

From Witness to Storyteller:

Mapping the Transformations of Oral Holocaust Testimony Through Time

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2015

For my grandparents

Acknowledgments

This thesis has been the single most rewarding project of my academic career, and I owe my deepest thanks to my advisor, Professor Julian Levinson. It was Professor Levinson who first brought my attention to the Boder interviews and encouraged me to work with oral Holocaust testimony. His steady feedback and enthusiasm for my work made this project all the more achievable.

I am indebted to past professors Dr. Paula Harvey and Dr. Scott Lyons, whose excellent teaching equipped me with the knowledge, skills and confidence to craft this thesis. I must also thank Professor Sean Silver and Professor Gillian White for helping me articulate the stakes and arguments of my work. My peers in the cohort deserve equal thanks for their support and editing recommendations. I must further thank Dr. Alan Rosen and my Oxford tutor, Dr. Zoë Waxman. Both scholars not only offered their personal help, but also produced some of the brilliant literature that I used to shape my own thesis.

I could have never embarked upon this project without the support of my family and friends. I'd like to especially thank my parents, Richard and Terri Rohan. In addition to their unwavering support and concern, they agreed to fund an additional year at Michigan so that I could complete this honors thesis.

Finally, I must acknowledge the vital role that my grandparents Manny Z"L and Valy Rohan played in the conception of this thesis. The stories of their own Holocaust survival inspired me to consult the testimony of other Holocaust survivors. I thank my grandparents, along with every Holocaust survivor, who have nobly and beautifully shared their stories. Those stories are treasured.

Abstract

Comparative studies of Holocaust testimony—those that compare survivor narratives offered at differing historical moments—have generally focused on written narratives, largely ignoring the vast body of available oral testimony. The scholarly work that has been produced on oral testimony tends to focus on memory patterns and linguistics, rather than on the transformations in content and narration of the testimonials themselves. Comparing a selection of interviews performed in 1946 by the American psychologist David Boder with 21st century oral interviews of the same subjects, this thesis investigates the manner in which Holocaust survivors have discussed their experiences over a period of fifty years or more.

What emerges from an analysis of these interviews is a decisive shift in the role of the interview subject, who transforms from a witness into the cultural role of a “Holocaust survivor.” The narrative form of story that the survivors ultimately adopt in their later testimony reveals the cultural functions that determine their role as Holocaust survivors today. Using Walter Benjamin’s 1938 essay about the traditions of storytelling, this thesis identifies and demonstrated the value of the Holocaust survivor’s stories.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses the Boder project and later efforts taken by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to re-interview the Boder subjects. It then launches into a comparative analysis of the interviews, distilling common trends across the immediate postwar interviews versus contemporary ones. This investigation focuses mainly on shifts in chronology, emotional description of experience and anecdotes within the testimonials. The second chapter offers an expanded analysis of the 21st century interviews and engages with the theories of Walter Benjamin on storytelling in an effort to understand the role of the Holocaust survivor today.

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Introduction

I. A Brief History of Holocaust Testimony

“Suddenly, as if from heaven, [someone] moves the people aside...a priest...he takes me on his back and carries me three or four kilometers in the deep snow. We went, stopped for a rest... And then we talked. He asked me...my name...so I tell him my name, and he says, ‘My name is Karol Wojtyla.’”¹

Her eyes widen with enthusiasm, perhaps even disbelief, as Edith Zierer, aged 71, describes how her life was saved by Karol Wojtyla, a man whom most know by the name Pope John Paul II. The incredible anecdote, which comprises some of the lengthiest portions of Zierer’s 2003 interview about her Holocaust survival, did not always occupy a significant place in her story. In fact, Zierer made no mention of the encounter when she gave her first interview in 1946 with American psychologist David Boder. It was not that the story never occurred—Pope John Paul II himself confirmed its veracity—but rather, the fifteen-year-old, tuberculosis-stricken Edith had evidently not yet recognized its narrative power, a power it would gain considerably through the unlikely course of history.² The details Zierer deemed important to share with her interviewers shifted with the passage of time. As it turns out, this phenomenon was virtually ubiquitous among survivors who lived long enough to provide more than one rendition of their Holocaust experience.

In 1946, Zierer was one of 130 displaced persons or “DPs” interviewed by Boder in the immediate aftermath of World War II. At the time of Zierer’s first interview, “the Holocaust”

¹ Throughout this thesis I cite the transcribed transcript, rather than the oral recordings, so that Edith Zierer in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=ziererE&display=ziererE_en.

² See: Cohen, Roger. "The Polish Seminary Student And the Jewish Girl He Saved." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 05 Apr. 2005. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

was not recognized as a unique aspect of World War II, or, as it is commonly viewed now, an unprecedented event in history. Like millions of others in her position, Zierer ostensibly considered herself as simply another victim of Hitler's war. This self-understanding as one victim in an innumerable collection of victims, evident in her 1946 interview,³ affected how Zierer framed her recollections of survival.

Thanks to organizations like the USC Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem and the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale, hundreds of thousands of oral interviews have been conducted with Holocaust survivors over the last four decades. However, in the immediate post-war era, due to a multitude of factors such as lack of proper recording equipment and limited access to the survivors themselves, recorded oral interviews with Holocaust survivors were rare. Because of the dearth of early interviews, Boder's work remains a unique resource through which scholars can access the mind, words and emotional intonations of newly liberated survivors. Although largely ignored in the decades after Boder completed his project, the 1946 interviews have recently enjoyed renewed scholarly interest, prompting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to conduct modern-day video interviews with the original Boder interviewees. The museum called this project "the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Project with David Boder Interviews." As with the bulk of video and oral Holocaust testimony, though, this set of interviews has not been thoroughly explored or engaged. My thesis therefore aims to consider the raw material of these two sets of interviews, and map the development of narrative formation across them.

³ Zierer tended to answer Boder's personal questions using plural pronouns, such as "us" or "we," implying her understanding of experience as a collective, rather than a deeply personal one.

Many scholars have noted the change in narrative form, vocabulary and content between *written* testimonials composed in the immediate post-war era and decades after the Holocaust. In one of the more recent works on this subject, Oxford historian Zoë Waxman explains this shift, asserting that “[f]or many survivors, before they could begin to commemorate their lost community, they had to inform the world of the suffering they had witnessed.”⁴ This view is substantiated by other scholars, such as Henry Greenspan who concludes that “testimony immediately after the destruction...shared the same overriding purpose: to ‘let the world know’ based on the assumption that the world did *not* yet know...”⁵ The most urgent concern for the survivor, according to Waxman and Greenspan, was to ensure that the facts of Nazi-inflicted suffering were recorded somewhere—anywhere. Furthermore, in the immediate post-war era, survivors felt that their particular stories might not be welcome, since the “enormous suffering and destruction of World War II...dwarfed the Jewish catastrophe.”⁶ This fact, too, influenced the amount of witness literature produced and the way that those who *did* testify composed their stories.⁷

II. Historical Shifts Affecting Testimony

As the world moved further away from the immediate post-war days, “the Holocaust,” as it is now widely perceived, emerged through a series of historical events. In 1953, Yad Vashem was established in Jerusalem and, in 1954, the museum began to collect survivor testimony on a

⁴ *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, p. 100.

⁵ *The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years After the Holocaust and Today*, p. 5.

⁶ Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, p.106.

