



**READING  
IN TIME**

**[ A CURRICULUM  
FOR HOLOCAUST  
LITERATURE ]**

A COMPANION TO

**Holocaust Literature  
A History and Guide**

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# Introduction

This is an adult curriculum, for students old enough to know that reading over time takes a lifetime of effort. Because Holocaust literature evolved over time, through the push-and-pull between sacred and scandalous memory, the seven lessons that follow examine Holocaust writing and testimony through a time-sensitive lens. The limits of what is remembered and forgotten of the Holocaust are constantly being tested and renegotiated in print, on screen, and in cyberspace, keeping this awesome subject very much in the public eye. Perhaps, therefore, the following curriculum may best be put to use if it is studied in a group setting. The more diverse the group, the more unpredictable—and enlightening—the results.

The curriculum follows a loose chronology, from the distant past to our own day, from the past significance of historical catastrophe to the meaning and importance of the Holocaust in the present. This order does not have to be followed. The joys of self-study are just that. The reader-student is free to choose a point of entry.

The same is true when it comes to “doing the reading.” Lessons 1 and 6 are reading-intensive and may be saved for later. Lesson 7 examines testimonies that are available only on the Internet. Each lesson tackles a different issue:

## **Lesson 1: The Anthological Imagination**

How anthologies that come and go provide an accurate measure of continuity and change.

## **Lesson 2: The Auschwitz Chronicles**

How the chronicles *of* Auschwitz and the chronicles *on* Auschwitz come from two different worlds, although they were written only a few years apart.

## **Lesson 3: Two Poets Speak, but Who Is Listening?**

Why two wartime poets, who stood on opposite sides of the ghetto wall, were not really heard for forty years.

## **Lesson 4: Reading for Metonymy, Reading for Myth**

How the same work of Holocaust testimony can be read as time-bound or as beyond time, and why these readings are complementary.

## **Lesson 5: Reading through the Lens of Gender**

How reading through a contemporary lens sensitive to issues of gender reveals the full tragedy of fathers, mothers, and children.

**Lesson 6: Discovering a Masterpiece**

How a masterpiece of the bildungsroman—a genre dedicated to the life of an individual as it unfolds over time—is a Holocaust novel set in the unending Warsaw ghetto.

**Lesson 7: Taking True Testimony**

How oral and visual testimony does or does not add up to the complete Holocaust.

Where can the primary sources be found? For more than half of the lessons, readers may access the primary source materials online through this curriculum. Clicking the active hyperlinks in the text will lead you to the primary sources. Readers who are planning to download and print the curriculum may do the same with these texts. All other assigned readings are from books that are readily available in print.

## [ Lesson 1 ]

# The Anthological Imagination

### Primary Sources

Friedlander, Albert H. *Out of the Whirlwind*.

Suchoff, David. "A Yiddish Text from Auschwitz."

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. *Holocaust Literature* (hereafter *HL*),  
75–84, 100–104, 208–10, 221–22, 231–32, 242–43.

[Optional] Stern, David, ed. *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*.

### Topics

So central, yet so ephemeral. Anthologies of destruction. Faith-based anthologies. The metonymic art of the anthology. Measuring continuity and change.

### Rationale: So Central, Yet So Ephemeral

The importance of anthologies in disseminating the knowledge and meaning of the Holocaust can hardly be overstated. Only seven of the titles in the Guide to the First Hundred Books in *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* are anthological, illustrative of the major types of anthologies, but there could have been many more. Before there were Holocaust museums or the plethora of Holocaust-themed movies we have today, a person was most likely to first encounter the subject through an anthology. Yet how quickly anthologies are superseded and become passé. How few receive a second printing, let alone a second edition. Why should this be so? Is it because the anthologies' archived information has become common knowledge or is more readily accessible elsewhere? Has the art of the anthology taken a new aesthetic turn? Or is it because the imagined community to whom they are addressed, once unified by a place of origin or shared vision of the future, has already moved on? If, in ages past, as David Stern teaches us, the anthology was a medium for the

transmission, preservation, and creation of tradition, then the anthology is only as strong as the chain of transmission. Anthologies with a more revolutionary agenda, which harness the memory of the past to call into being a new culture and community, may lose their driving force once that culture or community is a going concern. They become, at best, objects of historical inquiry. What better way, then, to measure continuity and change in a literature that evolved in fits and starts, with each generation defining itself as the first to bear witness, and what better way to locate oneself somewhere in that broken chain of transmission than through the anthology, the genre of all Holocaust genres?

## **Discussion**

### **ANTHOLOGIES OF DESTRUCTION**

History, insofar as Jews in ancient times were concerned, was the story either of God's miraculous interventions or of Israel's disastrous defeats. There was the megillah of thanksgiving and the jeremiad of the great destruction—that is, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. As early as the rabbinic period, historical memory was programmed into the liturgical calendar through the recitation of the Haggadah on Passover and the recitation of *Kinot* (Dirges) on the Ninth of Av, both of which were anthological works that had a fixed but open-ended structure. Liturgical poems lamenting later persecution could always be added to the Dirges without changing the fixed liturgy or establishing a new day of mourning. One liturgy fit all. The structure of feast days and fast days more or less covered the range of catastrophic possibilities for two millennia, until there came a crisis of faith and a revolution in historical consciousness. If the people no longer believed in a theology of sin, retribution, and penitent return, then there had to be some meaning to the suffering outside of the covenantal relationship with God. History itself became a source of covenantal meaning. In 1887–92, Hayyim Jonah Gurland compiled a seven-volume sourcebook on the *History of Jewish Persecution* (Gurland 1972) in order to signal that history was progressing toward a more enlightened future. Things could only get better. When things got worse, assembling a multivolume *Book of Tears: A History of the Decrees, Persecutions and Destructions* (1923–26) was Simon Bernfeld's way of convincing an embattled polity to soldier on. When sporadic pogrom violence escalated into a full-scale holocaust in the Ukrainian civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the hometown associations in faraway America mobilized a relief effort on behalf of the survivors and produced the first *yizkor* books to commemorate their martyred communities (Roskies 1999, 57–66). This did not exhaust all possible anthologies of destruction, because the atrocities perpetrated against Jewish



civilian populations during the First World War inspired the publication of so-called black books, assemblages of eyewitness accounts. All these anthological genres—liturgies, historical compendia, *yizkor* books, and black books—were firmly in place when the unprecedented and unthinkable happened.

During the Second World War, the Jewish anthological imagination turned revolutionary, its stated or unstated purpose to call into being a new culture and community. This was especially true in Mandatory Palestine, where Yehuda Even-Shmuel collected Jewish messianic and apocalyptic texts that the rabbis had driven underground (1943); where Israel Halpern published the first volume of *Sefer hagvura* (1941), his counteranthology of Jewish “Resistance and Martyrdom from the Time of Masada until the Emancipation,” as the subtitle announced, and where Bracha Habas (1943) launched the ambitious Min Hamoked series with five anthologies of authentic wartime materials. Her collection of last letters was especially memorable. Inside the Jew-Zone, all anthological projects were collaborative and anonymous, be they *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–1944* (Dobroszycki 1984); the Oyneg Shabes Archive; the 101-page mimeographed anthology of *Suffering and Heroism in the Jewish Past in Light of the Present* published by the Zionist youth movement Dror in 1940; or *Z otchłani* (From the abyss), the collection of new Polish verse published by the Jewish National Committee in 1944 (see Lesson 3 for more about the committee).

Most revolutionary, if we can judge from its surviving introduction, was the projected anthology *Auschwitz*, compiled in Auschwitz proper. So let us now turn to the remarkable text translated and annotated by David Suchoff. Like Zalmen Gradowski, the anonymous editor of the *Auschwitz* anthology wrote with the certainty that neither he nor his fellows would survive. Like Rachel Auerbach, he began with an analogy taken from an extreme occurrence in nature. To whom could he be likened? To stranded explorers of the earth’s polar regions. Like them, he felt mandated to leave “documentary fragments” of his final days, to fulfill his “duty toward posterity.” But the civilized world the polar explorers had left behind was concerned to learn of their fate; in contrast, he and his fellow Jewish prisoners, dying next to the fires of the crematoria, were driven to write by their rage at the icy indifference of an entire world.

