

# History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony

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**Abstract** The essay focuses on the relationship between memory and history, which has changed in many ways under the impact of the Holocaust. Memory that had been discarded by historians as an unreliable and distorting source came to be acknowledged as an important factor in the reconstruction of past events, thus advancing from a rival to a partner of historiography. The question to be asked is no longer merely what has happened? but also how was the event experienced, how is it remembered and passed on to succeeding generations? The new mnemo-historical genre of video testimony is analyzed as an archive of trauma stories and set off against other forms of autobiographical discourse, on the one hand, and legal testimonies, on the other. It is argued that its specific value lies in forging a transgenerational link between the faces and voices of victims and those who listen to them, thus transcending the frame of family memory that, as a rule, fades after three generations.

## History and Memory: Rivals or Partners?

Over the last two decades, our approach to the past has become ever more complex and controversial. One of the reasons for this development in the social and cultural sphere is the continuous impact of the Holocaust and the experience of living in the shadow of a historical event that in many ways maintains its presence. The Holocaust, it turns out, is an event

It was a great honor for me, indeed, to raise my voice, a German voice, on the occasion of the conference in a unique community of scholars, archivists, remembrancers, and mourners. I do it with my deep gratitude to Geoffrey Hartman, whom I met for the first time in 1972, when he came to lecture on Wordsworth at the University of Heidelberg. So my bond of veneration and friendship with Geoffrey and Rene Hartman also had an anniversary in 2002.

both in history and in memory. On a certain level, these two dimensions are easy enough to distinguish. The assault of the Holocaust deniers, for instance, is aimed at the Holocaust-as-a-historical-event, while the assault of the Holocaust critics who have raised a debate about its political or commercial instrumentalization is aimed at the Holocaust-as-a-social-and-political-memory. While there is at present little real controversy about the "Holocaust-as-history," there is a growing awareness of and interest in the "Holocaust-as-memory."

It is true that Holocaust memory itself has a history and one that confronts us with perplexing anomalies. Instead of an attenuation with growing temporal distance from the event, we have witnessed an increase in memory activities during the last two decades. Like many others, the historian Saul Friedländer has pointed to this paradox in his lecture "The Development of Public Memory and the Responsibility of the Historian."<sup>1</sup>

Friedländer is himself a Holocaust survivor who has published his own memoir, thirty-three years after the Holocaust, under the title *Quand vient le souvenir* (*When Memory Comes*) (1979). The motto of his book is taken from Gustav Meyrink's novel *The Golem*: "When knowledge comes, memory can also slowly return. Memory and knowledge are one and the same thing." In the case of the Holocaust, however, it was rather the other way round, which is another anomaly that Friedländer (2002: 211) pointed to in his lecture: "It was the memory construction of popular culture and mass media that enforced the growing attention of professional historians on the history of the holocaust since the late 1970s." The historian acknowledged the fact that the "Holocaust" as televised in 1979 preceded the Holocaust as researched and reconstructed by historians! Memory, writes Friedländer (*ibid.*: 219), thinking of the growing impact of survivors' testimonies in the last two decades, "is the initiating impulse for the reconstruction of the past in general and for the holocaust in particular." As the writer of a memoir and a historian, he considers memories, in spite of their notorious unreliability, to be an indispensable and integral part of historical discourse. Memories are important for him as a historian because they can help bridge the gap between the abstract academic account, on the one hand, and the intensely painful and fragmented personal experience, on the other.

This is to say that, over the last two decades, history has received a potent rival or partner in its claim to access, reconstruct, and represent the past, namely memory. Alon Confino (1997: 1386) aptly summarized this state of the art when he wrote: "The notion of memory has taken its place now as

1. The lecture, delivered at the University of Heidelberg in October 2000, was published as Friedländer 2002. See also his essays on history and memory in Friedländer 1993.

a leading term, recently perhaps *the* leading term, in cultural history.” Up until then, memory had enjoyed little prestige among historians. It was not acknowledged as a reliable source; on the contrary, it was discarded as an undisciplined activity that troubles the clear waters of historiography. This changed in the 1980s, when history and memory came into closer contact and were discovered to interact in many ways. In 1989, Saul Friedländer, together with Dan Diner, founded the academic journal *History and Memory*, in which they brought what used to be contrasting activities into a productive exchange and even arrived at some kind of a fusion.

