"TELL ME ABOUT AUSCHWITZ." CHANGING FORMS AND PERCEPTIONS OF HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

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Holocaust survivor testimonies are complex not only in their nature but also in their function and public perception. This notion is complicated even more as survivor testimonies and their function have significantly changed over time. In the immediate postwar years, Holocaust survivor testimonies served a strictly documentary purpose in order to document the Nazis' crimes. Over the course of different legal proceedings, such as the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, in the early to mid-1960s, testimonies were utilized to legally convict several Nazis of murder. Today, survivor testimonies can be found in more literary forms, giving voice to individual and personal experiences. Furthermore, scholars and the public perception have a crucial function in the formation of testimonies as well. The broader context that frames this thesis is the idea that the past is not only defined by events that already took place but that it is also shaped by the present. To elucidate this context, this thesis will be diachronic and comparative in nature, analyzing the function, motivation, perception, and reception of survivor testimonies. It explores the idea that it is the nature of the questions we direct at survivors concerning their testimonies that possibly make the difference between talking *about* and talking *with* survivors. In particular, this thesis will show that a more nuanced understanding of Holocaust testimony is only possible if we are aware that it is not only the survivor who gives shape to his testimony but that we as listeners, including our expectations, questions, and reactions, to a certain degree, shape the form and content of testimony as well.

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1. Introduction

In April 1945, the Jewish woman Nelly Bondy asked an American guard in the German city of Grimmar, Saxony for refuge. By this time she had survived at least six different concentration camps, among them the now infamous extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a four-day long death march. When the American guard asked Bondy who she was, she told him that she was "a French political prisoner" (Voices of the Holocaust Project). After checking with his captain, the guard returned with the words: "I'm extremely sorry for you, but so far I haven't got any instructions for political prisoners, just for prisoners of war" (Voices of the Holocaust Project). For approximately three weeks, Nelly Bondy was not granted access to the American occupied zone. It was only after the Russians had arrived that she obtained authorization and was finally transported to a hospital and later sent back home to France. What, from the current perspective, is so gripping about Nelly Bondy's story is that she did not introduce herself as a "Holocaust survivor" or as a "Jewish survivor" of Auschwitz or of any other death and concentration camp. These terms and their broader implications, which today are widely understood, did not exist for Bondy or other Holocaust survivors, nor would the guard have understood them.

The lack of commonly understood terms that are synonymous with the Holocaust experience, not to speak of the symbolic character many of these words have come to possess, also becomes evident in the interviews conducted by David Boder in displaced persons camps in 1946. In his interview with Nelly Bondy, he asked her about Auschwitz and Birkenau:

> David Boder: Oh, it was Birkenau. Yes . . . where is Birkenau?
>
> Nelly Bondy: Birkenau is some . . . some kilometers from Aus— . . . from Auschwitz.
>
> David Boder: And Auschwitz is where?

Nelly Bondy: In east Upper Silesia.

David Boder: In east Upper Silesia . . .

Nelly Bondy: . . . Upper Silesia . . .

David Boder: Who has it now?

Nelly Bondy: Poland (Voices of the Holocaust Project 00:15:47-00:16:00).

In the summer of 1946, the names Birkenau and Auschwitz were not yet part of the general public awareness or memory. The same holds true for many other Holocaust-related terms such as *ghetto*, *deportation, camp, death march*, *survivor*, *cattle car*, and even the term *Holocaust* itself.

Raul Hilberg, who played a crucial role in establishing the field of Holocaust studies, once said, "in the beginning there was no Holocaust" (qtd. in Lipstadt 2). That is to say, in the immediate postwar period there was neither a field of study nor one common label for what had happened. The term *Holocaust*, which is a combination of the two Greek words *holos* (whole) and *kaustos* (burnt) and generally refers to a sacrificial offering that is totally consumed by fire (see Oxford Dictionary; Michman), did not receive the singular connotation it has today until the 1960s. Before that, as Deborah Lipstadt points out in her book *Holocaust. An American Understanding,* the term, commonly written with a lowercase h, usually referred to tragedies, conflagrations, and other "mishaps" in a general sense (12). Even after World War II, the term was still used in a more lighthearted sense or at least not in the singular connotation it has today. In 1948, for instance, as Lipstadt further observes, an article in the *Palestine Post* described the breaking of glasses and china by clumsy housewives as a "holocaust of housework"; and in 1959 Paul Benzaquin published a book called *Holocaust!* about the Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston

(qtd. in Lipstadt 12). In the beginning, there were many terms to describe the murder of at least six million European Jews by the Nazis. Many Yiddish speakers used the term *khurbn* - meaning utter destruction, Hebrew-speaking Jews used the name *Shoah*, a biblical word for complete destruction or devastation, and English speakers referred to the events as "catastrophe," "destruction," "mass murder," "the six million," "Hitler times," and sometimes as "holocaust"[1] (Lipstadt 8-9).

The emergence of various terms that have become identifiable as relating to the Holocaust represents more than just a change in language. The way in which these terms came into being and came to be commonly understood reflects underlying changes in public perception of the Holocaust. Taking this as a starting point, my thesis will focus on the changing forms and perception of Holocaust survivor testimony. Over the last 70 years, Holocaust survivor testimonies have been of great importance for survivors themselves, for people who did not experience the Holocaust, and for scholars. Moreover, this importance, just as the perception of the Holocaust, has varied at different moments in time. In the immediate postwar years, accounts given by survivors often had a strictly documentary character and appeared in the form of written or oral interviews. In the course of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials in the early 1960s, many survivors gave testimonies in written form to ensure responsible perpetrators were convicted. Towards the end of the Cold War, nations started to officially commemorate the Holocaust, which, too, gave rise to a new public and scholarly interest in survivor testimonies. During this time, an increasing number of individual and personal survivor accounts had been published and made into films. The public discourse and interest have had and continue to have a significant influence on the status and function of testimonies.

[1] The term “holocaust,” if used, was usually accompanied by a modifier, such as “the Jewish Holocaust.”

The emergence of Holocaust studies as a field of research further demonstrates the pivotal role of public discourse. Research on the events of the Holocaust started as early as the mid-1940s. It was, however, the common perception at this time that witness testimonies were not suitable as historical sources. Evidence for this can be found in the attitude of the prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials in 1945/46, the first historical attempt of a reconstruction of the Holocaust. Lipstadt asserts that the prosecutors were suspicious of witnesses who had "a strong bias against the Hitler regime," or in other words: against Jews who were the primary victims of Nazi racism (17). Immediately after the war, testimonies were mostly collected by survivors themselves. These survivors were motivated by the fear that, without evidence, the world would not be able to understand what happened to the victims. Furthermore, it was their goal to gather as much material as possible in order to ensure the conviction of their tormentors and to commemorate the victims who did not survive. Philip Friedman, the first director of the *Jewish Historical Institute* and one of the first historians to lay the foundation for the field of Holocaust studies, tried to gather as much material as possible and to present the Holocaust from multiple perspectives. Even he, a survivor who lost his wife and daughter to the Holocaust, was to some degree skeptical of witness testimonies, describing them as often being "inferior" material threatening "serious research" (Friedman qtd. in Lipstadt 17). He also pointed to the fact that "German sources are biased," and that writing a history of what the European Jews had endured was only possible if it were based on Jewish records and statements as well (ibid.).

The Eichmann trial in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, which ran from December 1963 to August 1965, helped shape a new perspective on witness testimonies. For the first time during these trials, hundreds of survivors and their accounts became the focus of international public attention (Stengel in Adler et. al. II). Here again, it was Holocaust survivors and not the

general public who took matters into their own hands. Hermann Langbein, a scholar and Holocaust survivor, was particularly involved in this process (II). In his function as the secretary of the *Austrian Camp Community Auschwitz* between 1955 and the early 1960s, Langbein endeavored to make public the crimes that were committed within the concentration camp, to convict Nazi criminals, and to provide restitution for former Auschwitz inmates. Langbein played a crucial role in the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials: assisting the Frankfurt law enforcement agency in locating members of the SS, encouraging survivors of Auschwitz to come forward, and documenting their testimonies.

Even though the public perception of witness testimonies shifted in the 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that witness testimonies were acknowledged as a reliable source by historians (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 263). Saul Friedländer, a historian who survived the Holocaust in hiding, attributes this shift to a large degree to the influence of popular culture and mass media. For instance, he points out that the popular but controversial U.S. television miniseries "'Holocaust' as televised in 1979 preceded the Holocaust as researched and reconstructed by historians" (Friedman in Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 262). Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour long documentary film *Shoah* (1985), too, is responsible for the new status of witness testimonies and was successful among the general public and scholars alike. Although *Shoah* is a documentary rather than a feature film and despite the fact that it is nine hours long, it was seen in more than ten million U.S. households when it first aired on public television in 1987 (Cesarani). Lanzmann was not interested in a reconstruction or reimagining of the Holocaust, as, for example, Steven Spielberg was twenty years later when he made his film *Schindler's List*. Rather than relying on photographs and archive material, Lanzmann interviewed survivors (and other witnesses) in order to capture their

trauma as they were re-living it in the moment of the interviews. *Shoah*, therefore, managed to bring the past and the trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors into the present, consequently challenging what people thought they knew about the Holocaust, and ultimately reshaping the public memory of the past.

As Holocaust survivors and their memories began to play an important role in the public sphere, historians had to acknowledge that they could no longer discount memory as an unreliable source, nor could they uphold the practiced dichotomy between the subjectivity of witness testimonies and the alleged objectivity of scholars. Historian Alon Confino summarizes this change in the following way: "The notion of memory has taken its [history's] place now as a leading term, recently perhaps the leading term, in cultural history" (qtd. in Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 262-263). The question of "What happened?" was no longer of primary interest for historians and other scholars. The new, larger focus included the potential consequences of the Holocaust on the present and future. Further questions came to the fore, including the possible modes of representing events of the past, how a traumatic event is experienced and remembered, and also the role of memory and its preservation in public commemoration (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 263). The perception of survivor testimonies had changed. It was no longer expected that survivor accounts supply factual historical knowledge but that they complement this view from the outside with personal views from within, giving some indication of how it felt, and providing faces and personal stories to the countless numbers gathered in Nazi documents. For the first time in the history of Holocaust studies, the borders between factual history and remembered past start to blur (ibid.).

This development in terms of status and perception of survivor testimonies is also mirrored in the development and emergence of different types of witnesses. Aleida Assmann, whose research focuses on cultural memory and remembering, illuminates this process and the role of scholarly and public expectations on witness testimonies in her book *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (2006). Assmann identifies four types of witnesses: the witness in court, the historical witness, the religious witness, and the moral witness. The function of the *witness in court* is to assist the judges in establishing the facts and thereby help them to decide on a verdict (Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 85). As it became clear during the Nuremberg trials and the prosecutors' suspicion towards "biased" Jewish victims, the court witness is not expected to voice his opinion or to express his emotions. The only thing that is expected from him is to be impartial, to have witnessed the crime, and to *reliably* recount this event, and, in addition, he is (legally) obliged to tell the truth (ibid.). The *historical witness* fulfills a different function. In contrast to the court witness, the historical witness is not involved in establishing the (legal) truth, but in communicating and passing on the knowledge she has about a key event to people who, otherwise, would not know about the event (Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 86). The historical witness plays a crucial role with regard to the reconstructive writing of history (ibid.). And yet, even though her account is a key element to learning about the past, and even though the beginning of oral history research starting in the 1960s and the idea of establishing a history from the bottom up attributed new meaning to the historical witness, her status for professional historiography has remained controversial even until today (ibid.). The aspect that is most important about the *religious witness* is that there are at least two people involved. The first person dies a martyr, that is, not as a passive victim but *for* a greater (religious) cause (Assmann,

Der lange Schatten 87). The religious witness is the person who reports about this death and the circumstances surrounding it.