⁷ According to Zoe Waxman, twenty-eight memoirs were published in the year of the Eichmann trial, compared with eleven published in the prior year. *Writing the Holocaust*, p. 115.

mass scale through its Department for Collecting Witness Accounts.⁸ Historian Peter Novick argues that the 1961 Eichmann trial⁹ was a turning point in global acceptance of the “Holocaust” as a “distinctively Jewish—entity.”¹⁰ Scholar Annette Weiviorka goes so far as to argue that the trial marks “a new era,” in which, “genocide becomes central to the way many define Jewish identity.”¹¹ Not only did the trial call for living witnesses to testify against Eichmann (as opposed to relying solely on documented evidence and published accounts), it was broadcast on the radio. Novick suggests that the trial’s particular focus on the Jewish experience and its ability to reach a wide audience likely accounts for the surge in Holocaust memoir publication seen in 1961.¹² For the first time, on a broad and highly publicized scale, Jewish survivors began to feel that their stories were both wanted and needed to be heard.¹³ This shift in public demand was preceded and, in some cases, accompanied, by a shift in the vocabulary of the Holocaust. In the immediate post-war era, for example, the label “Displaced Person” was applied to newly liberated prisoners, with “survivor” supplanting the deleterious term only in later years.¹⁴ And, of course, the notion of “the Holocaust,” as a singular event largely unique to Jewish suffering, appeared to have emerged in the wake of the Eichmann trial.¹⁵

⁸ Yad Vashem is Israel’s official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust and is the largest repository of Holocaust data in the world.

⁹ The “Eichmann trial” refers to the highly publicized trial of Nazi lieutenant colonel, Adolf Eichmann, who was a major architect of the Holocaust. Preceding his trial, Eichmann was captured in Argentina by the Israeli Mossad in 1960. He was hanged in 1962.

¹⁰ *The Holocaust in American Life*, p.134

¹¹ *The Era of the Witness*, p. 56

¹² According to Novick’s work, *The Holocaust in American Life*, twenty-eight memoirs were published in 1961, versus only 11 publications in 1960, pp.133-45.

¹³ Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, p. 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Sean Warsch, who published his findings in *Jewish Magazine*, maps the usage of the word “Holocaust” in New York Times articles from the 1930 to 2000. According to his analysis, the word “Holocaust” was used 88 times in the year 1960. In 1961, the year of the Eichmann trial,

Discussing his own hesitation at producing his own account in the early aftermath of World War II, the most recognizable survivor-writer of the Holocaust, Elie Weisel, states:

I knew that the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not know how. I lacked experience. I lacked a framework. I mistrusted the tools, the procedures. Should one say it all or hold it all back...Place the emphasis on those who were gone or on their heirs? How does one describe the indescribable...And then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear? So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essentials for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly...Long enough to regain possession of my memory.¹⁶

Wiesel's statement suggests one explanation for why there are apparent shifts in the way survivors testified in the immediate post-war years and onwards. Lacking an established "framework" in which one could express their experiences, and unsure about and to whom one should speak, the survivors seemed to be extremely cautious in offering their early testimonial accounts. Compounding this fact, and affecting the particular details survivors chose to share, was the fear of audience reception. Weisel's anxiety that his words might strike a listener as incomprehensible is one common to many survivors. As Lawrence Langer, a prolific scholar in the field of Holocaust studies (and one of the few to have focused specifically on oral testimony), notes, "From the point of view of the witness, the urge to tell meets resistance from the certainty that one's audience will not understand." This fear influenced both the formation of the survivor's story and the survivor's willingness to share it.¹⁷

"Holocaust" is appears 165 times in the newspaper nearly double the number of times it appeared in the prior year.

¹⁶ This quote originally appeared in the article, "An Interview Unlike Any Other," and was quoted by Waxman in *Writing the Holocaust*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *The Ruins of Memory*, preface, xiii.

III. Tending to the Oral Word

Although many Holocaust historians recognize the notion of narrative differences that emerge across early and late Holocaust literature, the vast majority of literary scholarship on the topic focuses on written testimony, largely eclipsing the subgenre of oral testimony. The relatively few critics who have studied oral testimony, such as Langer, Jürgen Matthäus, Shoshana Felman, Henry Greenspan and Dori Laub, tend to privilege the idea of how memory shapes oral testimonials or to focus on the challenges that accompany oral testimony translation and transcription.¹⁸ In fact, it has only been within the last twelve months that a work on the transformations of oral testimony through time has been published. This work, entitled *Testimony and Time* by Yad Vashem scholar Sharon Cohen, considers the differences between immediate post-war oral narratives and more recently produced oral testimony, providing potential explanations for these differences. Although I do not engage heavily with the explanatory hypotheses Cohen puts forth in her work, I do rely on some of her observations to substantiate my own analysis of the Boder and USHMM interviews.

Focusing strictly on the text of the Boder and USHMM interviews, I will explore differences in chronology and content across the testimonials—particularly relating to organization, emotional tone and embedded anecdotes. This comparison yields a flurry of evidence that suggests a transformation in the *role* of the subjects themselves. Explored at length in the first chapter, survivors initially perceived their role as an attestant—their charge was to substantiate the reality of Nazi barbarism against the Jews, gypsies and socio-political dissidents. These early narratives were largely chronological, emotionally detached and concerned with technical detail. As history progressed and the world embraced the veracity of the Holocaust, the

¹⁸ See: Chapter 3 in *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor* Matthäus. Also see: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature Psychoanalysis and History* 1992

subject's role shifted. Through events like the Eichmann trial and even ones so recent as the 1993 film release of *Schindler's List*, Jewish survivors of Nazi brutality became "Holocaust Survivors"—a cultural role in its own right. Adopting the identity of "Holocaust survivors," rather than "displaced persons," the Boder subjects interviewed by USHMM in the 21st century operated within entirely different expectations. Naturally, their tellings shifted with the emergence of a specific vocabulary and narrative tradition established through decades of written Holocaust memoirs and retellings. But what is further apparent through this comparison is that the survivors spoke about their experiences in ways that seemed to cater to their present or imagined audiences. As Sharon Cohen writes, "These later interviews...reflect contemporary research concerns and in some cases the questions are raised by the survivors themselves in what Robert Kraft has called a 'narrative expectation'—a question that survivors expect to be asked about and that is understood as something society wants to know about."¹⁹ What the survivor speaks about in contemporary interviews is determined not only by recollections, but also by what the role of "Holocaust survivor" demands.

Recognizing that testimony is shaped to fit the needs and expectation of its audience compels one to reconsider the role and expectations of the Holocaust survivor in the contemporary decades. Survivors are no longer simply witnesses to war crimes (as their USHMM testimonials convey), they are figures bearing a message to be issued and reissued throughout time. As Cohen writes, "The survivor...is seen as the individual who has wisdom and expertise to pass on."²⁰ The audience, therefore, represents "the generation that will inherit a legacy, which they are committed to preserving and passing on."²¹ As bearers of a message

¹⁹ *Testimony and Time*, p. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*

communicated through story, the survivor in many ways resembles the historical role of the “storyteller,” as defined in Walter Benjamin’s 1939 essay, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” Benjamin’s understanding of the storyteller as a vehicle of wisdom determined through the precise shape of their stories helps to explain the function today’s Holocaust survivor, whose 21st century testimony adopts the traditional oral story form.

Before I offer an overview of chapters, I wish to qualify the category of oral testimony as its own subgenre of Holocaust literature. Doing so enables me to discuss oral testimony on a basis distinct from other branches of Holocaust literature, such as “Documentary Fiction” or “Holocaust Poetry.” It is first necessary to point out that my use of the word “testimony” in this thesis deviates from its conventional application, which is historically legal or forensic in nature. With the exception of their uses in Nazi war trials, the interviews and experiences of Holocaust survivors are not testimony summoned for the purposes of legal incrimination. The word has been appropriated by me (and many other scholars) to encompass all varieties of literature and interviews produced by Holocaust survivors. Thus, when I speak of “testimony” here, I refer to the word’s broad meaning in which it is applied to survivor narratives. I further wish to distinguish oral testimony—that is, testimony rendered by the spoken word—from written Holocaust literature. Not only is the category of oral testimony massive—with over 120,000 oral accounts recorded, transcribed, or videotaped—it arguably comprises the largest category of Holocaust narrative. Oral testimony is distinct from written witness literature by its very nature of being an oral account. Unlike written testimonial works, oral testimony, in its original form, is unmediated. Though the stories shared via oral account have been refined throughout time and influenced by the literary tropes and images used by other survivors over time, these accounts

posses what Langer calls a “spontaneity and raw directness” absent from published texts.²² By literalizing the metaphors of “speaking about the atrocity” or “telling one’s story,” oral testimony allows audiences to be direct recipients of the account. The audience is being spoken to by the survivor, rather than simply traversing words on a page. Oral testimony therefore alters the recipient experience of Holocaust testimony.

