

INTRODUCTION

Gita Taitz and Liuba Feldman were both born in Kovna (Kaunas), Lithuania, in 1921.¹ Both were imprisoned in the Kovna ghetto and in the Stutthof concentration camp and subsequently testified about these horrors on film for the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archives—in 1995 and in 1996, respectively. Despite the similarity of their personal histories, these two witnesses offer highly contrasting testimonies. Gita Taitz presents a broad, reflective narrative, organized around ideas of morality and decency, rich with emotional language and sensual detail. She has several titles for what took place—“the calamity,” “the Holocaust,” and concludes her interview by declaring, “To be a Jew is not easy. But I am proud to be a Jew. This is the way I was born and this is the way I will die.” Liuba Feldman, by contrast, shares a string of small, darkly humorous episodes about her cunning intrigues during the war. She shows pride in recalling her ability to slip through walls, bribe guards, and find holes in the most restrictive situations. As for the title of this event, she calls it simply “the war.” Liuba’s testimony does not build up to a conclusion. After four hours, the interviewer unceremoniously thanks Liuba for her time, which causes her to chuckle until the camera is turned off.

The testimonies of Gita Taitz and Liuba Feldman ask us to consider how contemporary language and context shape the witnessing process: Gita testifies in English, in a well-appointed apartment in Manhattan, and Liuba testifies in Yiddish, in Kovna, Lithuania. In deciding what should happen when the camera starts rolling, Gita and Liuba draw from

different ethical concerns, tools of expression, physical cues, and sources of knowledge in their environments. They seem to mean different things when they say “I,” and especially when they say “we.” That is, despite their solo appearances in front of the camera, Gita and Liuba do not face the task of remembering alone, but incorporate the conversations and textual conventions around them.

Surely, a wide number of factors contribute to the conspicuous differences between Gita’s and Liuba’s Holocaust testimonies. Personality, educational background, family life, economic status, political and religious leanings (and in other cases, gender) could all be taken up as axes of comparison. This book concerns itself with two elements of difference: those of the language and the location of testimony. I do not approach these two elements as totalizing determinants of narrative, but as windows onto the complex ecologies that surround these truth-telling scenes. The natural metaphor of “ecology” appropriately suggests a messy, imprecise, and yet powerful web of sensibilities, with which the individual must interact in order to make sense. Ecologies include ideology, poetic tendencies, ethos, mythology, material landscape, bodily practice, and the very mechanisms that allow people to organize and connect all these.² The word “ecology” aptly carries the echo of its classical Greek root *oikos*, which means both “house” and “household,” at once the container and the substance of social life. I use the term in a way that encompasses what Charles Taylor calls a “social imaginary,” which he explains to be “the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”³ Yet, an ecological approach also heeds the spatial, aural, and material spheres that support the imagination.

If we look carefully at the testimonies of Gita and Liuba—which, when we include their respective peers, is a task that will require all of the chapters ahead—we see that their differences do not call into question how the Holocaust destroyed Jewish lives, but if and how it destroyed Jewish paradigms of living. Thinking of “catastrophe” in the way that it is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as “an event that produces the subversion of the order or system of things,” “a change and revolution”⁴—then we might say that the testimonial groups diverge regarding

the Holocaust's catastrophic nature: They disagree as to which meanings became unhinged, what order was subverted, and how.

The idea of rift and rebuilding organizes Gita's manner of testifying throughout. This very sense of transformation so permeates her narrative that she feels impelled, in its final moments, to declare its limits: "This is the way I was born and this is the way I will die" is the statement of someone in conversation, perhaps in struggle, with an overriding belief that the world has been overturned in her lifetime. Liuba, on the other hand, finds no need to insist that she is the same person as she was before the war. Through her vocabulary, her references, her tone, and her chronological structuring, Liuba gives the impression that she witnessed horror through a fixed lens.