The first question for historians to ask is still what has happened? but it is no longer the only one. Other questions are now also being asked by historians, such as: How is an event, and especially a traumatic event, experienced and remembered? What kind of shadow does the past cast over the present? What are more or less adequate modes of representing the past events? How can the memory of a historic event be preserved in public commemoration and personal memories? Such additional questions concern less the events themselves than the experience and aftermath of the events in the lives of those who experienced them and those who decide to remember them, together with the problem of how to represent them. The survivors as witnesses do not, as a rule, add to our knowledge of factual history; their testimonies, in fact, have often proved inaccurate (see Laub 1992: 59–61). This, however, does not invalidate them as a unique contribution to our knowledge of the past. Their point is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the center of those events; they provide very personal views from within. With the acknowledgment of personal voices and their inclusion in historiography, as, for instance, exemplified by Saul Friedländer in his book on Jews in Nazi Germany (1997), the clear-cut borderlines between “factual history” and “remembered past” becomes to some extent permeable.

History and memory, then, are no longer considered to be rivals and more and more are accepted as complementary modes of reconstructing and relating to the past. Among the clearest proofs of this new interaction are the frictions and controversies about their respective statuses. Some theorists, like Charles Maier (1993) and Kerwin Klein (2000), speak critically of the ascendancy of the memory discourse over the history discourse; others, such as Dominick LaCapra (1998), argue for a closer approximation. Since the Holocaust is still very much of a presence, the historian who deals with it must work out a specific subject position: “Transference is inevitable to the extent that an issue is not dead, provokes an emotional and evaluative response, and entails the meeting of history with memory” (ibid.: 40). Friedländer (2002: 215) has argued that “the historian cannot and should

not be the custodian of memory”; but he has also made it quite clear that either cannot exist without the corrective support of the other. While memory is indispensable, as a view from the inside, to evaluating the events of the past and to creating an ethical stance, history is needed, as a view from the outside, to scrutinize and verify the remembered events.

### **The Genre of Video Testimony**

The audiovisual video testimony is a new genre that has evolved only over the last two decades. The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies has played a major role in establishing it as a separate genre and defining its specific format and purpose. In order to determine the specific quality of this genre, it may be helpful to set it off against two other genres to which it is closely related: written autobiography and oral testimony. I will start with some observations on generic differences between written autobiography and video testimony as a genre for registering and archiving individual incidents of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust.

#### ***Video Testimony and Autobiography***

The new genre of testimony as registered and collected by the Fortunoff Archive presents an intrinsic mixture of history and memory: it renders accounts of the ways in which the historical event of the Holocaust has deformed and shattered the patterns of an individual life. The video testimony belongs to the larger genre of autobiography (German historians prefer the term “ego-documents” [Schulze 1996]), but as the framing of a traumatic event, it unsettles the “story concept” and contradicts the patterns of sense production and coherence built into the conventions of other autobiographical genres in almost every aspect.<sup>2</sup> The Fortunoff video testimonies are not centered in an ego but in the Holocaust. In the genre of non-literary and nonformal autobiography, memories are collected and selected in such a way as to promote the coherent construct of a biography;<sup>3</sup> while in the case of these video testimonies, memories do the very opposite: they shatter the biographical frame. While the genre of autobiography creates meaning and relevance through the construction of narrative, the relevance of the video testimony solely lies in the impact of the historical trauma of the Holocaust. It registers events and experiences that are cruelly meaningless and thwart any attempt at meaningful coherence. It presents an incompre-

2. The pioneering study is that of Georg Misch (1998 [1907]), who has laid the foundation for the research of autobiography as a literary genre.