The purpose of the projected anthology was to leave a record of how one lived in Auschwitz, a hidden transcript of the life and death of the Jews. To be sure, there would be an official transcript as well, “narrated by pictures, witnesses and documents,” of how one died at Auschwitz. Written by non-Jews, who viewed their fellow inmates from the outside, they would dwell on instances of Jewish depravity and collaboration in order to assuage their own conscience. The Jews alone, therefore, had to tell their own story, however

crudely or inadequately, even if only a few pages survived for the YIVO Institute, “the archive of Jewish lament.”

How would the projected Auschwitz anthology have compared with *We Were in Auschwitz*? Would the editor’s pessimism and despair have been tempered by reading how Tadeusz Borowski and his fellow Polish Christian inmates implicated everyone in the crime of the Holocaust? How was the anthological genre uniquely suited to convey the experience of absolute extremity—enough tattooed numbers for all?

The two Black Book Committees established in 1943, one in the United States and the other in the Soviet Union, were indeed given the responsibility of documenting how the Jews died. Unfortunately, Stalin ordered the plates of the *Black Book of Russian Jewry* destroyed before the book could appear in 1946, and Soviet readers would learn of its existence from a *samizdat* edition only in 1980 (Ehrenburg and Grossman 2002). Most other anthologies of and on the Holocaust, however, were concerned with how the Jews lived, with the inner lives, dreams, and tragedies of the victims and survivors. The life stories of the displaced persons (DPS) and survivors were brought to life in Leo Schwarz’s *The Root and the Bough* (1949), just as Yosef D. Sheinson created a new Haggadah (2000) to be recited and argued over at the first seder after the Liberation. Anthologies organized by genre were especially popular: of songs, poetry, plays, art work (especially from Terezín), and last letters.

#### **FAITH-BASED ANTHOLOGIES**

All these anthological genres are children of modern times. They did not exist before the end of the nineteenth century. There is one new genre, however, that resonates deeply with Jewish habits of the heart. For lack of a better name, let us call it the faith-based anthology. As Rabbi Shimon Huberband already understood in the first years of the German occupation, recorded instances of supreme self-sacrifice added up to a new definition of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God’s name (Huberband 1987). Such martyrological tales, in turn, were easy to excerpt, which is precisely what Mordecai Eliav did in his popular anthology *Ani ma’amin* (I believe: Testimonies on the life and death of people of faith in the time of the Holocaust) (1965), which has been reprinted numerous times. The works of Yitzhak Katzenelson, Chaim Kaplan, Leyb Rochman, and Abraham Sutzkever were mined for their inspirational content, in the sleight of hand that is the stock in trade of all good anthologizers.

But Orthodoxy was no longer the only religious faith that Jews lived by. Not by a long shot. Just as Mosad Harav Kook, the major Zionist Orthodox publishing house in Israel, published Eliav’s *Ani ma’amin*, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the official arm of the Reform Movement, published Rabbi Albert Friedlander’s pathbreaking *Out of the Whirlwind* (1968), accom-

panied by starkly expressionist illustrations. For Reform Judaism, founded in Germany in the first decade of the nineteenth century, there were two ontological realities: Human beings are most free when they are answerable directly to God, and Jews are most free when they live in complete equality in a gentile world. Both faith in God and faith in the emancipation were mortally threatened in the years 1933–45.

There is a sense of theological urgency to Friedlander’s anthology, which the editor conveys directly in the introductions to six of its seven sections. “Today,” he writes in 1968, “when the demands made upon religion are so much clearer and more urgent—the Shoah simply puts old questions into the sharpest possible form—religion must make some response or close its doors” (463). Putting God on trial is a time-honored response to adversity, going all the way back to the Book of Job, and doing so in the wake of God’s occlusion in the Holocaust is a difference of degree, not of kind. According to Friedlander, the demands on God after Auschwitz have never been greater. Eliav, too, devotes the last section of *Ani ma’amin* to challenging God’s inscrutable ways, which is how it came about that “Yosl Rakover’s Appeal to God” appears in both anthologies—in Eliav as an authentic last testament (translated from the version that Sutzkever published in *Di goldene keyt*), and in Friedlander as a “reconstruction of the last thoughts of a pious Jew” (390) whose story was known to the author, and which American Jewish college students had begun to adopt for liturgical use.

There is a sense of moral urgency, too, and Friedlander calls on the reader to draw inspiration from the exemplary acts of armed resistance (in the Warsaw ghetto uprising) as well as from acts of everyday heroism. If there were people who could behave morally in the throes of hell, then who are we to lose faith in humanity? For Friedlander, whose frame of moral reference is the crisis of German Jewry, those Jews who had staked all on the promise of equal rights, the Holocaust began in April 1933 with the violent boycott of Jewish businesses and the courageous stance taken by the Zionist leadership. As Robert Weltsch’s “Wear the Yellow Badge with Pride” (1999), first published in that year, marks the outermost boundary of the scandalous memory of the Holocaust, three postwar controversies mark the innermost boundary: Bruno Bettelheim’s attack on Otto Frank, Anne’s father, for failing to split up his family to increase their safety and for submitting to death without resistance, Rolf Hochhuth’s attack on Pope Pious XII for his failure to protest the annihilation of the Jews, and Daniel Goldhagen’s attack on ordinary Germans for becoming Hitler’s willing collaborators. The commitment within Reform Judaism to social action comes through in Friedlander’s anthological choices. *Out of the Whirlwind* is very much a child of the 1960s.

Equally intent on reviving an inner Jewish dialogue, Friedlander sets his

anthology within an exegetical frame, which he underscores through the scriptural epigraphs to three of its seven sections and through the retold legends that bracket the book. The Holocaust becomes a sacred text as interpreted by sanctioned commentators—none of whom is more authoritative than Elie Wiesel, who is represented four times. (In contrast, Leo Baeck, the patron saint of German Reform, appears only twice.) This anthology established Wiesel’s position within the English-language world as an oracular presence and as the most authentic voice from “over there.” Wiesel’s neo-Hasidic tales on the Holocaust, which picked up the lost strands of S. Y. Agnon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Jorge Luis Borges, had just the right blend of mysticism and modernism.

### **THE METONYMIC ART OF THE ANTHOLOGY**

In *HL* we had much to say about the metonymic art of Holocaust writing. And much can be learned from Friedlander about the metonymic art of the anthology. It seems that certain genres cry out to be anthologized: a scene from a play, a chapter from a novel, entries from a diary, a sermon (if it’s not too long), a speech, a song, a poem. In the age of the sound bite, however, some of Friedlander’s selections now seem too long, and we are moved to ask: Do we not (let’s be honest) choose the classics of Holocaust literature on the basis of their brevity and excerptability? Friedlander deserves credit for selecting from longer works such as Piotr Rawicz’s *Blood from the Sky*, André Schwarz-Bart’s *The Last of the Just* and Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*, scenes that center on powerful existential encounters. To round out the diary entries and dramatized encounters and the historical, psychological, philosophical, and theological debates, Friedlander offers the reader a liturgical “Interlude” made up of songs, sketches, and poems that are supposed to represent the folk culture of Eastern European Jewry. With so much else vying for one’s time, having the “best” of Holocaust literature and graphic art in one volume is certainly an attractive offer.

Thus far had the state of public memory of the Holocaust come in 1968, the year that “Holocaust, Jewish” entered the Library of Congress cataloguing system as a separate event category. Much can be learned about the changes that have occurred since then from the nine authors introduced in section 7 in the “revised and expanded edition” of Friedlander’s anthology, published in 1999. Most striking is that four of these authors are women. Reviewing sections 1–6 of the 1968 edition, we are astonished to note that only four of the twenty-seven authors were women. Back in the 1960s, Friedlander was still reading through a patriarchal lens, but thanks to his editor, Bonny Fetterman, he adopted a feminist lens in the last year of the twentieth century—though it was probably too little and too late to have *Out of the Whirlwind* adopted for course use on most American college campuses.

### **MEASURING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

Times change. Reading habits change. Controversies come and go. What does not seem to grow weaker is the power of the literary imagination. The literary selections in *Out of the Whirlwind* are significantly more alive today than Salo Baron's historical overview (which was already flawed when he delivered it at the Eichmann trial) or the theological discourse of section 6, which by then already required copious footnotes. There exists a corpus of great Holocaust literature that has withstood the breaks in transmission, the generation gaps, the challenges of translation, the receding of narrative into the past of experience and history, and the inevitable blind spots of even the best editor.