The *moral witness* is of particular relevance for the considerations made in this thesis, as he first emerges during the aftermath of the Holocaust and encompasses aspects of the three types of witness outlined above. The moral witness has a "particular performative power," as pointed out by Vera Nünning who comments on Assmann's work in her book *Unreliable Narration* (384). That is, such witnesses give public testimony not in a courtroom but in a significantly wider and general arena of *a moral community* (Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 91). What is exceptional about this perception of the moral witness, as Assmann explicates further, is that the moral community first comes into being through the performative act of addressing the community (ibid.). Unlike the court, the moral community does not exist outside of the relationship it has with the witness or victim. This means that the witness not only provides a description or representation of the Holocaust, but he also allows to draw inferences from the interest and solace from the people of the community. Therefore, he uses the cultural resources about morality, politics, and identity that constitute the community. In other words, the witness' testimony is influenced not only by his experiences but also by the community he speaks to. Ultimately this view undermines "the idea of the historical witness, so that history and memory merge" (V. Nünning, *Unreliable Narration* 384). The subjectivity and alleged unreliability of witness accounts based on memory, as opposed to 'cold' facts and 'objective' documents, therefore no longer pose a problem, but rather they become an essential and desired part of historiography. This, again, constitutes a drastic change in comparison to the perceptions of and expectations placed on the nature and the role of witness testimonies in the immediate postwar period.

Despite the usefulness of Assmann's clear-cut categories of witnesses for this thesis, it is crucial to mention that not all witness accounts fall under one of the introduced four categories. In 1992, for instance, Ruth Klüger, an Austrian American author and literary scholar who, as a child survived the Holocaust, published her autobiography *weiter leben. Eine Jugend*. In this book, she provides an account of her life in the concentration camps and also of her post-war experiences. She, therefore, is a witness providing a witness account; however, she does not fit in any of Assmann's categories. Klüger wrote her autobiography more than 45 years after the events she describes in her book, events that she experienced when she was a child. Her view of this past, as she herself once said, is accessed through "the filter of memory" (qtd. in Woods). The focus does not lie on her as a witness or on her as participant of a trial or as an object of a historical study, instead the focus lies on her individual and very subjective experience during the Holocaust and the time after. The text is not a chronological, straightforward narrative, as it is interrupted by reflections. It is also characterized by contradictions, which, according to Assmann's categories would make Klüger a rather unreliable witness. Yet, Klüger won many prizes and awards for her autobiography and was, and still is, praised for her account. There are many other texts and accounts that fall under the broader category of witness accounts that Assmann's categorization does not necessarily cover. Another prominent example is Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* an autobiography in the form of a graphic novel written not by a survivor but by his son. Yet, the reader learns about events of the Holocaust as they have been experienced by his father and also by learning more about the son, the relationship he has to his father, and his inherited trauma. What this example in particular shows is that witnesses do not have to have experienced an event firsthand in order to "testify" to the trauma or in order for

historians and others to learn from them about the events. Marianne Hirsch describes this kind of "inherited" memory as *postmemory*.

Given these observations, this thesis aims to show how testimonies have changed over time. It will explore the function, form, and reception of Holocaust survivor testimonies at different historical moments using concrete examples drawn from testimonies. It considers further factors, such as the public and scholarly discourses surrounding testimonies, and the implicitly and explicitly formulated expectations placed on them. To this end, I will highlight the content, language, and (non)narrative form of these testimonies and the fact that it is not only the survivors who give shape and voice to their experiences but that both scholars and the public play a crucial role in shaping testimonies as well. This thesis strives to broaden existing discussions and to draw more attention to the multi-layered nature of survivor testimonies, demonstrating that Holocaust testimony is not a straightforward process, in which the survivor has some clearly formulated, quantifiable information that simply needs to be communicated or passed on to another person. Survivors and listeners — who are themselves also in a sense witnesses as they witness the testimonies — find themselves as participants in an ongoing personal and public discourse. The broader context that frames this thesis is the idea that the past is not only defined by past events but is also shaped by the present. The thesis expands on these ideas by exploring the difference between talking *about* and talking *with* survivors, potentially allowing for a better understanding of the individual experiences of survivors and of the Holocaust.

In addition to providing a general context, Chapter 2 will introduce the method and key terms that will be utilized in this thesis. In Chapter 3, I will analyze Holocaust witness testimonies that were recorded by David P. Boder in the immediate postwar period. These

testimonies are characterized by their immediacy to the events and experiences they represent. Chapter four will focus on the multiple medial forms of Holocaust testimony and the cultural shift they represent. This will include possible effects these media have on the form and content of witness testimonies and also on the public perception. In chapter five, I will take a closer look at testimonies that were gathered in the 1990s and that, in contrast to Boder's interviews, can be characterized not by their immediacy to the Holocaust but by their temporal distance and more coherent narrative structure. The conclusion summarizes the core arguments of the thesis, and the bibliography provides an overview of the testimonies, primary, and secondary sources used.

2. Theory and Method

This thesis will be diachronic and comparative in nature, as it analyzes the function, motivation, perception, and reception of survivor testimonies at different historical moments. I will also closely read and compare specific testimonies, some of which were given by the same survivors at different times in different medial forms. I will draw on interviews conducted and recorded by David Boder in 1946 and video interviews filmed between 1994 and 2000 for the Shoah Foundation Institute's *Visual History Archive*. A comparative analysis will provide some crucial indication of the changing nature of testimonies with regard to function, form, content, and language at different historical moments. Supporting this analysis will be my examination of the role that these different types of media play (audio, textual, video).

I will start out by providing working definitions of key terms that are crucial for this thesis. My analysis relies on Aleida Assmann's concept of video and audio testimonies as she defines these genres under the broader category of autobiography in her article "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony." I will apply her definitions to written testimonies as well, although it will quickly become clear that the borders between the different medial forms are not always clear-cut. According to Assmann, (written) autobiographies, in general, are collections of certain memories, arranged in a way that promotes "the coherent construct of a biography" ("History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 264). They usually "follow certain narrative patterns and are based on cultural codes and symbols," and they also rely on "an autobiographical pact [...] in which the author guarantees the authenticity of the events as really experienced" (265). Not all of the three different kinds of media meet these criteria in the same way. Some, in fact, seem to challenge or at least to open up the proposed definition of autobiography.

Assmann states that Holocaust video testimony, and the same could be said of audio testimony as well, does not always tell or show a coherent story since it is a traumatic experience, reflecting senseless destruction and defying all understanding, that the witness is trying to remember and to put into words. Therefore, video and audio testimonies reflect "the structure of the Holocaust itself" rather than the structure of a narrative or a biography (265). Another difference between an autobiography, or written testimony for that matter, and a video/audio testimony is the dialogical nature of the latter. At least one other person is involved in the process of testifying by asking questions, supplying responses and reactions. Since the witness speaks more or less freely in video and audio testimonies and does not simply recite from a pre-formulated text, their form is less structured. Assmann states that the video testimony "has a less elaborated form that also leaves room for open-ended passages, such as pauses, periods of silence, uncompleted sentences, innuendo" (ibid.). The physical presence of the witness in video and audio testimonies sets these medial forms apart from written accounts. The individual voice, its changes in pitch and pace, conveys emotions and creates an immediacy that ultimately enables the listener to more easily empathize with the person recounting their experiences. In the case of video testimonies, moreover, the viewer can identify and visually remember the face and body, with observable facial expressions and gestures. Overall, the forms of video testimonies and audio testimonies appear to be very similar insofar as the physical presence of the witness plays an important role.

Although Assmann's description of video testimonies as representing the structure of the Holocaust holds true for the oral testimonies David Boder recorded in 1946 and on which this thesis will in part focus, it does not apply to all oral testimonies. When Assmann talks about oral testimony, she only considers legal testimony that is given in the courtroom. Here, the witness

himself and his biography are not as important as his testimony. The focus also does not lie on new and personal insight he can potentially provide but on "additional evidence on events that are already externally established" (266). In other words, the witness ideally confirms what is already known. The individual called to testify is valued primarily for the function he serves in the court case; his experiences as a victim are only of secondary interest to the court. In video testimonies, and also for Boder, the person testifying is always victim and witness at the same time. In that sense, the written testimonies I will analyze in this thesis, might actually fall under Assmann's category of oral testimonies. It will become clear that the expectations people have of testimonies and also of their alleged purpose, play a crucial role when it comes to the form and perception of testimonies. This becomes particular obvious when considering the fact that a witness is, in Boder's case, valued for her individual story and personal insight but in the courtroom she is only valued for additional evidence she can potentially provide.

In this thesis, I will also follow Henry Greenspan and his crucial distinction between *testimony* (also *retelling*) and recounting he suggests in his book *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (1998). According to Greenspan, a retelling of past events or a testimony would most likely happen in a courtroom or in a similarly formal setting. Most importantly, the focus of a recounting does not lie on the process of remembering. What is expected is "a formal, finished quality" of the testimony (Greenspan, *On Listening* xvii). The act of recounting, on the other hand, is more provisional and processual in nature, "a series of what are always compromises that *always* point beyond themselves" (ibid.). Greenspan focuses solely on the process of remembering and recounting rather than simply retelling. He therefore emphasizes the relevance of the unfinished as opposed to definitive character of testimonies, and the influence survivors' ideas of the "tellable" and "hearable" may have on their accounts.

Particular to Greenspan's project is that he interviews the same group of survivors over and over again, rather than collecting testimonies from as many different people as possible. This approach therefore emphasizes the relevance of the unfinished as opposed to definitive character of testimonies, and the influence survivors' ideas of the "tellable" and "hearable" may have on their accounts. I will adopt Greenspan's distinction as it points out that not all witness testimonies are the same, and that their form and content very much depend on the situation, the setting, the audience, and also on the survivor himself. In short, Holocaust survivors never recount their experiences in a vacuum; rather, the social context of the retelling or recounting must always be taken into account. Elie Wiesel has expressed similar views. He points out the process of finding and selecting words that survivors go through when trying to put their potentially inexpressible experiences into words and also into a narrative form, a process which is often invisible to the listener or reader (Wiesel qtd. in Greenspan, *On Listening* 6). This idea of paying attention to and learning from the pauses, breaks, and interruptions in testimonies can possibly allow us to come to a better understanding of survivor accounts. Both Wiesel and Greenspan also emphasize the dialogical character that such recountings have, which is a further crucial aspect for the current analysis.

In order to provide a general context for this analysis, my work draws on the general field of Holocaust studies, memory studies, memorial culture, and commemoration practice. This includes ethical and aesthetic questions, as will become obvious in the chapter on video testimonies in the 1990s. In particular, I will consider questions concerning the (im)possibility of representing the Holocaust and individual Holocaust experiences and also concerning the forms of representations. Holocaust testimony, as this thesis will show, has both historiographical and psychological value. How, however, can other forms of Holocaust representation — feature films

such as Steven Spielberg's or Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, or fictional memoirs like Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* — be positioned in this moral framework? In addition, is it, for instance, morally and ethically justifiable to dramatize events, to add humoristic elements to survivor accounts, or to conventionalize the Holocaust? And who should make these decisions?