When we add a third group to the comparison—witnesses testifying in Hebrew in Israel, who will compose another major source for our study—the question becomes even more complicated. Consider the words of Yosef Ben-Ya'akov, who declares that he "became a new person" after having survived the Holocaust and moved to Israel.⁵ "What happened there, happened there," he states, defining the spatial boundary between Eastern Europe and Israel as one that divides his identity and history as well. Yosef's life story almost parallels a conversion narrative in its bold transformational path and clear point of fracture. But while telling us outright that he has become a new man after the Holocaust, he also claims to fashion this new self according to old principles, materialized in ancestral language and ancestral land. In this ecology, the witness should recover from catastrophe by deriving a revolutionary vision from Jewish tradition.

Scholars have debated the question of continuity and rift through broad theological, political, and philosophical lenses. The idea that extreme violence kills something in addition to people was at the heart of Raphael Lemkin's writings on genocide in the 1940s. In addition to the ecumenism for which he is famous, Lemkin was in search of a theoretical concept adequate to describe the tear in culture, politics, and lifestyle that Hitler inflicted upon his victims.⁶ Among Jewish historians, Jacob Katz was an early proponent of seeing the Holocaust as a historical meaning break, "an absolute *novum* lacking accountability in any rational terms

at the disposal of the generation that experienced it.”⁷ In the thirty years since Katz wrote those words, trauma theorists have explored this large-scale unhinging of meaning on an individual cognitive and (anti-) narrative level. Among them, Dori Laub asserts that the Holocaust rendered eyewitness cognition impossible. This gap in the individual’s understanding of the event, according to Laub, accumulated into a worldwide break in meaning. A collapse of old values systems, a “transvaluation,” resulted from this massive decimation of people’s horizons of expectation.⁸ A similar assertion underlies Saul Friedländer’s *The Years of Extermination*, in which he uses individual voices to convey “the sense of disbelief” in a wide range of settings and perspectives during the Second World War.⁹ If “disbelief” not only characterized reactions to the Holocaust as it happened but also remains an ethical requirement of those wishing to study the event today, then Friedländer’s conception of the Holocaust is indeed catastrophist at its core. Alon Confino adds that the Holocaust “is considered *the* rupture in contemporary historiographical time, morality, representation and experience.”¹⁰ Confino draws attention to the importance of perception and interpretation in this matter: Empirical uncertainties aside, the Holocaust has the power of a civilization break because it is widely “considered” as such.

On the other side of the debate, scholars have argued that we need to be more mindful of Jewish conceptual continuity in and around the Holocaust. Foremost among them, David Engel has characterized his own research on Jewish institutions during World War II as driven by a “desire to examine the political resources that the system placed at the Jews’ disposal at the height of its development and the ways in which Jews deployed them at a time of grave collective existential danger.”¹¹ While Engel focuses on the deployment of extant political systems, literary scholars like Alan Mintz and David Roskies have argued that prewar systems of writing, reading, and self-expression remained at Jews’ disposal during and after the war.¹² Similarly, in arguing that survivors emerged from the war with commemorative paradigms in hand, scholars of the postwar era, like Laura Jockush, Hasia Diner, Dina Porat, and David Cesarini, also foreground conceptual continuity throughout the period.¹³ Lastly, scholars critical of trauma theory, like Carol Kidron and Ruth Leys, argue that

“disbelief,” silences, and meaning gaps have become fetishized objects of study, which mask more than they reveal.¹⁴

I hand the question over to survivors of the event, asking how they narrate the life and death of paradigms through their own stories. Using Lithuanian Jewry as a case study, I compare testimonies from the survivors of this community delivered in Israel, North America, and contemporary Lithuania, in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish. In these three ecologies, differences over the question of transvaluation emerge in conjunction with a network of formal, thematic, and ethical distinctions. We can think of the body of testimony produced in each ecology as its own genre, with an unspoken set of expectations and rules of praxis:

1. The most prominent mode of testimony that emerges from the English-language American ecology is *personal-allegorical*. That is, one important way that Gita Taitz draws truth from the events she has witnessed is through recreating personal experience in narrative. It is through individual perception that she offers pictures of prewar life, wartime, and recovery. Her testimony is also openly allegorical in that she enables the distant listener to derive lessons from her memories, applicable anywhere.
2. Conversations in the Hebrew-language Israeli setting revolve around an ideal of *communal-monumental* testimony. When Yosef Ben-Ya’akov becomes a new man, he does so as part of a polity, which moves through the march of history together with him. The kind of transformation that he cares to impart to his listener relates to official communal activity, not his own sensory world. His testimony is monumental in that it offers a way of making greatness out of suffering and invests in articulating a program for the Jewish future.
3. Lastly, witnesses in the Yiddish-Lithuanian ecology testify through a *collective-forensic* framework. Liuba Feldman incorporates a wide cast of characters into her narrative throughout. This assembly of people is not connected through a political program but through the circumstances of ethnicity, workplace, and geographic origin. The names and place details that Liuba shares all convey an ongoing investment in the local microcosm. Lithuania is as real in 1995 as in 1941. The city

that Liuba calls home has not changed much, nor have its inhabitants, the good or the wicked. In fact, scores have yet to be settled for the wrongs of World War II, as other witnesses in Liuba's environment are eager to point out. Liuba cares to single out those who helped her, and her friends engage in similar name-work, identifying local assailers in a forensic manner. These witnesses aim to accuse and to vindicate. Their testimonies do not sound like moral instruction or programmatic planning for the people.

The vast scope and scale of contemporary Holocaust testimony collections invite comparative analysis. I examine testimonies drawn from four sources: (1) a set of forty-six audio testimonies I recorded in Lithuania in 2004–2005. These testimonies were given in Yiddish in the witnesses' homes; (2) the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, which began gathering testimonies in 1979 and now includes forty-four hundred testimonies, mostly recorded in English in North America, with additional testimonies from Israel, South America, and Europe; (3) the USC Shoah Foundation's Institute for Visual History and Education, which includes roughly fifty-two thousand Holocaust testimonies in thirty-one different languages from fifty-six different countries. Testimonies from this collection were gathered from 1994 to the present, though most of their work with Jewish Holocaust survivors was completed by 1999;¹⁵ and (4) Yad Vashem Archives video testimonies, which the institution began collecting in 1989 and continues to collect to the present. Their video collection currently consists of approximately ten thousand testimonies. The vast majority of this footage was taken in Israel in a studio setting. Though there are important differences between these four collections—the scale of the projects, interviewing techniques, and the recording technology employed—they nonetheless constitute a coherent-enough enterprise, one aimed at concretizing Holocaust memory through individual speech.

Beyond teaching us about the Holocaust and transvaluation, these testimonies raise questions about the conditions of remembering at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first—the period that Annette Wieviorka has called “the era of the witness.”¹⁶ The timing of these recordings is crucial: The recent explosion of testimony

reached its peak of activity in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The global scope of these projects expresses an ambition to make Holocaust memory borderless, and conveys an implicit faith that ideas about memory and suffering will travel easily, once given sufficient political freedom and technological means.¹⁷

Methodologically, this project learns from Maurice Halbwachs, who argued as early as 1926 that remembering is a collective enterprise.¹⁸ While “collective memory” was once thought to be the domain of public ceremonies, political rhetoric, museums, and textbooks, theorists of memory have suggested that even private conversation and recall take part in a shared forum.¹⁹ Though a prominent object of scholarship in other fields, the witness’s social ecology has not been taken seriously enough in the realm of personal Holocaust narrative, the study of contemporary oral and audiovisual Holocaust testimony especially.²⁰ Instead, two other kinds of reading have prevailed: one that is interested in facts—what happened—and the other in the psyche, the impact of what happened to the individual human soul.²¹ But we cannot access either of these research objects without considering the ecology in which the witness testifies, nor should we strive to.

Social imagining is the vital process through which facts become meaningful, worth uttering and studying. Its presence in the source is not a hindrance but a benefit, something we cannot afford to ignore. In a similar manner, we cannot study the person in the Holocaust without investigating the specific notions of subjectivity operative in a given setting. When we attempt to look straight into the soul of a victim of atrocity, without regard for language and discourse, we often project our own (Western, American) models of pain.²² The testimonies themselves, when studied fully and closely, reveal the specific assumptions that enable people to say both what happened and why it hurt.