Were you to compile an anthology of Holocaust literature, what would it look like? Would you, like Friedlander, create a thematic collage, or would you organize it by genre or country of origin? In what order would you present the selections: alphabetical, chronological, generational, or in an entirely different way? Would you mix and match poetry and prose, testimony and fiction? Would you limit the selections to a certain length? Would you draw the line in terms of representing atrocity at sexual violence, mass killing, or cannibalism? Would you include material about other holocausts? Would you compare different translations of the same work? This is an assignment you might consider doing, especially if you are working in a group.

## [ Lesson 2 ]

# The Auschwitz Chronicles

### Primary Sources

Borowski, Tadeusz. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

Gradowski, Zalmen. "The Czech Transport."

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. *HL*, 73–74, 84–89, 215–16, 222–23, 232–33.

### Topics

"Chronicles of" versus "chronicles on." Stories of a new Bible. Point of view in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Heroic action in Auschwitz, or the choiceless choice.

### Rationale: "Chronicles Of" versus "Chronicles On"

The gas chambers and crematoria were built to exterminate the overflow of millions of Jews recently removed from the ghettos and transit camps with greatest possible efficiency. Those who lived to tell the tale were mostly "high numbers," people who arrived late in the long night of mass extermination. Unlike other curricula, however, ours takes advantage of the extraordinary, almost unbelievable, corpus of writings by members of the Sonderkommando—the men who oversaw the murder of their own people, who gave them instructions about where to undress and where to leave their belongings, who shaved their heads and led them to the baths, whose job it was to pull the dead from the gas chambers, pry open their mouths to extract their gold teeth, and feed the bodies into the ovens, men who knew their own days were numbered. These chronicles, we now know, were written by observant Jews who were raised in the Yiddish-speaking heartland but who were conversant with one or more European cultures. Zalmen Gradowski, by far the most prolific among them, attached an inscription in Polish, Russian, French, and

German to the writings he buried in the ash pits of the crematoria for postwar disinterment: "Take note of this document because it contains material that is most important for the historian" (1985, 173).

It is somewhat jarring to compare Gradowski's on-the-spot chronicles with those written after the war for a known audience and designed for publication. The comparison produces an unexpected result: Gradowski's account seems contrived and self-consciously "literary," while the later chronicles are disarmingly direct and devoid of literary gilding. Gradowski's eloquence and embellishments, we suggest, are as much a product of his time as Tadeusz Borowski's plain style is of his. By doing much more than merely chronicle the facts, Gradowski hoped to win the attention of future historians. By eschewing metaphor, omniscient narration, poetic fallacy, and a whole arsenal of other literary devices, Borowski challenged the postwar reader to adopt a new norm of concentrationary realism. Yet only a few years separate the buried chronicles *from* Auschwitz and the first published chronicles *about* Auschwitz. Did one world end when the other was born?

## Discussion

### STORIES OF A NEW BIBLE

"For I intend to write a great, immortal epic," Borowski resolved at the end of his first collection of concentration camp stories, "worthy of this unchanging, difficult world chiseled out of stone" (1976, 180). The most overtly biblical and epic chronicle of Auschwitz, it seems in retrospect, was written by Gradowski, the eyewitness and resistance fighter who perished in the wake of the one-day uprising of October 7, 1944, along with 450 other members of the Sonderkommando. They succeeded in blowing up Crematorium IV, the ruins of which still can be seen today.

As someone schooled in Jewish collective memory, what came most naturally to Gradowski was to exemplify the behavior of the group, the collective, the nation. The Germans, to begin with, cast the annihilation of "The Czech Transport" in an archetypal mold. They orchestrated the deception of the victims to coincide with the joyous festival of Purim, which commemorates the victory and vengeance of the Jews over those who plotted their destruction. There can be no greater sacrilege. The day of national rejoicing was turned into a day of destruction, with the Germans aided and accompanied by other Jews. The Germans also observed the unities of time, place, and action, executing this operation in their war against the Jews with military precision. As in the Scroll of Esther, where the Purim saga was immortalized, the fate of the women loomed especially large in Gradowski's anti-scroll, which unfolded in a series of archetypal encounters: between the Sonderkommando and the naked

women, their last erotic desires knowing no bounds; between one courageous mother, in a replay of 2 Maccabees, and the German officers whom she openly defied; between a husband and wife reunited just as the last stragglers were pushed into the gas chambers. Presiding over this satanic festival was the indifferent moon, which continued to shine, standing in for the natural world from which a whole community of Jews was now being torn away forever.

But the analogy between Purim and the latest war against the Jews, waged on the battlefield of Birkenau, goes only so far, for the Sonderkommando's real work has yet to begin. Their job is to strip the dead of all valuable commodities. "Three prisoners prepare the body of a woman," for example. "One probes her pretty mouth with pliers, looking for gold teeth, which, when found, are ripped out together with the flesh. Another cuts the hair, the woman's crown, while the third quickly tears off earrings, often drawing blood in the process. And the rings, which do not come off the fingers easily, must be removed with pliers." Then the body is burned. "The entire process lasts twenty minutes—and a human being, a world, has been turned into ashes." This last chapter has the title "In the Heart of Hell." The ancient archetype is made real, with no need of literary gilding.

Borowski, with his Jesuit training, picks up where Gradowski left off, and the title story of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, to which we now turn, can be read either as a mock Eden ("All of us walk around naked" is the famous opening line) or as Dante's inferno. Either way, it is a tale of initiation, in which the Auschwitz prisoner must adapt immediately and deaden his spirit if he is to survive even a single day. And he seems to have succeeded, because all of these stories are narrated by Vorarbeiter Tadek, Auschwitz No. 119198, with studied indifference and a callous demeanor. In style as well as substance, Borowski's stories are, on the surface at least, "simple and incomprehensible" (Levi 1985, 66).

#### **POINT OF VIEW IN AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU**

"The Death of Schillinger," another story in Borowski's book, may serve as our point of entry to this section. The subject of the Sonderkommando is already familiar to us from reading Gradowski. The style and brevity of this story are influenced by Borowski's discovery of Hemingway. The incident it recounts is among the most celebrated acts of spontaneous resistance in the annals of Auschwitz. On October 23, 1943, a Jewish dancer, naked and at the entrance to the gas chambers, grabbed a revolver from Josef Schillinger, one of the most hated and sadistic of the ss officers, and mortally wounded him (Chatwood 2010; Langbein 1994, 497–98). For Tadek field of vision is everything, and since he wasn't there to witness the deed himself, he entrusts the story to someone who was.



A foreman of the Sonderkommando is taking a breather “while waiting for a shipment of evaporated milk to come in from the gypsy camp warehouse,” and as he gets himself ready to recount the latest news, he props a pillow under his ass and lights a cigarette. The reader has met these Sonderkommando guys before. They are scum of the Auschwitz earth, who feed off the dead. In his lead-in to the story of Schillinger’s death, the foreman explains that the arrival of the transport from Będzin made the Sonderkommando nervous, because some of its members hailed from there, and the foreman, too, was afraid of recognizing someone from the transport. This prompts Tadek to ask the foreman about his connection to the transport, because there’s nothing in his Polish that is suggestive of that region. “I once took a teacher’s training course in Warsaw,” the foreman explains, and he taught for a while at the Będzin school. He might have gone abroad to teach, had family reasons not prevented him. So the foreman is a schoolteacher, a member of the Polish intelligentsia, no less, and a family man to boot. Why, Auschwitz itself is one big family.

True to form, the proper subject of the foreman’s story is not the woman from the Będzin transport but First Sergeant Schillinger, and Schillinger is so drawn to her naked body that he takes her by the hand, at which point she scoops up some gravel, throws it in his face, grabs his revolver, and shoots him in the abdomen: “The whole place went wild. The naked crowd turned on us screaming.” The woman then shoots the ss chief in the face, and the ss men flee the scene, leaving it to the Sonderkommando to manage the maddened crowd, with Schillinger clawing the dirt in pain. The Sonderkommando, “thank God,” drive the crowd into the gas chambers and call in the ss to administer the Zyklon B, and Schillinger expires with Wagnerian death throes, lamenting his tragic fate. “O God, my God,” he exclaims, “what have I done to deserve such suffering?”

The two main players in this family saga are God-fearing men. One is a former schoolteacher. The other can appreciate a woman’s body and dies with an operatic flourish. Though the monologue is over, the story is not. “That man didn’t understand until the very end,” says Tadek of Schillinger, shaking his head. “What strange irony of fate.” “What strange irony of fate,” the foreman repeats thoughtfully.