Scholars whose work on memory can add to the broader contextualization of the thesis include Maurice Halbwachs and the idea of *collective memory*, Marianne Hirsch and her idea of *postmemory*, and Alison Landsberg and *prosthetic memory.* Further scholars who have reflected on memory in the cultural and public context include Myrna Milani, Oren Baruch Stier, and John Sutton. Most relevant for the current analysis, however, is the research that has been done on the perception and the nature of survivor testimonies and memory over the last 70 years. I already mentioned the crucial role Philip Friedman played when it comes to the emergence of the field of Holocaust studies. Friedman's correspondence with another prominent Holocaust survivor and scholar, H. G. Adler, shows that both agreed on the importance of international scholarly collaboration and a diversity of perspectives regarding Holocaust research (Aleksiun 153). They, too, like many others, reflected on the notion of the interconnectedness of history, testimony and literature. It is the work of scholars like Adler and Friedman that pointed out the importance of survivor testimonies in the first place. Adler, in particular, paved the way for the idea that testimonies can vary in their form, and that a narrative element or literary form, too, have their place in Holocaust research. The work of other important Holocaust scholars, like Elie Wiesel, Henry Greenspan, and psychologist David P. Boder can be aligned with this view. Boder even argued that the 130 oral testimonies he recorded in 1946 could be seen as a form of literature (Rosen 23). He recognized that the interviewees were struggling to find ways and words to tell

their stories, and that the narrative flow as well as the pauses and interruptions conveyed just as much meaning as the words themselves. Finally, this thesis will draw on the work of Dan Michman, who has engaged with Holocaust historiography and analyzed specific terms used in testimonies and Holocaust scholarship and their emergence and application over time.

3. The Drive to Document: "Unbelated" Testimony in the Immediate Postwar Period (1945-1950)

3.1 David P. Boder's Project

During the last months of the Second World War and also during the immediate postwar period, many Holocaust survivors, in particular Jewish victims, founded historical commissions, documentation centers, and other projects. Shattered by their losses and the traumatic experiences they had just survived, it was their goal to chronicle and research these events (Jockusch 23). Even after liberation and after the war, many survivors still lived in unstable conditions. Most victims tried to go back to their former homes, hoping to reunite with family and friends. Instead of finding relatives, however, they often had to deal with the locals' hostility. In Poland alone, anti-Semitic gangs murdered approximately 1,500 Jewish survivors in the first few months after liberation (Yad Vashem). As a result, many survivors settled provisionally, uncertain in terms of their future and possible emigration, in displaced persons (DP) camps or other community institutions. In the midst of all this, survivors were afraid, that "without evidence of the catastrophe, the world at large would never fathom the scope of their experience" and that people would forget about them and the events of the Holocaust (Lipstadt 13). Given the fact that making people forget and erasing all traces of their wrongdoing was not a strategy first deployed by the Nazis after the war but that it already was part of the crime itself, this fear was more than justified (Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 92).

Survivors, among them Israel Kaplan and Moshe Feigenbaum, in the American zone in Germany, for instance, founded in December 1945 the *Central Historical Commission*. Within only three years, the committee and its members had established a network of fifty local committees based in DP camps in Germany. Overall, they collected 2,550 personal testimonies

(Lipstadt 14; Aleksiun 150). Emanuel Ringelblum, a historian, started his work even earlier, creating a group called *Oyneg Shabbes* while being held in the Warsaw ghetto. This group collected and wrote reports in order to document aspects of the ghetto life, such as relations among different groups of Jews, the crucial role women played in sustaining their families, and the ghetto's vast educational system, hoping the material would be useful to historians in the future (Lipstadt 13). Other organizations and institutions that interviewed Jewish survivors and collected their testimonies, usually in order to use them as legal or historical evidence, are the Wiener Library in London, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris, and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, a continuation of the Central Historical Commission. Yet, these efforts were made at a time when the world was "largely indifferent or hostile" to survivor memories (Kushner 276). As already mentioned, war crime trials after 1945 tended to rely on documentary evidence rather than survivor testimonies, as witness accounts were seen as unreliable and inaccurate. Survivor testimonies were almost exclusively used (as supporting evidence) to confirm what was already known based on other sources. Although one can say that this attitude simply reflected the legal tradition at the time, it also gives some indication of the status of oral testimony as well as the lack of respect that was given to the victims of the Holocaust (Kushner 277).

During the same time period, one scholar stands out, for he was not primarily interested in collecting historical or legal evidence but in preserving "an authentic record of wartime suffering" and in investigating the "impact of extreme suffering on personality" (Voices of the Holocaust Project). This scholar, David Boder, unlike most other people who collected survivor testimonies during and after the war, was not a historian but a psychologist who, at the time, worked for the Illinois Institute of Technology. In the summer of 1946, he traveled to Europe

and, using a state-of-the-art wire-recorder, recorded approximately 130 interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish people living in 16 different DP camps in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. As Alan Rosen has observed, the fact that these testimonies were recorded and preserved distinguishes Boder's collection from all other, as Rosen calls them, *unbelated* testimonies, or in other words, from all other testimonies that were documented without "undue delay" (227). The recorded interviews and the way in which Boder conducted them, point to the complex nature of Holocaust testimony and furthermore the diversity of early testimony in DP camps. From today's perspective, Boder's collection offers even more insight. It allows for the examination of how survivors talked about the Holocaust during the immediate postwar period, that is, at a time when the Holocaust was not yet known by this term, as outlined in the introduction. A comparison between Boder's collection and testimonies provided in the immediate postwar and testimonies gathered over 50 years after the war can be fruitful, especially considering that today, survivors, in order to tell their stories, have various terms, tropes, and keywords at hand, that have become synonymous with the Holocaust experience over time. In 1946, there was no universally agreed upon terminology; survivors were still in the process of trying to make sense of what happened and therefore struggling for words. Something else that was first established in later years, as Rachel Deblinger points out, were taboos which "served to filter out moments of personal shame" (121). While stories of violence are not usually part of more recent testimony collections, they are often part of the witness accounts Boder recorded in the summer of 1946.

What already becomes clear at this point is the array of factors that play a role in the recounting of experienced events. Events are always experienced in a very personal and therefore subjective way. Recounting those events is complicated even more by the use of language.

Written or spoken language does not represent the world in an objective, unmediated manner. Therefore, the necessary use of language adds an additional layer of mediation and representation to the recounting process. As Berel Lang notes in his book *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, "by definition there must be a difference between a representation and its object *un*-represented, with the former adding its own version to the 'original' it represents" (51). The situation in which a representation is produced, therefore, has at least as much influence on the witness account as the event that is being recalled itself. The specific moment in time, the spatial environment, language, emotions, other people, and collective memory, to name only a few factors, all influence the form and content of witness accounts. Boder seems to have had a comprehensive understanding not only of the complexity of memory but also of how difficult — not to say impossible — it is, to get to the "real" Holocaust experience, or in other words, to the *un*-represented experience, as Lang terms it. It is possible that Boder was familiar with the work of French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs, who died in the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945, already investigated in the 1920s and 30s the influences on so-called *autobiographical memory*, which he defined as "memory of events that we have personally experienced in the past" (Halbwachs 24). He, too, pointed out that there are many factors that play a role in the formation of memory and also in the process of recalling or remembering an event. In particular, he emphasized that all human experience is rooted in a social context, referring to his idea of *collective memory* (23). Therefore, the direct or indirect interaction with other people and social groups plays a crucial role in the creation and perpetuation of personal or autobiographical memory, which then again poses the question of whether an experience can be remembered objectively and outside of any social context at all.

The knowledge of the complexity of memory in combination with his perspective as a psychologist might have been the reason why Boder decided to collect "narratives, reports, personal histories and documents, stories, and even 'tales'," as he referred to his interviews (Rosen 12). Rather than striving for an allegedly objective account of *the* Holocaust experience, he was much more interested in the influence such a catastrophe has on human personality. Boder was convinced that it was possible to find evidence of trauma in the way Holocaust survivors and other displaced persons used language. He, therefore, granted his interviewees the freedom to choose the language of the interviews. In addition, Boder, who spoke seven different languages, was also aware that "language choices were not neutral, that the topic at hand might be best served by one language (or two, or three) rather than another" (Rosen 202-203). In other words, he knew that a specific language could trigger certain memories just as it can block other thoughts or emotions. This is crucial, since it implies that an account given by a witness in, for example, Polish can potentially vary from the same account provided in Yiddish (given that the witness speaks both languages).[2] Boder, for instance, asks Bella Zgnilek, a Jewish survivor, at the end of the interview, if she would like to say something to Jewish people living in America. She agrees and starts in English: "Well, I will just send them regards, and I am happy that not everybody of the Jews went through such a hell as we did." Possibly aware that this statement is not sufficient to convey what she really thinks, she adds something in Polish: "I would like to tell you, my friends, that all of us Jews ought to strongly hate the Germans because of the wrongs which they did to us [...] and we ought never to forget that" (Zgnilek qtd. in Rosen 209). It becomes clear that she is not able to fully express what she feels in English. Only the switch to the Polish language allows her to complete her statement.

2 This circumstance also complicates translations of witness accounts conducted by third parties into other languages, for example in the courtroom, for research, or for publications etc.

Moreover, Boder felt that it was also crucial to interview displaced persons while their memories were still fresh and that the interviewees would talk freely, and most importantly, in their own voice (Rosen 8, 227). In the introduction of his book *I Did not Interview the Dead,* in which he published eight selected interviews, Boder wrote that:

> most of the displaced persons had spent their time of imprisonment in camps among inmates of divergent tongues and dialects. For years they had been deprived of all reading matter [...], of religious services, of radios, and often of opportunities to talk with others in their own tongue. It is no wonder that their language habits show evidence of trauma (xiii-xiv).

Boder would also limit his stay in each DP camp to about two days. Besides his goal to record experiences of individuals in many different groups and thus to get a representative cross-section of the general war and Holocaust experience rather than exceptional stories, this short time span would ensure that the interviewees would not have time to prepare their stories and that the narratives would not lose their spontaneity (Boder xii).

To encourage and enable his interviewees to talk freely, in their own language and in their own voice, and furthermore to preserve the interviews for future use, Boder decided, as mentioned above, to record all interviews on a wire recorder.[3] These recordings came to represent the earliest known oral histories of the Holocaust (Voices of the Holocaust Project). Boder was convinced of the wire recorder's potential as an aid to documenting traumatic experiences and life stories. After watching film newsreels of the liberation of concentration camps by the Allies and — due to the lack of narrative — condemning film as inadequate to do justice to the victims and their suffering, Boder decided that a wire recorder was more suitable to

3 Copies of the wire recordings can be found in the Motion Picture and Sound Division of the Library of Congress and also in the Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The location of the original spools, however, is unknown (Rosen viii).

emphasize and focus on the human aspect or experience of the Holocaust (Rosen 19-20.) Jorge Semprún, a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, expressed a very similar, if not identical opinion in December 1945:

> Even though [the newsreel images] showed the naked obscenity, the physical deterioration, the grim destruction of death, the images, in fact, were silent. [...] They were silent above all because they said nothing precise about the reality they showed, because they delivered only confused scraps of meaning (qtd. in Rosen 19).

Therefore, what was needed was some kind of verbal commentary or explanation, providing a narrative in order to contextualize the "confused scraps of meaning." This is exactly what Boder tried to do with his interviews. He asked victims to tell their stories, and thus created a collection of narratives and commentary that would allow for an audience, especially for people who did not experience the Holocaust, to be able to, in some way, make meaning of the "confused scraps."

