



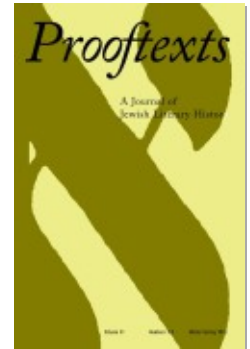
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A Yiddish Text from Auschwitz: Critical History and the Anthological Imagination

David Suchoff

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DAVID SUCHOFF

A Yiddish Text from Auschwitz: Critical History and the Anthological Imagination

Introduction

The following text, written at Auschwitz on 3 January 1945, introduces an anthology of writings composed by Jewish prisoners within Auschwitz itself. That anthology was lost, while this remnant remains. Avraham Levite's piece, presented here in a new translation, offers itself as a plea from the "other planet" that was Auschwitz to postwar generations, calling upon them to appreciate a fully Jewish and critical historical voice that was forged within its bounds. The introduction presciently voices its author's certainty that Jewish life at Auschwitz and the Holocaust as a whole would be distorted in representations of the event, submerged by a world eager to ease its conscience, cry and feel better, and thus to deny or minimize the facts of Jewish suffering. The price of world recognition, Levite reasons from history, would be the diminution of the powerful voice of Yiddish life.

This concern with the difference between history and memory gives Levite's text an uncannily contemporary ring, as it presciently calls upon its readers to beware of the lures of an "objective" history. In recent debates on the differences between popular "memory" and professional "history" of the Holocaust, in the German "Historian's Debate" of the late 1980s as well as in Israel, attention has been focused on the gaps and absences created by apparently objective historical accounts that would make Germany, too, a victim, or swamp the moral importance of the Shoah by seductive screen versions. The public question of how to memorialize and to remember, without producing a fetishized objectivity that forgets, has challenged the historical profession to become more literary and to include witness material such as that included and described in Levite's essay. As one of the foremost contemporary historians of the Holocaust puts it, the history

of the Shoah must sustain a critical tension between the commentary, living voice, and memories of actual Holocaust victims with the objectivity and dispassion of historical accounts.¹ Levite's essay precedes the current critique of history and memory by taking an explicitly critical stance toward an historiography that was yet to come. Unlike professional historians, Levite announces the intention of his fellow Jewish writers to construct their own objective record of the subjective Jewish experience of an infernal, everyday life. Writing from within Auschwitz itself, Levite prophetically saw that a universal historical perspective and Jewish memory would be at odds when the Holocaust became history.

The different contexts and languages in which Levite's piece has appeared suggest that the Yiddish language is a crucial and underrepresented voice in Holocaust historiography. The Yiddish writer tackles the experience of Auschwitz in a language that sounds, but does not look, European; he thereby evokes in his very linguistic medium the central tension between Jewish particularity and the claims of a modern and universal culture. Yiddish writing, in other words, sounds and breathes the rich and productive plurality of Jewish modernity. Calling as it does upon Yiddish cultural context for much of its resonance, Levite's essay was first published in the original Yiddish in *YIVO-bleter* in 1946.² There Levite explains that at the beginning of January 1945, shortly before "the liquidation of the tragic death camp, Auschwitz," several "serious boys" (*ernste yinglekh*) planned to produce an anthology of writings under the title *Auschwitz*; the collection was to contain poems as well as descriptions and impressions of what the writers had experienced and survived. Several copies of their notebooks were to be buried in the camp in bottles, which was the practice followed in the preservation of Sonderkommando narratives that were discovered after the war.³ Several other copies were to be given to reliable Poles, coworkers in labor details undertaken by the writers outside the camp proper. The collection was also to contain "factual material of historical significance," including descriptions of the "ghetto" and of the "murderers," several "Hebrew poems" (*shirim*) written by a "Hungarian Hebrew poet," an "apology for our course of action" in the form of "a letter to my brother in Erets Israel," and other items.⁴ The anthology's Jewish perspective and subject matter remain in critical conflict with the world audience Levite imagines. While directed to Yiddish readers, the anthology promises to voice Jewish self-criticism as well as an attack on an uncomprehending world.

