Rita Horváth

Memory Imprints: Testimonies as Historical Sources

Work in Progress: Copyright. Please do not cite without the author’s consent.

This study is part of a larger project on which I am working in close collaboration with scholars from a variety of disciplines.¹ In a series of papers, which aim at developing methods and devices for analyzing testimonies, I seek to establish the personal accounts given by Holocaust survivors not solely as what Lawrence L. Langer terms “human sources” or “human documents,” but also as highly valued sources of historical research that can be examined by applying the classical rules of historical source criticism.

Analytical methods and hermeneutic techniques pertaining to trauma narratives in general, and to Holocaust testimonies specifically, that have already been developed mainly by literary scholars and psychologists suggest that we need to pay attention—“listen”—differently to testimonies of traumas than other kinds of (written and oral) traumas.

¹ A linguist, Professor Joel Walters, a historian, Dr. Boaz Cohen, and I, a literary scholar and a historian, are developing techniques by working together in the framework of a project entitled: “Voices of Child Survivors: Children Holocaust Testimonies,” that was supported by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany from 2007 until 2009. In addition, I participated as a scholar-in-residence in a seminar at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute at Brandeis University (Waltham, USA) entitled “Families, Children and the Holocaust” led by Dr. Joanna B. Michlic in the spring semester of the 2009/2010 academic year. I would like to thank all the participants for the many fruitful discussions: Kinga Frojimovics, Ethan Helfand, Uta Larkey, Joanna B. Michlic, Karen Schwerin, Joanna Sliwa, and Lenore J. Weitzman.
I also often collaborate with MD Katalin Zana, PhD, psychotherapist.
I would also like to express my deep gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Rachel Salmon-Deshen, my colleague, Dr. Michal Michelson, and Abby Rosenberg, the librarian of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, who have read drafts of my paper and gave me invaluable advice.
texts. However, the special methods of listening and understanding developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Henry Greenspan, Geoffrey H. Hartman, Lawrence L. Langer, Dori Laub, Júlia Vajda and others focus upon the survivors as human beings and regard the testimonies as “human sources.” These scholars have not been particularly interested in employing the texts themselves as sources of classical historical research which focuses upon chronology, political history, and the description of events in intricate casual chains. Nor have they concentrated on clarifying what kind of historical sources Holocaust testimonies may be. This lack of concern with testimonies as classical historical documents has much to do with their dominant notions about history and historiography. From the writings of the scholars mentioned above, it is possible to infer that when they talk about history, they draw upon a very broadly defined social historical definition combined with views from the history of ideas. A case in point is Laub’s well-known statement concerning the testimony of the woman who made a mistake in the number of chimneys blown up in the revolt in Auschwitz: “The woman testified to an event that broke the all-compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth.”

This all-inclusive, human-centered, philosophical-existential understanding of history that takes account of everything of human concern, does not, of course, invalidate the arguments of historians who adopt narrower definitions of their discipline. It is thus

---

2 Annette Wieviorka, the historian most dismayed with the recent emergence of what she calls “the era of the witness” notices this phenomenon: “Historians have essentially relegated reflection on this gigantic body of sources to literary critics, to the various ‘psys’—psychiatrists, psychologists, psychoanalysts—and, to a lesser extent, to sociologists.” Annette Wieviorka, The Era of the Witness (translated from the French by Jared Stark, Ithaka and London: Cornell UP, 2006), p. XIV.

necessary to make explicit and clarify the definitions of history and historical events that scholars of various disciplines are now utilizing. Only then can we effectively employ interdisciplinary approaches. In this chapter, however, I cannot undertake such an extensive project. I shall try, instead, to substantiate my claim that precisely by drawing upon and expanding the methods developed by the aforementioned scholars, who define history in a very broad sense, it becomes possible to establish survivor testimonies as crucial sources of historical research even according to the narrower definition of the discipline.

The employment of testimonies in this narrower sense is important because the survivor testimonies and the survivors’ concept of the role of the witness are informed primarily by classical notions of what constitutes history. Besides commemorating the dead and their obliterated communities, the most important aim of the overwhelming majority of those who gave testimony was to document the previously unfathomable historical reality that is now called the Holocaust. This goal is evident in both early and late testimonies. The majority of survivors, classical historians such as Philip Friedman among them, intended their testimonies to be used primarily as sources of classical historical research: for the construction of basic chronologies, as well as for description and interpretation of events, event-sequences and their circumstances.

However, the findings of the psychologists and literary scholars are also essential for the understanding of both the human and scientific significance of the trauma of Holocaust survival, and witnessing. Their work enables us to go a step further in complying with the explicit goal of the testifying survivors to document the Holocaust. Knowing how emotionally invested survivors are in their role as witnesses, how the
undertaking of this role was in many cases already a part of their Holocaust experience contributing to their drive to survive, and what the construction of this role cost them, it is an ethical imperative to employ the testimonies as they were intended: as sources, indeed, as the basis of historical research.

There is a further imperative for drawing upon life writings and oral testimonies about the Holocaust in historical research. These sources alone allow the specifically Jewish and individual character of the victims to emerge. They comprise an almost exclusive record of the reactions and characteristics of the victims, something which is not available in the numerous official sources prepared by the perpetrators concerning the destruction of the Jews during this period. In addition, there are major events of the Holocaust, especially towards its end, that are barely documented by any other source. An example is the ill-famed death marches of Jews from Budapest towards the inner parts of the Third Reich. Often we can reconstruct the route of those marches only by relying on survivor testimonies.4

However, the use of life accounts as sources of research poses a general methodological problem in respect to historiography. Historians traditionally consider life

---

4 For example, Kinga Frojimovics has reconstructed the main routes of the death marches on the basis of early post-war testimonies given in Hungary in 1945-1946 to the National Relief Committee for Deportees in Hungary (DEGOB). See Forced Labor Service in Hungary during WWII. (In Hungarian and Hebrew) (http://www.tm-it.co.il/avodat-kfiya/show_item.asp?levellId=65137 downloaded on May 8, 2010.) Christopher R. Browning’s research on a Nazi slave labor factory in the Radom District and its evacuation to Birkenau is also based on survivor testimony. Browning also carefully reflect on his methodology: “Survivor Testimonies from Starachowice: Writing the History of a Factory Slave Labor Camp,” and “Survivor Testimonies from Starachowice: The Final Days,” in Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 37–85. Another example is Daniel Uziel’s paper “‘We were specialists…’: Jewish Slave Workers in the German Aviation Industry,” that he delivered at the 3rd Annual Summer Workshop for Holocaust Scholars of Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research entitled “The Persecution and Murder of Jews: Grassroots Perspectives” on July 6, 2010. Uziel’s main sources for this research concerning Jewish camp inmates working in the German aviation industry, were 236 survivor testimonies from the Yad Vashem Archives. He drew upon these sources not only to reconstruct daily life in the factories and the camps, but also to reconstruct the production processes, and what were exactly produced in these factories.
writings and oral renderings—testimonies, memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, etc.—to be sources of highly questionable value, merely “anecdotal evidence,” mainly because life writings are hopelessly subjective and warped by problems pertaining to the workings of memory and individual psychology. Narratives that are rendered long after the events occurred—especially trauma narratives that test the boundaries of representation as well as those of memory and therefore necessitate special hermeneutic techniques—usually are viewed with profound skepticism by historians.

First, I would like to take issue with these assumptions and to demonstrate that the traumatic nature of the survivors’ memories, contrary to general belief, may actually facilitate historical research. Psychological studies indicate that certain kinds of traumatic memories record exact details obsessively, and that these memories are uniquely impervious to the passage of time and psychological processes that might change them. Unless traumatic memories assert themselves as a special mode of remembering, they are not available to either the conscious or the unconscious workings of the mind. Langer has described this phenomenon.

Numerous strategies are available to individuals who wish to escape the burden of a vexatious past: forget, repress, ignore, deny, or simply falsify the facts. For reasons difficult to ascertain, what I have called humiliated memory seems immune to these forms of evasion.6

Most probably what Langer notes here can be explained by the fact that traumatic memory is a specific type of memory; in many ways, it is not a memory at all. It does not exist most of the time in the mind of the survivor; it is simply not available in any form or

5 Langer actually calls these kinds of traumatic memories deep memories; humiliated memory is a subcategory of deep memory. Deep memory is the general term, and Langer identifies several subcategories according to the type of the events they record and their relationships to basic concepts of Western culture, such as ethics and morality.

way. Therefore, traumatic memories are not subject to the normal functions of remembering and time. According to Laub, a: “listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma […] comes to look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made. Massive trauma precludes its registration [by the victim’s mind].” Caruth, in an attempt to explain why “trauma precludes its registration,” suggests that trauma is a “wound of the mind […], a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world,” caused by an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly.” Hartman, attempting to describe the relationship between a “traumatic kind of knowledge” and art, suggests that “the traumatic event [is] registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche.” Since the traumatic event is “registered” but not “experienced,” it follows that the record of it, etched into the human mind, is not affected by our everyday mental processes; it remains separate and unassimilated.

Alterations within memories corrupt their documentary value from the point of view of historical research. If we accept, however, that something in the nature of traumatic memories resists change, there is no basis for historians to regard testimonies given closer in time to the events they describe as more reliable than later testimonies. Tellingly, survivor writers have consistently protested against the notion of discrediting

---

8 Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) p. 4.
later testimonies. Indeed, survivors reveal in their tone of voice that they are themselves surprised by their report that the traumatic memories of the Holocaust lay unchanged and in waiting. Nevertheless, they repeatedly and stubbornly insist on reporting this as a fact. Primo Levi, for instance, provides a startling example of a Yiddish sentence that had etched itself into his memory correctly, even though he did not speak Yiddish. “Mechanical memory had functioned correctly,” he concludes.10 The survivor narrator of Ida Fink’s famous short story, “A Scrap of Time,” formulates this notion especially forcefully: “I was afraid, too, that this second time, which is measured in months and years, had buried the other time under a layer of years, that this second time had crushed the first and destroyed it within me. But no, today, digging around in the ruins of memory, I found it fresh and untouched by forgetfulness.”11 Survivor writers thus minimize the problem of passing time and other difficulties accruing from the workings

---

10 Primo Levi, The Drowned and the Saved (trans. by Raymond Rosenthal, London: Sphere Books Ltd., 1989), p. 79. The scientist Levi devotes an entire chapter, “The Memory of the Offense,” to the examination of the workings of memory, and still concludes: “As for my personal memories, and the few unpublished anecdotes I have mentioned and will mention, I have diligently examined all of them: time has somewhat faded them, but they are in good consonance with their background and seem to be unaffected by the drifting I have described.” (See ibid, p. 21.) Many survivor writers, such as Jorge Semprun, Aharon Appelfeld, Imre Kertész, and Ida Fink, have stressed that they did not or could not begin to write immediately after the end of the war about the Holocaust; they needed time before rendering their testimonies. In Ida Fink’s case it was more than a decade, and in Semprun’s case it took sixteen years. (p. 349. Sara R. Horowitz, “Ida Fink.” and p. 1148. Colin Davis, “Jorge Semprun.” in S. Lillian Kremer, ed., Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work, New York, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 348–356.; pp. 1146–1151.) Concerning Kertész, see Rita Horváth’s “In Order Not To Have To Talk About It: Artist and Witness in Imre Kertész’s Oeuvre,” in Johannes-Dieter Steinert, Inge Weber-Newth, eds., Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution (Osnabrueck: Secolo Verlag, 2008), pp. 295–305. Despite the, for various reasons, necessary waiting period, the above mentioned artists all comment on the accuracy and surprising vividness of their memories. Building on these observations, in a recent study, cognitive psychologist Robert N. Kraft can take the following as his starting point: “in the study of Holocaust testimony, the most pervasive finding about memory for atrocity is its extraordinary persistence. Specific memories can remain vivid and powerful for more than fifty years, causing people to cry suddenly, to break down uncontrollably, to become angry. Core memories can remain unchanged over very long periods of time, and memories can intrude forcefully into the consciousness of the individual. While recalling, people can become immersed in memory, lost in the events of the past. […] Recent memories do not weaken or conceal older memories of atrocity, and time does not diminish their potency.” p. 315. Robert N. Kraft, “Archival Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Oral Testimony,” in Poetics Today, vol. 27, no. 2 (2006), pp. 311–330. 11 Ida Fink “A Scrap of Time,” in A Scrap of Time and Other Stories (translated from the Polish by Madeline Levine and Francine Prose, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), pp 3–10.
of memory, about which historians are particularly concerned. On the contrary, the survivor artists assert that early and late testimonies are not that different in respect to the freshness or the accuracy of the memories.

Traumatic memories, thus, usually are not available to the traumatized consciousness, and therefore, they are immune to the normal workings of the human psyche. From time to time, however, trauma-memories violently assert themselves, causing unbearable pain to the survivors. They tend to appear as a series of moving images that flash involuntarily and unstoppably “upon the inward eye,” completely blotting out one’s surroundings. Sounds, smells, tactile and taste experiences often accompany these “mini movies,” and sometimes even constitute the entire memory, but it seems that visual images have a primacy.