Indeed, Boder not only conducted and recorded interviews with displaced persons in order to carry out his research, but also to address and reach a specific audience. Boder, who himself had fled his home country of Russia and the emerging civil war, planned to present his interviews to the American public. It was his hope that the stories and accounts of what displaced persons had gone through would convince Americans to loosen immigration policies and to allow victims of the Holocaust and the war to immigrate to the United States (Voices of the Holocaust Project). To address this goal, but also to exercise as little influence as possible on the accounts, both their form and content, Boder started each interview with the following words: "We know very little in America about the things that happened to you in concentration camps. If you want to help us out by contributing information about the fate of displaced persons, tell your

own story" (Boder xii-xiii). Boder's various spontaneous questions and his "perplexity," as he himself would call it (Boder qtd. in Rosen 6), make clear that this invitation to displaced persons to tell their stories was not just an empty phrase: he really did not know much about what happened in concentration camps. Edith Serras, for instance, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau tells Boder in an interview conducted in August 1946 about her arrival at the extermination camp, and his questions clearly reveal his puzzlement:

> Edith Serras: And so, we arrived at the station.
>
> David Boder: Yes . . .
>
> Edith Serras: So there was a 'selection.'
>
> David Boder: Yes . . . What is a 'selection'?
>
> Edith Serras: A 'selection' means that they selected the people who were to go into the lager, to work, and the people who were to go, to make 'experiences' on them . . .
>
> David Boder: Experiments?
>
> Edith Serras: Experiments. And which people were to go into the gas [...].
>
> David Boder: Into what?
>
> Edith Serras: . . . into the gas . . . That means—into the gas chambers.
>
> David Boder: Oh . . . They went to the gas chambers? (Voices of the Holocaust Project [English transcript, translated from German and Yiddish] 00:10:11-00:10:40)

Evidently, Boder did not have any prior knowledge regarding the selections, thus he had to interrupt the interviewee in order to ask for clarification. This points back to how Boder proceeds with each narrative. Unlike the historical commissions that operated in the American zone, for instance, he did not have a pre-formulated set of (historical) questions he would ask the displaced

persons to answer (Ofer 521).[4] Boder was interested in their life stories, their experiences, and in the way in which they gave their accounts. His interviews, in fact, were highly dialogical and spontaneous in nature, which also coincides with the fact that his interviews were usually greater in length than other interviews conducted at the time. They would last from twenty minutes to upwards of four hours, always depending on the interviewee and his or her readiness to talk (Boder xiii).

Boder's interruptions and confusion, however, reveal more than just his lack of knowledge regarding particular events and details of the Holocaust. That he had to ask for clarification on such a regular basis also points to a broader issue, namely the "incomprehensibility of Holocaust testimony," as Rachel Deblinger shows in her article "David P. Boder. Holocaust Memory in Displaced Persons Camps" (119). Deblinger further explains how this incomprehensibility has many causes. The narratives Boder recorded often lack chronological consistency, as well as a clear beginning and ending. This was mainly due to the fact that the persecution, the war, and its consequences, started at different moments for the displaced persons, depending on their location and personal circumstances at the time. The witnesses also regularly jumped through time in order to clarify certain points or, most often, family structures and other relationships (117), which made it hard for someone else to follow their accounts. A potential reason for this might be the nature of the witnesses' traumatic experiences. It is possible that it is less painful to remember short episodes than to remember the entire experience at once and as a whole. It, too, is not a given that every memory or experience, in particular traumatic ones, has to be chronological and in the form of a narrative. If this is the case, imposing a narrative structure would mean to actively influence content and form of

4 The historical commissions that operated in the American zone used a questionnaire headed "Historical Questions," including questions about the respondents' identity, property, events at the start of the war, the witnesses' own experience, and stories of family members and other people (Ofer 521-522).

witness accounts. Most crucial and noticeable, however, is that most accounts do not end with the moment of liberation. Boder, for instance, asks Jewish Auschwitz survivor Jürgen Bassfreund towards the end of their interview about the whereabouts of his mother after learning that the last time he had seen here, was sometime in 1941.

> David Boder: Nun erzählen Sie mir mal, wieviel wissen Sie und was wissen Sie von Ihrer Mutter?
>
> Jürgen Bassfreund: Ich weiß eigentlich von meiner Mutter gar nichts. Ich weiß so viel, dass meine Mutter nicht mehr aus dem Lager zurück gekommen ist.
>
> [...]
>
> David Boder: Aha. Und, hm, Sie haben es probiert nach Berlin zu schreiben?
>
> Jürgen Bassfreund: Ja.
>
> David Boder: Oder verschiedenen Stellen sich zu verbinden?
>
> Jürgen Bassfreund: Ja, ja, natürlich, ich hab mich selbstverständlich mit der jüdischen Gemeinde in Berlin in Verbindung gesetzt [...]. Und ich hab den Bescheid bekommen, dass meine Mutter nicht dort eingetroffen ist und auch nicht registriert ist. Und es ist wahrscheinlich anzunehmen, dass sie nicht mehr lebt. Denn ich nehme bestimmt an, wenn meine Mutter noch leben würde, dass sie doch jeden Hebel in Bewegung gesetzt hätte, um mich zu finden (Voices of the Holocaust Project 00:55:07-00:56:18).

At this point in time, more than one year after his liberation, Jürgen Bassfreund still did not know for sure whether his mother was still alive, what had happened to her, and whether he would be able to see her again. He also explains that he had planned to go back to their former home in Berlin to see if he would be able to find his mother there. However, he ended up not

going because it was too difficult, especially in terms of transportation (at the time of the interview, Bassfreund was in a displaced persons camp in Munich).

Here, the influence of the specific historical moment, the physical environment, and emotions on memory and testimony become particularly evident, that is, we begin to gain a better understanding of what the historical situation entailed. Although the war was over and concentration and extermination camps had been liberated, displaced persons still continued to struggle. For various reasons, they were not able to go back to their former homes, at the same time, countries like the United States or Palestine had strict quotas regarding the immigration of refugees or did not accept any displaced persons at all ("The Aftermath of the Holocaust"). As a result, they often had to stay in displaced persons camps, many of which were former concentration camps. Additionally, many people did not know if their relatives and friends had survived. The war and the Holocaust might have come to an end, but the survivors were still suffering the consequences. This continuation of suffering manifests itself, among other things, in the raw nature of survivors' testimonies and their missing narrative structure.

Boder, at the time, most probably was not aware of the enormous insight his questions would later offer to other scholars and audiences. This, however, does not mean that he did not reflect on his interruptions. He writes:

> I have a feeling that every time I interrupt the story to clarify a point, I have lost a no less important item which would have been told spontaneously. Nevertheless, it had to be done from time to time, if for no other reason than to assure the interviewee of my interest in his narrative (Boder qtd. in Deblinger 118).

He was aware that his interruptions, on the one hand, disrupted the interviewee's thought process and also the (already limited) narrative flow. On the other hand, he also saw the potential of

learning more about certain details that the witness would have left out otherwise. Boder's interview with Kalman Eisenberg, a Jewish survivor, illustrates how his questions can interrupt the story, but, at the same time, how they give room for new information and aspects that the interviewee might have left out.

> Kalman Eisenberg: All the Gypsies were taken out and driven away on trucks. Next morning we found out that the three ovens were filled up, so the Gypsies had been taken, and pits were dug, and in these pits they were burned alive, without gassing.
>
> David Boder: The Gypsies?
>
> Kalman Eisenberg: The Gypsies.
>
> David Boder: What...
>
> Kalman Eisenberg: Without gassing. The Gypsies had been there until then, for two years. Suddenly an order came to burn them. After having been there, in the Gypsy Lager, a week's time, we left for Buna. In Buna I was a few months. Many cases also happened that many boys because...when there was an air-raid, finding a piece of bread on the building-site, they would take and eat it. Upon returning to the lag-...[a pause, possibly a break in the wire].
>
> David Boder: Tell me, Kalman. You say that the Gypsies were burned without having been gassed. How are people burned without gassing?
>
> Kalman Eisenberg: Oh, that happened [thus]: Wide pits were dug. Wood was piled in the pits. And the Gypsies were chased into the pits, doused with gasoline and set on fire with grenades ... (Voices of the Holocaust Project [English transcript, translated from Yiddish]).

In this segment of the interview, Boder, apparently for the first time, hears and learns that people in Auschwitz-Birkenau were not only burned after being gassed but also while they were still alive. This is unarguably a crucial aspect of the Nazi crimes and the camp life. Boder's question, however, reveals that this is something that someone who has not experienced the Nazi atrocities first hand, has no knowledge about. Since Eisenberg, unlike Boder, had witnessed these events and due to the fact that people were murdered on a daily basis in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Eisenberg does not see the need to provide any further explanation; it appears to be obvious or self-evident to him. Instead of going into detail, he simply continues with his story and his transport to Buna. Without Boder's interposed questions, the interview may not have included the specifics of the murder of Sinti and Roma in the camp. Boder's confusion and lack of knowledge, therefore, too, shaped the form and content of the conducted interviews. One can only speculate how many "details" have never been told simply because nobody asked the "right" questions.

Yet, these are not the only choices Boder made that influenced the content and form of the accounts. He sometimes found himself struggling with the tension between his scholarly and humanitarian goals: investigating the effect of trauma and convincing the American people to take in displaced persons. Although these goals do not necessarily contradict each other, there were situations where he had to prioritize audience over evidence. On the one hand, he knew that the survivors' choice of language (usually their native language) and the way they utilized language provided some indication of their trauma, on the other hand, he also knew that the stories needed to be accessible to and heard by the American audience. As Rosen points out in his book on Boder, this becomes particularly obvious in the interview conducted with Mene Mizrahi, a then twenty-four-year old Jewish Greek man. He spoke German and French fluently, both of which he learned in school. In addition, he spoke some English, which he had acquired

on his own rather than within a formal educational framework. Nevertheless, the interview was not conducted in German or French but in English, "not for reasons of linguistic comfort but rather for its capacity to bring the DP's story and message back to America" (208).

The nature of Boder's questions and his general approach reveal that his immigration background, profession, scholarly and personal interests, and the intended audience as well as other factors such as the specific point in time or the prominence of newsreels played a crucial role in his interviews. In addition, as shown here, there are various other factors, such as the ways in which memory is created and recalled, the effects of trauma on someone's personality, the physical environment, audience, specific questions and context, that, too, shape the form and content of testimonies.

What will follow now is a close reading and analysis of specific testimonies that were conducted and recorded by Boder. This will highlight moments in which "the brokenness of language," as Boder called it, becomes visible, the lack of terms and narrative form, and other characteristics that might be specific for the moment in time and for the medium of audio recordings. This analysis will allow for valuable insight in the form of specific examples into the complicated nature of early Holocaust survivor testimony.

3.2 Audio-Recorded Testimonies - An Analysis

David Boder interviewed 130 displaced persons in four different European countries, and 118 of these audio-recorded interviews can be found on the Voices of the Holocaust website (voices.itt.edu), which was launched in 2000. The project's mission is "to provide a permanent digital archive [...] so that they [Boder's interviews with Holocaust survivors] can be experienced by a global audience of students, researchers, historians, and the general public." In this way, the

Voices of the Holocaust project aims to finish the work of "preserving an authentic record of wartime suffering" that Boder, due to his relatively early death, did not have the chance to complete (Voices of the Holocaust Project).