So the speaker and his interlocutor are in complete agreement. They accept the shopworn headings of “irony” and “fate” as the story’s moral summary. But can the reader? Irony is built on the tension between two opposite and simultaneous sets of truth. Fate presupposes a world of meaningful human choice. Do the foreman and Tadek really “understand”? Tadek has the final word, saving the last instance of ironic fate for his punch line: The foreman took part in the one-day uprising of the Sonderkommando, made it as far as the outer perimeter, and was mowed down by the same ss whom he had served so faithfully.

**HEROIC ACTION IN AUSCHWITZ,  
OR THE CHOICELESS CHOICE**

Collective action, heroic deeds, death scenes, seductions of the flesh, a sense of solidarity among people from the same place and speaking the same language, narrative, speech, inherited moral categories—all are robbed of significance, leveled, and swallowed up into a world of stone. In Auschwitz, the stories are as simple and incomprehensible as that.

If that is the last word, must we share the implied author's moral perspective? Why is his perspective any more reliable than Tadek's or the foreman's? Why, we ask, should a member of the Sonderkommando be judged more harshly than the Polish inmates who feed, as he does, off the dead? Tadek and his buddies all receive packages and even letters from the home front, while the foreman does not. And although he is killed in action, however futile, they live on to the bitter end. Our chapter on the DP camps made passing mention of *Journey to the End of the Night*, "a prewar French novel that Borowski greatly admired" (*HL*, 82), the work, as it happens, of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a pornographic anti-Semite. Borowski's nihilism is of a piece with Céline's. Perhaps Czesław Miłosz's portrayal of Borowski as Exhibit B of *The Captive Mind* (1981) was overly harsh. Or perhaps that part of Borowski's soul that was destroyed in Auschwitz finally consumed the other half.

## [ Lesson 3 ]

# Two Poets Speak, but Who Is Listening?

### Primary Sources

Błoński, Jan. “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto.”

Miłosz, Czesław. “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” and “Campo dei Fiori.”

Sutzkever, Abraham. “How?”

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. 2012. *HL*, 44–50, 62–64, 89–92, 292.

### Topics

Poetry in wartime, when the muses are not silent. From bystander to moral witness. The belated reception of wartime writing. A Jew of the New Testament: faith and the act of bearing witness.

### Rationale: Poetry in Wartime, When the Muses Are Not Silent

At precisely the moment when all hope was lost, two poets, one in Yiddish, the other in Polish, issued a call for radical self-confrontation. As much as the first calls for armed resistance marked a breakthrough in group consciousness among the politically affiliated youth, the crisis in poetic consciousness marked the birth pangs of a new literature “of” —as distinct from “on” —the Holocaust. But for whom did these poets poeticize? Most wartime poetry was lyrical in nature, expressing personal loss, grief, and hope, challenging the commonplace that when the cannons roar, the muses grow silent. In the major ghettos and urban centers, however, there were also poets who assumed the mantle of prophecy, harnessing their muse to something much larger—a call so existentially extreme that it fell on deaf ears, so morally compelling that

it could not be silenced. One of these poems became a mandate for national self-scrutiny, triggering a seismic aftershock of Holocaust memory.

## Discussion

Between February and April 1943, two poets—one Jewish, the other Christian—reached a breaking point. As one stood inside the ghetto looking out and the other stood outside the ghetto looking in, both seized on the same terrifying image to convey their sense of despair. It was the image of a mole that flourished underground, in the dark, and whose name in both their languages was almost the same: *krot*, or *kret*, sounding harsh and especially guttural when pronounced with the Slavic *r*. Both poets imagined a mole, boring deep into the landscape of destruction, at once physical, psychological, and metaphysical—an inhuman abode that humans would now be forced to inhabit. “How and with what will you fill / Your cup on the day you’re free?” Abraham Sutzkever asks the starving Jewish remnant of Vilna with prophetic rage. “Will you in your joy still / Hear the scream of the past / Where the skulls of chained days / Clot in bottomless pits?” What sounds will greet the ghetto Jews on the day of their liberation? Will their present joy drown out the screams of the past or—as this terrifying poem predicts—will they find themselves trapped in time? At worst, “Searching hopelessly / For the keys to jammed locks, / You’ll chew pavement like bread / And think it was better before.” At best, “time will gnaw at your hand gently / Like a cricket under the floor.” The vision ends not merely under the floorboards but under the very foundations of the city. “In a rubble-encrusted old city / Your memory will be like a hole. / And your glance will burrow furtively / Like a mole, like a mole.”

### FROM BYSTANDER TO MORAL WITNESS

Two months later, in another part of the Jew-Zone, a “poor Christian” watches in horror as the Warsaw ghetto goes up in flames. As the tearing, trampling, breaking, and burning of human habitations proceeds apace, he sees the bees and ants busily building their tiny lairs on the livers and lungs, the black and white bones of the dead. It is a landscape of destruction devoid of human agency. The roof and walls collapse; the bees and ants go about their business. But suddenly the Christian speaker, Czesław Miłosz, catches sight of a “guardian mole” making his way through the rubble; part Polish miner, “with a small red lamp fastened to his forehead,” part Polish Jew, with “swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch.” With his penetrating gaze, the mole demands a moral reckoning from the bystander, accusing him of having become—either by design or by default—an accomplice to the crime, a helper of death, one of the uncircumcised. Sutzkever’s mole exposes the curse of survival, the false liberation that

awaits the Jews, whose desperate search for a piece of bread in the ghetto present will be replaced with a choiceless choice between a buried past and a dead-ended future. Miłosz's mole exposes the curse of bearing witness.

Here is a remarkable instance of simultaneous poetic taxonomy: two poets conjuring the same image of an underground mole. No less remarkable is that in doing so they defied the German tactic of divide and conquer, of fostering mutual hatred and suspicion under a constant reign of terror. For a Christian and Jewish Pole on opposite sides of the ghetto walls to achieve poetic adjacency was no small act of spiritual resistance.

#### **THE BELATED RECEPTION OF WARTIME WRITING**

But was anyone listening? The Jews of the ghetto, we know from the diaries of Herman Kruk (2002) and Isaac Rudashevski (1983), looked to Sutzkever's verse primarily as a source of consolation, an island of meaning in a world gone mad. His measured, epic verse conjured up an inviolable standard of beauty; his rage and despair were translated into a call to action. Addressed to a second-person singular "you," "How?" challenged each and every ghetto Jew directly, yet the searing vision of the past devouring the future served neither to console nor to mobilize. Until it was anthologized in the late 1980s, the poem did not get much notice. Is there something in the temper of our times that has made us more attentive to the poet's individual despair?

Miłosz's more muted poem, meanwhile, was one of two submitted by Adolf Rudnicki to the Jewish National Committee in Warsaw for inclusion in the historic and unprecedented underground anthology then under preparation (Shenfeld 1991, 27–28). One, "Campo dei Fiori," was accepted, while "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" was rejected for being too pessimistic and for needlessly provoking the Polish reader (Berman 1971, 156–67). Too pessimistic? Too provocative? Or perhaps too Christian? The chief difference between Miłosz's two submissions may lie instead in their formal approach. His mole is the classic metonymy, the little rodent that stands at the terrifying abyss, while "Campo dei Fiori" draws an extended analogy between two centuries and two martyrdoms. (For more on this distinction, see the next lesson.) The allegorical meaning of the second poem was both more accessible and more attuned to group purpose in Warsaw of 1944, where the Polish underground was preparing for its own uprising against the German occupier.

#### **A JEW OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:**

#### **FAITH AND THE ACT OF BEARING WITNESS**

Miłosz's call for moral reconciliation fell again on deaf ears when the German occupation gave way to Stalinism. Where the dead could not be divided, the particular wounds could not be sutured. Only when there were barely any Jews

left in Poland with whom to be reconciled did the republication of Miłosz's two wartime poems initiate an open and brutally honest Polish-Jewish dialogue. That public dialogue began in January 1987 with a manifesto-like article written by the Polish historian, literary critic, publicist, and translator, Jan Błoński (1931–2009), which was published in a highly influential Roman Catholic weekly.

For Błoński, there are three inexhaustible and unimpeachable sources of moral truth and justice: the Old and New Testaments and “our literary greats” (1987, 48), by which he means the most revered Polish-language poets. Among the latter, Błoński singles out Miłosz, then living in self-imposed exile, for he alone can guide the Polish people through the tragic terrain of the twentieth century. Błoński's article itself follows a tripartite structure: in between a close reading of Miłosz's two wartime poems, Błoński presents a thumbnail sketch of some twenty angry, accusatory conversations that he had held abroad on the subject of Polish-Jewish relations. And so, after a gap of forty years, the forgotten writings of an exiled poet and the scandal of Polish antisemitism serve to awaken the conscience of the Polish people.