Both literary and scholarly works frequently describe the way in which traumatic memories assert themselves. First, an example from a different historical trauma: slavery. Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is trying very hard not to remember her past:

As for the rest, she [Sethe] worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately, her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled

---


13 The primacy of the visual component in traumatic memories and also in the act of witnessing, which even the term “eyewitness” suggests, is a major theoretical concern in Holocaust literature. Anne Michaels for example, in *Fugitive Pieces*, employs the lack of visual memories to represent and symbolize her protagonist’s overwhelming sense of marginality that leads to intense feelings of survivor guilt. Jakob Beer, the child survivor protagonist of *Fugitive Pieces*, who had been concealed in a hiding place prepared in the wall and completely covered by wall paper while his parents were murdered and his sister was dragged away, deems his status as a witness deeply problematic: “I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground.” Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (New York: Vintage International, 1998) p.17.
like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off [...]. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that.\footnote{Toni Morrison, \textit{Beloved} (c 1987, This is an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition published by Alfred A. Knopf), p. 6.}

Morrison’s description stresses the suddenness of the appearance of the traumatic memory. The repetition of the word “rolling” forcefully conveys the moving nature of the pictures that completely erase and replace Sethe’s current surroundings.

In Edward Lewis Wallant’s \textit{The Pawnbroker} (1961), one of the earliest American novels to focus on a survivor of the Holocaust, Sol Nazerman works as hard as Sethe in order not to remember the historical trauma in which he lost his entire family. As he walks towards his workplace in Harlem early in the morning of a summer day:

His feet crunched on the hard-packed sand. [...] Crunch, crunch, crunch. It could almost have been the pleasant sound of someone walking over clean white snow. [...]As he plodded along, Sol watched the quiet flow of the water. Ironically, he noted the river’s deceptive beauty. [...] He narrowed his eyes at the August morning: the tarnished gold light on receding bridges, the multi-shaped industrial buildings, and all the random gleams that bordered the river and made the view somehow reminiscent of a great and ancient European city. No fear that he could be taken in by it; he had the battered memento of his body and his brain to protect him from illusion.
Oh yes, yes, a nice, peaceful summer day; quiet, safe, full of people going about their businesses in the rich, promising heat. A dozing morning in a great city. He looked idly at the intricate landscape, his eyes lidded with boredom as he walked. 

_Suddenly he had the sensation of being clubbed. An image was stamped behind his eyes like a bolt of pain. For an instant he moved blindly in the rosy morning, seeing a floodlit night filled with screaming. A groan escaped him, and he stretched his eyes wide. There was only the massed detail of a thousand buildings in quiet sunlight. In a minute he hardly remembered the hellish vision and sighed at just the recollection of a brief ache, his glass-covered eyes as bland and aloof as before. Another minute and he was allowing himself the usual shallow speculation on his surroundings._

Both descriptions emphasize the involuntary appearance and the uncontrollable nature of the traumatic images or mini movies as they come and go of their own accord. Something sets off the irrepresible flow of memory: in Sol Nazerman’s case, it is a noise resembling the “sound of someone walking over clean white snow.” The trigger is quite insignificant, but it acts upon the sufferer’s unconscious. The reader must make the connections. The literary descriptions also emphasize that once these mini movies start, it is impossible to stop them.

Psychology employs numerous trauma-definitions: it acknowledges the existence of the intensive individual traumatic event, a series of events, or long-term situations, each one of which completely overwhelms a person and remains unassimilated, with continuing negative effects. In his ground-breaking book, Langer differentiates between “deep memories” and “common memories,” adopting the terms used by Auschwitz-survivor artist Charlotte Delbo. By deep memories Langer means “imprints of the Holocaust reality,” whereas common memories refer to recollections of the survivors’ long-term historical trauma that do not assert themselves as raw, completely

---

unassimilated, instantaneously traumatizing forces as do the deep memories. Morrison and Wallant represent the intrusion of deep memories on the victim’s consciousness in the form of moving images. While testifying, whenever deep memories emerge, survivors have to make a decision about the way they will describe the images moving in front of their eyes, that is, if they choose to describe them at all. In any event, the struggle of the sufferer, who simultaneously views the mini-movies and tries to commit them to words, is quite visible in oral testimonies and leaves discernable traces in written ones. Common memories, on the other hand, are the consciously available, regular forms of recollections that can be put into words without serious difficulty. Langer also makes the significant claim that deep memories emerge from time to time within narratives relating the survivors’ common memories.

The typically multiple traumas of each Holocaust survivor that are recorded in these two basic ways in the survivors’ minds manifest themselves in their life accounts as two main types of texts: the recounting of common memories and that of traumatic deep memories. As a consequence of the traumatic nature of the entire period, trauma centers emerge in the life accounts rendered by Holocaust survivors, making the process of recollection spasmodic. These trauma centers, which constitute the emotional centers of the testimonies as well, assert themselves as deep memories that time after time violently puncture the process of recounting the survivor’s common memories. Those events and situations that are consciously available remain subject to various mental processes and therefore can undergo distortion and modification. However, the traumatic events and situations which are registered as deep memories remain impervious to change.
Thus not the common memories by themselves, but the relationship between the two kinds of memories—deep and common—with a special attention to the content of the deep memories gives the listener the best possible access to the largely inconceivable realities of the Holocaust. Greenspan formulates the interaction between the two kinds of memories as follows: “The seeds of the story’s undoing—memories of the worst possible made actual—are thus carried within it. And when they emerge, the story ends. [...] For, in place of narrative unfolding, we now hear a pressured staccato of snapshot images.”

For Greenspan, “the story” signifies what Langer calls “common memories,” which are possible to relate, and can be related to, as narratives. The “pressured staccato of snapshot images” signifies what, in Langer’s terms, are “deep memories.” Interestingly, even when the survivors do manage to relate their deep memories in the form of narratives (illustrative or explanatory, to employ Deborah Schiffrin’s terms), the construction of those narratives evinces a struggle for words by which the deep memories forcefully puncture the flow of the overall narrative. The audience, thus, still experiences them as the break-down of the narrative form.

Cognitive psychologist Robert N. Kraft, who—like Langer and Hartman—has studied oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, also identifies the existence of what he calls “core memories,” which correspond with Langer’s “deep memories.”

---

16 Henry Greenspan: On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger 1998) p. 13. Greenspan comments on the way the survivor struggles to convey the content of the images: “Recounting takes on the language of immediacy and simultaneity rather than remembrance or duration: ‘Here was fire,’ said Victor, and here was always burning rubbish and here were always burning people. [Italics are Greenspan’s] p. 13. I would like to add that the timelessness of the word “always” is also noteworthy, as it signifies ultimate “immediacy and simultaneity.” Greenspan’s formulation: “Manny [a testifying survivor] also came to terminal images.” p. 13.

17 Ibid, pp. 11-15. Greenspan quotes survivors, especially Leon, who comments upon the breakdown of the story as a genre in the face of such memories.

As we have seen, Wallant depicts the characteristic change of the survivors’ facial expression while experiencing traumatic memory: “For an instant he moved blindly in the rosy morning, seeing a floodlit night filled with screaming. A groan escaped him, and he stretched his eyes wide.” These physical alterations, especially the stretching of the eye, reveal the pain together with the intense involvement of the organ of sight in the encounter. Such facial expressions enable scholars, such as Langer or Laub, to note the emergence of traumatic deep memories when watching videotaped oral testimonies. Langer, who calls the emergence of traumatic memories “the assaults of deep memory,” quotes a testimony in which the testifying survivor herself comments upon being suddenly swallowed up by such a memory:\(^{19}\)

Asked by the interviewer to describe her arrival at Auschwitz Barbara T. begins: “It was night, but it was light because there were flames and there were powerful searchlights in the square. The air stank. Some people in the cars had died of thirst, of hunger, of madness. I felt a tremendous thirst. We had no water. And as the doors opened, I breathed in air as if it would be water, and I choked. It stank. And eventually we saw these strange-looking creatures, striped pajamas, who got us into a marching line.” Then an odd thing happens. The witness pauses, half-hypnotized by her own narrative as if returning from a strange place, and apologizes for what she calls her “absence”: “I’m sorry, OK, I … I … forgive me … all right … I’m going to … I kind of was back there.”\(^{20}\)

Langer emphasizes the importance of “witnessing someone like Barbara T. vanishing from contact with us even as she speaks, momentarily returning to the world she is trying

---


\(^{20}\) Ibid, p. 17.
to evoke instead of recreating it for us in the present,” in order to recognize the signs that indicate the emergence of deep memories within testimonies.21

Fictional characters and survivors themselves often describe how traumatic memories emerge suddenly, triggered by factors that are usually unknown to the victim, and blot out the everyday surrounding reality. By contrast, testimonies and other forms of life accounts consciously facilitate the emergence of traumatic memories. Rather than responding to triggers that present themselves by chance and work unconsciously, the survivor, by relating his life story, himself provides the triggers. Thus, the listener/reader can expect the surfacing of traumatic memories, which the survivor both dreads and anticipates.22 In this way, the emergence of traumatic deep memories is made possible by the recounting of common memories. Elements of common memories function as triggers prompting deep memories to surface. Furthermore, the common memories, as contexts for the deep memories, simultaneously incorporate them into an overall narrative and keep them completely apart. Thus we can analyze the narrative contexts (the common memories) of traumatic deep memories both in relation to those memories and also as facilitators of their emergence. In Ida Fink’s story, the narrator’s “digging around in the ruins of memory” signifies the creation of the surrounding narratives, viz. the telling of the common memories. The way to create what Laub has called the “record yet to be made” is through the construction of narratives that relate one’s common memories.

21 Ibid, p. 20.
22 Laub identifies this mechanism as the main reason why the role of the interviewer is pivotal: “A traumatized person cannot help but to relive the most difficult aspects of her memory when trying to remember and therefore will experience the sequellae of her traumatization no matter what the setting.” p. 136. Dori Laub, “On Holocaust Testimony and Its ‘Reception’ within Its Own Frame, as a Process in Its Own Right: A Response to ‘Between History and Psychoanalysis’ by Thomas Trezise, in History & Memory, vol. 21, no. 1 (2009), pp. 127–150.
These then, by triggering the deep memories, become surrounding narratives and a new “record,” containing both, is born.

Kraft asserts that “core memories [traumatic deep memories] are then integrated and constructed into episodic narratives [by the testifying survivor], creating memory’s second level.” Kraft’s simultaneous use of two mutually exclusive words—“episodic” and “integrating”—in his description of testimonial narratives calls attention to the double nature of common memories as both incorporating and segregating forces. I see the process of the survivors’ constructing overall narratives somewhat differently. Rather than having primary “core memories” and then integrating them into an overall, albeit episodic narrative, I suggest that the overall narrative (multiple narratives, in fact) is constructed from one’s common memories and the “core memories” are dealt with as they emerge. “Core memories” can be integrated into the overall narrative of the testimony as descriptions, but as Kraft astutely points out, they are usually related as narrative episodes.

Constructing the multifaceted narrative structure of testimonies and life accounts of historical traumas involves complex mental, psychological, and textual processes. Deborah Schiffrin has distinguished various types of narratives that are employed in life stories. The two major categories are specific and intertextual narratives. There are three basic types among the specific stories that “recount a specific episode tied to a particular time and place.” They “are [all] centered around a single experience, bounded (they have a beginning and end), internally structured (temporally ordered clauses) and

---

23 Kraft, Archival Memory, p. 316.
Based on “function, location, and structure,” Schiffrin distinguishes between explanatory narratives, illustrative narratives, and performative narratives. Being “oft-told stories,” performative narratives are largely irrelevant to early Holocaust testimonies, but the other two types are particularly characteristic of life accounts containing historical traumas. In addition to simple or specific stories, Schiffrin also identifies intertextual narratives constituting various hermeneutic frameworks for life accounts. Intertextual narratives are “non-contiguous stor[ies] that emerge across a set of narratives [and] other discourse segments that are linked in some way, for example by characters […], type of episode […], interaction […], or goal,” endowing life stories with coherent and otherwise not available meanings. According to Schiffrin, identifying and “analyzing an intertextual narrative is not just a question of adding the specific narratives together; rather, it may require finding a more abstract connection (e.g., theme, evaluation, point, style) that links the different texts together into a coherent framework of meaning.” Several intertextual narratives can assert themselves into a life story and provide various hermeneutic frames. Elements related thematically, through a common character, or type of relation, can be interpreted in one another’s context. Life writings thus typically offer several different, even contradictory and mutually exclusive interpretative narratives.

---

26 Explanatory narratives provide sequences of temporally and causally linked events that explain a transition, and thus occur at temporal/spatial junctures.
28 Schiffrin defines performative narratives, “which also serve either explanatory or illustrative functions” as follows: they “are marked as oft-told stories in which characters behave in ways emblematic of their general roles, and plots re-create major themes of the life story.” See Deborah Schiffrin, “Mother and Friends in a Holocaust Life Story,” in *Language in Society*, vol. 31, pp. 309–353., esp. p. 318.
30 Ibid, p. 3.
Building on Schiffrin’s research, I claim that traumatic deep memories, which are usually related as illustrative or explanatory narratives, can even assert themselves as intertextual narratives. Deep memories become intertextual narratives as the same traumatic memories, or closely related ones (routinely connected by repetition compulsion), surface in several contexts within the narrative of common memories. An audio-taped testimony that was collected in the framework of Júlia Vajda’s testimony-collection project\(^{31}\) is a case in point.