Boder's general approach included interviewing people from as many different experience groups as possible. This is one of the reasons why he traveled to at least seventeen different locations. As a result, he interviewed displaced persons of twenty or more different nationalities, of at least five different religions, people between the ages of 13 and 78, people who survived ghettos, concentration camps, extermination camps, or in hiding, or who were affected in other ways by the war and the Holocaust. Boder was not interested in creating and recording some kind of "general" Holocaust experience but in individual stories.

What follows now is a close reading and an analysis of individual audio-testimonies recorded by Boder. One aspect that this analysis will highlight is how different, individual, and multifaceted not only the testimonies are but also the survivors themselves.

One of the first things that stands out is the young age (13-19) of at least twenty of Boder's interviewees, with two girls being only 13 at the time. From today's perspective, especially in combination with the prevalence of video testimony recorded 40 to 50 years after the Holocaust, listening to these survivors' young voices serves as a powerful reminder that Holocaust survivors have not always been of advanced age. Their accounts, furthermore, allow for some insight in how children experienced the daily horror of persecution, separation, and death. When Esther Freilich, for instance, a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl who was interned in the Drancy internment camp, tells Boder about her experiences, her voice is that of a child. She talks very fast, often incomprehensibly, and she sounds almost excited when she tells Boder about her

experiences.[5] If someone who does not speak German would listen to her account, he would most likely never guess that she is recounting how she and her family have been deported to Drancy or how she later has been separated from her family. If one focuses on how she speaks, as opposed to the content, her account *sounds* like an adventure story, almost like something that is exciting. Rather than emphasizing hunger or violence, her account revolves around her family, playing or being excluded from playing with other children, and school. When listening to the following excerpt, one may wonder if she is able to grasp what it means that her sister was deported or whether she is still too young to comprehend what happened. Without a change in voice, pace, or emotion she tells Boder how her older sister was taken:

> Esther Freilich: Ja. Sind wir dann raus und der Tag, ich hab gesehen, wie man deportiert die Schwester . . .
>
> David Boder: Deine Schwester?
>
> Esther Freilich: Und hat sie gerufen die Neime [gemeint: Namen?], ne?
>
> Esther Freilich: Ich hab gesehen, wie man gerufen die Name, die Schwester weggefahren und hab gesagt, ich geb dir was [unverständlich].
>
> David Boder: Aha.
>
> Esther Freilich: Bin ich gelaufen [unverständlich] und sie getragen. Nachher der Bruder ist wieder raus, hat man gedacht ihn nicht deportieren (Voices of the Holocaust Project 00:08:26-00:08:56).

The interview Boder conducted with Esther Freilich's mother, Fania Freilich, reveals that the sister who was taken that night, was "led out on the square for deportation, to death" (Voices of

5 It is unclear if Esther Freilich's native language is German. She gives her interview in German and the Voices of the Holocaust website states German as the only language she speaks. However, her mother, Fania Freilich, does not speak German but Yiddish and French. Esther Freilich's syntax and accent might therefore not only be influenced by her young age and the traumatic experiences she had to live through but also by French and/or Yiddish.

the Holocaust Project [English transcript, translated from Yiddish and French]). Also noteworthy and supporting the claim that Esther Freilich was not able to comprehend the magnitude of her experiences or the events themselves, is the complete lack of narrative form in combination with the many broken sentences and pauses.

The lack of narrative form and the struggle for words seen here in this child's account can actually be observed across all age groups in Boder's interviews. Israel Unikowski, an eighteen-year-old survivor, for instance, was very reluctant to provide his testimony without being allowed to use his "previously prepared, written story of his life" (Voices of the Holocaust Project 00:00:29-00:00:40). As mentioned before, spontaneity was very important to Boder, so he convinced Unikowski to speak without his notes. This is worth noting, because as soon as the interview starts, Unikowski seems to struggle to tell a coherent story. As the following excerpt shows, he also seems afraid to forget to mention certain aspects of his experience that are important to him. He is telling Boder how the Germans and the president of the Lodz ghetto forced people to report themselves (prior to deportation), when Boder interrupts:

> David Boder: Talk a little more about the deportations. What happened? They came and said what?
>
> Israel Unikowski: There arrived . . . was sent a paper . . .
>
> David Boder: Well.
>
> Israel Unikowski: . . . to this and this family. On this and this day you have to report to the general prison on [name not clear] street. And when the man reported, [...] nu, then he was sent away. How the deportation was conducted I'll relate to you later.
>
> David Boder: Yes. Yes.

Israel Unikowski: But if he didn't report, for this Rumkowski had a good remedy. To the store where he received his food rations was sent [...] a note: 'such and such a man does not receive any more bread.' (Voices of the Holocaust Project, [English transcript, translated from German] 00:23:00-00:23:30).[6]

As it becomes apparent through his broken sentences, Unikowski already has a hard time talking about people reporting in a somewhat chronologically and relatable manner. When Boder interrupts him, he is unwilling to stop his train of thoughts.

What is also striking is that he, more than once, fails to mention that his older brother — his only relative — was with him during certain crucial events. Towards the beginning of the interview (00:02:00) Unikowski tells Boder that he grew up in an orphanage and that all children left together for a different city when the war broke out. He explains the logistics of their travel, how they arrived in Lodz, and in general, provides a rather detailed account. It is not until minute ten (00:09:50) of the recording that he mentions that his brother, who was one year older, grew up in the same orphanage and that he was with him the entire time. This happens one more time, when Unikowski recalls how the Germans came into the Lodz ghetto in order to deport all children and how he (and his brother, as Boder learns later) managed to not get caught. Here again, he talks over ten minutes about the specific circumstances, details and other people involved, before he mentions that his brother escaped with him (00:29:50 - 40:00). Boder, too, seems surprised that Unikowski failed to mention that his brother was with him:

Israel Unikowski: We returned . . . we returned to where we have been before, to that orphanage. Nobody was there.

6 Israel Unikowski gives his interview with Boder entirely in German. However, due to the poor sound quality of the recording, the quotes and the excerpts provided here are taken from the English transcript of the interview that is provided on the Voices of the Holocaust website. The original German transcript, although usually provided, is not available for Unikowski's interview.

David Boder: Yes?

Israel Unikowski: So we got together three people, that is, myself and the brother and another boy.

David Boder: Oh. Your brother was with you? (00:39:38-00:40:03).

The cause for not mentioning his brother earlier and more often is probably the temporal proximity to the Holocaust and, as Boder would most likely say, Unikowski's trauma that becomes evident in the lack of a narrative form. He also has difficulties finding a balance between details that — at least from the perspective of someone who has not experienced the Holocaust — do not necessarily seem crucial to his account and aspects that do (such as his brother). Although he has been liberated, the events still affect his life. At the moment of the interview, he has not overcome the trauma yet, and he carries it with him in the present and also into the future as his following statement demonstrates:

David Boder: Nu, and where do you plan to live after you become a dental technician?

Israel Unikowski: What kind of plans can we make? We already saw that thinking about tomorrow won't do. Today I am here [?]. Today I am there. What will be tomorrow, I don't know (01:03:35-01:03:47).

That the inhumane and dehumanizing treatment he had to endure for years did not leave Unikowski unaffected and ultimately influenced his self-perception and self-worth becomes evident when Boder asks him to "omit the general stories" and to talk more about what had happened to him:

Israel Unikowski: It is important to mention the way of action of the police in the Ghetto.

David Boder: Wait. Let's go over this again. Tell me what happened to you afterwards. Omit the general stories.

Israel Unikowski: I think that the 'general stories' are more important than my own.

David Boder**:** But that was already written about. I want your story. Let us talk it over. So far it [your report] went on very well. True? So then what happened to you? You returned? You will some day write a good book about it. Nu?

Israel Unikowski**:** What happened to me happened to every Jew (00:38:58-00:39:32).

It is in a sense tragic that Unikowski does not view his personal story as being "important" enough to be told, especially in contrast to the "general" experience of the Holocaust. Considering that he, during a crucial state of his childhood, had been persecuted for six years, not for his actions but simply for being born a Jew, and that Jews were seen, treated, and most importantly murdered as a category rather than individuals, it is not surprising that he struggles with a feeling of inferiority.

The circumstance that Unikowski believes that he is speaking for all other Jews who fell victim to the Nazis rather than talking about what happened to him personally, could also explain why he gets somewhat aggravated or possibly even offended when Boder asks him a follow up question about what have become known as death marches.[7]

Israel Unikowski: People were weak from walking. Whoever lagged behind a few steps, they immediately shot him. They . . .

David Boder: Did you see it yourself?

Israel Unikowski: What a question, whether I saw it? They [?] walked behind me. People wept, 'I can't any more!' If he remained lagging one . . . one step, 'Oh you old creature!' He took off the rifle and shot him on the spot (00:50:56-00:51:16).

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7 Unikowski does not use a particular term for the death march he was sent on. In fact, he uses a variety of expressions such as "rausgegangen," "weggeschickt," and "raus-" or "losmarschiert." As mentioned above, Unikowski spoke German during the interview but due to the sound quality, the excerpts are taken from the English transcript. It was, however, possible to recognize the Germans terms listed here from the original recording.

When Unikowski answers Boder's question, he raises his voice and speaks even faster than usual. It almost seems as if he perceives Boder's inquiry as an attack, calling into question not only the truth content of his account but also the extent of suffering he and other Jews had to endure. As mentioned above, during the immediate postwar period, it was not uncommon for survivors of the Holocaust to be afraid that the world at large would not be able to grasp the scope of their experience. Unikowski's reaction to Boder's rather innocent question can potentially be characterized as a manifestation of this fear.

Another aspect of Unikowski's interview that distinguishes his account from most accounts that were provided at a later point in time, is that he, even without being prompted, mentions how he and other prisoners of the Buchenwald concentration camp took revenge on the Germans after their liberation: "Where we passed we did some damage. In everything . . . in the gardens we broke everything, the houses. We did some . . . [...] If we found . . . if we met a German on the road, a young one . . . we also . . . we also told him a bit" (01:01:31-01:01:47). He also explains to Boder that he and other prisoners chased and beat SS men in Buchenwald. They did not shoot anyone, however, since German political prisoners, who were in the majority, prohibited the shootings (00:58:15-00:58:59). As Rachel Deblinger points out, stories of violence committed by survivors are not usually part of more recent testimony collections, as it became a taboo to talk about "moments of personal shame" (121).

One last thing I would like to mention in regards to Unikowski's account is that, at two different moments in the interview, he notes that words cannot capture what went on when Buchenwald was liberated ("The joy, that I can't picture in words!" (00:59:28), "There are no words to picture what went on" (01:04:29)). This is noteworthy, because when it comes to the possibility or impossibility of representing the Holocaust, many questions revolve around the

potential inexpressibility of the survivor's suffering. Unikowski, however, only refers to this problem when he tries to express how happy he and others were at the moment of their liberation. A possible explanation might be, that the survivors had suffered for such a long period of time, that it became (if one can say that at all) normality, especially for a young boy like Unikowski who was still developing physically and mentally during these years. For him, one year after his liberation, it seems as if it were more difficult to verbally express feelings and emotions of joy than of loss and suffering.

Another Jewish survivor, Jacob Minski, who at the time of his interview with Boder was 39 years old, recalls his experiences "in disorganized episodes" (Niewyk 300). Boder has to interrupt Minski several times in order to be able to follow his account. Towards the beginning of the interview, when Minski is being asked about his parents, he states that they are not alive anymore and indicates that he is going to explain what happened to them. Instead, however, he jumps ahead in time, to October 1941, when he was deported to the Lodz ghetto.