Similarly important in distinguishing the literary subgenre of oral testimony from written testimony is the number of parties involved in formulating the narrative. While the question of authorship is straightforward in written accounts, oral testimony complicates it. The testimony offered in oral accounts is often a consequence of the questions the survivor is asked. Thus, what the survivor shares in oral inquiries is not always reflective of what is significant to the survivor, but to their interviewer and the interviewer’s construction of the broader audience. The questions asked of the survivor, therefore, are relevant, as they are both indicators of cultural expectation and also often determining of narrative shape.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide background on the Boder interviews and the specific survivor testimonials considered in this work. I will discuss the nature of the USHMM interviews, a project initiated in 2002 with the intention of re-interviewing as many of the original Boder subjects as possible. I will then analyze a portion of the testimonies, underscoring major trends that emerge from the two sets of interviews. In the second chapter, I will offer an in-depth analysis of anecdotes shared in the later interviews, placing my finding in conversation with Benjamin’s concepts of the storyteller. In light of the trends exhibited by the USHMM testimonials, I will explore how the transformations of narrative conventions in oral testimony determine the role of the Holocaust survivor today. This study not only allows us to

²² *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, p. 6.

gain a better understanding of survivor testimonials, but more importantly, their function and legacies.

Chapter 1: Divergence in Organization and Function

I. The Boder Project and the USHMM Interviews

In July of 1946, European-born Jewish psychologist, David Boder, arrived in Paris to commence his project. Working for the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), Boder wanted to utilize the newly developed technology of a wire recorder to record oral accounts of those who endured extreme suffering during World War II. He framed his project as one that would enable him to study trauma from “the European tragedy and especially the tragedy of displaced persons.”²³ Secondly, Boder hoped to educate Americans about the conditions of European labor and concentration camps, telling one interview subject, “We know very little in America about the things that happened to you people who were in concentration camps.”²⁴ During his visit, Boder interviewed around 130 witnesses and victims, both Jewish and not, from DP camps in France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. His interviews comprise some of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, audio testimony of Holocaust survivors. In 1949, Boder published an English translation of a fragment of his interviews entitled *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. He self-published other interview translations in multiple volumes of a series called *Topical Autobiographies of Displaced People Recorded Verbatim in the Displaced Persons Camps, with a Psychological and Anthropological Analysis*. He died in 1961 at the age of 76, without having finished the translation of his interviews; however, all of his interviews were subsequently translated and published in an online database by the IIT. It is primarily these three sources that I have consulted in my analysis of immediate post-war oral testimony.

To achieve his goal of gathering what he called “personal histories” for the purposes of both international education and psychological research, Boder felt it imperative to conduct the

²³ Quoted in Alan Rosen’s *The Wonder of their Voices*, p. 9.

²⁴ *I Did Not Interview the Dead*, Intro. xii.

interviews “while the memories were still fresh.”²⁵ As a psychologist, Boder was not only interested in the content of the testimonials, but in form and language as well. According to Alan Rosen, Boder’s primary biographer, “Having DPs speak in the language most comfortable for them offered ‘evidence,’ in Boder’s view, of their wartime experience. It was not only what they said, but how they said it that could best attest to the privations they had...suffered.”²⁶ Thus, Boder’s interest in content, form and language, which shaped his manner of inquiry, makes this collection uniquely suited for my own investigation. However, whereas Boder’s project was driven by the desire to collect memories while still “fresh,” this work is driven by the quest to map how the narration of experience has shifted with history and cultural expectation.

Working in the immediate post-war era, Boder, like the vast majority of society at that time, did not see the phenomenon of the concentration camps as a uniquely Jewish tragedy. Indeed, Boder interviewed all types of DPs during his 1946 European excursion including Jews, non-Jewish Pole and even some German civilians. Explaining his motives to one of his DP subjects, Boder relays, “That is why I interview many and have them tell their story...Now you understand my purpose. Why I want to collect two hundred spools of these interviews because nobody can tell the whole story.”²⁷ Since this thesis is primarily concerned with the cultural role of the “Holocaust survivor” (a label that is generally applied to Jewish victims), I consider only the testimonies of Jewish DPs.

The conditions of Boder’s interviews and the methods he used to gather them bear directly on my decision to use these as the foundation of my analysis on early oral testimony. Intending to study the effects trauma, Boder valued the largely unmediated spoken word over a

²⁵ *The Wonder of Their Voices*, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁷ Adam Krakowski in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=krakowskiA>.

premeditated account of experience. In one interview, for example, Boder instructs his subject to put down his notes and to speak without any kind of textual guidance. In his introduction of the survivor, Jacki neé Israel Unikowski, Boder relays, “[Unikowski] Eighteen years old, who should prefer to speak from a previously prepared, written story of his life. But he was convinced that [I] insist exclusively upon verbal reports without notes or memoranda...he is rather reluctant to do it, but he was convinced... at least to try.”²⁸ Boder’s use of a wire device to record testimonies, rather than manually copying them, places his interviews on par with modern-day video recordings. In copies of the recordings, published online, visitors have access to and can infer the tone and emotion expressed in the voices of survivors, something that text alone cannot convey. Furthermore, Boder’s commentary on what is occurring visually (such as moments when the subject shows Boder their tattoo or when they seem upset) provides an element of communication not present in written discourse.

As with the vast majority of written and oral testimonies, the bulk of Boder’s interviews were conducted in a language other than English. Believing that the language in which one offered testimony and the “verbal peculiarities” therein were important to accurate understanding, Boder was deeply concerned with the translations of his interviews and therefore translated as many interviews as he could before his death in 1961. After Boder’s death, the IIT hired two translators who, using Boder’s methodology, did not attempt to standardize the English translations of the interviews and translated them verbatim.²⁹ In his own translations, Boder included fragmented notes in the interviews often clarifying what he interpreted the survivor to mean. Boder’s concern with orality and accurate transcription of the translations, including

²⁸ Israel Unikowski in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=unikowskil>.

²⁹ Cohen, *Testimony and Time*, p. 18.

elements such as long pauses and emotional interjections, are especially useful in the quest to study changes in the construction of survivor narratives.³⁰

As mentioned above, Boder bracketed notes in his translations of the interviews, clarifying what he interpreted the survivor to mean when their testimony seemed unclear. His parenthetical notes often reveal his naiveté on the degree of suffering experienced by his interview subjects. One such example occurs during his interview with Jack Bass né Jürgen Bassfreund who tells Boder that in the camps he weighed “sixty-four pounds.” Boder amends his translation of the text to include his own notes in brackets, which read: “[sixty-four kilograms?]. As Alan Rosen points out, Boder’s attempted clarification here is not only wrong—it’s impossible. Sixty-four kilograms equates to “about 140 pounds”—a weight far too heavy for someone who had been in the camps for as long as Bass had been. Nevertheless, Boder’s bracketed notes and diligence in rendering an exact transcription make his work one of the most clear and accurate sets of oral interviews conducted in the post-war era. They also allow the modern scholar to gain a contextualized insight into the degree of ignorance that the general audience possessed in 1946. It enables one to draw a clear distinction between the immediate post-war audience and the contemporary and more familiarized listener of today.