Vajda and her students interviewed survivors by employing a “narrative interview technique” that she had designed by drawing upon Fritz Schütze’s and Gabriele Rosenthal’s work. Initially, the interviewer asks the witness to tell the story of his/her life as a survivor of the Holocaust. The interviewer tries not to interrupt the flow of the witness’s narrative: “It is a method that focuses on [the survivors’] own narrative and its own construction. The goal of using this method is to gain at first a text that is not influenced by outside questions.” The second step is to ask questions that refer to events and experiences that were mentioned in the testimony, but upon which the narrator did not elaborate. The aim is to induce further story-telling. Next, this process can be repeated concerning newly surfacing but laconically related experiences. Only then is the interviewer allowed to ask questions in order to clarify specific information\(^{32}\).

Vajda and Szegő produced a detailed analysis of the testimony in question\(^{33}\). By employing psychological and literary methods concentrating on gaps, incongruities,
repetitions, and emotions in the testimony, the authors identified the major trauma of the survivor. The special feature in this case is that “Gyula,” the interviewee (the names in the article are all pseudonyms), does not relate the actual trauma, but Vajda and Szegő show that the specific trauma, which remains uncommitted to words, emerges several times during the interview, and renders the witness speechless for long periods of time, eventually making him angry. Those long silences are the places where the witness is watching the traumatic mini-movie running before his mind’s eye that records and forms the focus of his Holocaust trauma. After telling a story about acquiring Arrow-cross uniforms and describing the purpose for which he used them, the witness fell silent: “But a long-long silence follows all of these. Fifteen seconds. Even though, in a flowing narrative, even five seconds seem long.” [RH’s translation] Then, Vajda and Szegő call attention to another long—eight seconds in duration—pause in the narrative.

The crux of the analysis is that from the ways that the witness does not relate the center of his trauma, Szegő and Vajda are able to identify and name it: the survivor, a boxer, cannot deal with his guilt, which stems from the fact that he was forced to break the commandment of “Thou shalt not kill,” the precept that is, according to him, the sole moral basis of being human. In order to acquire an Arrow-cross uniform that would enable him to bring food to his family in the ghetto of Pest, he, together with a Jewish friend, beat two young, and compared to him, weak lads to death. Gyula talks about acquiring the uniforms from two armed Arrow-cross thugs who had followed him and his friend because they suspected that the two men were Jews in hiding, but he does not say that he killed (or that he thinks that he killed) the young Arrow-cross men. One of the major signs of the nature of Gyula’s trauma, which Szegő and Vajda note, is that he
cannot perceive of or relate his bringing of food to the ghetto and supplying the resistance with weapons as a heroic story, which would be the “natural” way to understand it. Moreover, we perceive of his actions that way regardless how he himself interprets them. Szegő and Vajda write: “And this is what is impossible to tell openly, the information that prevents him from perceiving the story that we see as a heroic one also as a story of bravery and valor and from relating it accordingly. Instead, the message of his story, according to its teller, is that the Ten Commandments are not observable.”

Gyula’s main trauma, which he cannot tell but which emerges in several places within his testimony, constitutes an intertextual meta-narrative, structuring his entire life account and forming associations with the related common memories.

Holocaust testimonies, memoirs, autobiographies, and other forms of life accounts, thus consist of two major kinds of narrative units: the traumatic deep memories typically in the form of a mini-movie, which the survivor simultaneously—or quasi-simultaneously—watches and describes, and the surrounding narrative units relating what Langer calls common memories. Together these document unimaginably severe traumas of harrowing events as well as long-term situations, as they make up both the whole of the testimony as well as its parts. Langer formulated this notion very precisely: “testimony [in its entirety] is a form of remembering.” In this chapter, I shall focus on the traumatic deep memories that constitute the traumatic centers of the life accounts, and I treat the other parts of the testimonies only in relation to those centers.

34 RH’s translation. “És ez az, ami nyíltan el nem beszéldhető, ami lehetetlenné teszi azt, hogy az általunk hősnek látott történetet ő is annak lássa, akként mesélje el, aminek az az üzenete, hogy a tíz parancsolat be nem tartható.” ibid, p. 1.
35 In this chapter, through my analysis of a child’s testimony, that of AS, I will show the emergence of a fully verbalized intertextual narrative constituted by traumatic deep memories, which the survivor has related in detail.
I wish to note that this is one way to analyze life accounts, and there are other methods and approaches to the employment of life accounts as valuable sources of historical research. Examples are Debórah Dwork’s prosopographic treatment of the experience of Jewish children in the Holocaust, Joanna Michlic’s comprehensive socio-historical method of addressing problems of identity and survivor children, and Lenore Weitzman’s primarily sociological approach to the use of testimonies for her study of Jews passing as non-Jews on the “Arian side” as well as for her research on the Kashariot (couriers).

The narrative units surrounding the deep memories may also contain additional triggers that, for some reason, have remained dormant in a particular life account. Greenspan’s interview method that entails the repeated recording of the same survivor’s testimonies over an extended period of time is especially helpful in identifying the central traumatic memories of a survivor, while also acknowledging that in different circumstances, different trauma-centers from the long period of persecution can emerge.

There are, however, central traumas that surface every time the survivor testifies. “Leon’s” story of the execution of an inmate, which the survivor told several times to the interviewing Greenspan, forgetting each time that he had already described this event, is

---

40 Other scholars, including Ronald J. Berger and Sidney Bolkosky have also been interested in repeated accounts of the same survivors. In addition, listening to testimonies of the same survivors over an extended period of time is a formative life experience for many third-generation and some second-generation survivors.
a case in point. There are other traumatic centers, however, that materialize, or are related, in only a few specific contexts.

Traumatic deep memories are thus not constantly present in the mind of the testifier. Triggered by certain elements in the related life story, and also by the act of testifying itself, they surface and puncture the narration of common memories. The potential for the emergence of deep memories, however, is an integral part of the testimonies. What further complicates the relationship of common and deep memories is that some memories can be related as both. The survivor might have a stock way to relate something utterly traumatic, as, for example, the first selection upon arrival in Auschwitz, but other times, when the circumstances are right (for instance, the right audience), the same event can emerge with its entire traumatizing and re-traumatizing force as a deep memory.

Langer argues that observable interactions between common and deep memories are unique to videotaped oral testimonies. By contrast, I claim that we can identify the emergence of deep memories in all kinds of testimonies, including written ones: both early and late accounts. Here, I will demonstrate this point by closely analyzing a handwritten testimony given by a child survivor, AS, in the Zeilsheim DP camp in the

---

41 The audio taped testimony that was collected in the framework of Júlia Vajda’s testimony-collection project (YVA O.99 – Totalitarianism and Holocaust-Survivors, Testimony Collection) and analyzed thoroughly, is a good example. I claim that, led by Szegő and Vajda’s scholarly analysis and with their careful recording of the survivor’s display of emotions, we can identify the times when most probably the survivor was watching the mini movie that at once records and forms his major Holocaust trauma. Even though the interviewee does not relate the content of the “mini movie,” it is clear that he is watching it during the long silences puncturing the interview. After telling the story of acquiring Arrow-cross uniforms and describing for what they were used, the witness fell silent for fifteen seconds. “Even though, in a flowing narrative, even five seconds seem long.” (RH’s translation) In my opinion, a second emergence of the same mini-movie is signaled by another long—eight-second-long—pause in the narrative.

(Dóri Szegő and Júlia Vajda: “‘Ne ölj!’: Egy el nem mesélhető történet az életbenmaradásról,” [“ ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill!’: A story about remaining Alive that is Impossible to relate”] in Múlt és Jövő, 2006, p. 1.
immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. In a future paper, I will also show that different modes of remembering, especially the emergence of traumatic deep memories, can be detected in other kinds of testimonies, especially in artistic works such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, a memoir, and Imre Kertész’s *Fatelessness*, an autobiographical novel.

Since I claim that traumatic memories, because they largely resist the change-inducing forces of time and psychological processes, facilitate historical research, a major research task is to identify and isolate the traumatic memories within testimonies. The technique of literary and linguistic close reading enables us to accomplish precisely this; it aids us in isolating those instances in oral and written texts when the witness is watching one of the traumatic “mini movies” etched into his/her mind. The most important step in the process of isolating traumatic memories is to find the emotional centers of the given testimony. However, before demonstrating the techniques of identifying the traumatic mode of remembering through the close reading of testimonies, I must qualify my claim concerning the usefulness of the “imprint”-nature of deep memories in historical research.

Even if we trust traumatic memories to contain recorded pieces of facts, they still record how things were in a specific place at a specific time. The memory might record a particularity and not something generally true about the era or the events. For example, in Stella L.’s testimony, the witness’s whole manner indicates that when she relates her

---

42 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 881/747. A great number of Jewish child survivors gave testimonies in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust in their own handwriting in the DP camps, as part of their schoolwork. Their teachers asked the youngsters to write about their experiences in compositions, and usually gave them titles such as “What Happened to Me during the Years of the Hitlerist Occupation,” or “My life under the Nazis”, or “My Survival.”

43 Yad Vashem Archives, O.93 – Survivors of the Shoah – Visual History Foundation, established by Steven Spielberg – Collection of Testimonies, File No.: 17227; Date of the interview: 1996, July 30; Interviewer: Helen Stern; Place of the interview: Philadelphia, USA; (Name of the submitter to YVA: USC Shoah Foundation Institute, University of Southern California)
especially traumatic memories of her train ride to Auschwitz, she reports what she actually sees with her mind’s eye. Her entire behavior: the strength, the pitch, as well as the quality of her voice, her body language, and her facial expression, all change. She also sighs very deeply before she starts to talk about her family’s journey to Auschwitz. This sigh separates the story of the train ride from the other parts of the overall narrative. A further indication of her being back in the memory instead of merely relating it is that her English fails; she has to search for the word “bar.” It is especially painful to see that during her struggle to find the word—the memory’s language is of course not English—she wants to point to the object instead of using language, and therefore glances up to the window of her Philadelphia home, expecting to see bars there. Her immense relief when the interviewer supplies the word and the flood of her feelings of gratitude demonstrate clearly that the entire episode is unbearably overcharged with emotions. Since the witness is “back there” and reports a—for her—especially humiliating and guilt-ridden scene, involving the forced regression requiring her to use a “potty,” which she simultaneously sees with her mind’s eye, we can be certain that there were bars covering the window of the cattle car and the prisoners were not allowed to leave the cattle cars at any time to relieve themselves.

However, this does not automatically mean that these conditions were typical for Jews transported to Auschwitz. If we want to rely on testimonies to determine whether this was a typical condition, then we need to examine numerous individual memories that we can think of as “snapshots.” By comparing these “snapshots,” viz. considering them together, we can separate typical from atypical phenomena. No one has doubted the documentary value of snapshots on the basis of their individual-momentary nature. On
the contrary, we are usually very happy to have them. My claim that by drawing upon textual analysis we can identify traumatic deep memories also in creative works by survivors and in survivor testimonies recorded in writing becomes important in this respect, since it leads to the conclusion that we do have a very large number of traumatic memory “snapshots.”

As I have stated before, the major advantage of traumatic “mini movies” is that they remain and assert themselves over and over again, unchanged. However, they are not exempt from the difficulties of interpretation pertaining to memories of trauma and related thought processes. Only when we understand more fully the extent to which the mental and psychological processes manifest themselves as textual features, together with the primary textual necessities that are at work in any text, can we utilize them fully in historical research. We have to determine, for example, to what degree the mental recording of the traumatic memory is, like a photograph, already an interpretation, and how its status as an interpretation influences the way in which it is encoded.

Psychological and emotional forces that interpret the traumatic scene already before and for its recording, work the most strongly within the center of each traumatic memory. Laub asserts that “the record of traumatic events is so frequently lacking and those events that are transmitted may completely lose their essence, often because the

---

44 It is crucial to make this point, because many scholars—Langer and Greenspan among them—mourn the lost opportunity to collect survivor testimonies in a way that facilitates the emergence and identification of deep memories. It is true that certain interview techniques—for instance, Greenspan’s repeated interviews, Vajda’s intensive “narrative interview technique,” the interview technique of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony—are better suited to accomplish this task, but this does not mean that other testimonies taken by different interview techniques or the other kinds of writings by survivors are devoid of identifiable deep memories.
pivotal details are missing.”

Since exceptionally deep emotions usually influence the centers—the pivotal sections—of the traumatic deep memories, I shall presently only claim that we can rely on the content of traumatic “mini movies” to provide us with accurate facts that facilitate traditional historical research when we pay attention to details that the witness mentions or describes in passing. In other words, we can safely take special notice of details that are marginal to the main thrust of the traumatic episode and/or the entire testimony. Laub’s famous example of a woman’s report of the Auschwitz uprising and assertion that all the crematoria were blown up, illustrates this point well. The details the traumatized psyche engraved onto itself concerning the traumatic memory’s very center have already been colored and therefore distorted by strong emotions. Thus, it is advisable to be careful with exact numbers and measurements given in relation to the emotional centers of the traumatic memories that are the emotional centers of the entire testimony or life account as well. On the other hand, details given incidentally while describing scenes that the witness is simultaneously watching with his/her mind’s eye, are very reliable.