3. Randall (1995) writes on the story concept from the point of view of psychotherapy; for an application of the story concept to history and literature, see Neumann 2000.

hensible event that defies all patterns of understanding, reflecting the naked terror of an alien agent and its unimpeded drive toward senseless destruction. Autobiographies, though telling individual life stories, follow certain narrative patterns and are based on cultural codes and symbols. Video testimonies also have a structure, but this structure reflects the structure of the Holocaust itself in its murderous teleology through the stages of exclusion, persecution, imprisonment, and extermination. In an oral presentation at the Academy of the Arts in Berlin in 2002, Imre Kertész drew attention to the repetitive structure of events that has stamped multifarious biographies with a dismal monotony. He referred to this structure as “myth,” meaning by the word, of course, not a fable or a fiction but the invariable and deadly pattern of dehumanization, persecution, and destruction that drew the lives of the victims into its vortex to crush or deform them.

There are other significant differences between traditional forms of autobiography and the genre of video testimony stemming from their respective media. The autobiography is a written document that, more often than not, starts from an internal impulse and is composed in a formally coherent and monologic form. The video testimony may also have an internal impulse, but this depends on an external call, together with a framework of technical support. It has a less elaborated form that also leaves room for open-ended passages, such as pauses, periods of silence, uncompleted sentences, *innuendo*. It is dialogic rather than monologic; it depends for its process on the continuous guidance of another person, who asks questions and supplies some response. In spite of occasional more elaborate passages, it is implicit rather than explicit and presents a fragile verbal frame for what remains untold. Instead of arbitrary signs written on paper, there is the (indexical) tone of an individual human voice, changing in its pace, pitch, and timbre; and instead of the square and standard page, there is the screen with a face that is as expressive and concrete, individual and memorable, as the voice that is speaking. The autobiography relies on an autobiographical pact between author and reader in which the author guarantees the authenticity of the events as really experienced (Lejeune 1989). The video testimony also relies on a pact between a narrator and a listener, but this time, a special responsibility is conferred on the listener, who must be willing to share the testimony and become a co-witness or secondary witness of the memory that he or she helps to extend in space and time.

### ***Video Testimony and Oral Testimony***

The differences between video and oral testimony are, of course, much less marked, but, I think, they nevertheless significantly highlight further specific qualities of the new genre. I will choose here, as a paradigmatic form

of oral testimony, the witness in the courtroom rather than, for instance, the witness of oral history. In this official juridical context, the standards concerning the accuracy and reliability of the testimony are much stricter than in the case of video testimonies, which provide additional evidence on events that are already externally established via archival data and historical research. It is therefore the first obligation of the court witness to provide factual information that will help to discover the truth and to distinguish between the guilty and the not guilty.<sup>4</sup> In the courtroom, the witness as a person is of less interest than his or her testimony. The economy of the trial demands that biographical aspects are invoked only to the extent that they help to probe and to ascertain the testimony.

In his film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann created a setting for testimonies that was much closer to the legal and psychoanalytic framework than to that of video testimonies. His film created, so to speak, a legal case outside the courtroom within the medial possibilities of a film. Lanzmann was not interested, as was director Steven Spielberg twenty years later, in a reconstruction and reimagining of what happened in the death camps. His artistic project was a careful consolidation of traces and testimonies culminating in a universal “j’accuse.” The film is a legal case without a trial, based on living testimonies by survivors who provide important evidence and proof for the factual and technical reconstruction of the Nazi mass murder of the Jews. But the film also does something else. It reenacts the terror of the survivors’ trauma in the actual situation of the interview, thus confronting the viewer with the Holocaust as something that is not past but still very present. As Lanzmann comments on his film, “The worst crime, simultaneously moral and artistic, that can be committed when it is a question of realizing a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider the latter as *past*. The Holocaust is either legend or present. It is in no case of the order of memory” (quoted in LaCapra 1998: 105). In his film, which is framed as an ongoing trial based on living testimonies and at the same time as a therapy session in which the trauma of the survivors is reenacted, Lanzmann fuses the public-juridical and the private-therapeutic modes of testimony. Individual therapy, however, is not his concern. His filmed testimonies are—so to speak—larger than the individuals. In an interview, Lanzmann (1986: 273) emphasized that his film does not present individual biographies of

4. I take the search for truth and the accurate reconstruction of a past event to be the aim of the juridical process, although I also acknowledge that there are situations in which this claim is not or cannot be fulfilled. In her book *The Juridical Unconscious* (2002), Shoshana Felman extends her studies on “crises of witnessing” from literature, history, and psychoanalysis to the courtroom. She analyzes how a social or historical trauma can impinge on the legal setting, producing what she calls “judicial blindness.”