> David Boder: Ja. Sagen Sie mir, sind Ihre Eltern am Leben?
>
> Jacob Minski: Meine Eltern sind nicht mehr am Leben. Ich werde Ihnen kurz sagen . . .
>
> David Boder: Ja, bitte.
>
> Jacob Minski: . . . Ihnen das kurz erklären. Als wir in, hm, . . . im Oktober neunzehn hundert ein und vierzig (1941) bekam ich von der Gestapo per Einschreibebrief die Aufforderung mich an einem gewissen Tag in der Mohrweidenstrasse mit, hm, fünf und zwanzig (25) Pfund Gepäck einzufinden (Voices of the Holocaust Project 00:01:19-00:01:47).

It seems like he starts out by explaining what had happened to his parents, when he uses the pronoun "we." He then, rather abruptly, decides to talk about his deportation. During the entire

interview, he does not mention his parents again. This is not the only moment he wanders from one topic to the other without finishing his train of thought. When telling Boder about people committing suicide by purposefully falling against the electrified barbed wire, he, possibly to lift the mood, says: "es gab auch humoristische Szenen" (Voices of the Holocaust Project [German transcript]), but again, does not finish his story and starts talking about something else. Curious to know what possibly could have been humoristic in the camps, Boder interrupts Minski:

> Jacob Minski: Ja. Also ich benützte dann eine Gelegenheit also eine Kolonne . . .
>
> David Boder: Sie sagten, Sie wollten etwas Humoristisches erzählen.
>
> Jacob Minski: Oh ja, ich bin da leider abgekommen (lacht) von dem Thema. Ich erzählte da von dem Singen (Voices of the Holocaust Project [German transcript]).

This excerpt demonstrates how difficult it is for Minski to structure his memories and thoughts, to put them into a narrative form, and ultimately to make sense of what happened to him and others. This impression is also reinforced by his very slow pace of speech and his constant struggle for words.

The excerpt is also revealing with regard to emotion. It demonstrates Minski's seemingly emotional detachment from his past. In fact, throughout the entire interview, he shows very little to no negative emotions. Yet, he laughs several times, and as seen above, talks about humoristic (as he called it) events. That survivors do not seem to get emotional is not uncommon in Boder's interviews. It most likely is a form of coping mechanism that helps survivors to not experience the same emotional pain and suffering they experienced during their persecution and internment in various camps again when talking about these very same experiences. The addition of allegedly humorous stories to his account, could also be understood as one of Minski's coping mechanisms. What, however, is striking about Minski is that his humorous story is not, in any

way, funny. He recounts to Boder how, one day, people in the camp were forced to sing a song called "Es saß ein Vöglein auf dem Baum."

> Jacob Minski: . . . war also ein SS Mann, der ging vorbei und sieht da, dass ich eigentlich stumm bin . . . ich beteilige mich nicht an dem Gesang . . .
>
> David Boder: Ja.
>
> Jacob Minski: Ja, dann fragt er eigentlich: „Warum singst Du nicht?“ Sagt er dann: „Ich kenne das Lied nicht.“ „Was Du kennst das Lied nicht?“ Und dann bekam ich eine auf die Schnauze und er sagte, „Dann sollst Du wenigstens die Schnauze aufreißen.“ Und abends wurde dann in unserem Block geübt, also wir mussten dann abends auch das Lied singen, auch wenn wir es nicht kennen (Voices of the Holocaust Project [German transcript]).

The way Minski talks about this episode, in an almost excited tone, waiting for Boder to laugh, indeed, *sounds* like he is merely telling a joke. Considering the content, however, this is a story of violence that gives insight into the inhumane and degrading way the Nazis treated people in concentration camps. It seems as if Minski, already while being in the camp, gave up trying to make sense of his experience. His use of humor and his ability to laugh about certain events, as well as his use of various causal expressions (such as "dann bekam ich eine auf die Schnauze") reflect his acceptance of the absurdity and senselessness of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, and therefore led to an emotional detachment from this past. Another possible explanation is that, after having been exposed to the Nazis' control for such a long time, his seemingly unconventional use of humor allows him to be in control of his own story and experience. He can decide and define what is (un)conventional or (in)appropriate, because he survived, while others, including Boder, who did not have to endure such inhumane treatment, do not have a say in the

matter. This way of recounting his experiences might therefore be the only possible way for him to talk about his past at all.

Minski is not the only person interviewed by Boder who seems to have accepted that there was no hidden logic or pattern for the beatings, torture, or killings. Jürgen Bassfreund[8], who survived several extermination camps and whom Boder describes in his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead* as "a young man of twenty-two who looks much younger than his age due to undernourishment and somewhat stunted physical development caused by the concentration camp regime" (26), tells Boder about his arrival and the selection at Auschwitz. Almost as a side note, he mentions that they were beaten again. Yet, Boder wants to follow up on this "detail":

> Jürgen Bassfreund: Und wir wurden damals zu diesen Arbeiten genommen. Also zuerst, als ich ankam, es war Nacht, wurden wir wieder geschlagen und dann mussten wir stehen bis morgens um fünf Uhr. Dann wurden wir in einen neuen . . .
>
> David Boder: Warum wurden Sie geschlagen?
>
> Jürgen Bassfreund: Ja, warum, das . . . das wussten die meisten Leute selbst nicht. Das war ein sogenannter Lagerältester, das war der erste Häftling des Lagers und das war ein Berufsverbrecher . . . (00:20:43-00:21:05).

Bassfreund usually makes sure to answer Boder's questions in as much detail as possible but in this particular case, he brushes off his question and does not appear to even give it much thought. After experiencing and seeing what he did, he is past the stage of trying to rationalize the torture and murder. Boder, on the other hand, continues to try to find a reason or a pattern that would

8 Jürgen Bassfreund's interview is also transcribed in Boder's book *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. Yet, in this book he appears under the name "Jörn Gastfreund," which is also listed under "other names" he used on the Voices of the Holocaust website. When he was interviewed by the Shoah Foundation in 1997, however, he explicitly states that he has never used any other names besides "Jürgen Bassfreund" and "Jack Bass," as he called himself after he emigrated to the United States. "Jörn Gastfreund" could potentially be a mistake that was made in the process of transcribing the interview, as the two names are phonetically similar, especially for a non-native speaker of German.

explain why the SS deported or killed certain people on the spot and not others. In other words, during the interview(s), Boder still tries to make sense of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Bassfreund, on the other hand, already accepted and experienced firsthand that there was no pattern or deeper meaning to the violence and murder of so many innocent people.[9]

What Boder's interviews, and the interview with Bassfreund in particular, demonstrate is — from today's perspective — the "lack" of common terms and tropes to describe the experiences and events. As pointed out above, the term *Holocaust* was not yet used in connection with the Nazi atrocities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the interviewees do not use the word. However, Bassfreund also does not use terms such as "Gaskammer," "Selektion" or "Todesmarsch," all terms that today are closely connected to the Holocaust experience. Instead, he uses different but often synonymous terms or he does not sum up certain experiences under one single expression at all. He, for instance, does not describe gas chambers as "Gaskammern" but as "Gasanstalt." Bassfreund's use of the term "Gasanstalt" serves as a reminder that there were other ways to refer to "Gaskammer, and yet, that it is this one particular term that is now in use. Another example is the death march (as we know it today) Bassfreund was sent on. He only refers to this event as "Marsch." Yet, he and other survivors do not fail to mention that many people died from hunger, the cold or beatings during these marches. The same holds true for Bassfreund's arrival in Auschwitz. Even though he is describing and explaining the "selection" process to Boder, he does not use the actual term "Selektion."

The questions that arise are, why are some terms that were used by survivors no longer in use today and why is there usually only one particular term rather than multiple synonymous

9 The initial urge to try to make sense of the events of the Holocaust, as well as the realization that this is a hopeless endeavor, is also reflected in Primo Levi's memoir *Survivial in Auschwitz.* At one point, Levi reflects on the arrival of new prisoners, after he had been imprisoned in Auschwitz for about five months already. He writes: "We were old Häftlinge: our wisdom lay in 'not trying to understand' [...] not asking others or ourselves any questions" (S. 116).

expressions to describe experiences of the Holocaust. Oren Baruch Stier has researched and analyzed the emergence of "Holocaust icons" (as opposed to terms, but his findings could be applied to the question of terminology as well) and the role they play for historical memory. Stier's study focuses on four specific icons: the railway cars used to transport Jews to their deaths, the "Arbeit Macht Frei" sign over the entrance to Auschwitz, the number of six million that represents an approximation of the number of Jews killed, and Anne Frank. Further central aspects of the Holocaust, which are prominent in later witness accounts, photographs, films, and documentaries and have come to have an iconic status, include the selections in Auschwitz and the death marches. Stier points out the complicated and fraught relationship between history and memory, stating that even though "history and memory select items from the past in their attempts to describe and appropriate it, history tends toward elucidation, clarification, and differentiation, while memory tends toward simplification, mythologization, and identification: that is, toward symbolization" (*Holocaust Icons* 4). In other words, as part of the memory formation process, certain events, objects, persons, or words come to represent not only themselves but also certain experiences of the Holocaust in general. Anne Frank, for instance, is not only the little girl who hid in an attic, kept a diary, and ultimately died in a Nazi concentration camp, but she also has come to represent victimization in general, strength, and the innocence of victims. These extra layers of meaning are attached to objects, terms, or persons after the events themselves. This means, since the formation of memory always happens in the present, it is not only shaped by the past but also by, for example, social, political, historical, and media influences at the time of emergence.

In the case of the terms "Selektion," "Todesmarsch," and "Gaskammer," Stier's observation leads to the assumption that not only the specific terms but also the events they stand

for have over time become symbols of the Holocaust experience. This would explain why, in Bassfreund's case, for example, the selection in Auschwitz and the death march he was sent on do not occupy a special status in his account. At that time and in his experience, he did not perceive these two occurrences as exceptional experiences, they were merely two more atrocities in a series of cruel and inhuman acts committed by the Nazis. In the summer of 1946, the death marches and the Auschwitz selections simply did not yet have the symbolic character they have today. The analysis of early, unbelated Holocaust testimony, especially from today's perspective, therefore provides insight into the memory formation process itself, allowing a glimpse into the raw or unfiltered Holocaust experience.

Jürgen Bassfreund's account also reveals the potential influence external circumstances can have on the form and content of a survivor's account. At the time of the interview in September 20, 1946, Bassfreund was about to immigrate to the United States. He considered himself "lucky" to have had his identification papers in perfect order and to have had American relatives who provided necessary affidavits (Boder 26). Throughout the interview, it seems as Bassfreund is extremely aware of his audience and that he is indirectly speaking to the American public. He not only recounts his experience but he also tries to keep it "interesting." For instance, he tells Boder:

> Nun wollte ich eigentlich erzählen, wie wir nachher, als schon die russischen Armeen Auschwitz sich näherten, von Auschwitz nach Dachau transportiert wurden. Das ist insofern sehr interessant, weil es eigentlich die größte Strapaze von allen war, die wir im Lager mitgemacht hatten. Wir waren sehr viel schon gewöhnt, aber das war das Letzte, wo die meisten Menschen wahrscheinlich haben ihr Leben lassen müssen (00:32:33-00:32:52).