Another characteristic example for the interpretative distortion of the emotional centers of traumatic memories can be seen in one of Vajda’s interviews with “Matild/Márta” (Vajda uses both pseudonyms for the same person in her articles), a

---


survivor of Auschwitz, Lenzing, and Mauthausen. Vajda has analyzed this woman’s testimony in several articles and has identified the trauma-centers of the survivor’s life story.\textsuperscript{47} One of the interviewee’s central traumas that continued to cause terrible—and, of course, unjust—destructive feelings of guilt and self-hatred was that, during a selection in Auschwitz, Mengele sent her sister, who was walking in front of her, to the gas chambers. By that time, the sisters had gone through several selections. The survivor describes this fatal one and talks about their “mistake,” which was standing close to each other:

\begin{quote}
We noticed that if two persons looked like each other, Mengele had one of them killed. So my sister and I shared some family features, and tried to walk far from one another for the selection. I must have been very upset, maybe my sister was so too, for sure, my sister was in front of me and I behind her when we reached Mengele, and he sent my sister to the left with those to be gassed (4) and I was in front of him, in front of Mengele, \textit{and my sister waved to me to go with her.} \textsuperscript{48} [\textit{Italics are mine, RH}]
\end{quote}

The 17-year-old girl could not bring herself to go to die with her 15-year-old sister and went where the selecting physician had sent her: “and I didn’t go with her, this distresses me until the end of my life. After all I was my sister’s murderer.”\textsuperscript{49} The survivor is burdened with terrible guilt feelings both because she was careless to stand near her sister during the selection and because she did not die together with her. She adds: “Nonetheless, the neurologist said that it was a natural instinct of life, and I should not eat


\textsuperscript{48} Vajda Júlia: „Sterilizált élet, egy auschwitzi rab rémálmai.” [“A Sterilized Life”] in Múlt és Jövő 2004, No. 2., p. 79. The translation of the excerpt from the testimony is taken from the English translation of the article.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p. 79.
out my heart over it. Thus I lived and my sister ended up in the crematory. Vajda’s analysis shows the dynamics of the guilt: how it is a mixture of not being able to forgive her sister, who knew that a death sentence was pronounced over her, and still called her, and not being able to forgive herself for not being able to forgive. Most importantly for me, Vajda also asserts that even though the interviewee had interpreted then and there, and still interprets, her sister’s wave as beckoning her, this interpretation may be incorrect. Her sister might actually have been taking leave of her by waving goodbye, encouraging her to be strong. Because the testifier had interpreted her sister’s action, her brain recorded a beckoning hand-movement. That is what she sees over and over. This demonstrates clearly that interpretation concerning the center of the trauma, both simultaneous with the experience and following it, can distort the memory of the absolute center. The focus of the trauma here is already interpreted, because the victims, having been inmates in Auschwitz for some time, understood instantaneously the magnitude of the tragedy befalling them.

I claim, however, that marginal details are recorded on the mini movies without being already interpreted. I must qualify this a bit, since perception already entails elements of interpretation, I actually mean that marginal details are recorded with only minimal interpretation in contrast to central parts, which can be recorded as being heavily interpreted. It is crucial therefore to distinguish between the strongly interpreted central elements of traumatic mini movies and the elements that are recorded with only the level of interpretation that is necessary for perception. Details which appeared neutral at the time of the experience and were only later understood and identified as parts of the central trauma, thus becoming elements in the memory’s traumatizing force, are usually

50 Ibid, p. 79.
also recorded without the distortions of a heavy initial interpretation. As the lengthy descriptions of later life accounts attest, while watching the traumatic mini movies they are powerless to stop the survivors themselves often actively look for the kinds of details that revealed themselves as traumatizing only after a period of time. In an article in which I have analyzed the memories of the first selection on the ramp of Auschwitz of young women arriving together with their families and communities from Hungary, I called attention to this mechanism. The arriving deportees learnt only later the bottomless depth of the tragedy of the first selection, and the significance of such details as who was helping whom, who was holding onto whom.\(^5\)

In contrast to early testimonies, in which the majority of survivors described the selection procedure very briefly and in general terms, in testimonies given many years after the events, a great number of survivors dwell at length on the minutiae of the extremely traumatic events that occurred on the ramps upon arrival in Auschwitz. The main reason for this is related to the fact that the unimaginably traumatic way of entering the concentration camp was re-lived over and over again in the minds of survivors from the point of view of their knowledge acquired a few hours later, after they had been admitted to the camp. During these “replays,” survivors examined every detail again and again. In my article I examined how strong emotions, such as guilt feelings, forced the survivor to look for and check certain details and how this mechanism, can be employed in historical research.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Testimonies of enormous traumas are tragically laden with entangled emotions, especially with feelings of guilt. Terrifyingly, guilt is one of the strongest emotions that permeate the testimonies and the entire life accounts of Holocaust survivors. This leads to methodological, psychological, and ethical problems. The most problematic aspect of working closely with testimonies is that traumas reemerge in them together with
A further difficulty concerning the utilization of memories contained as traumatic “mini movies” is that even though the memories themselves do not change, the way the witness reports them while watching the movie can vary depending on the audience, the immediate situation, his/her stage in life, and most importantly, on the surrounding narratives (determined by common memories, to use Langer’s terminology). Langer identifies this particular difficulty by coining the term “tainted memory”: “memory sacrifices purity of vision in the process of recounting, resulting in what I call tainted memory, a narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness’s own present moral sensibility, as well as by some of the incidents it relates.”

Audience, situation, and the surrounding narratives also affect which deep memory surfaces. That is why, in order to analyze testimonies by focusing on the identification of traumatic deep memories, we need to rely on a complex literary and linguistic in-depth analysis of the entire testimony, and to pay special attention to the various narratives and narrative frameworks of the texts as well as their thematic and formal interactions with the deep memories.

The loss of their family is obviously one of the greatest blows that the overwhelming majority of Holocaust survivors had to endure, and continue to survive. Rachel Auerbach’s comment on interviewers who were survivors themselves stresses this particular source of excruciating pain. Auerbach was a member of the famous Oneg

---

54 Deborah Schiffrin’s differentiation of various kinds of narratives within life accounts is particularly helpful. See Schiffrin, “Mother/Daughter Discourse in a Holocaust Oral History” pp. 1–44.
55 Many of them, indeed, did not succeed in surviving this. My grandfather, Dr. István Fehér, who survived Auschwitz, told me numerous times that after liberation, many survivors just turned towards the wall and died. He said that the reason for this was that they realized just then, when they could stop using every drop of their life force to fight for survival, the enormity of their losses, and that there is no one to whom they could return. My grandfather always added that he was so extremely lucky that since he hid his daughter with gentiles and his wife went into hiding with false identity papers, he had a good chance of being reunited with them.
Shabbat Archives headed by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto, and worked after the war for the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, and then for Yad Vashem (Israel) as head of the department responsible for collecting testimonies. When describing the experience of survivor interviewers, she connected the two most painful phenomena torturing survivors: the loss of loved ones as well as the repeated and uncontrollable appearance of traumatic memories in the form of “mini movies”: “Woe to the man who is deeply involved in this experience [that of the Holocaust], and in particular if he is a bereaved and solitary man who lost dear ones in this great tragedy and whose memory recalls over and over again pictures of what his eyes have seen in those days.” [Italics are mine, RH]

Most psychologists and literary scholars identify the loss or the survival of one’s family members as the key factor determining the survivor’s entire life story and self-image. Psychologist and sociologist Júlia Vajda, for example, pinpoints this matter as the sole decisive factor in whether one is able to survive his/her Holocaust experience intact or not. Vajda states that according to her experience, those who were lucky not to lose their families, later became able to lead happy lives that did not revolve around the historical trauma of the Holocaust. Usually, these “luckier” survivors relate their experiences more easily. Moreover, as opposed to those who lost many family members or their entire family, it is possible for them to see their lives as one continuous story, whereas irreparable breaks between the “before, during, and after the Holocaust” is the most characteristic experience of the less fortunate survivors.57 It is thus not fortuitous

that, in the scholarly literature, it is customary to first relate whom the survivors lost in
the Holocaust before taking up any other matter. The account of losses usually precedes
even the specification of the camp, ghetto, or other experiences that one had survived: “A
locus classicus of such confrontation appears in the testimony of Magda F., whose
husband, parents, brother, three sisters, and all their children were engulfed in the tide of
Nazi mass murder.”

It is obvious, then, that we can expect the theme of losing one’s family to lead us
almost “automatically” to traumatic centers in the testimonies that are likely to assert
themselves as traumatic image-series. We can learn much about the nature of
testimonies as historical sources if we analyze the ways that survivors relate, imply, or do
not convey at all this focus of their trauma. Through in-depth analyses of testimonies, I
explore the textual strategies that survivors have employed in order to be able to report
this overwhelming loss. And conversely, it is imperative to understand what happens in
the text when the survivor could not bring himself/herself to address this theme.

---

59 Hanna Yablonka quotes the opinion of Ya’akov Robinson (historian and jurist, who served as a special
consultant to the Attorney General, Gideon Hausner, at the Eichmann trial on problems of the history of the
Holocaust and of international law) on what live survivor testimonies at the Eichmann trial should convey.
From it, we can infer the expected centers of survivor trauma. The loss of one’s family is mentioned with
great emphasis, especially with the point of view of children:
“The term ‘ghettoization’ has become hackneyed and does not convey the suffering latent in it. The
testimony must describe the suffering experienced by a family that is forcibly transferred from its home
with only an hour or two warning. It is not enough to talk about transports. Graphic descriptions must be
provided of the suffering of the people being transported under horribly overcrowded conditions in closed
cars for days on end. Descriptions must be supplied of the gray and hopeless conditions in the camp, the
starvation, and in later stages, the knowledge of imminent death. [It is necessary] to describe the torment of
families torn apart, and especially the horror of children being separated from their mothers. [It is
necessary] to emphasize that people were murdered before the very eyes of their families. … And [we
must] bear in mind that the purpose of providing live testimony at the trial is to introduce tension and to
elevate the trial out of dull routine.” [Italics are mine, RH] Minutes of meeting at Yad Vashem on
Holocaust witnesses at the Eichmann trial. Nov. 23/1960 attended by Robinson, Kubovy, Auerbach, and
Eichmann* (trans. from Hebrew by Ora Cummings and David Herman, New York: Schocken Books. 2001),
pp. 98–99.
I shall study which textual elements prevent or simply do not facilitate the relating of one’s loss of family, and which elements help the survivor to address this extremely painful topic, by examining testimonies of child survivors, written in DP camps soon after the war. The first three examples demonstrate various ways in which the enormity of the trauma prevents the deep memories from surfacing within testimonies. In NF’s testimony the magnitude of the trauma together with its continued existential consequences, in ChB’s case the assumed role of the testifying child, and in AG’s case, the deep structure of the testimony are the factors that block the emergence of deep memories. The trauma of losing close family members is therefore not related at all in these testimonies or is merely implied. By contrast, in the fourth testimony (AS’s account), we can examine the emergence of deep memories in connection to the complex narrative frameworks of the child’s testimony. It is a remarkable testimony, because AS is able to relate the story of losing her mother alongside her last memory of them together at home, but she could not bring herself to verbalize explicitly the fate of her father and younger brother. Therefore, we can study within the same testimony the textual elements that facilitate the telling of these extremely painful stories together with those elements that impede it.

I chose testimonies of children in order to make my point more forcefully since, from the point of view of traditional historical research, children’s testimonies are the most dubious. The reason for this is that children’s perspectives are usually extremely narrow, and their understanding of events tends to be even more inadequate than that of adults. Precisely because children’s testimonies are considered sources of especially
limited value by historians, they are the best test cases to determine what kinds of
information we can learn by using a literary and linguistic analytic approach.

Arguably, however, children can be seen as more qualified to talk about topics
related to family life and the loss of family than any other themes or events, as these
usually form the center of the children’s life experience of the Holocaust, and the
survivors feel competent to describe them. Moreover, children habitually employ their
family lives and structures in order to interpret their experience and environment as a
whole. Topics connected to families are therefore especially suitable for the analysis of
the testimonies of child survivors.

Upon first reading, early testimonies—both by children and adults—usually seem
stark, laconic, and emotionally dry. By conducting a close reading, however, we can
demonstrate that the texts are, in fact, bursting with emotions. In early handwritten
testimonies for instance, there are numerous signs to indicate emotional “hot spots” such
as features of the script—retouches, inkblots, messier handwriting—, textual gaps and
discrepancies, as well as various grammatical mistakes.

