuation experience in the Occupied Soviet territories reveals new parameters for contemporary inquiry. These once inaccessible archives expose what was long considered hidden or lost: histories of the Jewish experience in the Soviet Union which reappear in the form of memoirs, diaries, letters, and testimonies that reveal the dramatic hardships of war evacuations and refugee experiences, opening up new research vistas about the “Holocaust in the East.” Shapiro brings to our attention the saliency of evacuee and refugee experiences as critical to the broader context of Holocaust historiography. His mining of the Soviet evacuee and refugee experience revisits the empirical and now largely political question of the actual number of Jewish victims murdered during the Holocaust, once Soviet history is fully examined.

Insa Eschebach’s chapter, “Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp: Memories in Situ,” looks at the postwar history of an internment