This critical perspective accords with the literary context of the essay's first appearance in the *YIVO* journal. Levite's text signals itself as Yiddishist and leftist, with the essay itself citing *YIVO* as its intended addressee. The worldly literary references of the introduction are combined with what is clearly an intimate knowledge of Jewish tradition. As we learn from Levite's other writings, his background included traditional Jewish study at the behest of a father whom he revered, but whom he left behind to take part in the Yiddishist and Zionist movements that swept through the shtetl of Brzozow (Breziv), where he was born.⁵ Levite's style bears some comparison with another Yiddish author from within Auschwitz, Zalman Gradowski. The latter was steeped in European literature, a Zionist, but also an observant Jew who had been a yeshiva student, and who recited Kaddish in prayer shawl and tefillin at Auschwitz for the victims of each transport.⁶ Both Gradowski and this introduction intertwine Dante with Jewish scriptural reference, but here Levite combines Dante with the Jewish

profession of faith in a signal gesture, one that defines the writer's cultural dilemma as well as his brilliantly creative response.⁷ "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," the anthology tells us, mixing Dante with an undercutting Jewish anguish: "Let this stand as our proclamation of 'Hear O Israel' . . . the confession of a tragic generation unequal to its task." Dante appears with the author's reference to the traditional Jewish "martyrdom" of *kiddush hashem* to define a position between two traditions: Dante does not speak to a larger world that ignores the actual inferno of Auschwitz, while this young Jewish writer feels himself part of a failed generation, carrying the "burden" of an in-between period in Jewish life, capable of neither a tradition of Jewish "martyrdom"—he lives and writes—nor powerful Jewish resistance. History is the alternative he chooses.⁸

The anthological history that Levite turned to in place of an impossible political action nevertheless became a powerful political agent in Jewish efforts to commemorate the Shoah, bringing his text all the way to the floor of the Israeli parliament (Knesset). Discovered by the Holocaust scholar Israel Gutman, Levite's text was translated into Hebrew and included in the early anthology of Holocaust writing that Gutman edited, *People and Dust: The Auschwitz-Birkenau Book* (1957).⁹ From there, Levite's piece captured the attention of the Israeli Minister of Education and Culture, Ben-Zion Dinur, who cited Levite's text in the Knesset debate that produced the legislation passed on 12 May, 1953, establishing Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day ("Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism—Yad Vashem"). From there, the text became part of the Israeli educational curriculum, where it appeared in a textbook for eighth-year students, along with the minister's Knesset speech.¹⁰ Something ironic must be noted in this transformation: a Yiddish text voicing the fear that world culture would suppress the Jewish truth of Auschwitz finds a Hebrew voice in the Jewish state, and indeed becomes part of its national holiday of remembrance. Yet the Hebrew version of Levite's essay, while integrated into the anthological imagination of the Israeli educational system, drops from sight as a Yiddish text. The anthological urge that creates remembrance and cultural continuity in Israel does so only under the absent sign of loss.

The appearance of Levite's text in the memorial book for Brzozow, Poland, is accompanied by a similar relation between memory and absence. Edited by Levite and containing many contributions of his own along with those of other survivors of their shtetl, the *Yizker-bukh* produces all its contributions in three languages—the original Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. The complex modern life that produced Levite's multifaceted Yiddish voice receives textured description, with accounts of everything from the two Jewish public libraries of which the tiny town boasted—one in the Zionist Club (Beit Yehuda), the other in memory of I. L. Peretz—to detailed accounts of celebrations of the Days of Awe, descriptions of strife between the general Zionists, Gordonia, Hashomer Hatsair, and the revisionist Menorah group, descriptions of how the retarded and beggars were cared for, evocations of how women would visit the graves of their mothers for advice, detailed testimony by Yisrael Weitz on how the population was murdered on August 10, 1942, as well as a full account of Levite's own initial flight to the Russian zone, capture, assignment to slave labor, leading eventually to Auschwitz, his account of the camp's liberation, and much, much more. The anthological context of the *Yizker-bukh* creates an irony of its own for Levite's text that is

reproduced below: the full, textured Jewish existence of a town that strove to become fully part of the modern world is evoked, while the limited circulation of such a privately printed text tells the reader that world culture has yet to hear the critical counter-history of Levite's text.