³⁰ Pauses, for example, are useful in gauging how well prepared an interviewee was to answer certain questions. Unsurprisingly, survivors often paused or stuttered more frequently in their 1946 interviews than in their later ones.



Fig. 1. Photograph of David Boder with his wire-recording device (1946)

II. Chronology and Narrative Organization

Speaking to an audience understood to be largely uninformed of the magnitude of Jewish suffering during the war, and doing so without an established narrative framework yet in place,³¹ Boder's DPs told their story in the order most obvious to them: chronological order. The careful attention paid to chronology is apparent in Boder's interview with Georges néé Jurek Kestenberg, aged seventeen at the time:

³¹ Such as the narrative frameworks that would emerge through memoirs and testimonials published later in time.

DAVID BODER: ... Well now, tell the story how—³²

GEORGES KESTENBERG: And so, I was—I worked. I was twelve years old when the Germans arrived in Warsaw. It was quiet.

DAVID BODER: Speak Yiddish. [Jurek alternates between Yiddish and poor attempts at German]³³

GEORGES KESTENBERG: It was quiet until the Germans made the Ghetto. In the Ghetto our agony began. All our—the entire misery began in the Ghetto. And so, after a long time, after a... month's time the Germans gave a new order, that all Jews have to wear white bands with a blue star of David... From that time began our whole—whole agony...³⁴

Kestenberg proceeds to launch into a longer narrative, describing in chronological sequence the order of events that ultimately led to the expansion of the Warsaw ghetto and the “resettling” of the many Jews who lived inside. Kestenberg’s choice to relay his experiences in chronological order was, of course, dictated by his interviewer. As the interviewer, Boder could and often did control the direction of the interview. He, like Kestenberg, opted to pursue a chronologically ordered narrative. In Cohen’s work on the Boder interviews, she too observes Boder’s desire to maintain “a chronological sequence” throughout his interviews, pointing to his interview with

³² The dashes (—) used throughout this and all subsequent *interview* selections represent pauses in the speaking or abrupt stops. Original formatting used ellipses to represent pauses and abrupt stops, but to reduce confusion I have replaced all pause-representing ellipses with dashes. I retain ellipses when removing words or parts of interviews.

³³ Boder’s own notes appear in the brackets, providing his motivations in commanding Kestenberg to speak in Yiddish. Finally, note that Boder here refers to Kestenberg’s name at the time, “Jurek,” rather than “Georges.”

³⁴ Jurek Kestenberg in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kestenbergJ&display=kestenbergJ_en.

survivor Alan Kalish neé Adolph Heisler as an example.³⁵ Initially instructing Kalish to relay his name, age and place of birth, Boder begins the interview:

DAVID BODER: And so, tell me where were you and what had happened to you when the war began?

ALAN KALISH: When the war began we were put into a ghetto, and there we were very much mistreated. And after the ghetto—we were in the ghetto one month, and after a month we were transported away by train to Auschwitz.

DAVID BODER: Now wait a moment. I want to know the whole story. That did not go that fast. And so how did they make it known?³⁶

Having previously expressed his desire to create a “mosaic” from these interviews so that “the total picture can be assembled,” Boder wanted his interview subjects to provide him with a comprehensive background and demonstrate how each event led to the next.³⁷ While Kalish clearly relays his experiences chronologically here, he does so without providing the logical steps that map his journey through the war. Boder insists that those logical gaps be filled, and so he instructs Kalish to start his story over again. In another example of Boder’s redirection to extract a chronologically ordered narrative, Boder directs Kalish to discuss his time in the Warsaw Ghetto asking, “What happened then? Tell me all the details.”³⁸ Kalish responds:

³⁵ *Testimony and Time*, p. 29.

³⁶ Adolph Heisler in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=heislerA&display=heislerA_en.

³⁷ Avraham Kimmelman in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en.

³⁸ In *Testimony and Time*, Cohen uses this same extract to exemplify the role of chronological order in the Boder interviews. p. 29.

ALAN KALISH: We did not know about any Auschwitz, about extermination—We saw people dressed in prisoner clothes, but we did not know what it meant. Only afterwards we found out the entire story.

DAVID BODER: All right. And so let us go back a little. You were put into RR-cars...³⁹

Here Boder acts as a narrative conductor, determining the flow of Kalish's interview. When Kalish fails to expand upon his experiences in the ghetto, instead skipping forward in time to discuss his initial impressions of Auschwitz, Boder insists that Kalish backpedal. In her own observation of Boder's instruction in this interview, Cohen correctly notes, "It can be argued that the chronological account is...a feature of the type of interview Boder constructs;" however, citing Greenspan,⁴⁰ Cohen argues that the chronological order present in the 1946 interviews, "also mirrors the interviewees' prerogatives."⁴¹ Those prerogatives, as has been suggested by Cohen and Greenspan and that will become clear through further analysis later in the chapter, are the interviewees' desire to provide an objective and historically veritable illustration of the events of the war. Thus, the chronological sequence that the 1946 interviews generally follow appears to be an intentional pattern that both Boder and his interview subjects wanted to utilize.

Moving forward over fifty years to the USHMM interviews conducted with Kalish and others, it is apparent that the Boder survivors no longer operate within a strictly chronological framework. Kalish, for example, freely weaves back and forth through time, demonstrating how

³⁹ The "RR-cars" refer to the cattle cars which brought prisoners to Auschwitz and other concentration camps.

⁴⁰ As seen in footnote 6, Greenspan asserts that early testimony is driven by the urge "to let the world know." Cohen uses another quote of his to exemplify a similar point in which he states that immediate postwar testimony possesses, "a kind of *documentary insistence* that runs through...an expression of survivors knowing that they might well be the sole witnesses to certain events...and thus their enormous responsibility to make known names, dates, places that have not been known before." *Testimony and Time*, p. 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

past memories work with newer ones to alter the course of his narration. Speaking to USHMM scholar Joan Ringelheim in 2003, Kalish recalls a memory about his father that leads him to share a more recent, associative memory:

ALAN KALISH: my father... used to pour himself a glass, a half a glass of whiskey and drink it down, and that was it. And have breakfast and go out...It was funny because when my brother came to the States, and it was in 1965...there was a cousin of my wife's living in Mount Vernon, New York, and we stayed with them, the whole family. And my brother, first thing he did is bring out a bottle of vodka...I had a shot of vodka before breakfast.⁴²

Unlike his interview with Boder, Kalish feels free to go on tangents or to discuss events in a non-chronological order. And rather than discourage Kalish from veering from a strictly Holocaust-centered narrative, Ringelheim questions him about this anecdote further:

JOAN RINGELHEIM: In the morning?

ALAN KALISH: Yes.

JOAN RINGELHEIM: Before doing anything?

ALAN KALISH: Before doing anything, it's the first thing he had.

No longer constrained by a chronological framework in which to operate, contemporary interviewers asked the Boder survivors questions that required *reflection*—not just recollection. Interviewers wanted to know how the survivors felt, not just what they had witnessed. For example, in a 2004 interview conducted with Janine Oberrotman neé Binder, Ringelheim asks Oberrotman to reflect on her memories of when the Germans invaded her hometown:

JOAN RINGELHEIM: Do you remember when the Germans came into Lwów?

⁴² Alan Kalish, USHMM Archives, p. 34.

JANINE OBERROTMAN: Oh, sure I do.

JOAN RINGELHEIM: What was that like?

JANINE OBERROTMAN: It was very, very, very scary...

...