“To purify after Cain means, above all, to remember Abel,” writes Błoński, going back to the beginning of recorded time (1987, 36). Applying this biblical analogy to the history of Jews and Christian Poles, he goes on: “This particular Abel was not alone: he shared our home, lived on our soil. His blood has remained in the walls, seeped into the soil. It has also entered into ourselves, into our memory. So we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth.” To put truth to the test, the writer subjects both poems to moral scrutiny by taking his lead from Miłosz himself. “Campo dei Fiori,” surprisingly, fails the test, leaving only (as Błoński's title already suggests) “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto.” “It is we ourselves who fear the mole who burrows in our subconscious,” he writes in conclusion (44). “We must face the question of responsibility in a totally sincere and honest way. Let us have no illusions: it is one of the most painful questions which we are likely to be faced with. I am convinced, however, that we cannot shirk it.” Facing up to the darkest side of the Polish-Jewish past will require nothing less than a “moral revolution,” which alone will have the power to “gradually cleanse our desecrated soil” (46).

Together, Miłosz and Błoński model a Christian response to the Holocaust that does not talk the language of forgiveness. Rather, they acknowledge the suffering of the other side, admit their own complicity in the crime, and express their sense of irreparable loss. A coexistence that lasted over eight centuries ended at the ghetto walls. But given that he stood so close, the poor Christian of Miłosz's parable could not pretend that this was a Sunday just like any other. As a bystander, he accepted the terms of absolute moral engagement and thus set in motion a process of national self-scrutiny that has not yet run its course.

## [ Lesson 4 ]

# Reading for Metonymy, Reading for Myth

### Primary Sources

Hebrew Bible. Gen. 22: 1-19; I Samuel 1.

New Testament. John 11: 1-46; 19:7.

Siddur (Daily Jewish Prayer Book). Yizkor (Memorial Service).

Auerbach, Rachel. "Yizkor, 1943."

Hecht, Anthony. "The Book of Lolek."

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*.

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. *HL*, 39-41, 57-62, 65-68, 117-24, 241-42, 267-68.

Sherman, Kenneth. "The Necessity of Poetry."

### Topics

Metonymy, myth, and collective memory. The art of countercommentary. The soldier as witness to the Holocaust. What is a "Jewish" response to catastrophe?

### Rationale: Metonymy, Myth, and Collective Memory

Metonymic landscapes are translatable from one imaginative realm to another. Metonyms, the large writ small, presuppose the communicability of microcosmic experience, inviting dialogue, disagreement, and interpretation. Mythic landscapes are *sui generis*; one must buy into the whole thing. They describe an archetypal situation that can be mimicked but never fully replicated. Take it or leave it. So for example, S. Y. Agnon's "The Lady and the Peddler" (1971) is a universal and brilliantly plotted tale of seduction, the story of a lower-class peddler who exchanges his wandering and want for the shelter and sexual embrace of an upper-class lady. The Ideal Reader, as learned as Agnon

himself, hears the exegetical echo that identifies the *adonit* (the “lady”) of the story’s title with the wife of Potiphar, which is why the peddler is named Joseph (see Genesis 39). This changes the explanatory force of the story completely. It becomes an ancestral tale, an ominous replaying of Israel’s betraying and effacing itself in the presence of pagan rulers. Read as myth, the story serves a collective purpose in the present by fostering group identity. Does this mean that in order to qualify as Holocaust literature, the first and preferred reading must be mythic?

## Discussion

Among its many virtues, Rachel Auerbach’s “Yizkor, 1943” takes us step by step through an interpretive response to the Holocaust. Written on the first anniversary of the great deportation from the Warsaw ghetto, the survivor reaches out for the closest analogy, comparing the national to a natural disaster. It was like a flood Auerbach once witnessed in the mountains. Almost as a reflex, she then makes two conceptual leaps from the punctual to the trans-temporal: from a mere flood to the biblical Deluge, and from the destruction of Jewish Warsaw to the fall of another walled city, Jerusalem. The survivor is trying the catastrophe on for size, comparing and contrasting, and there is nothing facile or consoling about this activity. The comparison of Warsaw and Jerusalem breaks down the moment she remembers the active collaboration of the Jewish police: “And if, for even one of the days of my life, I should forget how I saw you then, my people, desperate and confused, delivered over to extinction, may all knowledge of me be forgotten and my name be cursed like that of those traitors who are unworthy to share your pain.” Nor is the comparison of the national to the natural disaster any easier, for “every instinct is revealed in the mass—repulsive, tangled. All feelings churning, feverish to the core. . . . Hundreds of deceptive or ridiculous schemes of rescue. At the other pole, a yielding to the inevitable; a gravitation toward mass death that is no less substantial than the gravitation toward life. Sometimes the two antipodes followed each other in the same being.” This is the dialectic of destruction, and it is unfathomable.

Absent an explanation, the survivor proceeds to draw a composite portrait of her people, recalling them group by group: the children and the youth, the women and the men, the rich and the poor, the pickpockets and the pious. The recapitulation takes up the lion’s share of her requiem until—exhausted by the effort to recall each group of Jews individually, despairing of the possibility of ever completing the litany of losses—her account becomes more personal, and she turns to an incident that had just happened to her while riding the Warsaw streetcar, the jarring moment that birthed this very work. Seeing



a bereaved mother crying over the death of her son reminded her of another woman who seemed drunk or mad with personal grief, Hannah in Shiloh, crying her heart out before God, because she is childless (I Samuel 1). But as a Jew living with Aryan identity papers, even that act of catharsis is denied her, so all she can really do is write this chronicle in greatest secrecy, and return in her memory to the ancient rite of Jewish mourning, to the recitation of *yizkor*.

#### THE ART OF COUNTERCOMMENTARY

Auerbach's "Yizkor, 1943," then, can be read as a primer in Jewish collective memory. Using a grammar of remembrance perfected over time, applying her philosophical training, and drawing on her intimate knowledge of her subjects, Auerbach disassembled this unprecedented catastrophe into its constituent parts: a flood, a Deluge, a Hurban; a walled city, a social mosaic, a civilization in miniature—moving from personal bereavement to national lament and then to cosmic loss.

The main structuring device of Elie Wiesel's *Night* is the father-son relationship: sons who see their fathers cry, who are silent when their fathers are beaten, who are rewarded for persecuting their fathers, who kill their fathers for a crust of bread, who lose and find and lose their fathers yet again, forever. Does Eliezer, in the end, become one of the sons whom he despises? Do not his own words betray him when he admits, after his father has died, "and deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscience, I might have found something like: Free at last!" This is what we have been calling "reading for metonymy," conjuring a human landscape that carries over into other imaginative realms and invites dialogue, disagreement, and interpretation. However, in the first two iterations of *Night*—the Yiddish and the French—Wiesel's readers heard him speak in an ancestral voice, the language of ancient myth. Key to the archetypal meaning of his memoir for the Jewish reader was the same father-son relationship, which both in its individual and aggregate parts shed a sinister light on the Akedah, God's command to Abraham in Genesis 22 to sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah. Overturning the biblical paradigm, it was the sons who now sacrificed the fathers. Here, no heavenly angel appeared to stay the sacrificial homicide. Key to the meaning for his Christian readers were the two public hangings in Buna; between one evening soup and another, the crucifixion was reenacted, without any hope of resurrection. Through the master narrative of ultimate sacrifice—of Abraham and Isaac, of Father and Son—Wiesel translated his *Via Dolorosa* from Sighet to Buchenwald into the grammar of two religions at once. His gospel of survival could be read as a countercommentary on both Testaments, Old and New. The Christian thinker François Mauriac then took one look at the young Israelite and identified him as Lazarus, raised from the dead.

Transformed, thanks in no small measure to the combined efforts of Wiesel and Mauriac, into an event with scriptural significance and authority all its own, the Holocaust became a mythic landscape that was *sui generis*. None but the eyewitness could enter its sacred precinct. Not even vicariously.