This excerpt shows that Bassfreund, at least in part, carefully and consciously decided what to talk about. It even appears as if he had already made these decisions before the interview, as indicated by his remarks: "nun wollte ich eigentlich erzählen," "ich wollte noch erzählen" (00:40:42) or "ich habe noch etwas vergessen, was ich als sehr wichtig erachte" (00:17:05). Furthermore, he provides an extremely detailed account and is very eager to answer Boder's questions. It even seems as if he tries to impress Boder and the American public. In fact, Bassfreund spends almost one and a half minutes praising the good work the Americans did during and after the liberation, and how well they treated the survivors (00:47:32-00:48:55).

Some other survivors were keenly aware of their audience as well. They, on the other hand, were afraid that saying something wrong, or talking negatively about the wrong people, could have negative consequences for their future. Boder, for example, interviewed a man only known to him as Boguslaw. The commentary on the Voices of the Holocaust website reads:

> Like other interviewees who used pseudonyms or refused to give their full names, Boguslaw was reluctant to reveal his identity to Boder, and his surname is never mentioned. At the time, the practice of giving recorded statements was still a new concept, and many interviewees — especially those who had plans to emigrate to Palestine — were wary of Boder’s motives, not to mention possible repercussions (real or imagined) should their testimony be heard by the wrong ears.

The example of Boguslaw shows how the idea of having their statements recorded was disconcerting for many survivors. It also shows that having been liberated did not necessarily mean that they were or at least were able to feel safe. Esther Freilich, for example, the young girl mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, tells Boder towards the end of her interview about the new school she was now attending and reveals that she still experiences anti-Semitism:

David Boder: Und sind sie gut zu, äh, zu dir?

Esther Freilich: Sie sind, also . . . der eine hat geschrieben, du schmutziger Jude . . .

David Boder: No. Und der Lehr . . . wer ist der Lehrer?

Esther Freilich: Der Lehrer hat mir . . . ein französische Frau hat mir nicht lieb (00:09:21-00:09:32).

Boder's unbelated testimonies reveal, not only in terms of the trauma that becomes evident in the way that survivors recall their experiences but also in the external circumstances and simply through the content of the testimonies that neither anti-Semitism nor survivors' mental suffering and trauma abruptly ended just because the war did. These are aspects of the aftermath of the Holocaust that, in later interviews, generally have not received much attention.

What, overall, can be said about Boder's recordings is that they, especially from today's perspective, allow the listener to hear the rawness of the testimonies and the often young age of the interviewees. In the immediate postwar period, the interviewees do not tell a finished, clearly formulated narrative of their experience, as is more often the case in later recountings. Furthermore, as the excerpts from Nelly Bondy's interview and Bassfreund's account have shown, there is an absence of terms and tropes that are now synonymous with the Holocaust experience, that survivors can make use of today to tell their stories. In addition, Boder's interviews allow for the identification of events and experiences that have obtained symbolic character over time and have come to play an important role in shaping newer survivor accounts. Bassfreund's und Boguslaw's accounts have shown that survivor testimonies are not only influenced by the specific experiences but also by various factors at the moment in which the experiences are recounted. Most importantly, however, Boder's unbelated interviews in combination with his many unscripted and spontaneous questions illustrate how crucial the role

of the person who listens to (or witnesses) survivors' testimonies can be. The audience can consciously or unconsciously change, to some degree, the testimony's content, direct the story, allow for emotions, or prompt the survivor to suppress them.

3.3 The Different Forms and Receptions of Boder's Interviews

As already indicated, Boder's work was far from being done after recording approximately 90 hours of first-hand testimony. He decided to transcribe his interviews in order to make the witness accounts and life stories accessible to the American public and to other scholars. What he had in mind for the readers was to be able to engage with the testimonies using two different media. He wanted the audience not only to read the interviews but also to be able to always go back to the audio-recordings and listen to the testimonies as well. Since the interviews were conducted in nine different languages, it was necessary to translate them into English for them to be accessible to an American audience. Yet, Boder's approach to the process and role of transcribing the interviews, again, varied greatly from other methods at the time. Making explicit his interest in both the content of the stories that displaced persons told and the way they recounted their experiences, Boder introduced his collection of selected testimonies by stating, "I endeavored to keep the material as near to the text of the original narratives as the most elementary rules of grammar would permit" (Boder xiii). In order to also capture the mood and emotions the interviewees displayed while recounting their experiences, Boder developed a very unique technique of translation. He used two different wire recorders, listening to the original recording on one machine and then dictating the English translation on the other machine. Typists, afterwards, transcribed the translated audio-recordings (Boder xiii). What, therefore, can be found in these transcriptions are — italicized and enclosed in parentheses — "words

describing the emotional range in the voices of the narrators, and their gestures at the time of speaking" (Boder xiv). Boder published eight interviews transcribed in this way in his 1949 book *I Did Not Interview the Dead* and another seventy interviews in a self-published series called *Topical Autobiographies*. Again, what Boder had in mind when he conducted his interviews was not the creation of a comprehensive picture of the experiences of displaced persons or a collection of legal or historical evidence, as was the goal of the Historical Commission and others. Instead, he intended to gather individual and personal reports that would on the one hand convince Americans to loosen their immigration policies and that could on the other hand be used by other psychologists and anthropologists in order to investigate the impact of catastrophe.

Boder's case, especially in contrast to the work of the Wiener Library, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, the Jewish Historical Institute, and the Historical Commission, illustrates the effects that different motivations for gathering survivor testimonies can have on their form, their content, and the way they are presented. The same holds true for the public and scholarly perception of Holocaust survivors and their testimonies. As shown, in the immediate postwar period, it was the norm to ask survivors not for their life stories (with Boder being the exception) but to ask them to provide information to confirm allegedly objective facts that would help convict Nazi perpetrators. Prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials did not want Jewish victims to testify due to their "bias" against the Hitler regime (Lipstadt 17). When survivor accounts or accounts on the Holocaust in general were published, they were expected to be documentary and not literary in character. Authors who wanted to publish their works on the Holocaust had to comply with these expectations, otherwise their works would be rejected by publishers and readers due to their "inappropriate" literary form (Vordermark 173-174). Prominent examples of authors whose works were rejected in the immediate postwar period

include Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Edgar Hilsenrath (Vordermark 174).

Another possible reason for the rejection of Boder's work during his lifetime was the way in which he conceived of his interviews. He saw them as a new form of "world literature," pointing to the new forms of interpretation that come with this innovation: "It is also highly probable that in time we shall develop an art of listening to authentic recordings and find new methods of appreciation of verbally reproduced narratives" (Boder qtd. in Rosen 218). Boder's first manuscript of his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead,* which he submitted to the Jewish Publication Society in 1948, was rejected as well. This, however, was not due to disinterest but due to the translated "awkward English," given Boder's attempt to keep the texts as close as possible to the originals, in an effort to reproduce the "evidence of trauma" (Rosen 127). After changing the book's title, and also after taking out a glossary, several notes, a "chronological index of historical events from 1918-1948," and his essay "The Tale of Anna Kovitzka: A Logico-Systematic Analysis or an Essay in Experimental Reading,"[10] his work was published in 1949 by the University of Illinois Press. However, he did not make any changes to the "awkward English," insisting that this be preserved. Reviews of the book were mainly positive: Philip Friedman, for instance, noted in 1951 that Boder's work was "a 'noteworthy' contribution to the field of life history, 'introducing a new, more exact psychological method of interviewing and recording" (qtd. in Gigliotti 228). Although Boder hoped that *I Did Not Interview the Dead* would appeal to both popular and scholarly audiences, and although it was used as a popular primary source by scholars, the book sold poorly and went out of print (Rosen 128; Marziali/Glass). Although he was certainly successful on a scholarly level, Boder failed to achieve his humanitarian goal of reaching the broader American public with his interviews.

Taking the time and the particular circumstances of the late 1940s and early 50s into

10 As a result, the essay remained unpublished.

account, historian Deborah E. Lipstadt's analysis of popular literature in the United States offers a possible explanation for why Boder's book did not sell. Following her analysis, I argue, the reason for the low sales was neither the general lack of interest regarding the Holocaust and its victims in America nor Boder's attempt to publish his book under the category of literature. In contrast to, for instance, Germany in the late 1940s and early 50s, accounts of the war or the Holocaust did not necessarily need to be "documentary" in character, as the following examples will show. And yet, the public perception of the Holocaust still played a crucial role in regards to the sales of Boder's book in the United States.

In 1948, as Lipstadt points out, almost two years before Boder's publication, five books about World War II were on the New York Times best-seller list: all books had Jewish soldiers as their central characters and addressed the mass murder of the European Jews (31).[11] Interestingly, they also had in common that they did not represent the Holocaust as something different or separate from the war but, as Lipstadt points out, as an integral part of it (32). That these books were written from an American perspective and for an American audience becomes evident considering that four of the five books culminate with the (American) liberation of Dachau concentration camp. The general public therefore, was clearly interested in reading accounts about the war, the Holocaust, and even about individual experiences of suffering and survival. However, as the example of one of the best-selling books in 1950 shows, the readership was generally interested in a very specific perspective on these events. This book, *The Wall*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Hersey, told the story of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Even though the book was a novel and labeled as such, many readers, often inquiring about the characters' ultimate fates, were convinced that the book was entirely based on facts and

11 The five best-seller books were: Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, Ira Wolfert's *An Act of Love*, Merle Miller's *That Winter*, and Stefan Heym's *The Crusaders* (see Lipstadt 31).

actual people (Lipstadt 32). For my argument, *The Wall* is important for two reasons. Firstly, according to contemporary critics such as Daniel Schwarz, the book opened "the doors to Holocaust hell" (qtd. in Lipstadt 32) to the English reading public. Secondly, the author, John Hersey, presented the failed uprising and the human tragedy within the ghetto in a way that "injected a universalistic tone into the story" (Lipstadt 33). This "universalistic tone" in particular and its appeal to the American readership illustrate that it was not the actual, individual fates of the Jews or of other victims that drew the readers in. The main characters of the novel were represented and conceived of as heroes, not just for the uprising but also for representing humanity, as the example of the character of Rachel shows. After the failed uprising, she finds strength in her religion and is still willing to "love thy neighbor as thyself," even if the neighbor is a Nazi, because "how else [can one] cure him of being a Nazi?" (Hersey 628). What appealed to many Americans, according to Lipstadt, was this "turn-the-cheek universalism" and also the fact that the struggle was depicted as a battle against enemies of humanity in general, rather than Jews struggling with anti-Semites (33).

Despite the fact that Boder presented his interviews as literature and even though the accounts were provided by displaced persons — by people who had suffered through the war and through the omnipresent death in concentration and extermination camps — Boder did not succeed in reaching the American people. The reason for failing to touch the people emotionally in the way Boder had hoped for is that the accounts were neither given from an American perspective nor were they (allegedly) universal enough in nature to become "a metaphor here for American prejudice and discrimination" (Lipstadt 35). What most likely also played a crucial role in the different public perception is the fact that Boder's collection of testimonies, unlike the other previously mentioned literary works, did not consist of polished stories written by

experienced novelists but of survivor testimonies. The reading experience itself, including the storyline, rhetorical means, and the stylistic choices that were made by the authors, therefore, certainly influenced the sales figures as well. Yet, I argue that from today's perspective, it is crucial to understand this "failure" not as an inherent shortcoming of his work but more as reflective of the historical cultural context at that particular time.