A crucial reason for our initial impression that early testimonies are devoid of
emotion is that the loss of the witnesses’ loved ones is almost never described in detail, is
many times only implied, and at other times, the witness cannot afford emotionally to
bring the topic up on the personal level at all. Usually witnesses, children and adults
alike, state in general that Jewish families had been torn apart, and many family members
were murdered. They write general sentences like “without mercy they [the Germans]
took the children from the Jewish mothers and killed them,”  

NF, a child survivor, who gave his testimony in the Aschau DP camp (Children Center) in 1946, for example, does not report the loss of his family in detail.

The translation of NF’s testimony:

BOŁSZOWCE

Aschau UNRRA Team 154

NF, born on July 15, 1930 in Błeszowce (Poland)

Education: 6 classes of elementary school. Lived in Błeszowce [different spelling of the town’s name], until the war, among the Poles, until the Germans came in. Two months after they came in, in 1941 [the “in 1941” seems to be inserted later as the writing is lighter and it is placed where there was space for it.] the German Gestapo carried out an Aktion – they took out the people in transports to Belzec. I managed to hide and so I did not fall among those who were taken away. The next day, they gave us an order that within 24 hours we must leave the [town? – word is missing] and go to the ghetto. Life in the ghetto was very bad. Children Aktionen and adult Aktionen did not evade us one day. In a short while, at the beginning of 1942, they liquidated all the ghettos in Galicia, including the ghetto in our town Rohatyn. We sat in the bunker for three days and on the fourth day we went to a forest, not far from our town. We stayed there for one week and then went to another [forest/place? – word is missing]. I and my sister went to look for bread, and when we got back, we did not find anyone there. We are going, but we don’t know where. [grammatical mistake: present tense!] We went closer to the partisans. We found the partisans and they took us in with great care. We were there until the Russian Army liberated us on April 15, 1944.  

Signature

NF’s written Yiddish is obviously not sufficient, since he writes in Latin characters. The language is so grammatically chaotic that the translator, Yiddish scholar

---

60 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 881/744 SK’s testimony given in Hebrew in the Zeilsheim DP camp: in lines 7-8, in the last sentence of the general story.

61 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 169. Yiddish scholar Vera Szabó translated the text of the testimony from the Yiddish original. The translation stayed very close to the Yiddish text.
Vera Szabó, had to heavily interpret certain features of the original in order to be able to render it in English. As part of the process, she inserted much of the punctuation as well. In 1946, NF was 16 years old according to his testimony, or 17, according to a document kept in the ITS Archives (Bad Arolsen, Germany). Textually the painful emotional intensity of the testimony is evident through the fact that many crucial pieces of information are formulated in the negative:

“I managed to hide and so I did not fall among those who were taken away. The next day, they gave us an order that within 24 hours we must leave the [town? – word is missing] and go to the ghetto. Life in the ghetto was very bad. \textit{Children Aktionen and adult Aktionen did not evade us one day.} In a short while, at the beginning of 1942, they liquidated all the ghettos in Galicia, including the ghetto in our town Rohatyn. We sat in the bunker for three days and on the fourth day we went to a forest, \textit{not far from our town}. We stayed there for one week and then went to another [forest/place? – word is missing]. I and my sister went to look for bread, and when we got back, \textit{we did not find anyone there. We are going, but we don’t know where.}”

\textit{[Italics are mine, RH]}

We are aware of the most painful gap in the testimony because of the existence of a document in the ITS. According to the document, NF’s mother was murdered in the ghetto of Rohatyn in June, 1942. The intensely negatively formulated sentence: “\textit{Children Aktionen and adult Aktionen did not evade us one day},” is overwhelmed by emotions. It probably implies and hides at the same time, the murder of NF’s mother possibly together with some of his siblings, as he also includes “\textit{Children Aktionen}.” (The ITS document contains information only about NF’s mother.) Next, NF relates his hiding in a bunker and then in the forest with others. Knowing that he still had his sister with him, we can suspect that perhaps other relatives were with them too. However, our

\footnote{ITS OuSArchiv, Document Id 20883390. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem Archives)}

\footnote{William Labov in his groundbreaking linguistic work on narratives emphasizes the importance of negative formulations as evaluations within the narratives.}
witness does not tell anything about that matter. Then, in a dryly factual sentence, NF relates how he and his sister remained completely alone: “I and my sister went to look for bread, and when we got back, we did not find anyone there.” The testimony’s emotional arch peaks in the grammatically faulty next sentence which also contains a negative formulation that breaks out of the relative safety of past tense, and from which intense disorientation, fear, and vulnerability radiate: “We are going, but we don’t know where.” The use of the present tense demonstrates not only the inescapable presence of the traumatic losses, but also how disorientation and aimlessness still rule the world of the testifying youngster now in the DP camp.

The negative formulations are in obvious contradiction with the positive tone of the last part of the testimony relating the survival of the witness and his sister owing to the help of the partisans. While in the previous part of the testimony, the rendering of points of orientation was formulated in the negative: “not far from,” in the last section, the point of reference is rendered positively: “We went closer to the partisans.” NF in this very short testimony makes sure that he comments upon the partisan’s unexpected goodness: “they took us in with great care.” The testimony ends with liberation, but the focus of the last sentence is still the “there,” the place where the partisans saved him and his sister. In this testimony of utter disorientation, the fact that NF wrote about the saving actions of the partisans in spatial terms: “there,” and terms of directions: “took us in,” efficiently conveys the youngster’s gratefulness. However, the grateful and positive tone of the ending cannot become a real celebration of survival and rescue, because the losses are too overwhelming.
When the witness was left alone with a piece of paper to write his testimony-composition, without the continuous, and supportive attention of a dedicated, sympathetic adult (teacher or interviewer), he could not emotionally bring himself to record in detail the center of his trauma: the loss of his family. In NF’s case, the absence of continuous adult guidance and attention is especially debilitating, because abandonment was already the key factor in his trauma; he and his sister had been left alone to their own devices in a murderously hostile world.

Another child survivor, ChB, who was born in September 1932, and who takes her role as a witness extremely seriously, relates with amazing accurateness all the Actions carried out against the Jews of her East-Galician hometown and the ghetto. By contrast, she does not talk about the fate of her own family, even though she must have lost member after member as a consequence of the Actions. ChB makes a special effort to render accurately the dates of the Actions and the numbers of those who were killed, but she does not relate her personal story. She strives to depict specific incidents as exactly as possible: besides recording dates and numbers, she also describes events and conditions in detail. Some of the dates and events that she relates are surprisingly accurate, not only for a child, but even for an adult. A number of the dates and events can be corroborated by testimonies of other survivors.

The translation of ChB’s testimony:

64 Laub and Vajda both thoroughly and repeatedly describe the role of this adult whenever they depict the ideal interviewer for their own testimony-collection projects.
65 Boaz Cohen and Rita Horvath corroborated many of the facts rendered in CHB’s testimony.
66 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 644/535. The text of the testimony is translated from the Hebrew original by Boaz Cohen and Rita Horváth: The translation stayed very close to the Hebrew text: wherever the English is awkward and/or faulty, the Hebrew original is also like that. The issue that CHB gives her testimony in Hebrew, which she is learning at the time, is tackled in our joint project with historian Boaz Cohen and linguist Joel Walters. For the language policy in the DP camps see Boaz Cohen, in his article entitled “And I was only a Child”: Children’s Testimonies, Bergen-Belsen
ChB (her name is written both in Latin and Hebrew letters)
Neu-Freiman – Munich 45
Ruschteiger str. No. 3
UNRRA team 560
17/09/1932

My Life under the Occupation of the Nazis

In the year 1941 [on] 8/IX the Germans came to us. After the Germans came[,] the Ukrainians set up a provisional Ukrainian Government and killed us in all the streets. [On] 1/VIII the Germans started to rule in our place. They caught thousands of Jews for hard work. This time there was a great famine because the murderers did not let us leave the town in order to buy bread. And so we suffered privations until the Action [gzerat hamachteret] happened on the first day of Sukkoth in the year 1942. On Saturday on the 5th hour in the morning[,] a Gestapo unit and Ukrainians surrounded our town. The Action [gzerat hamachteret] lasted for two days, they gathered [rounded up] 800 Jews in a train [iron machine] and took them to the town of Belzec. There they burned them in/by fire. When the Action [hamachteret] happened, we[,] by chance[,] escaped / were saved from the hands of the murderers. After the big Action [machteret,] not many days had passed and they expelled us to the town of Borszczow. In the year of 1942 [on] X 23 [,] they made a ghetto for all the Jews who lived around the town, under the rule of the Nazis. There were 5500 Jews in the ghetto. We lived 15 people in one room. [15 people/room] In the month of Kislev in the year of 1942 they gathered [rounded up] 120 people and took them to the town of Chortkow where killing blows were dealt to them. [the text says: “they killed them killing blows. From the next sentence it becomes clear that they were not killed but brutally beaten] After ten days[,] they returned to the ghetto. Not many days passed and the people who had returned from the prison became ill with typhoid fever, and the majority of them died. Because of the great crowdedness[,] the epidemic hit all the people of the ghetto. In 2 months[,] 800 people died. On 17 Adar in the morning[,] a German unit and Ukrainians surrounded the ghetto and killed 200 people. The blood of the Jews ran like water on the streets. In this Action [machteret] they caught me and wanted to kill me and by chance I escaped/ was saved from the hands of the murderers. On the day of 20 in the month of Nisan

in the year of 1943, the Germans again surrounded the ghetto and the Action [gzerat machteret] started and in one day they killed 12000 Jews. After the big Action [macheret] on the 1st day of the festival of Shavuot[,] the destruction of the ghetto started[,] which lasted for 15 days. After the destruction of the ghetto, we ran away to our town and there we (hid) were [for] 9 months in...... . The hunger and the fear were very great. All day they killed Jews in the streets. And thus passed for us the bad years under the rule of the Nazis. On the 12th day of the month Nisan in the year 1944[,] we became free. And out of 5500 people who were in the ghetto there remained 200 sick and weak Jews.

The emotional centers of the testimony are clearly the Actions, and the role ChB assumes is that of the objective witness who aims at recording the experiences of her community. This is an important role that is generally viewed as having intrinsic value, and it does not require the witness to relate her personal traumas and losses. In fact, a more personal tone could be perceived as a factor that lessens the objectivity of the historical account. Informed by this view of what a historical account should be, ChB’s testimony is only silently dominated by the absence of her personal losses. The absent center of the testimony is probably the fate of her family.

As a witness, the spokesperson for a murdered community, she even corrects her writing as she composes her testimony.67 ChB undertakes the task of becoming a communal witness partly in order not to have to think about her personal story. The pronouns: “we” and “us,” in her testimony typically refer to the suffering Jewish community. By this use of first-person plural personal pronouns, she establishes her role as an authentic witness, who was there, who is part of the community without getting really personal. In other words, we only learn about her suffering as part of the collective.

The use of first-person plural personal pronouns varies in only two places. In the first instance: “When the Action [hamachteret] happened, we[,] by chance[,] escaped /

67 See the original, handwritten copy Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 644/535.
were saved from the hands of the murderers,” the “we” is significant as opposed to what happened to the “I” during a later Action: “in this Action [machteret] they caught me and wanted to kill me and by chance I escaped/was saved from the hands of the murderers.”

The second case—“After the destruction of the ghetto, we ran away to our town and there we (hid) were [for] 9 months in.....”— occurs when ChB continues to use the first-person plural personal pronoun to relate her escape regardless of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Jews have been murdered during and as a consequence of the liquidation of the ghetto. This “we” is much more personal than the previous use of “we”s denoting the entire community. This “we” seems to denote her own personal community: probably the remainder of her family. We ache to learn whether she was with her family, but she never gives away that information and quickly returns to her role as an authentic but emotionally distant observer, eventually employing a third person narration: “And out of 5500 people who were in the ghetto there remained 200 sick and weak Jews.” Obviously, ChB was one of those surviving “200 sick and weak Jews” who were liberated “on the 12th day of the month Nisan in the year of 1944,” but we do not learn whether any other members of her family survived.

The unique, more personal “we”—hinting at her personal community, probably her family—seems to be merely an unconscious slip. Precisely because she insists on not telling the story of her family, the slip signals her terrible losses. The fact however remains: she does not tell anything about her family’s fate at all.

---

68 The second Action receives an added emphasis in ChB’s testimony. It is not the largest Action, yet in connection to this one she adds the Biblical description: “the blood of the Jews ran like water on the streets.” The reason for this is probably that she, personally, almost died: “in this Action [machteret] they caught me and wanted to kill me and by chance I escaped/was saved from the hands of the murderers.” Like all Jews during Actions, she was in mortal danger during all the Actions, but in this one she experienced the danger more closely than during the other times.
As long as the Actions organize the testimony as the reference points as well as the foci of the experience and its representation, the narrative has a very clear structure. After the destruction of the ghetto, however, ChB’s narrative becomes much more disoriented. She seems to be aware of that, as she concludes the testimony promptly and abruptly, but with a sort of summary: “And thus passed for us the bad years under the rule of the Nazis.” She indicates, therefore, that this is a proper ending. Then, after relating their liberation briefly and objectively, she finishes her testimony on a bleak note emphasizing the losses, especially the loss of the lively Jewish communities of her region: “And out of 5500 people who were in the ghetto there remained 200 sick and weak Jews.”