#### **THE SOLDIER AS WITNESS TO THE HOLOCAUST**

The men in uniform who served in the Soviet, British, and American armies were the first outsiders to enter the cursed precincts of the concentration and death camps. Best known and best documented, thanks to the recent republication of his wartime diaries and writings, is Vasily Grossman (2005). The experience of Palestinian Jewish soldiers attached to the British army is the subject of Hanoch Bartov's fine novel, *The Brigade* (1968). Among Jewish GIs, Anthony Hecht—who had served with the US 97th Infantry and participated in the liberation of Flossenbürg, part of the Buchenwald concentration camp complex—returned to the subject of the camps in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Hard Hours* (1967). That experience did not recede with time. In “The Book of Yolek” (1982), written to memorialize a boy murdered forty years before, Hecht provided the definitive answer to our question: Must a work of Holocaust literature be about Memory rather than about memory?

“The Book of Yolek” is a rare, if not unique, sestina on the theme of the Holocaust. Adding another layer of formal complexity is the chilling and unattributed epigraph in German: something about having a law, and by that law “he will be put to death.” The sestina, to begin with, is an intricate verse form created by thirteenth-century Provençal troubadours, a thirty-nine-line poem consisting of six six-line stanzas and one three-line envoi (or “send-off”). By any contemporary measure, it is a difficult genre. The six end-words in the first stanza are repeated in a prescribed order as end-words in each of the subsequent stanzas. The concluding envoi brings together all six of the end-words.

Until its final stanza, “The Book of Yolek” is a palimpsest of highly individualized memories. An idyllic campfire scene reminds the speaker of another campfire meal, buried in his childhood memory, which in turn recalls another child, eating his last meal on August 5, 1942, the day that Janusz Korczak's orphanage was liquidated—which from that day on turns every August into the month of commemoration; which makes the absent, murdered child who has no memorial into a permanent presence; which turns him into the missing Presence at every Last Supper. So here it is again: memory turned into Memory, metonym into myth. And lest there be any doubt, there is the troublesome matter of the German epigraph. It reads like a Nazi ordinance, until Kenneth Sherman informs us that Hecht is actually citing Luther's translation of Pontius Pilate responding to the Jews in the Gospel of John: “We have a law, and according to the law he must die.” When is a German epigraph just a Ger-

man epigraph? Do we really need the Christian—or anti-Christian—overlay? Isn't a courageous act of personal memory retrieval sufficient if it elicits an ethical encounter with one murdered child, who is a world entire?

#### **WHAT IS A "JEWISH" RESPONSE TO CATASTROPHE?**

Epigraphs, citations, parodies, recycled memories—these are the stuff of all imaginative writing. What makes such habits of the mind particularly Jewish? And by what right can we claim that Hecht, like Wiesel and Auerbach before him, has adopted a "Jewish" response to catastrophe? What makes this response Jewish is the art of countercommentary.

For Jews, the Hebrew Bible is a collective blueprint. Sacred and immutable, it is open to all. In the normal course of events, its meaning can best be apprehended with the help of the commentators, liturgical poets, preachers, and teachers in Israel. It is they who turned Scripture into the GPS of life. But in times of historical catastrophes—expulsions, evil decrees, mob violence, mass murder—anyone with a modicum of Judaic literacy can become an exegete.

In Jewish tradition, moreover, it is permissible to argue with God. Indeed, the sanctioned way of response is to throw God's word back at God, to "re-mind" God, as it were, of the covenant with Israel, and to provoke God to action in the name of that divine set of promises. Ever since the Jews began to adopt secular modes of self-expression—epic and lyric poetry, drama, short story, monologue, novel, autobiography—it has become possible to adopt this technique of invoking and provoking God without an underlying belief in divine authorship. The best-known instances of countercommentary in Holocaust literature—Primo Levi's anti-prayer at the beginning of *Survival in Auschwitz*, André Schwarz-Bart's anti-kaddish at the conclusion of *The Last of the Just*, and Dan Pagis's "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car"—situate their authors within a cultural continuum without their having to make any commitment of faith. As the great American-Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein put it so paradoxically, "The God of my unbelief is magnificent" (Glatstein 1972, 71).

Much ink has been spilt on the question of whether there can ever be a commensurate response to the Holocaust. Some of our greatest writers have already given the answer: the answer is to write a countercommentary, to essay a new scripture—not the book of Yolek, but the Book of Yolek.

## [ Lesson 5 ]

# Reading through the Lens of Gender

### Primary Sources

Appelfeld, Aharon. "Bertha."

Fink, Ida. *A Scrap of Time*.

Pagis, Dan. "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car."

Sutzkever, Abraham. "To My Child."

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. *HL*, 16–19, 69–73, 139–51, 273–74, 278–79, 287.

### Topics

Is this pornography? Anne Frank and after. The heroism of small deeds. Family structure and its destruction.

### Rationale: Is This Pornography?

In the Auschwitz chronicles, the world broke down into men, women, and pornographers (or *Prominenten*). The complexity of human existence and co-existence was reduced to its lowest bodily denominator. Gradowski, it must be admitted, succumbed to the prurient fascination with so much female flesh, and another Polish Jew from the same Orthodox background who took the name Ka-Tzetnik 135633 (1955) later turned the pornography of Auschwitz into the focal point of his family chronicle. With scientific precision, Primo Levi (1985) focused on the "excremental assault" to the body (in Terrence Des Pres's memorable phrase [1976]), introducing a glossary of scatological terms: *Scheissbegleiter* (shit companion), *Scheissminister* (superintendent of the shit-house), *Zweiplatziges Kommandoschiesshaus* (two-seater shit-house reserved for our Kommando), and the ever-popular *Stinkjude*. It was an all-male preserve. In most literature on the Holocaust, however, we see a world much the same

as our own, a world made up of fathers, mothers, and children. The essential difference is that, sooner or later, all are robbed of their key gender and generational roles.

## **Discussion**

### **ANNE FRANK AND AFTER**

In the wake of the publication of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), the master narrative of the Holocaust included many women, whether as diarists (the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum), heroines (Hannah Senesh [Szenes], Justyna), eyewitness chroniclers (Rachel Auerbach, Charlotte Delbo, Liana Millu, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Gisella Perl, Nechama Tec, Giuliana Tedeschi, Gerda Weismann Klein, Reska Weiss), poets (Nelly Sachs, Irena Klepfisz, Gertrud Kolmar, Rivka Miriam, Kadia Molodowsky, Reyzl Zychlinsky), novelists (Ida Fink, Naomi Frankel, Michal Govrin, Ilona Karmel, Anna Langfus, Elsa Morante, Chava Rosenfarb, Nava Semel), or metonyms. There was much room for the self-representation of women. Later still, when the focus of Holocaust memory turned ever inward, the madness of women and female hysteria became a master trope of Holocaust fiction and film.

With fathers rendered impotent and husbands rounded up and killed, every home or hide-out turned into a battlefield in which the resourcefulness of women was decisive. The heroism of the Holocaust was the heroism of small deeds, parental sacrifice, bonding, loyalty, and love. The tragedy of the Holocaust, contrariwise, was the tragedy of choiceless choices, sudden reversals, silences, and betrayals.

### **THE HEROISM OF SMALL DEEDS**

The record keeping began in wartime, notably in diaries. The diary of Dawid Sierakowiak is a daily report on family breakdown. The confessions of Calek Perechodnik, Baruch Milch, Yitzhak Katzenelson, Abraham Lewin, to name a few fathers, are the confessions of men disabled by their powerlessness to fulfill their essential roles. Wartime writings that we raid for other content yield startling insights when read through the lens of gender. Rabbi Shimon Huberband (1987), the source for much of what we know about the inner life of observant Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, sees the catastrophe through patriarchal eyes. Devoting two chapters to the subject of clandestine mikvahs, or ritual baths, he describes the efforts of the women as slapdash and slightly comical, whereas the scene in which he accompanies the rabbi of Piaseczno (the revered Esh Kodesh; see Polen 1994) to the mikvah in the dead of night is presented in terms of obeying ancient paradigms, as a heroic, covenantally affirming act. Huberband's gender bias is underscored by the ritual severity of

the mikvah in the lives of Jewish women and men. For Orthodox women, sex and childbearing depend on monthly attendance in the mikvah, while for men it is a matter of ritual purity on a sliding scale of piety. Shouldn't the women get higher grades for their spunk and self-sacrifice?

Auerbach's identity as a woman, we recall from the previous lesson, does not come into play until she encounters a Polish Christian woman who has lost her child. For Auerbach this is the psychological and theological turning point; the dam of her grief bursts open when she confronts the personal loss of another woman, which in turn brings the biblical analogy into sudden focus. This analogy, like all the others, is not a perfect fit. Hannah's despair was rewarded with childbearing, consecration, and the continuity of the People of Israel. The trajectory of the solitary survivor leads from personal bereavement, to Hannah's grief, to a flood in the mountains, to the great deportation, to a dead-ended kaddish.