Levite's projected Auschwitz anthology sets itself against world culture's ignorance of Yiddish life, insisting that any history of the Shoah must, without paradox, register the richness of modern Jewish culture. The plurality of genres Levite cites in the writings of his Auschwitz friends represents the range and variety of a culture very much alive. Like the Oyneg Shabes project of the Warsaw ghetto, directed by Emanuel Ringelblum, the introduction tells us of a group of Yiddish writers who want to tell us how one "lived" at Auschwitz, as they are certain that "how one died at Auschwitz" would doubtlessly "be narrated by pictures, witnesses, and documents." Levite's introduction insists that "we alone must tell our own story," echoing I. L. Peretz's "Appeal to Collect Materials about the World War," published in 1915.¹¹ The projected anthology follows Peretz in laying historic claim to the active, bitter, loving, and critical Jewish life that existed in the midst of the Holocaust, from its description of the mother on the train to Auschwitz with her child, to the denunciation of a non-Jewish world whose charity apes Jewish custom as it does nothing, leaving nothing but a grisly parody of Jewish culture in its wake. In a beautifully exact use of inaugural figure, Levite establishes a perspective of taut *polar* tension, beginning his piece with the metaphor of the icy indifference of an entire world, as if he were a stranded polar explorer of some new realm, while voicing his rage next to the literal fires of Auschwitz. Levite's style sustains a tension between a larger world that ignores and, he is sure, will falsify the specifically Jewish experience of Auschwitz, and the anthology's insistence that, in Peretz's tradition, Jews who wish to participate fully in modern culture must be responsible for narrating their own particular story within it.

The past recorded by this text was indeed prologue. Levite's text anticipates a time when images of Auschwitz will flash "across the screen," the "facts will be available," but superficial tears will salve the world's concern and thereby silence the complex and rich voices of contemporary Yiddish culture. This introduction thereby reminds us that despite the supposed surfeit of writing on the Holocaust, too little attention has been paid to the ineradicably Jewish voices that spoke from its midst. In its prophetic claims against the larger world's representations of Jewish life in the Holocaust, this text gives an angry twist to Simon Dubnow's contemporary notion that while "the fulcrum of Jewish national being lies in the historical consciousness," the writing of Jewish history was by definition "at once national and universal."¹² The anthological voice that speaks here is full of doubt and bitterness. But grounded in tradition, the anthology that was lost is portrayed very much like its Jewish generation: forcefully present and fully modern in the way it links the preservation of tradition with a claim to a transformed future, where nothing that had ever happened would be lost to history. Speaking "in our own language," the authors of the Auschwitz anthology announced their commitment to Yiddish, their language, and thus, despite their despair and loss, to the continuity of Jewish life.

Introduction to the Projected Anthology *Auschwitz*

I ONCE READ ABOUT MEN who had traveled to the North Pole. Their ships became wedged between the ice floes, and their S.O.S. calls of distress went unanswered. Their food ran out, the ice seized them in its grip, and, cut off from the world, freezing and starving, they waited to die. But these men nonetheless never let their pencils fall from their ice-stiffened fingers. They continued to make entries in their logbooks with eternity hovering before their eyes.

I was so moved then that men in such tragic circumstances, men whom life had already so mercilessly repudiated, men on whom death had already laid a paw, that these men raised themselves beyond their individual fates and continued to fulfill their duty toward posterity.

All of us—dying here in polar, ice-cold indifference of nations, forgotten by the world and its hustle and bustle—have nonetheless felt the need to leave something for posterity: if not complete documentation, then at least documentary fragments of how we felt as living corpses, how we thought and spoke. We have been buried alive, and the world dances a ghost dance on our graves, trampling and drowning out our moans and pleas for help with its feet. And when we will already have been suffocated, we will be exhumed, and our ashes scattered over the seven seas will then be all that remains. Every cultured and respectable individual does his duty by regretting our passing and offering his eulogy. When our shadows appear on stage and screen, piteous ladies will wipe a tear from their eyes with perfumed hankies, lamenting us: ah, those poor souls.