Jewish victims. During an oral presentation at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in 2002, he made the point that none of his witnesses testified for their own sakes but for the sake of the colossal Holocaust itself. They were witnesses for those who were no longer there to yield any testimony. This is why he referred to these witnesses also as “porte-parole des morts,” as vicarious voices, as stand-ins and deputies for the dead.

The testimony that is separated from the person of the witness and his or her biography in the legal frame is reconnected with it in the genre of video testimony. Victim and witness are no longer separated but, rather, two aspects of the same person in the case of the Holocaust survivor. The video testimony features the witness as a person with a specific biography and—from this point of view—unique experiences. It gives the testimony back to the Holocaust survivors and grants them a right to their own individual memories, including the years before the Holocaust as well as those following it. Video testimonies not only tell the experience of the Holocaust from the subjective perspective of the victims as targets of persecution and mass destruction, including the circumstances of their survival; they also tell the story of their living under “the longest shadow” (Hartman 1994) in the changing atmosphere of postwar society. They all focus on the Holocaust, but this focus is mediated and refracted through a specific personality whose individual experience is, in spite of the massive repetition and dire monotony of the central traumatic event, as unforgettable to the attentive listener as the tone of the voice and the expression of the face. In other words: the video testimonies are not only testimonies of the collective Holocaust, they are also memorials of individual human suffering and surviving.

### ***Primary and Secondary Witnessing***

The figure of the witness and the genre of testimony differ substantially according to the context in which the testimony is performed. To the legal context, we have to add here, however briefly, those of theater and religion. On the stage of ancient Greek tragedy, the witness carries the news of a catastrophic event as a messenger who has seen an extremely violent scene but has escaped to tell the story. Similarly, the dying Hamlet, in act 5, scene 2, of Shakespeare’s play, asks his friend Horatio to become his witness:

Horatio, I am dead:  
 Thou livest; report me and my cause aright  
 To the unsatisfied. . . .  
 O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,  
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
 To tell my story.

In the context of ancient and modern drama, the witness describes what cannot be brought onto the stage, in the name of those who are no longer able to speak for themselves. The division of roles between the one who experiences and the one who testifies becomes here a structural feature of the witness.

The case of the religious witness is rather different. While the Latin *testis* refers to the witness in the juridical sense, the Greek *martyr* refers to the witness in the religious sense. Derived from the latter word, our *martyr* and *martyrdom* maintain an important link with the highly symbolic act of witnessing, as developed in the three monotheistic religions and immediately related to persecution and violent death. The martyr is a person who is persecuted for his or her faith and, by martyrdom and death, exalts this faith publicly as the true and superior one. Dying, in this case, is a public, symbolic act conveying a message not only to the bystanders, but also to the world at large. As the martyr dies in the act of witnessing, however, he or she depends on someone to witness the suffering, to identify him or her as a martyr (rather than as a justly persecuted rebel), and to codify the story for future generations.

There are two fundamental differences between the religious martyr and the Holocaust witness. The first difference is that the religious martyr seeks the violent death or at least gives it a meaning that totally and triumphantly contradicts that of his or her persecutor. Due to this meaning, the martyr is not a helpless victim but a potent adversary, morally or spiritually much superior to the opponent in power. He or she achieves this heroic status through a "sacrifice," which consists in the symbolic act of witnessing for the true god. The martyr dies not only of something but also for something (Boyarin 1999). Dying counts as a performative act, a statement to the glory of God. In the case of the Holocaust witness, suffering and dying involves no similar sacrificial commitment, because it lacks symbolic meaning within a religious script.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, the genocide of the Holocaust is totally devoid of meaning for the passive victims, overwhelmed by the unexpected violence and sheer senselessness of this terror. As there was no "why" in the

5. Except for a number of very pious Jews, to whom the Holocaust was scripted within Jewish traditions of suffering, punishment, and martyrdom (*kiddush ha-shem*). They died with the Shema-Israel prayer ("Hear, O Israel, . . .") on their lips, witnessing for their God much like earlier Jewish religious martyrs.



world of the camps, there was no meaning and pattern. The trauma of the Holocaust, to which the testimonies testify, involves not only the physical violence of persecution and murder but also this utter void.