JOAN RINGELHEIM: What were you afraid of, do you think? When you say you were afraid when you saw them, what—

JANINE OBERROTMAN: You—what you were afraid of, you were afraid of what you didn't know. You knew they had concentration camps. There was *Kristallnacht*.⁴³ Of course, we didn't know that there was much worse than that. That we didn't know. Nobody knew then.⁴⁴

Emphasizing reflection rather than retelling, the USHMM interviews reveal the more intimate side of the survivor's experience—that of “feeling.” By asking Oberrotman “what was that like?” Ringelheim allows for Oberrotman to answer however she may prefer. Oberrotman chooses to give an answer that expresses a feeling at the moment of invasion: “scary.” Interestingly enough, Boder asks Oberrotman about the Nazi invasion precisely fifty-eight years before Ringelheim does. However, the way that Boder phrases his question and his follow-up responses leave little room for personal reflection:

DAVID BODER: Now tell me what happened when the Germans came to Lemberg?⁴⁵

JANINE OBERROTMAN: The Germans had come to Lemberg in the year—1943... The first day they were catching people in the street... ”

DAVID BODER: What kind of people? All people?

⁴³ “Kristallnacht,” also known as, “The Night of Broken Glass,” refers to a pogrom against Jews which took place throughout Nazi Germany November 9-10, 1938.

⁴⁴ Janine Oberrotman, USHMM Archives, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Lemberg is another name for Lwów.

JANINE OBERROTMAN: No, naturally, the Jews.

Asking Oberrotman, “what happened when the Germans came?” Boder makes it clear that he would like the facts of the matter—not the feelings she experienced during it. Twenty-one-year-old Oberrotman responds accordingly, telling Boder exactly what the Germans did upon invasion (“catching people”), never mentioning her personal reaction to it. From his interactions with the survivors here, it is apparent that Boder approaches these DPs as sources of information. As an analysis of the USHMM interviews in the following chapter reveals, DPs’ role as bearers of witness will ultimately shift to bearers of wisdom through story.

III. Emotional Tone and Reflection

Although Boder’s insistence on chronology and desire to gather the objective facts cause his interviews to seem emotionally bereft, the DPs he questions do not appear particularly keen on offering their emotional responses either. For example, in one of the first interviews that he conducts, Boder speaks to twenty-one-year-old Adam Krakowski in Paris. After asking him preliminary biographical questions, Boder initiates his deeper inquiry, instructing Krakowski, “Would you tell me whatever you remember from the day when the Germans came to Poland? Go and tell...as much as you can. Talk about it just as you can. Go ahead.” Krakowski’s responses to Boder are direct and succinct:

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: For the first few months I was still going to school, in the year '39.

DAVID BODER: . . . when did the Germans come to Lodz?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: In September, '39.

DAVID BODER: Yes. Did you know that the Germans will come?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: No, only when the Polish army broke down...but it was already too late.⁴⁶

Here, Krakowski responds to Boder's questions with little more than the recounting of dates, despite being encouraged to, "tell as much as you can." Fifty-nine years later, USHMM interviewer Joan Ringelheim asks Krakowski virtually the exact same question that Boder did, inquiring, "do you have a memory of the arrival of the Germans?" His response and the interview continue in the following way:

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: Yes.

JOAN RINGELHEIM: In Lodz?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: Yes...it was an event after all...

JOAN RINGELHEIM: Life changed then. How?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: It became—it was gradually... How can I say it? Every day there was another measure against the Jews. We didn't feel it at the beginning, but every day we have the impression that they tightened the screw a little more. In fact I didn't stay in Lodz for long...⁴⁷

Krakowski's response to Ringelheim in the 2005 interview is two hundred words and is far more detailed than the brief answers he offered to Boder in 1946. Speaking to Ringelheim, Krakowski calls the German occupation an "event" and uses the metaphor of an ever-tightening screw to describe being under Nazi rule. Similar to Janine Oberrotman's 2003 testimony, the response that Krakowski offers here describes feeling and "impression," not just the clinical development of events.

⁴⁶ Adam Krakowski in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=krakowskiA>

⁴⁷ Adam Krakowski, USHMM Archives, pp. 6-7.

Through further analysis of other Boder interviews, it is clear that the emotionally sterile way in which Krakowski testifies in 1946 is the rule—not the exception—of most DP interviews. As Boder survivor Avraham Kimmelman explains in his 2005 interview, “With so many stories of suffering, suffering...loses its meaning, as Hannah Arendt said...The banality of evil...It’s like going to this huge museum, how many times can you, in a single day, be moved by great works? How much can you take in? Eventually, it all becomes predictable.” Exemplifying this phenomenon to its extreme, is the 1946 testimony of Mark (né Marko) Moskovitz in which he speaks of his mother’s death in jarringly casual terms:

DAVID BODER: And where was your mother?

MARK MOSKOVITZ: The mother was already—kaput.

DAVID BODER: When?

MARK MOSKOVITZ: Then, the same day.⁴⁸

Speaking in German while describing his mother’s death, nineteen-year-old Mark Moskovitz uses the word “kaput,” meaning “broken” or “useless,” instead of the German word for dead, “tot.” His use of “kaput,” a colloquial expression when applied to the death of a person and not an object, conveys the extreme sense of emotional detachment with which Moskovitz spoke during his interview with Boder.

Given that death was so pervasive in the concentration camps, it is not surprising that so many speak of it with a dispassionate tone. Jack Bass, for example, tells Boder in 1946 about the conditions of the hospital block in Auschwitz:

DAVID BODER: Describe the room in which you were lying and so on.

⁴⁸ Marko Moskovitz in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=moskovitzM>.

JACK BASS: We were lying in a round tent, and in this tent the beds were mounted in three levels one over the other. We were laying two in each bed. And it was very unpleasant. For example, if one would die he could not be removed before twenty-four hours had elapsed because the block trusty wanted, of course, to get the bread ration and the soup which was allotted to this person, and for this reason the dead person would be reported dead only twenty-four hours later so that his ration would still be allotted. And so we had to lie all that time in bed together with the dead person.

DAVID BODER: You said ‘we.’ Did that really happen to you personally?

JACK BASS: Yes. That happened once to me personally, when I had to lie in bed a whole day with a dead Frenchman. And he died that time from intestinal typhus, from diarrhea, and I had to lie with him a whole day.

What appears to disturb Bass most about his experience is not that he sees a man die, but that he is compelled to lie in bed with the “dead Frenchmen”—and his excrement—for “a whole day.” To a contemporary audience, Bass’ words may seem insensitive; yet, as another DP explains to Boder, “we did not even perceive it as so bad if someone died, we were so down and out that the instinct of self-preservation prevailed for each of us—and we hardly bothered about the fate of others.”⁴⁹ As evident from Moskovitz’s interview with Boder, the “instinct of self-preservation” was so dominant that a person could not allow oneself to be emotionally destabilized even at the loss of a parent. In fact, seventeen-year-old Kimmelman recalls to Boder a situation in which a son stands up to a Nazi guard for incessantly beating his father. This incident leaves “a great impression” on Kimmelman because of how unusual it was in the camps for someone to risk his

⁴⁹ Gert Silberbart in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=silberbartG>.

life standing up for another, even if that other person is a man's own father.⁵⁰ Although Kimmelman seems to have regained some of his emotional sensitivities by the time of his 1946 interview, enabling him to share relatively more reflective thoughts, his recollection here underscores the experience of the complete emotional detachment that took place within the concentration camps. When Kimmelman further discusses the beatings that would occur regularly in Buchenwald, he describes to Boder his own experience of emotional numbness to another's suffering:

AVRAHAM KIMMELMAN: I couldn't do a thing. I couldn't open my mouth. It does something to a person. It does something to a bystander more than to the one who is actually beaten. And to my great regret I also have to tell you, it is true, and I am still ashamed that I have to tell such a thing, but it is the pure truth.