We know: we will not come out of here alive. On the gates of hell, the devil himself has inscribed this message: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." We wish to confess our sins; let this stand as our proclamation of "Hear O Israel" [the Lord our God the Lord is One] for all generations to come. Let this be the confession of a tragic generation unequal to its task, a generation whose rickets-stricken feet collapsed under the heavy burden of a martyrdom this epoch had laid upon its shoulders.

And therefore: for us it is not a matter of facts and numbers, of collecting dry documents. That will be done without us. It will be possible to assemble the history of Auschwitz without our assistance. How one died in Auschwitz: that will be narrated by pictures, witnesses, and documents as well. But we, too, want to construct our own image of how one "lived" in Auschwitz as well: to describe what a normal, average

day's work in the camp looked like. A day that is a jumbled snarl of life and death, terror and hope, resignation and the will to live. A day in which one minute never knows what the next may bring. A day in which, axes in our hands, we dig and hack away pieces of our own life, bloody pieces, years of youth that we load, out of breath, onto the trucks of time, groaning as if in lament as they travel with their bitter burdens down the iron rails of camp conditions. And toward dusk, we empty those trucks into a deathly weary and deep abyss. For who will delve into that precipitous abyss and select such a bloodstained night and its dark shadows, a night drenched in terror, and display it for all the world to see?

Yes, there will be men who leave that place alive: non-Jews. What will they tell of our life? What do they know of our sorrows? What did they know during normal times of Jewish suffering? They knew we were a people of Rothschilds. Now they will industriously collect every last margarine wrapper and sausage skin to prove conclusively that it wasn't bad at all for the Jews in the camp. They will have no desire whatsoever to grub about in memory's dung heap, to call out to the pale shadows who dwell there with their extinguished eyes, those constantly terrified shadows who trooped by the barrack blocks ever so quietly, their spoons clenched in their bluish fingers, clutching at the little barrels of soup. Grasping, though driven back ten times with sticks, at the dung heaps, searching for moldy crumbs of bread. The wretched ones, flickering like tiny candles, extinguished without ever being able to realize their single dream of eating their fill at least once. Those thousands, known in lagerlingo as "Muselmänner,"¹³ toward whom every "big shot" and camp functionary was forced to pay his debt by performing the Auschwitz version of the commandment "give him a hand with it" by helping them—to die.¹⁴ Those were the weak and stumbling ones, thousands of the unknown, who, forlorn, bore everything on their weak shoulders, all the brutality and misery of the camp. Bore it all, because they had to carry the load for the privileged, carried it so long, until they fell and a pair of polished kapo boots trampled them underfoot to die like worms.

This, of course, is not the story they wish to tell, for why spoil the mood by rousing ghosts? Especially when one's own conscience is not particularly clear . . . better to speak of those few who were well fed, those they preferred to know. In this whole vast sea of isolation and misery, they notice only a few drops of oil floating on the surface, all that remains of the dismembered ship. Yes, they are the ones who say—as we gnaw at our own bodies in agony—that we eat our fill of meat, and when they put our parents to death, they're jealous that we'll be able to sell their clothes.

We alone must tell our own story. The account we give in our writing is meant to record our tragedy, give an impression of it and represent it,

but our powers fall short of the task. In no way can our writing be evaluated using standard literary measures, but instead finds justification in its documentary value. Thus, it is not artistic worth as such that is at stake here, since the time and place of composition must be taken into account before all else. The time: shortly before death. The place: on the executioner's scaffold. Only the actor on the stage is required to scream, cry, and moan in a way that satisfies every artistic convention. Because, as it were, he doesn't feel any pain. In the end, no one will criticize the afflicted victim for moaning too loudly, and crying too softly.

And we certainly have something to say, even if, literally speaking, we're stutterers. We want to tell the story as we're able, in our own language. Even complete mutes cannot remain silent when they feel pain; they speak at such times, but in a language of their own, in sign language. Keep silent? Leave that to the Bontshas.¹⁵ They make their secretive faces, as if they had who-knows-what to say. It is only in the land of the dead, where posture and pretense no longer mean a thing, that they announced the desire kept secret all their lives: a roll with butter!