It is a characteristic of testimonies given by children that they insist on reporting that their experiences were not unique; they were not singled out; they were not different. The remaining two testimonies that I will analyze also demonstrate this. In his testimony, a 14-year-old boy from Hungary, a survivor of Auschwitz and the Mühldorf work camp writes: “Like the rest of my Jewish brethren, together with my family, I too was dragged away to a ghetto (on) May 15, 1944.”69 Whenever child survivors feel that their experiences were not typical, they report that with special pain. The Polish Jewish girl, whose testimony I will analyze in the last part of this chapter, adds, for example, the following sentence after describing the abduction of her mother during the first large-scale Action in her hometown:

And after a while we came close to the central point. At the central point there were two sides. One side that went to be banished and the second side which went to freedom. And I with my entire family went over to freedom. But this happiness didn’t last long: the Germans seized my mother and I stayed by myself with my father

69 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 168.
and brother, who was four years old. *I was amongst the first children that remained without her mother* and in my house there was a great sadness without my beloved mother. [*Italics are mine—RH*] ⁷⁰

My next example is a testimony in which, just like in the above analyzed testimony, the loss of the child’s family is not related explicitly, only implied. The major difference here, however, is that the “untellable” trauma of losing one’s entire family informs the deep organizational pattern of the text: it becomes a crucial structural element, a kind of governing force, a hermeneutic framework, a meta-narrative. ⁷¹

Many testimonies given right after the Holocaust in Displaced Persons camps end with the testifier’s enthusiastic statement that he/she wants to make aliyah and his/her principal goal in life is to participate in the work of building Eretz Israel. Through a close analysis of a child survivor’s testimony given in Hungarian in the Aschau DP camp in 1946, I will demonstrate how this aim is not simply added to the reporting of past events, but determines the entire testimony as a structural element.

The translation of the testimony: ⁷²

I am AG. I was born in Hungary, in Debrecen on October 17, 1931.

---

⁷⁰ Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 881/747.

⁷¹ Langer also wrote about a testimony in which he identifies the loss of the witness’s family as a governing meta-narrative: Sidney L.’s testimony (pp.13-16.) Sidney L.’s “first piece of information is that he was one of nine children. […] As his narrative of more than two hours proceed, this simple fact emerges as the key to its inconspicuous structure. […] His narrative emerges not as a story of survival, but of deprival—deprival of the members of his family, and hence, in his own eyes, of his personal will. […] Only at the end, if he have been hearing him, do we realize that all along, while he has ostensibly been telling us how he managed to stay alive (the interviewers question confirms our belief that this has been the substance of his testimony), its essence has been the doom of those closest to him who did not survive. His conviction that he and his brother were predestined to live is a last attempt to rescue from oblivion some confidence in the continuity of life. […] We as audience experience an existence defined not merely by its own survival but also by the destruction of others. It is a revelation fueled by the vitality of its insight—and the gloom of its finality.” Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) pp. 13–16.

⁷² Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 168. RH’s translation. Since I want to show the results of a literary close reading, I stayed very close to the Hungarian original: wherever the English is awkward, the Hungarian original is also like that.
Like the rest of my Jewish brethren, together with my family, I too was dragged away to a ghetto (on) May 15, 1944. After one month of ghetto life, we were taken to a brick factory and from there to Auschwitz.

On July 1, 1944, in the morning on a rainy Saturday at 6 o’clock, 90 of us by a cattle-car with wired windows, together with a couple of lunatics, we arrived in Auschwitz. Men dressed in striped clothes unloaded [kivagoniroz = detrain] us. And then came, without our knowledge, the most important moment of our lives. We marched past Mengele and by chance I was also put [assigned] among the workers. After disinfection I got into Lager E. or [also called as] the Gipsy Lager. After 10 weeks of unparalleled suffering, I was taken to the Mühldorf work camp [work lager], where I succeeded to get into the potato peeler (brigade), and later, I became the lackey [csicskás = pipel] of the boss of the S.S. store-house [S.S. magazin séf]. Later they put us into cattle-cars and sent us towards an unknown aim. The aim was machine-gunning. Along the way we had an air raid and I got wounded. At the same time the transportführer also died, who would have executed the machine-gunning and thus we came through. The S.S. men fled and the U.S. Army [liberated—this word is missing and the sentence is not grammatical] us on April 29, 1945, after 10 months of a sore trial I was free once again.

After four months of vacationing I returned to Hungary, where I joined one of [the] Zionist movements in the framework of which I hit the road again on January 26, 1946. Now here, in Aschau, I wait for aliya, which brings my only aim: the building of ERETZ ISRAEL.74

When we look at the original handwritten document, we can see that there are two places where AG pressed the pen hard on the paper. Both places relate events with special importance for him. He presses the pen harder when he writes about his family’s arrival in Auschwitz, the result of which he loses his family, and when he relates his own choices that he made alone after liberation. AG also makes a few grammatical mistakes, which I will analyze later. These mistakes are important precisely because he has so few of them. Here, I only want to call attention to one instance. When AG relates the crucial

73 Here, it the Hungarian grammar does not require one to specify the pronoun.
74 AG used large block letters to write the words: Eretz Israel. See the original, handwritten copy Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 168.
experience of his liberation, he does this with an ungrammatical sentence: “The S.S. men fled and the U.S. Army [liberated—this word is missing and therefore sentence is not grammatical] us on April 29, 1945, after 10 months of a sore trial I was free once again.”

A word is missing, and as a result, two sentences are pushed together. Information is rushing out; AG cannot wait to report his freedom. The pace of writing could not keep up with the testifier’s rush of emotions: it is like cutting himself short, cutting into his own words.\(^{75}\)

Two foci of the witness’s trauma emerge clearly within the text. One of the clearest signs of the presence of unresolved traumas in the text is that AG, who employs punctuation in a highly sophisticated manner, did not end those sentences that express the centres of trauma properly with periods. “And then came, without our knowledge, the most important moment of our lives [there is no period here!] [...] After 10 weeks of unparalleled suffering, I was taken to the Mühldorf work camp [work lager], where I succeeded to get into the potato peeler (brigade), and later, I became the lackey [“csicskás” = pipel] of the boss of the S.S. store-house [S.S. magazin séf] [there is no period here!]” [Italics are mine, RH]. By doing this, he inadvertently signals that these experiences are not over for him; there is no closure whatsoever, and so the event cannot be contained by language.

One of his major traumas is stated: he was a pipel, a lackey, of a camp functionary, and the other is only implied by a drastic change in the pronouns he uses: the loss of beloved family members during the first selection upon arrival in Auschwitz.\(^{76}\)

---

\(^{75}\) This phenomenon narrows the gap between written and oral testimonies.

\(^{76}\) From this testimony we could infer that AG lost his entire family upon arrival in Auschwitz. It is emotionally true enough, as he was separated from many of his beloved family members to whom he unambiguously felt very close. From later testimonies of AG, we learn that, in fact, his father was also
After one month of ghetto life, we were taken to a brick factory and from there to Auschwitz.

On July 1, 1944, in the morning on a rainy Saturday at 6 O’clock, 90 of us by a cattle-car with wired windows, together with a couple of lunatics, we arrived in Auschwitz. Men dressed in striped clothes unloaded [kivagoniroz = detrain] us. And then came, without our knowledge, the most important moment of our lives. We marched past Mengele and by chance I was also put [assigned] among the workers. After disinfection I got into Lager E. or [also called as] the Gipsy Lager. After 10 weeks of unparalleled suffering, I was taken to the Mühldorf work camp [work lager], where I succeeded to get into the potato peeler (brigade), and later, I became the lackey [csicskás = pipel] of the boss of the S.S. store-house [S.S. magazin séf].

AG mentions his family only once at the beginning of the testimony, and then we learn that he lost his loved ones upon arrival in Auschwitz only from the change in the personal pronouns: until arrival in Auschwitz, he uses plural pronouns: ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’ and after marching past the physician conducting the selection, he uses only the first person singular: “I.”

The other feature that distinguishes this crucial part of the testimony is that here AG adds evaluation and includes information he could not have known at the time. That selected to enter the camp. He died much later in the Mühldorf work camp. However, because the relationship between father and child was complex and troubled, full of ambiguous feelings already before the Holocaust, the youngster could not deal with this explicitly in the early testimony. The later testimonies demonstrate how he keeps struggling with the father-son relationship in his entire life. [Yad Vashem Archives, O.93 – Survivors of the Shoah – Visual History Foundation, established by Steven Spielberg – Collection of Testimonies. File No.: 49301; The interview is in Hungarian (1999, Budapest, Hungary) Name of the submitter to YVA: USC Shoah Foundation Institute, University of Southern California] Reading Eli Wiesel’s Night together with AG’s later testimonies is especially illuminating in this respect. The father-son relationship is so complex in the stories of both of the youngsters that it either forms one of the explicit centers of the life account, as in the case of Night, or has to be left out completely, as in AG’s early testimony, because this topic refuses to be treated marginally. Also, in a long video testimony, AG, as an adult, relates in detail the first selection upon arrival in Auschwitz, and when doing so, he talks about his feelings of relief upon staying together with his father, only to feel intense pain because, nevertheless, they soon became separated. Father and son were later reunited, but AG eventually lost his parent to typhoid fever in the Mühldorf camp. This later loss strengthened his shock of remaining completely alone after liberation. And from the testimonies given later, we learn that AG lost all of his close relatives during the Holocaust.
is, he could not stay within the boundaries of his own otherwise completely straightforward, chronological narration: “And then came, without our knowledge, the most important moment of our lives. We marched past Mengele and by chance I was also put [assigned] among the workers.” He did not know at the time that what happened to them was the first selection in Auschwitz, and that those who were not admitted into the camp were sent to the gas chambers immediately. He certainly did not know Mengele’s name. AG even emphasizes that all this is later knowledge by stating: “without our knowledge.” AG learned later that as a child under 13, he was not supposed to survive the first selection. Hence the introduction of the evaluative statement: “by chance.” Rather than attributing his survival to a miracle or something destined, as some of his peers did, AG attributes his survival to chance. He chooses the most secular among the possible hermeneutic systems, which leaves the self most vulnerably lonely, since the secular concept of chance implies being completely at the mercy of chaotic and unimpressionable forces.

In addition to the change in the pronouns indicating the loss of AG’s family members, further down in the testimony, there is another significant change in the use of pronouns signaling another major change in AG’s life. After remaining completely alone, AG uses the first person singular as long as he remains active in some way: “After 10 weeks of unparalleled suffering, I was taken to the Mühldorf work camp [work lager], where I succeeded to get into the potato peeler (brigade), and later, I became the lackey [csicskás = pipel] of the boss of the S.S. store-house [S.S. magazin séf].” By using the pronoun “I,” AG assumes some sort of responsibility for these events, which he in some manner chose in order to survive.
AG relates that he was taken to the work lager in the passive voice, indicating that his choices were severely limited, but the use of the first person singular pronoun, “I,” suggests that he probably volunteered or actively did something to get out of Birkenau and into a group which was selected to be taken to work. Saying “I succeeded” implies taking responsibility, as well as the acceptance of the notion that to become privileged was the only way for him to remain alive. AG makes his confession of becoming a pipel by drawing upon the same assumption. Since to be a pipel usually entailed unspeakable abuse, he does not say the happy word “succeeded” in connection to that, but nonetheless, he assumes responsibility.

The word pipel implies abuse inflicted on the child, but often also abuse inflicted by the pipel on other inmates. AG does not say exactly what happened to him and how he behaved as a pipel; he simply states the fact that he was one. He lessens the impact of giving this most painful and humiliating piece of information by resorting to a subtle linguistic distancing; he writes the hateful word in Hungarian rather than using the camp-language term.

When AG loses his privileged position and becomes once again an indistinguishable part of the mass destined to be murdered, completely at the mercy of chance, he begins to use the collective pronoun once again, together with the passive voice. The sole exception is when he tells us that he was wounded during an air raid. After liberation however, he becomes an individual who is free to make his own choices. This time, he resolutely and proudly employs the active voice to accompany the emphatic use of the word “I”: “April 29, 1945, after 10 months of a sore trial I was free once again. After four months of vacationing I returned to Hungary, where I joined one of [the]
Zionist movements in the framework of which I hit the road again on January 26, 1946. Now here, in Aschau, I wait for aliya, which brings my only aim: the building of ERETZ ISRAEL.”

AG’s testimony is very successful in that he is able to establish, within the text of his testimony, a viable survivor-self with an aim which that self finds important and valuable. AG at first relates how he took responsible decisions as a free human being to go back to Hungary, to join a Zionist youth movement, and then to “hit the road again.” Now, he is not “dragged away” as a helpless part of a group, but actively selects a community for himself and chooses to “hit the road.” Then, he is able to announce his goal: the building of Eretz Israel.

AG not only revises the concept of travel by repetition, he also fills the word “aim” with new meaning through identical repetition. Twice he uses the word in order to signify the goal of others, which is to murder him, and then he appropriates the same word to establish the meaning of his life: “Later they put us into cattle-cars and sent us towards an unknown aim. The aim was machine-gunning. [...] Now here, in Aschau, I wait for aliya, which brings my only aim: the building of ERETZ ISRAEL.”