In being able to recognize his paralysis during in this instance, and by sharing his sense of regret at not coming to the defense of other prisoners, Kimmelman is one of the few Boder interview subjects able to meaningfully reflect on his behavior in the camps. The vast majority of DPs though, like Moskovitz and Bass, seemed to remain emotionally desensitized to their horrific experiences.

Yet analyzing the USHMM interviews conducted with Moskovitz, Bass and other Boder interview subjects, it is clear that the survivors eventually can and do speak about the emotionally trying events that accompanied their Holocaust experiences. Gert Silver neé Silberbart, for example, who had originally informed Boder about the notion of "the instinct of

⁵⁰ Avraham Kimmelman in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en.

self-preservation,” uses a figurative analogy to discuss his painful separation with his mother in Auschwitz.⁵¹

JOAN RINGELHEIM: How did you know you were in Auschwitz?

GERT SILVER: I—I found out later. I didn’t know where I was when we—when we disembarked. But I found out fairly soon afterwards where I was. When we arrived, we were asked to leave the wagons. There was an SS man on a podium and [he] said women and children to the left, and men to the right. And I instinctively held onto my mother and joined her and my sister to women—to the left where the women and the children were. And then my mother pushed me to the men. So I think she really gave birth to be twice. Once in ’28, once in ’43. My sister and my mother went straight to the gas chambers...she just pushed me to the men and that was it.⁵²

Using the analogy of childbirth, Silver casts his mother as his savior in Auschwitz—granting him a second life by pushing him to the men’s line. Unsurprisingly, Silver made no mention of this incident when talking to Boder in 1946, instead offering him a rather sterile reportage of the separation saying only, “we were separated. My mother, my father and my little sister...went, what I assume, straight for the gas chambers, while I, as the youngest, was meant to be among the living because I could work.”⁵³ In a similar vein to the narrative transformation seen in Silver’s testimony, Mark Moskovitz relays a more reflective and emotionally expressive recollection of separating from his parents in his USHMM interview:

MARK MOSKOVITZ: [I]n German he said... How old are you?—so I remember the guy, what he told us. Eighteen years old... Same thing with my brother. He was about

⁵¹ Refer to footnote 48.

⁵² Gert Silver, USHMM Archives, pp. 30-31.

⁵³ Gert Silberbart, in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=silberbartG>.

three years younger, he said eighteen... so my brother and I and my father went to the different line, and my mother with the children went on the different—different selection. Then ...we knew already that we were—we were in hell... I [was] in a delirious condition, you know? [I saw] women and children walking. Those were sent right away to the—to the crematorium...we were just like—like animals driven into the slaughterhouse. That's all it was. We were all frightened.⁵⁴

Moskovitz recounts his first moments in Auschwitz, telling his interviewer not just what he saw, but what he did (lied to the Nazi guard about his age) and how he felt (“frightened”). Discussing the fate of his parents in his 1946 interview, Moskovitz told Boder that his mother was rendered “kaput” during their first day in the camp. Yet Moskovitz’s description in the above excerpt includes details that he did not share in his Boder interview, such as his decision to tactfully lie about his age. Furthermore, during his USHMM interview, Moskovitz borrows the analogy of being driven like animals “into the slaughterhouse” to describe what it was like when he first entered the camp—a figurative comparison used widely by survivors and historians alike. His use of this now well-known analogy exemplifies the way in which his contemporary testimony has been shaped by genre-specific vocabulary and associations that have emerged over time. From this single instance, it becomes apparent that Holocaust survivors do not testify in a vacuum. Their testimony and narrative voice interact with the historical and cultural ideas present in modern Holocaust scholarship.

As explored throughout this chapter, the DPs interviewed by Boder were confined to a sequential organization and were unable—perhaps even unwilling—to discuss the emotional ramifications of their wartime experiences. Consequently, these early testimonials possess a

⁵⁴ Mark Moskovitz, USHMM Archives, p. 29.

distinct narrative structure that is organized chronologically and that pays careful attention to geographical and historical detail. Such narrative concerns with time and event, as opposed to emotional response, suggest that the DPs interviewed by Boder understood their testimony to function primarily as evidence of Nazi persecution and were reluctant to move beyond that. By comparing these 1946 interviews with their USHMM counterparts, the contents of which are concerned less with historical precision and more with the survivors themselves, one observes a shift in the way that the 21st century Holocaust survivors approach their testimony. Interviewed at a time when “the Holocaust” had become a largely accepted and familiar historical event, survivors no longer viewed the function of their testimony as strictly evidentiary. Rather than accuracy and a clinical description of event, the most important aspects of the survivors’ contemporary testimony were their personal reflections and stories. The sort of reflections that the survivors tended to offer, a point that is explored in the following chapter, proves key to understanding the role of the Holocaust survivor today.

Chapter 2: Role and Story

I. Testimony as Indicative of Function and Role

While the previous chapter provides a comparative analysis of the Boder and USHMM interviews, distilling trends in organization and emotional expression, this chapter primarily focuses on anecdotes offered in the USHMM interviews. By the time that the Boder subjects were re-interviewed in the 21st century, they seemed to recover emotional sensitivities that had been blunted by their wartime experiences. Furthermore, these 21st century speakers had access to a literary framework and vocabulary (developed through more than sixty years of Holocaust memoir publication and testimony), which offered them stock imagery and figurative language available for their own testimonial uses. (One such example is the metaphor of “animals driven to the slaughterhouse,” as seen in Moskovit’z USHMM testimony). These developments led people like Krakowski and Kimmelman to testify in a manner that not only signified a departure from their 1946 personas as witnesses, but that transformed them into the cultural role that they occupy today: the Holocaust survivor as storyteller.

In the introduction of this thesis, I pinpoint the Eichmann trial as being among the watershed events that led Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution to be seen distinctly as survivors of “the Holocaust.” As Weiviorka asserts, “With the Eichmann trial the survivors acquired the social identity of survivors because society now recognized them as such.”⁵⁵ I use the label “survivor” throughout this thesis to designate those whom Boder and the USHMM interviewed. Yet beyond acting as a mere label of identity, the “Holocaust survivor” as a social role remains ambiguous. What exactly does it mean to be a Holocaust survivor in the current era?

⁵⁵ *The Era of the Witness*, p. 88.

Consulting the 1946 Boder interviews, which were conducted at a time in which the “Holocaust” had not yet entered into the lexicon of the Second World War, it seemed that the survivor’s role was solely that of witness. Demonstrated in the first chapter, the testimony of Boder’s original subjects surfaced as an effort to report rather than to reflect. Due to the social consequences of the Eichmann trial and to the multitude of films, testimonials and academic courses oriented around the Holocaust at present, the world is now more aware of the destruction of European Jewry during WWII. Few question or doubt the events that have come to symbolize the Holocaust—the Jewish ghettos, the R-R trains, the numbered tattoos, the gas chambers—all are recognizable to the educated Westerner today. It is therefore only natural to wonder why we still seek out the testimony of the Holocaust survivor. What, if not information, do we have to gain through the survivor’s testimony in this era?

II. A Closer Look at Later Testimony

As earlier noted, the survivors testifying for the USHMM tend to be more emotionally expressive and less constrained by a duty to speak in an objective manner. These shifts in narrative pattern result in the survivors offering a multitude of lengthy and emotionally compelling anecdotes about their wartime experiences. Upon close inspection of the survivors’ anecdotes, it becomes apparent that their tales are not merely answers to questions that the interviewer asks, but stand independently as compelling stories in their own right. To demonstrate this phenomenon, I have selected two anecdotes from the USHMM collection shared by Adam Krakowski and Avraham Kimmelman, respectively.