The play has already come to an end. A gigantic piece of work has been perpetrated, a work for the ages. Judah has been wiped from the face of the earth. The firebrands have already been extinguished. The smokestacks are already being dismantled—the cultural monuments of the new Europe, the architectural models for a new Gothic style. People are already washing their hands of the affair, and go about pronouncing *al kisui dam*, the blessing of the ritual slaughterer. So what if they can't quite manage to cover up the ashes? No one will notice, so impressed will they be with five such luminous crematoria as these.

And the slaughter has been humanitarian:

A splendid summer day. A train of those being "resettled" is under way. Cattle cars. The tiny windows covered with barbed wire. A fully armed soldier stands on every step. A child looks out a small, barred window. A bright face, with clear, innocent eyes, and a gaze that is both curious and bold. The child suspects nothing, views a large picture book opened wide: fields and meadows, colorful—pairs of animals . . . farm fields and orchards, houses and trees, everything rocks back and forth, turns round in a half-circle and disappears. Colors rush together into a single shape, a shape, rotating for a moment before it just as suddenly disappears before his eyes. People with a horse, tiny shapes, as if living toys, move about, walk on, and stop at a certain point, only to have the point itself move farther on—where is all this headed? . . .

Suddenly, a train lurches forward with momentum, as if a black devil, disturbing the panorama, blotting out the sun and letting loose a choking

smoke. The cattle cars roll on, one grasping after the next. . . . Men in uniform, strange and black, peer through the windows, shrouded in smoke, looking at something as if it were ominous, ah, and the smoke . . . blocks even that out. . . . Finally, the train moves on, again and again passing through the same picture of fields and forests, meadows and gardens, mountains and valleys, all flow by so peacefully and at home, as if unrolling a giant ribbon, passing by and disappearing somewhere in the distance. Little houses and parks, telegraph poles swim by as if carried off by a great flood. Everything goes by, moves on, everything is alive, strange as in those stories that mama tells. . . . Where is all this headed?

The mother sits inside. She holds her head between her hands. Her face is gloomy, and her heart beats strangely. Pictures of an entire life pass before her eyes: childhood, youth, and the short period of the family's happiness. Home, husband, the parents' house, the village, fields, forests, gardens, all rush by, shuffled together like playing cards, one image driving out the next, all of it bordered in black, the shattered house, wantonly abandoned, in ruins, the family's nest destroyed: doors and windows torn open, cabinets ripped apart, broken dishes, clothes torn about and trampled, everything left a mess. And now, for heaven's sake, where are they headed? . . .

The train moves slowly, like a funeral procession. As if it wanted to accord the victims their final honors. In ten minutes, it will make its return trip empty. The Jewish plutocrat and the Jewish Bolshevik who had plotted the destruction of the Aryan world have now been neutralized once and for all. The unloading squad is already piling clothes still warm onto the trucks, 'raus, 'raus, get going; over there in Yekke-land,¹⁶ by order of the authorities, little Cain is being born, and the Reich is demanding its bounty; Krupp has a rifle all ready for him. He is wrapped in Abie's little white jacket, embroidered by mama's trembling hand.

And the world? The world is probably doing all that it can. Appeals are made and protests waged, new committees are formed of five, thirteen, and eighteen members, the Red Cross strikes a blow, collecting with its little box for its "Charity to Ward Off Death" fund, the newspapers and radio offer eulogies, the archbishop of Canterbury offers his version of "El male rahamim" [God full of mercy], Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, is pronounced in monasteries, and the world's little housewives toast us with *lekhayim*, to life, wishing us good luck so that our souls might make their ascent,¹⁷ and that salvation will be ours.

The noose has been thrown round our necks. The executioner is in good spirits. He has plenty of time, plays with his victim. In the meantime, he drinks a few beers, smokes a cigar, and smiles, a satisfied man.

Let us take full advantage of this moment when the hangman sucks down his swill, and seek to use the gallows as our writing desk, to describe what we have to say, and to tell our story.

And so my friends, write and record: give a picture that is brief and sharp, as brief as the few days left to us to live, and sharp as the knives that are aimed at our hearts. May a few pages survive for YIVO, for the archive of Jewish lament, may our free brothers still alive read them, and perhaps they will learn something from them.