How a father overcame the murder of his firstborn son is the subject of Sutzkever's personal lament, "To My Child." Whatever the historical circumstances, which are alluded to ever so cryptically (see Roskies 1984, 232–38), this much is clear. "I wanted to swallow you, child," says the bereaved father, "when I felt your tiny body / cool in my hands / like a glass / of warm tea." The poem bodies forth the father's desperate need to birth the child anew, and only when that effort is doomed to failure is he ready to bequeath him back to nature.

#### **FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ITS DESTRUCTION**

The family structure is both timeless and infinitely changeable. On one side are the writers who hearken back to ancient myths, and on the other side are those who rest their case with the case study alone. Pagis's poem "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car" rewrites Genesis 4 to cast Eve in the role of Everyvictim. Appelfeld's short story "Bertha" recasts Penelope and Odysseus as Bertha and Max—the one static and loyal, perpetually childlike, and the other always fresh from his travels, a purveyor of beer. They are also two sides of the Holocaust survivor, rendered here as a difference in gender: he trying to move ahead, she frozen in the past, locked in traumatic memory, busy knitting her own shroud.

In a series of brilliantly crafted (and translated) vignettes, Ida Fink has provided an anatomy of people (and a people) robbed of their essential gender roles. In "The Key Game," a son practices saving his father, and wins a grudging compliment. The speaker in "Crazy" saves himself by silencing his children. In "A Conversation," the wife discovers that her husband's newly acquired sex appeal might keep them alive, only there is nothing left for her as a woman. In the story without a title, a thin woman "with a huge pregnant belly" says

farewell to her father on behalf of all the bereaved children and grandchildren cowering behind the windows. In “Traces,” a lone survivor looks for some trace of the children who remained silent, refusing to betray their parents. And then there is a story so stark and simple that it carries scriptural authority. The temporal and physical frame in “A Spring Morning” is the same as that of Genesis 22, with one important difference: the child whom the father is forced to carry in his arms is already dead, and his elaborate scheme to save her from slaughter has come to naught.

## [ Lesson 6 ]

# Discovering a Masterpiece

### Primary Sources

Wojdowski, Bogdan. *Bread for the Departed*.

### Secondary Sources

Roskies, David G., and Naomi Diamant. 2012. *HL*, 132–38, 275–76.

### Topics

Nothing is obscure. Reading through a national lens. The whole curriculum in one book. The Holocaust as bildungsroman.

### Rationale: Nothing Is Obscure

There is no such thing as an obscure work of Holocaust literature. “Obscure,” in the sense of marginal or insignificant, must be struck from the books, for with it comes the suggestion that some points on the Holocaust compass are more central than others, or that translation into a major European language is the true measure of worth. Holocaust literature is written in as many languages and translated into as many languages as there are literate peoples; Holocaust denial knows no linguistic or religious boundaries. “Obscure” in the sense of arcane or esoteric is equally unsound, for with that meaning comes the suggestion that only short and otherwise reader-friendly works of Holocaust literature are so-called teachable texts. What passes nowadays as the canon of Holocaust literature is a historically unexamined list of teachable and readily available texts in English translation.

Holocaust literature unfolds both backward and forward: backward, as previously unknown works are published, annotated, translated, catalogued, and promptly forgotten; forward, as new works of ever greater subtlety or simplicity come into being. The fund of wartime writing is still open. So too is the possibility of discovering a new masterpiece.



## Discussion

### READING THROUGH A NATIONAL LENS

At the behest of our publisher, we limited our Guide to the First Hundred Books of Holocaust literature to works that are available in English. This proved a demoralizing task, because so many of the titles were already out of print. In a digital age, this situation must and will change. Meanwhile, we are most fortunate that Northwestern University Press, through a series called Jewish Lives, has made available the writings of Ida Fink, Michał Głowiński, Henryk Grynberg, Arnošt Lustig, Liana Millu, Zofia Nałkowska, Shaye Spiegel, and Jiří Weil (to name the most familiar) in handsome paperback editions, some reprinted and others new. A distinctive feature of this series is that it scrupulously preserves the Slavic diacritical marks—as we have also labored to do—out of respect for the integrity of each language. It is through this admirable series that we discovered Wojdowski's *Bread for the Departed*.

The existence of such a series makes it possible to read the novel through a national lens—that is, alongside other works by Polish authors. There is a fiercely antisentimental strand in Polish writing about the Holocaust. The style is deadpan, stripped down, skeptical. Grotesque, comical, and flamboyant characters must contend with gratuitous cruelty and self-betrayal. Jews enjoy no special privilege. The characters are embedded in that time and place in a way that vicarious Poles cannot begin to replicate: not Cynthia Ozick's Rosa Lublin, not Saul Bellow's Artur Sammler, not William Styron's Sophie Zawitowski. An absolute chasm divides 1939–45 from everything that comes before or after.

### THE WHOLE CURRICULUM IN ONE BOOK

*Bread for the Departed*, for all that, is a world entire, a Holocaust curriculum unto itself. Like Anne Frank, David Fremde (the last name means “foreigner, stranger”) is a child of our time. By the time Anne began keeping a diary, on June 12, 1942, however, time had just about run out for the Jews of Eastern Europe, so the timeline of Wojdowski's novel is determined by the lifespan of the Warsaw ghetto, sealed off in mid-November 1940 and almost liquidated in the late summer of 1942. David's family, like Anne's, is still intact, his family circle including grandparents, uncles, and aunts. “Father was saying his morning prayers,” we read at the beginning of chapter 2, “his face turned toward the wall that was under construction. There, at the intersection of Żelazna and Krochmalna Streets, the boundary wall was rising right under the windows of their apartment house” (Wojdowski 1997, 43–44). So the Fremde family, like the Franks, can stay put, but unlike Anne's father, David's—an upholsterer by trade—has no business to attend to, other than the business of survival. “He

looked long and hard at the chisel,” David notes, “as if seeing it for the first time in his life, and then threw it into a corner” (42). Wojdowski, like his fictional stand-in, spent three years of his childhood incarcerated in the Warsaw ghetto, the largest city of Jews in Europe.

*Bread for the Departed* is a polyphonic novel, so challenging in its “complex and ingenious blend of standard Polish, Warsaw dialect, thieves’ argot, Yiddish and Hebrew words or phonemes,” that the translator threw up her hands in despair and rarely deviated from standard English (Levine 1997, xi). Even so, curses and cries, street singers and beggars, scriptural quotations and German dialogue (much of it left untranslated) abound, weaving through the book like the motifs of a symphony scored for full orchestra. As oral testimony goes, this is closer to Claude Lanzmann than to Geoffrey Hartman and Steven Spielberg, except that Wojdowski records everyone talking all at once.

Two poets once stood on opposite sides of the ghetto wall and spoke openly of their despair. Said Wojdowski, remembering it later, “the wall divided people and that’s why it was erected. I cannot express it more briefly” (quoted in Adamczyk-Garbowska 2003, 1339). Inside the walls, his novel revealed, people were also divided, although one fate awaited all of them.

Dreams and nightmares, premonitions and prophecies abound, as this novel is written partially in the stream of consciousness mode inspired by Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Jewish Warsaw is a cross between Dublin and Nineveh, the city of debauchery. From first (“Cainan begat Mahalaleel, Mahalaleel begat Jared”) to last (“Rejoice, the commandant has forgiven you your sins and you will go with the others to the Umschlagplatz”), the Jews live under the sign of the covenant, a sinister, inscrutable contract signed at Sinai. Scripture for the patriarchal figures in David’s family is not only an accurate record of the past but also a foreshadowing of what is to come. As he gains greater knowledge and assumes the mantle of prophecy from his beloved grandfather, David too will understand that even as the catastrophe helps make the ancient text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the significance of the destruction. Just before he dies, Grandfather enjoins David to accept Jonah’s prophetic calling, a blessing that is also a curse. To contain David’s musings and forebodings, the unruly flow of his consciousness, Wojdowski—like Joyce before him—creates an ironclad structure, organized around recurrent motifs and underscored by ancient myths.

The leitmotif, the metonymy that speaks for all generations, genders, and social strata in the ghetto, is—bread: rationed bread, reveries of bread, chants about bread (“Crusts and stale bread! I buy crusts and stale bread, moldy bread!”) resounding from the streets below; incantations of bread, bread as the currency of life; stealing bread, smuggling for bread, dying for bread. Not only can myth and metonymy coexist in a single work; here they are interchangeable.