Interviewed by Boder at the age of twenty-one while living in a French DP camp, Krakowski appeared as a reticent speaker. For example, when Boder asks him about his time in slave-labor camps, Krakowski replies with few details:

DAVID BODER: Nu,⁵⁶ tell us a little more about the two years in the lager.⁵⁷ How did people live there and what did they do there?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: There is not much to tell.

DAVID BODER: Oh, tell me all that you are able.

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: Work and work again.

DAVID BODER: Yes. What did you do?

ADAM KRAKOWSKI: Road building at that time.⁵⁸

Despite claiming to Boder that “[t]here is not much to tell,” Krakowski later shares with Ringelheim many vivid stories which take place in the labor camps. In one example, Krakowski offers a compelling anecdote about working at a German airplane factory in which he discovers a hidden stash of eggs:

[W]e boiled the eggs, hard-boiled eggs. We made feasts! Well, I calculated that you can't live only on eggs, even if you eat 20 one day, you won't eat 20 every day. [So we] start giving out hard-boiled eggs to our pals. There were several thousand. It was also my revenge for, for [unpaid] work done... Then one day, an old guy shows up. An old guy, for me, back then, was someone over 60! He introduces himself. His name is Schultz. He's our new head, our foreman. And, he tells us that he had a paint business in a big suburb of Berlin. He was married. He had a little girl a few years old. And one day his house was bombed—destroyed. His wife was killed. He managed to save his daughter and they [the German government] sent him here... to do his job. He was in shock, hardly spoke, and he sat at his desk and asked the question, “Do you know what you have to do?” We said, “Yes.” “Good! Go and work.” We came back for lunch and he was still

⁵⁶, “Nu” is a common Yiddish and Hebrew expression that can roughly be understood to mean “So?” “go on” or “expand.”

⁵⁷ “Lager” is the German words for camp and in the context of the Holocaust, refers to work camps or concentration camps.

⁵⁸ Adam Krakowski in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=krakowskiA>.

sitting at his desk, without moving. We went to eat lunch. We came back. He was still sitting in the same place. So I ask him the question: “Aren't you going to eat lunch?” He says, “No.” I said, “Why?” And he said he lost his food cards in the bombing and he'll have the new cards after the end of the month. In the meantime you have to provide food cards, and since he doesn't have any, he can't go to the canteen. And it was the 28th or 29th of the month. I said then, “You'll stay two or three days without eating!” He said, “Yes, I have no choice.” But I said, “Listen, I'm going to try to organize something for you. There's no reason why you can't eat.” So he says, “Don't worry about it.” I said, “I'll do what I can.” Since I was rich with my eggs, I boiled them right in front of him... I gave him a piece of bread. I said, “I can't offer you anything else, but take this at least!” At the beginning, he resisted a little, but finally he gave in. He began to eat the bread and eggs and I don't know what came over me to propose that. It was maybe a form of humiliation, to humiliate him, that it was a prisoner who feeds his torturer... And then, I see my, my German, in the middle of eating, he starts crying, the tears fall from his eyes. I said, “Are you thinking about your wife?” And he says, “No.” He was thinking about the paradox of the situation that he is a representative of “*Herrenfolk*” [the master race]. He says this laughing, and that it's a prisoner who feeds him in need. “Oh!” I said, “Don't think about it, we're, we're both in the same boat, even if we're on two different sides of the barrier.” And he says, “It was damn stupid thing this war, we'll never win it! And we're starting to pay for it already!”⁵⁹

This anecdote, though long, is necessary to include here as it reveals important aspects about the transformation of Krakowski's position from witness to storyteller—a function that I argue is central to the role the Holocaust survivor today. Krakowski's testimony here takes on the form of an oral short story and should be treated as such. With a definitive beginning, middle and end, a protagonist, an antagonist, a transformation in character and the inclusion of embedded quotes, Krakowski's tale possesses all the underpinnings of a short story.

⁵⁹ Adam Krakowski, USHMM Archives, pp. 22-23.

Almost immediately, Krakowski introduces an “us” (himself and his fellow slave-laborers) versus “them” (the Germans and German overseer “Schultz”) dichotomy within his story. Constructing himself in opposition to “them,” Krakowski explains his theft of the eggs as “revenge” against his oppressors and he distributes them to his “pals”—sabotaging German efforts of starvation and torture. However, with the entrance of the character “Schultz,” Krakowski’s “us versus them” binary begins to collapse. Upon introduction of this new character within the plot, Krakowski’s assumptions of an apparent foe are challenged. Speaking about Schultz, Krakowski initially refers to him as “an old guy” and the factory “foreman.” Furthermore, Krakowski paints Schultz as a seemingly apathetic figure who advises his slave-laborers to “Go and work,” while he remains seated at his desk. Yet by the conclusion of the story, Krakowski calls Schultz as “*my* German,” indicating a shift in the way he perceives of his boss and his hierarchical relation to him.

Originally motivated by the intent “to humiliate,” Krakowski is moved to legitimate concern when he sees Schultz begin to cry. Ironically, Schultz’s reason for crying is not the loss of his wife, but the humiliating experience of being fed by a lowly Jewish prisoner. As he tells Krakowski, “It was damn stupid thing this war, we’ll never win it! And we’re starting to pay for it already!” Despite Schultz’s offensive remark (that accepting the favors of a Jew indicates that “*Herrenfolk*” are already beginning to “pay”), Krakowski appears to have undergone a transformation in character through the encounter. Whereas he begins the tale speaking of the desire for revenge and humiliation, by its conclusion, Krakowski generously tells Schultz, “we’re both in the same boat, even if we’re on two different sides of the barrier.” Irrespective of Schultz’s response to this assessment, Krakowski’s words at the conclusion of his story transcend the “us versus them” binary with which the anecdote began.

A story in which the protagonist undergoes a transformation by encountering a new character or an unusual experience generally follows the familiar narrative arc of what Joseph Campbell identified as the “monomyth,” also known as “the hero’s journey.”⁶⁰ Through the miraculous discovery of a trove of eggs and an unusual encounter with a new overseer, Krakowski’s attitude towards his oppressors (at least one of them) shifts from that of vengeance to empathy or pity. Consequently, Krakowski’s story adopts the monomythic form. Further reinforcing Krakowski’s anecdote with a discernable literary form is the presence of quotations throughout his story. Sharon Cohen, who observes the frequent employment of quotations in contemporary Holocaust testimonials, dubs this phenomenon, “constructed dialogue,”⁶¹ borrowing the phrase from linguist Deborah Tannen. According to Cohen, constructed dialogue within a story helps to “articulate interpersonal dynamics, relationships and the survivor’s reflections on their experiences.”⁶² In support of her assessment, Cohen references literary critics Herbert Clark and Richard Gerring, who write, “When we hear an event quoted, it is as if we directly experience the depicted aspects of the original event.”⁶³ Cohen shrewdly concludes that the survivor’s use of quotations simultaneously “facilitates engrossment on the part of the listener,” while enabling the speaker to “reenact or revivify” their experiences to the audience.

⁶⁰ As Joseph Campbell writes in his seminal literary work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back...with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man,” p. 30.

⁶¹ Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*.