May it be your will, *eyno shomeya kol bekhiyos*,¹⁸ He who does not hear our weeping, to nonetheless grant us this, *shetasiim dimoseynu benaodkho lehiyoys*, may you conceal these little pages of tears in the jar of your being: may they come into the right hands and find their repair [*tikkun*].

C.C. [Concentration Camp] Auschwitz, 3 January 1945

Translated by DAVID SUCHOFF

NOTES

1. "Most historians approaching the subject have dealt either with descriptions of the background or with narrations of the *Shoah*, never, to my knowledge, with an *integrated* approach to both. . . . [W]hether this commentary is built into the narrative structure of a history or developed as a separate, superimposed text is a matter of choice, but the voice of the commentary must clearly be heard." (Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the Shoah," *History and Memory* 4 [no. 1, spring/summer 1992]: 41).

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2. Published as "Dos zamlbukh Oyshvits," *YIVO-bleter* 27 (1946); 194–97. The editorial headnote tells us that in the summer of 1945, the text belonged to a survivor of Auschwitz by the name of Avrom Levite, who was then a refugee in Stuttgart, Germany. Levite entrusted his document to the chaplain Morris Dembovitz. With the help of Professors Abraham Joshua Heschel and Max Arzt of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the manuscript was transmitted to YIVO, its intended addressee, and printed with slight orthographic changes.

3. These Sonderkommando writings in Yiddish have survived. Ber Mark's *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv, 1985) contains English versions of Yiddish texts written in Auschwitz by Zalman Gradowski, Leib Langfuss, and Zalman Loewenthal; their Yiddish texts are available in Ber Mark, *Megiles oyshvits* (Tel Aviv, 1977). Another Gradowski text, "The Czech Transport," trans. Robert Wolf, is printed in David Roskies, ed., *The Literature of*

Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 548–64; the Yiddish text is available in Zalman Gradowski, *In harts fun genem: A dokument fun oyshvits'er zonderkommando*, 1944 (Jerusalem, ca. 1977). For background and other sources on the Sonderkommando Yiddish texts, see Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommando," in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 522–34.

4. Levite adds that the approach of the Russian army thwarted this plan when it resulted in the evacuation of Auschwitz by the Germans. The fact that Levite, in the first publication of his introduction, does not make an overt claim to authorship of the anthology is a distinguishing characteristic of Jewish anthological writing during the Holocaust. As David Roskies notes, "Every wartime anthology was both collaborative and anonymous," since to be identified as collecting Jewish testimony while the German extermination effort was under way was to be killed. Levite, however, survived with the manuscript while the other authors and their works were lost, suggesting a different motive for anonymity. The introduction refers to the anthology as an "apology," and it is possible to read the reticence in claiming authorship as an apology for seeming to speak for those who were murdered and deprived of speech. As Yitzhak Zuckerman defined the emotional issue for the Warsaw Ghetto survivors, "I agree almost completely with Rachel Auerbach about the guilt of those who survive . . . for, as she says, whoever survived did so at the expense of someone who was lost." The best-known formulation of this dilemma of the survivor who seems to speak for other victims belongs to Primo Levi, in a chapter entitled "Shame," where he declares: "[W]e, the survivors, are not the true witnesses." In his short preface, Levite says that the authority of the introduction derives from the fact that it was written "in Auschwitz itself," a "vision of the death camp through the camp's glasses. . . . It is also an expression of friends and fellow sufferers." The introduction thus offers its perspective from within the camp as the voice of texts and voices that were lost. The dilemma of the survivor may be lessened by symbolically giving authorship over to those who can no longer speak. In the 1984 *Yizker-bukh* for Brzozow, in which the introduction appeared in Yiddish as well as in Hebrew and English translations, Levite lists himself explicitly as author, but his introduction to the volume as a whole contains the same kind of apology for usurping the voice of the victims: "Each individual was a world in himself, unique in his aspirations, feelings and hopes; his past obliterated, his future cut off at the roots. Each and every one deserves his place in posterity, just as he deserves a grave and a tombstone of his own. The book mentions only a few and we pray that this book will serve as a communal monument for those who have been inadvertently passed over without mention." See David G. Roskies, "The Holocaust According to Its Anthologists," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 95–113; Yitzhak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Berkeley, 1993), p. 265; and Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1988), p. 83; and Avraham Levite, preface, *Sefer zikaron kehilas brezivo* [Memorial book to the Brzozow community], ed. Avraham Levite, published by the Survivors of Brzozow, 1984.