## THE HOLOCAUST AS BILDUNGSROMAN

*Bread for the Departed* is concerned throughout with David's education, both formal (at the hands of his grandfather and Dr. Baum) and informal, both at home and on the streets, both inside and outside the ghetto walls. The core curriculum, as in the Auschwitz chronicles, is survival, and the territory to be mastered is brutal. David's learning curve, to be sure, is not nearly as steep as Primo Levi's or Tadeusz Borowski's, but his human landscape, as yet undivided into those who go to the right and those who go to the left (that will happen later), is no less rich than theirs. The bildungsroman, or parody thereof, is a protean genre of Holocaust literature, and *Bread for the Departed* takes its place at the very top of the genre's examples.

David's education is the major structuring device of the novel. What may be called the patriarchal narrative (chapters 1–6), Wojdowski's retelling of Genesis through Exodus, builds up to David's coming of age as a smuggler and chronicler (chapters 7–12). Once David joins a gang of young smugglers, through a brutalizing initiation, the survival of the whole family rests entirely in his hands, the parent–child reversal that we discussed in lesson 5. Separated from his father when the small ghetto is cut off from the main ghetto, the novel's end cries out for resolution. Is his father still alive? Will father and son ever be reunited? How does David get to tell this story, and in what sense is he its true narrator?

All textual traditions, ancient and modern, meet in *Bread for the Departed*. The test of the polyphonic novel is in its ending, and through his stubborn insistence on keeping the ledger open, the story of the ghetto's liquidation unfinished, Wojdowski subverts all hope of catharsis, final understanding, and tragic resolution. There is talk of armed resistance, so far in the future that none will live to see it. Yet there is an ending, and that ending is triumphant, for halfway through his personal odyssey, David discovers that learning to survive on the Aryan side is the same as learning to become a writer. "People must differ from each other somehow," he reasons, "since they can tell each other's past at a glance."

But how? No one spoke about this clearly. He observed other people's behavior, their appearance, dress, gestures and way of speaking. When he crossed the wall, he began to distinguish a difference in accent; pedestrians from Wolska Street spoke the same language differently from the inhabitants of Krochmalna, although the distance between them was no more than a few hundred paces. There were other, more surprising differences, since people who lived on Płocka and Karolkowa talked differently from people who lived on Hoża and Żłota, and they were not separated by the wall;

they talked one way in the Ochota neighborhood, another in Śródmieście, and yet another in Stare Miasto. People behind the wall also differed from each other in many ways: the violinist Lerch never pronounced words with Yankiel Zajączek's drawn-out, singsong accent, and Mordechai Sukiennik cursed just like the drunken drivers in the back alleys of Wola. The Szaf-rans, deportees from the eastern borderlands, spoke differently from the neighbors he had known since he was a little boy. (254–55)

David, when he grows up, will learn to mimic these subtle and profound differences between Jews and Christians, rich and poor, borderland and heartland. Before they must die, Wojdowski, David's medium, will have given each and every one of them a distinguishing voice—the beggars and the children; the doctors and the whores; the brave, the wicked, and the weak.

## [ Lesson 7 ]

# Taking True Testimony

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### Topics

The Holocaust as eyewitness news. Written versus oral testimony. Victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. The interview and its visual frame.

### Rationale: The Holocaust as Eyewitness News

Life narratives of Holocaust survivors exert an irresistible hold on the imagination, all the more so when narrated on screen, very close up, in a sound studio or living room. The fact that so many survivors have been recorded in such a brief time-span—the usc Shoah Foundation alone houses close to 52,000 testimonies in thirty-two languages—suggests that every last testimony can and must be preserved. Every survivor, moreover, by virtue of having survived, has a story to tell, a story that sounds even more authentic when narrated with an accent. Finally, the fact that so many of the oral testimonies are now available on the Internet and may be accessed free of charge from anywhere in the world (except for those countries that restrict free access to the Internet) makes them seductive beyond words.

Yet the same age that has given us the Holocaust as eyewitness news has

also invented a critical vocabulary whose chief aim is to “problematize”—that is, to view all truth claims with radical skepticism. Is someone who is seated in front of a camera and addressing a total stranger in an adopted language, we are moved to ask, necessarily speaking the truth? If fifty or sixty years have elapsed since the traumatic events described, can their reenactment in reel time, framed by a standard set of questions, recapitulate the chaos and confusion that occurred in real time? Can a story of survival that has been rehearsed before and that is shaped by the survival narratives of so many others be anything more than a riveting form of melodrama, with the severely tested protagonist bearing witness to the ultimate triumph of life over evil? Why has the story of *How I Survived* replaced the story of *How They Perished*?

## Discussion

### WRITTEN VERSUS ORAL TESTIMONY

The wartime diarist has no knowledge aforethought; events either unfold in the present (in what is called durational time) or, if they occurred in recent memory, are reordered and recapitulated. Writing a diary is an intensely private act, even if addressed to a “Kitty” (as in the case of Anne Frank) or to a reader in some imagined future. A wartime diary, more often than not, is written in code, or on the run. Oral testimony is governed by a very different protocol. As an act of public witnessing, the narrative must be explicated, and if something is unclear to an interviewer at Yale University or to Claude Lanzmann, questions are asked. The oral witness knows where to begin and where to end. “Anyone who has viewed a sampling of these testimonies,” writes Alan Mintz, “is struck by the fact that nearly every survivor avers that he or she had a very happy childhood and was raised within a loving family” (2001, 184). *Paradise Lost* is a familiar and efficient plot. Working backward through time, the oral witness learns to improvise or to manufacture beginnings: “When the German tanks rolled in, I feared the worst.” “Starting now, I knew I was on my own.” Yet for all that oral testimony is constructed after the fact, has been staged for public viewing, and has been preserved with an eye toward the future, we sit glued to the screen as if we were watching something unfolding in the present, a unique and gripping slice of life narrated unself-consciously and meant just for us. The magic of the screen!

Thanks to the Internet, we can now view oral testimonies from each of the major repositories: the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies housed at Yale University, the USC Shoah Foundation, and all nine and a half hours of Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. So what are we looking for? In this curriculum, concerned with the workings of Holocaust memory over time, we are look-

ing for something more than the content. Whom, we ask, has the camera individualized, and how?

### **VICTIMS, BYSTANDERS, AND PERPETRATORS**

The historian Raul Hilberg, the only expert witness called on in *Shoah*, deserves the credit for having fashioned the trinity of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. And a trinity it is, in descending moral order. The usc website provides capsule summaries of each survivor's story, which follow no ranking system. Yet the camera has its own way of creating a visual frame in which the former victims occupy their rightful place in the moral hierarchy of Holocaust memory. Perhaps they are dressed for the occasion. Perhaps the background—their living room, with portraits on the piano—or the fact that they are joined by other members of their family at the interview's end is what singles them out in our eyes? If they were bystanders, then does their willingness to step forward and testify signify a moral purpose? Only Lanzmann had thechutzpah to give bystanders a bad name. One of the most scandalous scenes in *Shoah* is the staged assemblage of the Christian residents of Grabow, Poland. Lanzmann elicited from them their lasting suspicion, hatred, and envy of the murdered Jews, turning the category of "bystander" into a species of killers in waiting. Have they learned nothing? And only Lanzmann had the courage to seek out the perpetrators, stalking them in their own homes and violating their civil liberties. They show no remorse and are not sitting behind bars.

### **THE INTERVIEW AND ITS VISUAL FRAME**

For Lanzmann, then, the visual frame is nine-tenths of the meaning. The demands made of the viewer are that much greater when the perpetrators are being interviewed at home and their Nazi uniforms are packed away in mothballs; when the Chelmno death camp has become a lush and inviting landscape; when the train from Warsaw still passes a place called Treblinka; and when Abraham Bomba still works as a barber in Tel Aviv. For these ordinary, unexceptional backgrounds to speak, the viewer must translate absence into presence, the present mundane into the annihilation.

And that is precisely the point. Auschwitz, Lanzmann believes, cannot be explained or visualized. The explicit representation of Holocaust horrors, he maintains, diminishes their atrocity. Their ritual reenactment in front of an all-seeing camera best captures the ineffable and incomprehensible annihilation. The taking of testimony across several continents and in the interviewees' original languages replaces the peep show and background music of documentary film footage with sonorous voice-over. Factual, meticulous, mind-numbing testimony will finally elucidate the machinery of mass murder.





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