That is, this is not a book about the problems with oral and audiovisual Holocaust testimony. In fact, contemporary Holocaust testimonies are far richer sources than we often credit them to be, enclosing many topics and layers of expression into one text: Witnesses not only attempt to reconstruct the most harrowing wartime scenes but also to emplace them in a life narrative that includes description of the mundane and even the good. Speakers make claims about the past not only through their verbal

statements but through the sound of their voices, personal appearances, body language, and facial expressions. Since the interviewers' questions are captured on the recordings, we see how institutions have a hand in memory-making. But we also see that there are conversational and narrative habits that are implicit, internalized, and thus more powerful than institutional guidelines. The footage captures affective responses to history, but also scenarios in which affect is absent or deemed irrelevant.²³ Testimonies often imitate other Holocaust texts—literature, monuments, ceremonies, trials, textbooks—but then constellate them in ways not recorded elsewhere. Viewing testimonies comparatively helps us to animate all of these layers of text. Once we see how “things can be done differently,” we can appreciate testimony as a highly flexible, almost theatrical medium, whose very untidiness can produce insight.

Working with a comparison among three bodies of testimony, rather than two, steepens the challenge in analysis but also expands the potential for insight. The number three takes the analysis beyond binaries of East versus West, Jewish collectivity versus individual integration, minority versus majority languages. At times, the Hebrew and Yiddish testimonies seem similar, since in both cases, witnesses speak in a Jewish-particular tongue. In other respects, the shared diasporic element of Lithuania and North America brings these two clusters of testimony closer together.

The reasons for choosing the English-language–North-American and Hebrew-Israeli testimonies are perhaps self-evident. Israel and the United States are the two major contemporary centers of Jewish life, and English and Hebrew are the predominant languages of Jewish memory discourse in today's world. The third corpus, Holocaust testimonies delivered in the Yiddish language and in Lithuania, are numerically small and discursively off the beaten path. Testimonies from this ecology demand our attention for different reasons.

As stories relayed in the language of experience and on the scene of the crime, they raise questions about how contextual continuity frames atrocity. In contradistinction, they show how narratives of emigration typically shape what we know about the Holocaust. Furthermore, as contemporary spoken Yiddish sources, they also offer a new chapter, an epilogue, if you will, to the long-standing tradition of Yiddish orality, which has had a major influence on the Jewish literary tradition.²⁴ Binding the Ho-

locaust and Soviet periods into one life story, these testimonies also help us place these two often-disconnected histories together—and from the perspective of Jewish residents of the “bloodlands.”²⁵ On the whole, witnesses testifying in Lithuania and in the Yiddish language offer a counterperspective to the testimonies from North America and Israel, whose narratives have structured our expectations of Holocaust memory thus far. They allow us to peer into the wide margins of late modernity, showing us what it is like to be a subject on the Jewish and global periphery.²⁶

In fact, it was this small, marginalized Jewish community who challenged me to begin this project. In 2004–2005, I spent a year in Lithuania interviewing aging Jews who still lived in or near the places where they were born roughly eighty years prior, and thus also near the very sites where most of their communities had been annihilated during World War II. Locating Jewish names in the phone book, or approaching elderly people waiting in line to fill prescriptions at the Jewish Community Center pharmacy, I made contact with about fifty such individuals, who invited me into their homes to talk. They tolerated my non-native Yiddish and had plenty to say—especially about the war years. About midway through my research in Lithuania, I realized I did not understand what I was hearing. This had nothing to do with literal word comprehension or with historical knowledge. I had learned about the events central to their stories—the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1940, the invasion of the German army in June 1941, attacks by people considered neighbors or friends, flight eastward or imprisonment in ghettos, hiding in forests or partisan encampments, deportation to concentration and labor camps, liberation, return to Lithuania under Soviet rule—and yet I, as a researcher of American Jewish background, could not recognize these events as told to me in this manner. In short, these aging Lithuanian Jews narrated the Holocaust in a way that did not sound like the Holocaust.