⁶² *Testimony and Time*, p. 74.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In his own USHMM interview, Avraham Kimmelman offers an anecdote that adopts aspects of the narrative structures present in Krakowski's story. In this anecdote, Kimmelman recalls the day he was rounded up from home:

AVRAHAM KIMMELMAN: In the morning, I was asleep...and my mother...was also asleep. She was sleeping in one bed, I, in the next bed, and there was a knock on the door. I didn't hear it. Mother didn't either. And...after [a bit], she told me: "I heard footsteps going away, I think a client may have come to me"—she actually thought it might be some client, so she got up quick: "Who is it?" Who was it? A German policeman on a bicycle. Come to take me. He had probably called on me several times during the night, and couldn't find me, so he decided to be clever, saying: "maybe he'll be in during the day." Now, you can imagine, that was the last time I saw my mother, the state, the mental state in which I remember my mother, as we said goodbye under the circumstances I described...there is every likelihood, [that] she felt guilt—terribly guilty—it wasn't the damned war, nor Hitler, nor the Germans, it was her fault they took me to the camps...in the meantime I got dressed. And he took me and we left. The moment we left, I heard hysterical screaming, you could associate such hysteria, if y—such screaming, if you want to imagine the voice, that could come out of, say, the painting—the painting by Munch, "The Scream," yes? I heard that scream. It must have been an image of a woman screaming in exactly...the same style. It was a mad scream. A scream of guilt, and pain, and injustice, a great, terrible cry! The German was shaken by this cry, [and so he] went back in, and told mother: "don't worry, he's coming back." I was so thankful for that, although...he lied...he could at least not have done this [gesture].⁶⁴

Here, Kimmelman presents an extremely vivid story, recalling the day he was separated from his mother. Perhaps most striking about the anecdote is the way in which Kimmelman presents a textured portrait of "the German"—his abductor and foe. Initially suggested to be a cunning and steadfast antagonist, the German is granted a measure of humanity through Kimmelman's

⁶⁴ Avraham Kimmelman in Boder, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*. Link: http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en.

narration. Upon hearing the agonizing scream of the mother, the nature of which Kimmelman explains through referencing a painting by Edvard Munch', the officer is moved to sympathy. He attempts to assuage Kimmelman's mother by telling her, "don't worry, he's coming back." Although he knows this assurance to be a lie, Kimmelman expresses his gratitude for the German's gesture, thereby adding complexity to his adversary.

Like Krakowski's testimony, Kimmelman's anecdote employs the use of constructed dialogue, allowing his audience an insight into the dynamic of character relations within the story. Furthermore, Kimmelman suggests possible explanations for the behavior of the figures. When discussing the German's appearance in the early morning, for example, Kimmelman relays, "He had probably called on me several times during the night, and couldn't find me, so he decided to be clever, saying: 'maybe he'll be in during the day.'" Additionally, Kimmelman offers a theoretical explanation about how his mother probably felt about the events surrounding his capture, noting, "there is every likelihood, [that] she felt...terribly guilty." By offering these interpretations, Kimmelman infuses his testimony with reflection and contemplation.

The presence of constructed dialogue and reflection within the Holocaust survivor's contemporary testimony is a phenomenon common to each and every one of the USHMM interviews considered in this thesis. Unlikely to be mere coincidence, this surprising fact reveals a universal transformation in the narrative shape of Holocaust testimony, as earlier testimonies rarely employ the use of quotations. Relying on the linguistic theories of Tannen, Cohen, Clark and Gerring, one can reasonably conclude that the survivor's act of telling stories and "revivifying" their experiences through constructed dialogue converts them into a performer of sorts. Given the particular shape of this performance, the Holocaust survivor ultimately bears a striking resemblance to that of another historical figure and social figure—the storyteller.

III. Using Benjamin's "Storyteller" to Understand Our Storyteller

As the USHMM testimony often takes on the form of story, deviating from its original function as evidence, these interviews reveal an inner transformation of the survivors from witness into something else entirely. Called upon time and again to discuss their wartime experiences—both in front of the camera and in front of an audience—Holocaust survivors (whether consciously or not) adopt the conventions of traditional storytelling. In his essay, "The Storyteller," theorist Walter Benjamin provides a comprehensive categorization of the storyteller as a cultural and historical role. Applying his theories to the contemporary role of Holocaust survivor, Benjamin's work can illuminate the motives that drive survivors to continue speaking, even as the event of the Holocaust as remains widely known.

By Benjamin's assessment, the figure of the storyteller is distinguished by his or her ability to craft illustrations of lived experiences into stories that impart wisdom or truth.⁶⁵ Wisdom, according to Benjamin, is not any one fixed idea, nor is it something that can be explicitly taught. "Half the art of storytelling," he writes, "[is] to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it."⁶⁶ Thus, in Benjamin's conception, wisdom and meaning are constructed through narrative shape. An experience, if it hopes to confer wisdom, must be put into transmissible form. Experience that is not constructed in the way of story yields only crude information about an event (in German this type of experience is called, "*Erlebnis*"). The kind of individual experiences that "*Erlebnis*" signify contrasts with the transmissible experiences of "*Erfahrung*"—those experiences that contain some kind of lesson or larger truth. In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, scholar David Ferris explains, "*Erfahrung*

⁶⁵ "The Storyteller," p. 86.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

emphasizes the sense of a wisdom drawn and communicated from experience.”⁶⁷ Ferris clarifies Benjamin’s understanding of *Erfahrung*, writing that it “is not confined to what an individual encounters in the present, but rather it has both an individual and a collective aspect.”⁶⁸ This distinction is particularly applicable to the Boder and USHMM interviews included in this thesis.

Utilizing Benjamin’s distinctions between types of communicable experiences, it is tenable to suggest that the 1946 Boder testimonies communicate “*Erlebnis*,” while the USHMM interviews express “*Erfahrung*.” As Benjamin writes, “[story] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report.”⁶⁹ Whereas the conveyance of information is precisely the concern of the 1946 testimonies, the later testimonies transform the raw data of experience into transmissible stories. Moreover, Benjamin asserts, “All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder.”⁷⁰ This claim suggests that the narrative and emotional constraints that accompanied immediate post-war testimony disallowed the survivor from becoming the kind of storyteller that he or she is today.

Although the Holocaust survivor does not necessarily adhere to every aspect of Benjamin’s version of a storyteller, our understanding of the cultural function that the survivor today occupies is informed by Benjamin’s work. We discover that even as the vast majority of people know about the Holocaust, we have much to gain from the stories that the Holocaust survivor shares. By listening to Holocaust testimony that manifests itself through story, as the testimonies of today do, the audience of Holocaust survivors has wisdom to gain yet.

⁶⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, p. 111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ “The Storyteller,” p. 91.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Conclusion

“A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller”

-Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illustrations*, p. 100.

A study of the testimony given by a concentrated but representative group of Holocaust survivors reveals the function of the survivor today as that of sage counselor. Through their experiences, suffering and the stories they offer, survivors continue to command the reverence of their cultural audience. Yet while an examination of the Holocaust survivor of this era remains an imperative study, the concerns of such an inquiry are doubly important as they suggest an understanding of the survivor’s role in the next era. January 27th of this year marked the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. On such a significant anniversary, we are reminded that the historical chapter of living Holocaust survivors is approaching its end. As harrowing as that fact remains, those who live in the wake of a post-Holocaust survivor reality may take comfort in the fact that the testimonies provided over the past seventy years will long outstay their sources of synthesis.

The promising endurance of Holocaust testimonials is not only due to the herculean efforts of archivists, scholars and the survivors themselves that have recorded and preserved as many stories as possible. Their longevity and continued relevance are also due to the particular shape that the testimonies adopted through time. Crafted in the form of transmissible story, these Holocaust testimonies contain within them meaning that the clinical fact and raw history alone cannot convey. They remain rich resources through which audiences gain a sense of the Holocaust experience and deeper truths regarding the human experience.

Though I am not so naïve as to argue that forthcoming generations will take on the role of the Holocaust survivor by retelling the stories presented within Holocaust testimony, I do suggest

that the narrative form which the testimonies take transform anyone who encounters them into an audience of story receivers—and, potentially, an audience of counsel receivers. “A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller,” asserts Benjamin. This statement implies that long after the physical presence of Holocaust survivor ceases, their capabilities as storytellers and wisdom givers remain intact. The moment a person listens to, watches or reads from Holocaust testimony, he or she restores the Holocaust survivor to life.

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