The fact that AG implies how he wants to achieve his aim gives special weight and seriousness to the statement of the goal itself. AG does not name the specific youth movement which he joined. The ideologies of the youth movements were very different, therefore the group that a person joined was of great significance. Also, people routinely simply named the youth movement they entered, as another adolescent, MLG, who was born in 1930, did in his testimony, which was also given in the Aschau DP camp: “When I arrived home, after a few days of being home, I joined the Bnei Akiba Zionist
Movement.” Furthermore, AG makes a slight grammatical mistake when he talks about his choice of youth group by leaving out the definite article, a grammatical device for emphasizing self-contained separateness: “I joined one of [the] Zionist movements.” By not naming the specific youth movement he joined and omitting the definite article, AG may signify that he does not approve of divisions among Jews. Very likely, it is of special importance to AG not to draw attention to the ideologically fragmented nature of Jewish survivor society. Building Eretz Israel for AG, therefore, means participating in the construction of a unified Jewish community.

Why is unity within the community so important to him? Why would acknowledging divisions hurt him? Because, I propose, AG perceives the Jewish community in terms of a family. Already at the beginning of the testimony, he uses a word: “brethren” from the terminology of the family to denote the Jewish community. Moreover, he employs it as part of a simile, “like the rest of my Jewish brethren,” structurally calling attention to a hidden simile that structures the entire testimony: the community of Jews is like a family.

AG’s construction of this simile, by creating an intimate connection leading towards the identification of one’s family and the Jewish community, facilitates his survival and gives a special weight to the statement of his otherwise too abstract aim by making him again part of a familial unit. However, precisely by finding a way to sublimate his overwhelming loss into something constructive, thus becoming able to survive the destruction of his entire family, he prevents himself from directly reporting that loss. Feelings of guilt do not let the solution—the experiencing of an actively

77 „Mikor haza érkeztem egy pár napi othon lét után beléptem bnéj ákibá cionista mozgalmába.” (Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 162)
constructed community as one’s family, that is, “replacing” one’s immediate relatives—appear verbally, it informs the deep structure of the testimony instead. The emergence of a particularly strong self within the testimony that has an aim that in some way sublimates his traumatic loss allows the emerging “I” to report his other major trauma: being a pipel. In sharp contrast to the loss of the family, which is only implied, the trauma of being a pipel is stated clearly. But unlike the loss of the family, it does not become a structural element informing the entire testimony, so it can hopefully be left behind. Therefore, the sublimation of one of the main traumas together with the successful construction of the survivor-self make it possible for the testimony to be a deeper confession than the majority of early Holocaust testimonies, in other words, to become a better historical source. There are many testimonies which relate terrible details about pipels, but the admission of having been one is truly exceptional.

My last example is also highly unusual, because the testifying youngster is able to write in detail about one of her overwhelming traumatic losses, but not about others of similar magnitude. She relates the traumatic loss of her mother, but she is unable to do the same in respect to the loss of her father and young brother. The ordeal of losing her mother emerges within the text of the testimony, and AS describes in details the moving images of the traumatic mini film that she is forced to watch over and over.

The translation of the testimonial composition of a Polish Jewish child survivor, AS, who gave her testimony in Hebrew in the Zeilsheim DP camp: 78

1947 01. 30

78 Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 881/747. The text of the testimony is translated from the Hebrew original by Shelly Duvalski and Rita Horváth: The translation stayed very close to the Hebrew text: wherever the English is awkward and/or faulty, the Hebrew original is also like that.
How did the seven years of the Hitlerist occupation passed over me

In the year 1939 the world war broke out[,] and in October in the year 1939[,] the Germans conquered all of the country of Poland. The Germans were very bad to the Jews. They pressured them mercilessly. And one night in the year 1942 this incident happened. At night armed soldiers came to my house. At this time I was sleeping a deep sleep and didn’t know what was in store for me. They came to me and shouted [“quickly get up!”]. Quickly I got up from my lying-(down) position and entered my parents’ [room]. There I saw my mother holding on her knees my 4-year-old brother and big tears ran down on her face. When I saw this sight, I burst into bitter tears (cry)[,] and at the same time[,] the soldiers came and shouted [“quickly get out!”] and I with my entire family was driven outside[,] which was lit by big lights [search lights, but she uses Biblical words to denote them] and all the people were standing in one line. When we came[,] one of the leaders of the soldiers ordered [she/us] to move from the place[,] and we all went to the central point. The way was very terrible[,] solders were hitting us all the way. And after a while[,] we came close to the central point[.] At the central point there were two sides[:] one side that went to be deported [same word as she used above for being driven out from home] and the second side that went to freedom. And I with my entire family went over to freedom. But this joy didn’t last long. At the same time there were abductions on the street and the Germans captured my mother too. And I stayed by myself with my father and brother, who was four years old. And I was one of the first children who were without mothers[,] and in my house there was a great sadness without my beloved mother[.] And after a year[,] the Germans again banished [she uses the word: emigrate] the Jews and me with my father and brother [they] sent to Auschwitz. When we reached Auschwitz at night, solders were already waiting for us and when we arrived[,] the separation started. And many people[,] infants and the elderly and also the youth were sent to the crematorium to be set on fire[,] And joy came to me because by a miracle[,] I remained alive[,] and from that time onwards[,] what happened to my father and brother[,] I didn’t know. In Auschwitz[,] it was very bad for me[,] The crematorium was not far from my barrack. And at night[,] when I went outside[,] the sky was full of blood from the crematorium in which people were set on fire. And like that have passed for me two years amidst hunger and great troubles. When the Germans found out that the Russians were drawing closer[,] they evacuated [she uses the same word as above: emigrated—higru/banished] the camp[,] It was in winter[,] and on
the street there was very cold[,] and we were forced to march many miles on foot and those who didn’t have the strength were shot[.]
And thus half-dead[,] we arrived at Bergen[-]Belsen. In Bergen[-]Belsen[,] the situation was very terrible. We lived in barracks made of ????? and slept on the ground which was covered by ?????.

One night, the following catastrophe happened [:] there was a strong wind and it was raining[,] and the wind was so strong that it ripped the barrack apart into tiny little pieces[,] and during that night we remained without a roof on the street[,] The sight was very terrible[,] we were all drenched to the bone, and many people[,] at that night[,] died. And after a while in Bergen-Belsen typhus broke out and many people got sick[,] and I was also very sick and I couldn’t stand on my feet[.]

And at that time[,] the Germans were scared because the English had been drawing closer and they decided to evacuate [immigrate] all the healthy people and shoot the sick ones. And I was also sick and I heard all these things[,] but I so wanted to win a life of freedom. And in one morning there was a great commotion in the camp and all the armies started to run away[,] because the English were drawing closer. After two days[,] the first English tank arrived at Bergen-Belsen that gave us freedom and I was still sick and couldn’t perceive that the hour of freedom had arrived. And that’s how the seven years of the German Hitlerist occupation amidst hunger and big troubles passed for me.

Signature of AS
Class 5
Henrietta Sold Jewish School

From the testimony we do not learn the age of the survivor, but according to an ITS document, she was 16-and-a-half years old, when she gave her testimony in the beginning of 1947.79 Similarly to ChB, AS also wrote her testimony in Hebrew, which was not only not their mother tongue, but a language that they were just then in the process of acquiring. By contrast, AG wrote his testimony-composition in his mother tongue.

79 ITS OuSArchiv Document Id 35453066. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem Archives) AS was born on May 18, 1930 in Sosnowiec (Poland)
The choice of language in the DP camps for individual use,\textsuperscript{80} publications, or as the teaching language in schools depended upon both ideological and practical considerations. Choosing a language in itself amounted to a statement of identity; the chosen language served both as a means of identity construction and a way to establish one’s membership in a community. Moreover, choosing a common language actively helped to create that community. Language choice could also signify the rejection of one’s past victimization by the countries where that language is spoken.\textsuperscript{81}

The fact that the youngsters wrote their compositions in a language which they had been studying for only a short time greatly influenced the content of the testimonies. They had to express themselves more simply than they probably wanted to, owing to the limitations that their as-yet insufficient knowledge of Hebrew imposed upon them. The Hebrew of the testimonies varies in proficiency; ChB’s for example is more broken than AS’s. In numerous instances, one can note phrases clearly translated word-for-word from the survivors’ mother tongue. AS’s testimony, for instance, contains a phrase we have translated as: “we were all drenched to the bone.” However, she wrote in Hebrew exactly: “we were all drenched till the thread.” There is no such expression in Hebrew. However, in Polish, the expression: “drenched till the thread” exists: “przemoknięci do nitki.”

Limitations pertaining to writing in a language that the testifying teenagers were only just acquiring are probably responsible for some of the repetitions and most of the simplistic expressions, as well as for many of the spelling and grammatical mistakes. On

\textsuperscript{80} Children wrote their testimonial compositions in the DP camps in many languages. The choice of language is always interesting and informative, as it is closely related to choices pertaining to identity: statement of belonging or rejection. The majority of the testimonies were written either in the child’s mother tongue, or in Yiddish—the lingua franca of the DP camps—or in Hebrew. Closely connected to choices concerning identity, the choice of language also determined the intended primary audience.

\textsuperscript{81} Concerning the issue of choosing a teaching language and language policy, see Boaz Cohen, “And I was only a Child,” pp. 156–157.
the other hand, there are considerable advantages to testifying in Hebrew. One advantage is that precisely because Hebrew was not their mother tongue, the youngsters had to pay conscious attention to their language, which sometimes resulted in particularly precise formulations of their thoughts. Another significant advantage of writing in Hebrew is that it might have helped the child survivors to testify and manage their traumas in two different ways. First, Hebrew is a language that belongs to the past and future of the victims; a language that was not used by the perpetrators of their sufferings. Second, for the youngsters, modern Hebrew was a new language, viz. not related to the events of the Holocaust. Precisely this newness could have the effect of alienating the experiences from the traumatized consciousness and so result in the dulling of the livid pain, which usually accompanies the emergence of the memories, just long enough for their testimonies to be written.

In describing Aharon Appelfeld’s writing, Ruth Wisse claims: “Appelfeld’s Hebrew creates an atmosphere of remoteness […]. The language of remoteness also insulates him from the past, as though the Hebrew narrative were the closed scar over the wound.”\(^\text{82}\) Alan Rosen also mentions that both Yaffa Eliach and Jonat Sened have suggested in general that “writing in a new language can buffer the survivor-writer from the trauma.” Rosen makes explicit their underlying assumption as well: “implied in Eliach’s and Sened’s remarks is the proposition that language […] in which the pain was experienced sharpens the pain.”\(^\text{83}\) Rosen quotes Eliach: “For sometimes then language stands between the writer and the horrors of the Holocaust, in that it permits him to

grapple with the Holocaust in a language other than that in which he experienced it. Consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, the new language has the power to attenuate slightly the fiery pain.”

A consequence of learning Eastern European, so-called “Tarbut-school” Hebrew in the DP camps is that the youngsters frequently employ archaic Biblical and Talmudic expressions. This makes their language somewhat awkward for readers of Modern Hebrew, but often it elevates their style, lending unexpected poetic qualities and contexts to their writings. AS’s use of Biblical words to denote search lights seems to stem from linguistic limitations. Similarly, ChB’s application of the word “machane” (camp in modern Hebrew) according to its Biblical meaning, signifying a military unit, sounds obsolete.

By contrast, AS, through her use of the word “pressured” with which the Bible describes Pharaoh’s imposition of unbearable living conditions on the Israelites, endows the sufferings of contemporary Jewry with a hermeneutic historical and/or religious context. The astonishing Biblical expression in ChB’s testimony, “the blood of the Jews ran like water on the streets,” lends her composition highly poetic qualities, even when she is relating something horrifically concrete. To understand how concrete ChB’s words are, it is enough to quote an adult survivor, Tzippora Birman. She was “one of the Bialystok ghetto fighters [who] described the ghetto after an Action: “After the Action the ghetto looked like a large blood bath […] Blood flowed like water in the gutters and

---


85 Tarbut-schools, Hebrew-language, Zionist, secular educational institutions ranging from kindergartens through high schools and teachers’ seminaries, operated all over Eastern Europe between the two world wars.
sewers. Blood-stained pillows, houses in ruins, goods and chattels lay in mud, corpses on all sides.86

In addition to its poetic qualities resulting from the Hebrew of the testimony, AS’s composition shows real literary talent. She employs numerous literary devices, her text is deeply informed by them, and she develops archetypical imagery. For instance, she stresses that all the terrible things—the selection in the ghetto and the abduction of her mother, their arrival in Auschwitz and the collapse of the barrack in Bergen-Belsen—happened to her at night. That each of these horrifying events occurred at night is, of course, a question of reality, but the fact that she repeatedly, indeed rhythmically, asserts it, turns reality into a literary device. This is especially noticeable when we realize that AS contrasts the night to the dawn of liberation when she writes: “And in one morning there was a great commotion in the camp and all the armies started to run away[,] because the English were drawing closer. After two days[,] the first English tank arrived at Bergen-Belsen that gave us freedom and I was still sick and couldn’t perceive that the hour of freedom had arrived.” [Italics are mine] Eli Wiesel draws heavily upon the same archetypal imagery in his oeuvre.