This book tries to shed light on the reasons for this narrative nonrecognition, working through one point of difference at a time. I start from a procedural, formal level in chapter 1—where I define what “testimony” means and how an authoritative witness ought to speak in each setting. In chapter 2, I explore how these different genres of testimony shape notions of belonging and family life. Just as the testimony groups differ in how they define social bonds, so too do they diverge on definitions of the

enemy, the topic of chapter 3. Disagreements over which party should bear more blame—local collaborators or uniformed Germans—reveal deeper splits over ideas of justice and what should be done with memories of wrongdoing. Having explored portrayals of people, the last two chapters of the book examine witnesses’ perceptions of the world around them, the languages they have spoken and places they have lived: Chapter 4 focuses on how witnesses include or exclude the Yiddish language in their testimonies, as a way to define their stance toward prewar Jewish society. The fifth and final chapter explores how survivors animate geography. Sites that they chart in narrative include Lithuania, concentration camps, America, and Israel. While geographic movement parallels historical progress in Israeli and American testimonies, this equation erodes in testimonies from Lithuania. Each chapter also includes rule-bending testimonies, showing how each genre clears space for its own violation. Taken as a whole, these thematic chapters reveal the contours of a narrative gestalt, or “landscape of memory,”²⁷ in each setting. Each theme also offers a different inroad into our question about the Holocaust as transvaluation.

Lithuanian Jewry as a Case Study

It is helpful to enter these chapters with some appreciation of the revered name that Lithuanian Jews—Litvaks—earned long before the Holocaust, as well as the severity of violence that led to this community’s near annihilation. Jewish life in the multiethnic region of Lithuania dates at least as far back as 1171, the year inscribed on the earliest Jewish gravestone in the town of Eyshishok (Eišiškės).²⁸ By the seventeenth century, the Lithuanian capital, Vilna (Vilnius), earned the title “The Jerusalem of Lithuania,” reflecting a widespread perception of this region as a center of Jewish religious and cultural life.²⁹ The teachings of Lithuanian Jewish sages continue to be studied in *yeshivas* and institutions of rabbinic learning today; Jewish writers and artists of Litvak origin—including Avraham Mapu, Marc Chagall, and Avrom Sutzkever—have a notable presence in the annals of secular Jewish cultural history. The testimonies studied here relate to this rich Litvak legacy in a wide variety of ways—adapting, ignoring, or reinterpreting it within the languages of late Jewish modernity.

Lithuanian Jews stand out in the pages of Jewish history, not only thanks to their cultural and religious achievements but also in a very different way, because of the expedient, vicious, and almost total annihilation that this community faced during the Holocaust.³⁰ Over 90 percent of Lithuanian Jews, who numbered 240,000 in 1940, were killed under Nazi occupation. Relating closely to the theme of place and home, central to this book, many of these Jewish victims perished locally, within the territory of Lithuania itself. As historian Yitzhak Arad put it, the massacre of Lithuanian Jewry was in large part carried out “openly and in the vicinity of the localities in which the Jews lived, and was witnessed by the local population.”³¹ This adds further weight to the geographic setting of Lithuania, rendering it the site not only of prewar life, but also of wartime atrocity. Likewise, this means that local non-Jewish neighbors, along with German Wehrmacht troops and *Einsatzgruppen* (order police), played a decisive role in carrying out the massacres—especially in the period just after the German invasion of Lithuania on June 22, 1941.³² (Timelines at the back of this book provide a more comprehensive chronological overview.) This local, street-level violence has proven both difficult to document and difficult to confront in the public sphere.³³ The testimonies studied here offer firsthand impressions of the most controversial elements of this history: mass shootings, neighborly attacks, and pogroms in the streets, as well as memories of trust and covenants across ethnic lines. They do not resolve disputes about culpability on an empirical level, but help explain why they exist and to whom they matter.