The second difference between the religious martyr and the Holocaust witness lies in the separation or fusion of experiencing and witnessing. Dying as a witness to god, the martyr needs a secondary witness to interpret and preserve this testimony in telling the story. Hence two layers of witnessing: the dying martyr as a witness for god, the bystander as a witness for the martyr.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Holocaust witness, these two levels of witnessing are conflated. The person who experienced the ordeal and the person who testifies to it are one and the same. Avishai Margalit (2002) has introduced the term “moral witness” to distinguish the witness who actually suffered persecution from other witnesses who are bystanders or professional reporters. Suffering and secondary witnessing, so categorically divided in the case of the religious and secular witness, merge in the Holocaust witness.

There are, however, two ways in which the dual or disconnected model of witnessing also applies to the Holocaust witness. If we consider the survivors who escaped and were spared the worst as witnesses not for themselves but for those who died and were forever silenced, then the difference between dying and witnessing reappears. Again, the receiver of the testimony may count as a “secondary witness,” one who listens to the testimony with empathy and helps record, store, and transmit it. The Holocaust witness, like the religious martyr, depends on these secondary witnesses who understand the historic significance of the testimony and make it public. The appeal in this case is not to a divine authority but to humanity at large, which—to the extent that it registers and memorializes the event—constitutes itself as a moral community.

The first objective of the moral witness is to reveal the truth of an event that the perpetrators are eager to conceal, distort, and disavow. Once the event is established as factual by historical discourse and common knowledge, the accuracy of the testimony becomes less important than the fact that the witnesses tell what they have actually experienced. Having been in the center of the action, the Holocaust witnesses have not come away unscathed, which is the reason why they testify not only verbally with their words, but also bodily with the symptoms of their trauma. Here, therefore, experiential and indexical (or “symptomatic”) truth is more important than

6. The secondary witness is the point of origin not of the event itself but of its story and transmission. In this way, the writers of the four Gospels and their unknown editors initiated a tradition of transmission which was presented by the Catholic Church as a “genealogy of witnessing” throughout historical time.

representational truth. This became quite obvious in the perverse case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, who, as a false witness, published in 1995 his much praised, “correct” Holocaust testimony.

### Memory and Archive

To come back once more to legal testimony: after the trial, it loses its function, as it has no independent value outside the legal frame. An interesting case in point is the Auschwitz trial organized in Frankfurt by Fritz Bauer in 1963–64. The proceedings were taped in their entirety to allow for verifications of the statements, which were uttered in many languages and for which a large number of translators had to be supplied. Before the trial began, it was decided by the court that the tapes were to be destroyed immediately thereafter. For some reason, this did not happen, and the tapes were stowed away and forgotten. When they were rediscovered after thirty years, the former decision was revoked, and the tapes were transcribed. In this process, they changed their status from legal tools to historical sources.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of video testimony, however, the purpose of preserving and storing a narrative is inscribed into the very genre. From the start, its function is to transform the ephemeral constellation of an individual voice and an individual face into storable information and to ensure its communicative potential for further use in an indefinite future. Due to its inscription onto a material carrier, the video testimony “survives” the survivor and has the capacity to address numberless viewers and listeners. It stabilizes the individual testimony and transforms it into storable and retrievable information. As stored information, it can be collected in an “archive.” To build up and maintain an archive requires an institutional framework and considerable expense and effort. The function of the archive is to collect, catalog, and materially preserve information that is relevant to the identity of a society and to an understanding of its history and development. The historical archive stores information for the use of specialists. An archive is not a museum; it is not designed for public access and popular presentations. It differs from what is publicly exposed in the same way that great museum shows differ from the array of objects in the stuffed storerooms in the subterranean tracts of museums. There is, of course, some order and arrangement in the digital archive, too, but it is one that ensures only the retrieval of information, not an intellectually or emotionally effective display. The archive, in other words, is not a form of presentation but of preservation;

7. In March 2004, the Fritz Bauer Institute organized an exhibition at Frankfurt in which the Auschwitz trial of 1963–64 was presented in its historical space and the voices of the witnesses were rendered in visual, written, and auditory documents (Wojak 2004).

it collects and stores information, it does not arrange, exhibit, process, or interpret it.