As in Wiesel’s memoir-novel, Night, AS expands the night-dawn (darkness-light) binary into asleep/unaware versus waking up, and seeing clearly versus not being able to perceive reality. The loudness of the murderers and the silence of the victims form another clear binary. She also contrasts suddenness and slowness as well as eagerness and reluctance, both in terms of knowledge. When AS describes her first major trauma, the loss of her mother, she depicts it in terms of a night of initiation, the time when she was

cruelly forced to wake up to the unimaginable realities of the historical night of the Holocaust.

She opens her testimony in an impersonal objective voice, as if the occupation of Poland and the oppression exercised by the Germans has not much to do with her and her loved ones. She portrays the suffering of the Jews in general terms: “In the year 1939 the world war broke out[,] and in October in the year 1939[,] the Germans conquered all of the country of Poland. The Germans were very bad to the Jews. They pressured them mercilessly.” AS talks about “them” and “the Jews” and not about “us.” According to her own metaphor, she was sleeping “a deep sleep.” Then suddenly, the testimony becomes tragically personal, and we learn about her initiation into the night of selections and murder:

And one night in the year 1942 this incident happened. At night armed soldiers came to my house. At this time I was sleeping a deep sleep and didn’t know what was in store for me. They came to me and shouted [“]quickly get up[!”]. Quickly I got up from my lying(-down) position and entered my parents’ [room]. There I saw my mother holding on her knees my 4-year[old] brother and big tears ran down on her face. When I saw this sight, I burst into bitter tears.

This waking up brings clear personal awareness of the Holocaust reality, and is contrasted at the end of the testimony to the joy of liberation, the realities of which could not be immediately appreciated or even observed. In addition to the two-day-long delay, she was forced by her sickness to remain unaware, not to be able to perceive of the realities of the “morning.”

Furthermore, the dynamics of delay and repetition that characterize the major part of the testimony are turned upside-down at the end of the testimony. In the beginning, AS
is the one who does not want to wake up to unbearable reality, but the shouting soldiers force her to become completely aware. That part of the testimony is full of verbal and nonverbal delays. Unnecessary repetitions and wordiness effectively postpone the relating of that story: “At this time I was sleeping a deep sleep and didn’t know what was in store for me. They came to me and shouted [“]quickly get up[!”]. Quickly I got up from my lying(-down) position and entered my parents’ [room].” The directly quoted shouts of the soldiers, that forced her to hurry then, do not hurry the testimony now. In fact they delay it through repetitions. She slows the narrative down even further by adding superfluous pseudo-information: “from my lying(-down) position.” The most apparent non-verbal means of suspension are the large gaps between certain words. Moreover, these gaps become increasingly larger, whenever AS is about to relate the centers of her trauma. In other words, she asserts some degree of control by not letting herself be rushed.

In relating the liberation scene, the dynamic is the opposite. The suddenness encoded in the phrase “in one morning,” and the very specific point of time delineated: “the hour of freedom,” signify a sharp boundary, though AS relates that, in reality, the process took two long days and could not even be fully observed. She desperately wanted to wake up to a different reality, but the liberators had been delayed. AS’s ambivalent feelings regarding liberation are caused mainly by the fact that she alone of her family has remained alive, and now, in order to “perceive that the hour of freedom had arrived,” she has to “perceive” her loss in its entirety as well. The liberators had indeed tarried. The hesitation of the testimony concerning the reality of freedom is emphasized by the way she relates the first selection and her mother’s subsequent abduction: “and I with my
entire family went over to freedom. But this joy didn’t last long.” By contrast, in 1945, she, alone of her family, becomes a free person, and by the parallel wording she employs to describe the two occasions, she implies a fear that overwhelming joys are not always stable.

In addition, the text also indicates that AS’s “waking up” coincides with her forced growing up: she does not only lose her mother that night but also takes over the responsibility of caring for her baby brother and father. Her tears that reflect her mother’s grief imply both identification and a solemn promise. In my opinion, this identification with her mother makes it possible for her to describe in detail the trauma of losing her mother, but prevents her from relating the loss of her brother and father in the first selection in Auschwitz. She could not take care of them anymore; she was forced to abandon her role as a responsible, primary caregiver. She does not say this, but the structure of the testimony suggests it.

AS hides her knowledge about the fate of her brother and father in the text. She states in general that “many people[,] infants and the elderly and also the youth were sent to the crematorium to be set on fire[.]” She then relates that she, a “youth” was saved by a miracle and writes that she does not know what happened to her loved ones even though her brother was a small child. However, immediately after claiming that “from that time onwards[,] what happened to my father and brother[,] I didn’t know,” she describes the central trauma of Auschwitz: “The crematorium was not far from my barrack. And at night[,] when I went outside[,] the sky was full of blood from the crematorium in which people were set on fire.” In other words, she knows very well what transpired, but she could not and cannot bring herself to explicitly put her knowledge into words.
The narrative structure of this testimony is very complex. It contains both illustrative and explanatory narratives as well as intertextual narratives, to use Deborah Schiffrin’s terminology. The complexity of AS’s testimony’s narrative structure is unique within the context of the four testimonies that I have analyzed here, and rare among early child testimonies collected by the Central Historical Commission. NF’s and AG’s testimonies do not contain either illustrative or explanatory narratives. CHB’s testimony displays both, but in a much more undeveloped form than AS’s testimony. AS relates the following explanatory narratives, which move the story forward, in order to give added emphasis to certain elements of her chronologically rendered story:

1) Selection on the main square and the abduction of the mother [line numbers on the original hand-written testimony: 15-32]
2) Selection in Auschwitz [34-40]
3) Evacuation and forced march to Bergen-Belsen [44-49]
4) Typhoid fever [59-65]
5) Liberation [65-70]

Two illustrative narratives are also included:
1) The story of seeing her mother for the last time at home [6-14]
2) The story of the collapsed barrack [52-58]

Illustrative narratives do not move the main story forward and therefore, can be left out. Their main function is to illustrate or summarize and symbolize a stage in the speaker’s life. The illustrative narratives of AS’s testimony are made up by emerging traumatic deep memories. Deep memories often constitute illustrative narratives, because their emergence cannot be guaranteed. As I have shown above, the emergence of deep memories often take the witness himself/herself by surprise. Consequently, the narrative units of common memories have to move the life story forward, as the deep memories cannot be counted on to perform that function. The same is true for explanatory
narratives—the information can be given without the emergence of a full fledged narrative of this type. Thus deep memories can also be explanatory narratives.

In AS’s testimony, both of the illustrative deep memories are kept apart from the main text by an introductory sentence. The first narrative is introduced by the sentence: “And one night in the year 1942 this incident happened.” The second narrative, about the collapse of the barrack in Bergen-Belsen, is marked in a similar way: “One night, the following catastrophe happened.” Once again, something that was supposed to provide her with basic protection, that is, shelter her from the raging weather, failed her. The repetitive element of being left unprotected is the basic trauma that asserts itself through the apparent gradation between the terms “incident” and “catastrophe.” In this way, the two illustrative narratives together make up an intertextual narrative.

Moreover, the central intertextual theme of being able to protect or failing to protect becomes more complex, guilt-ridden, and painful as the testimony progresses. The two illustrative narratives relate stories in which AS was “abandoned” by exactly those forces that were supposed to protect her. In the traumatic center, which she cannot directly articulate in words, she perceives herself as the one who somehow abandoned those whom she was supposed to protect: her little brother and father. Again, I must emphasize that these feelings of guilt are the survivor’s patently and terribly unjust self-incriminatory emotions. The comparison of the absence of explicitly stated loss to the description of losing her mother reveals the existence of these torturous guilt feelings. She says that she was saved by a miracle, since she was young and should have been gassed upon arrival according to the system in Auschwitz, but some benevolent element in the universe did not abandon her even though she was forced to abandon her loved
ones. The theme of protection and the lack of it is thus part of several intertextual hermeneutic frameworks that make interpretation modular, and therefore, flexible.

The traumatic centers of the testimony conveyed as illustrative narratives are clearly connected to the ruling archetypal image of the testimony: night. The third event about which is stated to have occurred at night is the selection in Auschwitz upon arrival, during which AS loses her brother and father. This deep memory, however, cannot be described in the testimony; it does not become an illustrative narrative. Its emergence merely leaves an illustrative trace: after talking about the selection, AS describes Auschwitz at night: “The crematorium was not far from my barrack. And at night[,] when I went outside[,] the sky was full of blood from the crematorium in which people were set on fire.” She depicts the sky above the crematoria. Therefore, the archetypal binary: night and morning acts as a literary device, which assists and directs the formation of her intertextual narratives by providing a preexisting thematic connection that can take on multiple meanings and open up possibilities for a hermeneutic connection, such as traumatic repetition.

AS’s testimony is very rich. It is longer than the majority of the early testimonies given by survivor youth in DP camps, and more complex in terms of its narrative structure and use of literary devices. In addition, the writing itself records its own struggle to come into being: the testimony’s effort to be written. The strikingly visible sign of this battle is a physical feature of the script: there are increasing gaps between words and letters together with more and more elongated letters whenever AS nears a place where she might relate one of the traumatic centers of her testimony. The complex and multilayered rendering of her common memories that as intertextual

87 See the original, handwritten copy Yad Vashem Archives, M-1/E 881/747.
narratives enter into connections with each other, make up various patterns and interpret one another in multiple ways. They facilitate the emergence of deep traumatic memories, and invite them to enter into multiple hermeneutic relations to the other narrative segments.

In AS’s testimony, the illustrative narrative relating the traumatic deep memory of seeing her mother at home for the last time continues as an explanatory narrative relating the deep memories of the selection in the main square at Sosnowiec and her mother’s subsequent abduction. In fact, the illustrative narrative gets its meaning from the later explanatory narrative. The shocking events related by the explanatory narrative are what make the illustrative narrative so significant. Therefore, this illustrative narrative and the following explanatory narrative together relate a sequence of deep memories. To mention one piece of historical information that can be gleaned from this deep memory: we learn that the conventional image of selections as organized pedantically according to some kind of a rationale ignores the fact that they were often accompanied by random, irrational abductions. This arbitrariness caused the victims to lose any remaining feelings of the sort of minimal security that one can make some sense of his/her surroundings and thus be able to attempt to manipulate them to his/her advantage.

Christopher R. Browning differentiates between four basic scholarly approaches that draw upon testimonies: one is “primarily interested in the mode of ‘retelling’ and narrative construction,” another focuses on the survivors’ traumas, yet another on the

---

88 From the ITS document we know that she talks about Sosnowiec. ITS OuSArchiv Document Id 35453066. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem Archives)
89 For more information on the selections, see the “Sosnowiec” chapter (translated and submitted to the Yizkor Book Project by Lance Ackerfeld) in Pinkas Hakehillot Polin: Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities, Poland, Volume VII, http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_poland/pol7_00327.html) Since the entries of Pinkas Hakehillot were mainly based on survivor testimonies, we can see how testimonies of adults corroborate AS’s depiction of the selection process and the abductions.
aspects of “collective memory,” and his own research, which concentrates on “looking at memory […] in the individual plural” in order to employ testimonies when there are no other available sources. Browning states that in contrast to his own historical approach, the first two approaches “emphasize the effects of the Holocaust upon the survivors and how they have remembered and narrated, struggled and coped with those effects rather than the events of the Holocaust itself.”90 My own aim was to prove that the results of research projects falling into Browning’s first two categories could be employed as devices of historical source criticism, enabling us to qualify certain parts of the testimonies as reliable historical sources in the classical sense.

By building on research that focuses on “the mode of ‘retelling’ and narrative construction” of testimonies and by drawing upon trauma theory, we can utilize survivor testimonies and life accounts in historical research in a novel way. A thorough literary and linguistic analysis of both oral and written testimonies allows us to identify the emergence of deep memories within the text of the accounts. Deep traumatic memories are memory imprints, in other words, “snapshots” that have a high documentary value. Therefore, a detailed analysis of survivor testimonies can enable us to draw into the orbit of historical research a new kind of data registered by deep traumatic memories.

---

Short bio.,

Rita Horvath is a literary scholar and a historian. She received her Ph.D. from Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan, Israel) in 2003. In 2006, she was a research fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Research in Yad Vashem. Her latest book is: Rita Horváth, Anna Szalai, Gábor Balázs, Previously Unexplored Sources on the Holocaust in Hungary. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007. At present, she participates in the “Children’s Holocaust Testimony Project” with Prof. Joel Walters (Bar-Ilan University) and Dr. Boaz Cohen at Bar-Ilan University. Since 2004, she is teaching in the Holocaust Studies Program at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest, Hungary) and since 2005, she is teaching English literature at Bar-Ilan University. In 2009, she was awarded a five-year term fellowship at the International Institute for Holocaust Research in Yad Vashem.

Her e-mail address is: ritakatahorvath@gmail.com