After the liberation of Lithuania and the end of World War II, the remnants of Lithuanian Jewry began spreading across the globe. Emigration was a legal possibility for those Litvaks who found themselves in the American Zone after liberation, along with those from the Vilna area who had been repatriated as Polish citizens in 1946. These legal émigrés were joined by Lithuanian Jews who had ended the war in Soviet territory but then found illegal means of crossing the border, many with the help of the Brichah (Zionist emigration underground) movement. Though there is no precise way to track the emigration choices of Lithuanian Jewry at this postwar juncture, the overall proportions of Jewish survivor migration likely apply to these Litvaks as well: two-thirds of all Jewish displaced persons moved to Israel, nearly one-third to the United States and Canada

combined, and smaller numbers to other countries.³⁴ Some of those Litvaks who left became active in organizations dedicated to commemorating Lithuanian Jewish heritage from abroad, such as the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel or Nusach Vilne in New York. These organizations provided Litvak newcomers with social and welfare resources, while also sponsoring research and writing about the life and death of Lithuanian Jewry.³⁵ While these formal Litvak organizations were clearly very active in the postwar period, they receive only scant mention in the testimonies from Israel and North America discussed in the text to come. Instead, witnesses from these groups tend to stress their integration into the broader fabric of Israeli and American Jewish life—through avenues such as family building, synagogue membership, army service, and professional connections.

At the same time that these Litvaks sought out their places in Israel and in North America, a community of Jews about whom less is known remained in Lithuania. By 1946, roughly 20,000 Lithuanian Jews had regathered on Lithuanian soil. This included Litvaks who had survived the war in the unoccupied Soviet Union as well as those who had survived in ghettos, camps, partisan units, or in hiding. The postwar Jewish presence was enlarged at this time by the arrival of 10,000 non-Lithuanian Jews who had moved there from other Soviet territories.³⁶ From all of these different clusters, roughly 6,000 Jews left Lithuania within the first postwar decade, and 24,000 stayed for the long term.

Those who rebuilt their lives in this Soviet country lived through various phases of Jewish life: While Stalinist repressions crushed all efforts to establish Jewish welfare and educational institutions in the initial postwar years, restrictions on so-called “Jewish nationalist” activity were relaxed after Stalin’s death in 1953.³⁷ By many accounts, the period from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s was one of lively, informal Jewish life in Lithuania. Regarding these years, witnesses recall Jewish vacation spots, professional connections, social events, and, significantly, continuous use of the Yiddish language.³⁸ When emigration restrictions eased in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, almost half of the 25,000 Jews living in Lithuania at the time emigrated, and even more did so following Lithuanian independence in 1990.³⁹ As of 2001—seven years after the Shoah Foundation began filming testimonies there and three years before

I arrived—there were approximately 5,000 Jews living in Lithuania, the majority in Vilna, Kovna, and Klaipeda. Along with Jewish Community of Lithuania branches in these cities, there were also functioning synagogues in Kovna and Vilna that received very small but regular attendance at the time.⁴⁰ However, as with the Israeli and American testimonies, witnesses here do not recall these formal organizations as having been especially central to their postwar Jewish lives.

The connection between the pre-Holocaust Litvak legacy and the testimonies of witnesses like Gita Taitz, Liuba Feldman, and Yosef Ben-Ya'akov is not self-evident. Indeed, the stark contrast between the revered status of the Litvaks as a religious and cultural community, and their scattered post-Holocaust condition, presses us toward the question of Jewish transvaluation. Witnesses address this question on tape, not through explicit declarations of stability or change, but through the very fabric of their narration and presentation on screen. As such, the testimonies reveal a range of conduits through which survivors bring their pre-Holocaust history into the present day: as an image, a legal complaint, a political lesson, a sensation, an accent, a personality trait, a list of names, or as a word. The three-way comparison of this book affirms that, indeed, the Holocaust as an event carried the potential to rewrite Jewish norms and values. But this is a potential that acquired meaning only within certain ecologies of postwar and contemporary Jewish life. Changes in language and geographic setting support memories of the Holocaust as catastrophe, while witnesses who remember on a stable landscape challenge this equation. They frame this atrocity as one that killed more lives than ways of life. This book explores how three contemporary ecologies give people the resources to define the transformations they have witnessed, as well as the global endeavor that brought these three ecologies under one archival roof—by way of audio and visual recording.