5. See Avraham Levite, *Yidishe sprikhverter un glykhverter* [Yiddish proverbs and sayings], (Tel Aviv, 1996), and his many contributions to the *Yizker-bukh*, *Sefer zikaron kehilas brezivo*.

6. This is according to a fellow inmate, quoted in Mark, *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, p. 157. For a description of the style of another Gradowski text, see Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 517–19.

7. Mark, *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, pp. 156–57. When Gradowski tells us he was "assigned to guard the gates of hell," alluding to his position as Sonderkommando, the central literary motif of his narrative, his stance as Dante's Virgil—leading his reader through an inferno—becomes a request for Jewish forgiveness and a gesture of national assertion. By begging the reader to "come with me, the forsaken, lone remnant of the people of Israel," Gradowski

alludes to Isa. 10:20–23, where the prophet declares the hope that the remnant of Israel “shall no more again rely upon him that smote them. . . . [T]otal destruction is decreed, but overflowing with righteousness.” See Mark, *Megiles oyskhvits*, p. 290; and Mark, *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, p. 174.

8. A contemporary Hebrew text, written not at Auschwitz but in Cracow, is very similar in tone and spirit but, of course, envisions different alternatives. See “The Face of the Future,” editorial from the underground newspaper of the Fighting Organization of the Jewish Pioneer Group (Akiva) in Cracow, *Hehaluts halochem* (*Fighting Pioneer* 29 [13 August 1943]), reprinted in Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margalit, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem and Oxford, 1981), pp. 354–62.

9. See Israel Gutman, *Anashim va'efer: Sefer oshvits-birkenau* (Merhavia, 1957).

10. The Israeli school text in which Levite's essay appeared was entitled “Alumot,” in the “Messilot” edition. See Levite, *Sefer zikaron kehilas breziv*, p. 135.

11. “We must become the historians of our part in the process,” Peretz wrote. “Woe to the people whose history is written by strange hands after the fact. . . . BECOME HISTORIANS YOURSELVES! DON'T DEPEND ON THE HANDS OF STRANGERS.” Published in Yiddish in *Haynt*, 1 January 1915, English version in Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 209–10. For background to this sense of Jewish historical consciousness in the period, see Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover and London, 1994).

12. Simon Dubnow, “The Significance of Jewish History,” in his *Jewish History: An Essay in the Philosophy of History* (Philadelphia, 1927, c. 1903), p. 26.

13. Cf. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York, 1993), p. 88: “This [German] word ‘Muselmann,’ [Muslim] I do not know why, was used by the old ones of the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection.”

14. The author uses with heavy irony here the Hebrew phrase ‘*azov ta'azov*, referring to Exod. 23:5, *Ki tir'eh hamor sona'akha rovets tahat masa'o vefhadalta mei'azov lo azov ta'azov imo*. “When you see the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall cease to forsake him; [on the contrary] you shall arrange, together with him, the load [on the ass's back].” The halakhic principle here is known as *tsa'ar ba'alei hayyim*, prevention of pain to living things.

15. Bontsha, the protagonist of I. L. Peretz's short story “Bontsha the Silent,” is a figure of the pious and religious shtetl Jew who meekly accepts his plight. To most of Peretz's contemporary readers, Bontsha symbolizes the Jewish masses who suffer passively instead of rising and joining the socialist alternative that Peretz supported.

16. *Yekke* is a pejorative term referring to German Jews; *Yekke-land* often means Germany.

17. Lit., ‘*aliyah*, or “going up,” meaning either the honor of being called up to read the Torah scroll in religious services or, in Zionist terms, to immigrate to then-Palestine.

18. Likely an ironic allusion to Ps. 6:9, *ki shama' adonay qol bikhyi*, “for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.”