The institution of the archive depends, therefore, on agents other than archivists to transform this virtual information into actual knowledge—be it historians who dig up long-forgotten sources, be it curators of museums who make the invisible visible and create effective frames of attention for what had long remained beyond the scope of interest or consciousness, be it artists who retrieve elements from the archive and transform them into books, plays, films, happenings, installations, and other creative modes. The archive is a pure potential, a possible source of information, nothing more. It is dependent on others to actualize and realize this potential, to transform it from the status of virtual information to that of palpable objects that can be transmitted and received by future individuals who, in witnessing the witnesses, will themselves learn and know and remember. The archive, then, has a double function: to *store* testimonies as virtual information and to *restore* them as communicated and re-embodied knowledge.

In the decades following World War II, a new discipline called “contemporary history”—(*Zeitgeschichte*) as opposed to (remote) history—developed within university history departments. Contemporary history is the period in which the historian still has to compete and cope with the memories of living witnesses, while in the case of the more remote past, he or she can claim the unrivaled authority of a reconstructor and interpreter. As we are approaching the shadow line, which will turn the Holocaust from “contemporary history” to “remote history,” I see the archive of video testimonies as a powerful “veto” against this process. The stored interviews with survivors have the potential to prolong an intergenerational memory into an indefinite future. Intergenerational memory normally fades away after the span of three generations, a period of about eighty to one hundred years at most. There is, however, a “transgenerational contract” inscribed into the very setting of video testimony. Which means that each viewer of a testimony steps not only into the position of the interviewer but also into that of a belated “daughter” or “grandson” in sharing the memory. This is the point where *testimony* acquires the quality of *testament*: an *intergenerational* memory is transformed into a *transgenerational* memory. It is through the genre of video testimonies that the rights of memory can be restored in a future era of history and the experience of the Holocaust can maintain its status as “contemporary history,” supported by living memories.

“The implications of the Holocaust are so bleak that we continue to wrestle with the desperate issue of how best to represent it. That problem still needs to be solved. Literature, history, testimony, commentary, theological speculation—many avenues exist for entering its vestibule, but no

two approaches offer identical visions to those who cross the threshold into the landscape of the Holocaust itself” (Langer 1995: 180). The problem of how to represent the Holocaust will engage us further, and we will have to give up the expectation of a clear and unanimous solution. Instead of looking for the “best” way, it may be more sensible to reflect on the plurality of avenues and their respective merits and shortcomings. This contribution has attempted to assess the specificity of the new genre of video testimony both by investigating various concepts of “witness” and “testimony” within the historical, the legal, and the religious frames and by discussing it within a context of related genres and media. The specific feature of the video testimony is also its great project: to reconnect the enormous and abstract event of the Holocaust with the concrete voice and face of an individual. In doing so, this memory project is designed “to rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity, and to restore the person’s given and family name, to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him” (Appelfeld 1988: 92). In July 1942, when the Holocaust was taking the shape of a historic event that had yet no name and no space of witnessing, Richard Lichtheim, representative of the Jewish Agency in Geneva, wrote to Henry Montor, president of the United Palestine Appeals: “I am exploding with facts . . . and yet it is utterly beyond my capacity to tell you what is happening to five million Jews in Hitler’s Europe at the present moment.” And he went on: “Nobody will ever be able to tell this story—a story of five million personal tragedies, each of which would fill a volume” (quoted in Friedländer 2002: 222). The Fortunoff Archive of Video Testimonies has taped at least a small part of these tragedies and is thus making them available to secondary witnesses of future generations.

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