Although Boder's work is still not well known today, even among scholars, some researchers have made use of his interview project, written about the testimonies, or published on Boder himself. One of these scholars is the American historian Donald Niewyk who, in 1998 published a book containing 34 of Boder's interviews. Yet, Niewyk approaches Boder's collection in a completely different way than Boder did in the 1940s and 50s. While Boder was clearly interested in the trauma that survivors experienced, emphasizing this loss and death in his title *I Did Not Interview the Dead*, Niewyk, as the title of his book *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* reveals, focused on survival and on the victims who survived the Holocaust. From Niewyk's perspective as a historian and within this historical cultural context 50 years after the Holocaust, Boder's unbelated interviews appear to be of special value to him. However, Niewyk does not necessarily value the survivors' individual and personalized life stories but their testimonies' "reliability" (Niewyk 2). As mentioned above, due to their purported "bias" and subjectivity, witness testimonies were considered unreliable in the immediate postwar period. It is Niewyk's understanding that time and the effect of time on memory, contribute further to this unreliability. Yet, Niewyk does not dismiss survivor testimonies in general, and in fact, the opposite is the case. In the book's introduction, Niewyk writes: "They [survivors' testimonies] bring us as close as we are likely to get to the multifaceted essence of the experience" (1), being convinced, it seems, that unbelated testimonies are better suited for this purpose than testimonies

given decades after the actual experience. The reason for this, according to Niewyk, is the "fallibility of long-term memory and its vulnerability to a broad range of interfering stimuli" (2). He continues by referring to the well-known Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi who came to accept the unreliability even of his own memory as well. Niewyk, though, makes sure to emphasize that he does not seek to devalue memoirs or testimonies that were provided many years after the Holocaust but that he instead is pointing out the "special value of the few survivors' accounts rendered shortly after the Holocaust ended" (2).

Niewyk's concerns regarding late testimony demonstrate the importance of people's expectations on Holocaust testimony for their form, content, and the way in which they are presented. Boder was not worried about the reliability of his interviews. He was not looking to amass a certain amount of facts or a single comprehensive master narrative that would have explained *the* Holocaust — a term that was not yet in common usage, which bears repeating — or that would have helped to convict individual perpetrators. He was interested in the trauma survivors experienced and the consequences. This, he claimed, could often be found in the language, the lack of narrative form, the displayed emotions, and even in the inconsistencies within a single account. Niewyk, on the other hand "knows the crucial importance of survivors' testimonies in reconstructing the crime" (1). This approach treats survivors as — using Assmann's terminology — witnesses in court rather than as individuals. The witness is only valued for his or her potential help in establishing facts and not for their personal, subjective experience and life story. It seems like this approach contradicts Niewyk's claim that testimonies bring us closer to the "essence of the experience" (1). Of course, Niewyk is right, and the Holocaust can (partially) be described and reconstructed by allegedly objective facts, such as dates, time lines, or numbers, but if getting to the "essence of the experience" is possible at all

and if this is Niewyk's goal, individual and subjective experiences, and possibly even the long-term traumata they caused, need to be taken into account as well.

The goal of Niewyk's publication is to fit "the interviews into the big picture" (7). The idea is, by grouping survivors and their testimonies, to provide an account of the events from the bottom up rather than the other way around, pointing towards different themes such as women's experiences of the Holocaust, the (im)possibility of escape, the death marches etc. It is interesting that Niewyk reflects on the potential difficulties allegedly caused by the 50 years that have passed since the Holocaust ended but not on the fact that it is time that has allowed for the emergence of seemingly common and reoccurring themes and symbols of the Holocaust experience such as the death marches or the selections. Back in 1946, due to the proximity to the events and the understandable lack of what is common historical knowledge today, Boder tried to understand what had happened to survivors, and rather than looking for common themes, he simply tried to make sense of what he heard. This, however, is not the only aspect that distinguishes Niewyk's use of the interviews from Boder's approach. While Boder tried to gather as many different accounts and from as many different perspectives as possible, Niewyk, again following a theme, selected only accounts provided by Jewish survivors for his collection. That Niewyk is more interested in a generalized Holocaust narrative than in the individual experiences, however, becomes most visible in the fact that he altered the interviews, something that, as pointed out before, would have been unthinkable for Boder. Niewyk retranslated the interviews into more idiomatic English, excised "redundant material," and even reordered some aspects within individual narratives for "chronological coherence" (6). Niewyk states, "Here the objective is to let the survivors tell their stories as clearly and as intelligibly as possible" (6).

At this point, I challenge Niewyk's claim that he uses Boder's interviews to allow for a

"history from below" and in order to be able to see the Holocaust "through the eyes of the victims" (7). Unlike Boder, he is not allowing them to speak freely or in their own voices since he "retranslated" the survivor accounts, extensively edited them, even chronologically reordered some narratives so they would be easier to understand by the reader, and, most importantly, he grouped them and categorized them according to themes that he determined. Overall, this approach is rather top down than bottom up, and this might actually be a problem that is caused by Holocaust-related knowledge, tropes, and keywords that emerged over time. Similar to the prosecutors in the immediate postwar period, Niewyk utilizes survivor testimonies to prove what he already knew beforehand. He decided on themes and categories beforehand, and then picked 34 of Boder's testimonies in order to illustrate, for example, the female experience of the Holocaust. In short, it is Niewyk who provides the master narrative, not the survivors. Boder, on the other hand, only had very little pre-existing knowledge of the events of the Holocaust, and even though he might not have planned for it, his approach — allowing survivors to speak freely — more closely corresponds to the idea of writing "history from below."

4. From Spools to Paper: The Multiple Forms of Holocaust Testimony

The current chapter will analyze the often intermedial[12] form of witness testimonies and other accounts of the Holocaust. As shown in the previous chapter, Boder translated his audio-recorded interviews and published them in written form. Ideally, however, the reader would not only read the interview but also go back to the audio-recordings and listen to them. Boder saw in this intermedial approach the best solution for reaching the American people on the one hand and for staying as close as possible to the original interviews and their audible components (such as voices, language, speech pattern, etc.) on the other hand. This intermedial approach shows how form, content, and the form of representation of Holocaust testimonies can be greatly influenced by the different motivations scholars, authors, and institutions have for recording or publishing these testimonies. Some of Boder's interviews have been re-published in 1998, but, as shown in the previous chapter, the form of presentation, the arrangement and contextualization of the interviews, and even their content and form vary significantly from the way Boder had presented them.

This chapter will focus on the work conducted by the International Auschwitz Committee, in particular the work of Hermann Langbein and H. G. Adler, especially in the light of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials. Mediality also plays a role here in the work of Langbein and Adler, who were very conscious of the public perception of Holocaust survivors and their testimonies and to raise and increase public attention for Auschwitz and the crimes that were committed there by the Nazis. Boder and Niewyk were not the only ones who had difficulties reaching their goals despite careful considerations in terms of medium, form, content, and publication of Holocaust survivor interviews. In 1962, Hermann Langbein, H. G. Adler and Ella

12 *Intermediality* usually refers to the relations between literature, visual art and music (Herman, Metzler Lexikon,"Intermedialität"). Important is that at least two of these three different kinds of media interact with each other.

Lingens-Reiner published an anthology titled *Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte,* constituting the first publication in Germany that provided a detailed account of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz. Similar to Boder's publication, this anthology also received various positive critiques, but ultimately fell short of the editors' expectations in terms of the number of sales and the interest of the German readership, as Katharina Stengel, the editor of the book's 6th edition, points out (XXI). The reason for this, I argue, is the fact that during the 1950s and early 60s, the general public and historians in Germany were not necessarily interested in uncovering the details of the Holocaust, especially not in accounts provided by survivors.

The lack of interest was probably more an unwillingness to confront possible complicity with the Nazi past and a general fear of repercussion. This becomes more apparent when considering that even ten years after liberation, it was almost exclusively survivors, and some institutions in Poland and Israel, who saw the necessity to make Auschwitz the subject of research, publications, public debates, and legal investigations. At this time, although people slowly started to equate the name *Auschwitz* with the atrocities committed by the Nazis, as Stengel states in her introduction, the public did not yet have any detailed knowledge about the camp (III). Ironically, in the late 1950s, the book about Auschwitz that sold the best and was most widely read was written not by a survivor but by the commandant of Auschwitz Rudolf Höß who, in 1947, was sentenced to death for his crimes. That the public and historians at the time were more interested in Höß's account of Auschwitz than in the accounts provided by survivors not only reflects the status of survivors and their testimonies but also explains why, in 1960, the Internationale Auschwitz Komitee (IAK) saw the need to publish a book about Auschwitz that also included accounts provided by survivors (Stengel II). The IAK was founded in 1954 by various Auschwitz-Birkenau survivors from different European countries, including

Poland, France, Belgium, Austria, and Germany. It was their goal to prevent something like Auschwitz from ever happening again, to remember (and to make the world remember) the victims, to convict Nazi criminals, and to provide restitution for former Auschwitz inmates.

The IAK was predominantly concerned with the Federal Republic of Germany since its society, public, and institutions were, predominantly by communist countries and therefore by many members of the IAK, considered to be the successors of the so-called *Third Reich* (Stengel IV). Therefore, most former Nazi criminals and institutions the IAK sought to convict or to receive restitution from were located in West Germany. Despite the Allies' attempt to denazify the German society, many former Nazis and Nazi followers resumed their careers as politicians, judicial officers, officials, university professors, and policemen. As a result, for a while in the 1950s more than two thirds of the leading employees of the *Bundeskriminalamt* (Federal Criminal Police) were former SS men (Beste). It does not come as a surprise that these former SS men did not investigate any crimes that were committed under Hitler's leadership since, in many cases, this would have meant an investigation into their own pasts. Starting in 1958, the IAK and in particular Hermann Langbein began to do this work for the *Bundeskriminalamt* and prepared and enforced trials against Nazi criminals. They collected and created lists and indexes of former Auschwitz personnel, filed charges against perpetrators, named witnesses, and gathered evidence (Stengel VI). In 1959, the IAK celebrated their probably biggest success: Hermann Langbein, representing the IAK, and Fritz Bauer, the Hessian attorney general at the time, succeeded in initiating the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, the largest and most significant trials in Germany during the postwar period. These trials presented an unprecedented opportunity to direct the German public's attention to the atrocities committed in Auschwitz and to force them to accept responsibility. Furthermore, the trials allowed for survivors, most of whom were found and

named by the IAK, to testify, and thereby be heard by an international public.

It seems as if the members of the IAK were well aware that the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials had the potential to change the public perception in regards to Auschwitz and with respect to the status of survivors and their testimonies. This is why, in 1960, they decided to put together a major publication in preparation of the upcoming trials in order to raise and increase public attention (Stengel VI-VII). It was most certainly also intended to counterbalance the one-sided account of Auschwitz provided by Rudolf Höß. The preface of the publication in 1962 read that it was now "notwendig, daß die Überlebenden zu Wort kommen" (qtd. in Stengel VII). Much was at stake, and the editors, with Hermann Langbein and H. G. Adler leading the way, decided to publish an anthology mainly consisting of reports provided by Auschwitz survivors, documents, pictures, and excerpts from the records of Höß' trial. H. G. Adler was sensitive to public perception and knew that the book, at the given moment in time, could not be a comprehensive account of Auschwitz but that it had to be an anthology offering an introduction to the history and environment of the camp (Stengel XV). Furthermore, Adler and Langbein knew that they had to present the material to the public in a way that would attract their interest. At this point, it had been 15 years since the end of the war, but the German people had not yet taken the opportunity to talk to survivors or to read and listen to their testimonies, rather it appears as if the general public chose to forget about the past. This meant that the editors had to come up with something that had the potential to change people's minds at the time. Langbein and Adler, therefore, both agreed that the accounts had to be "wirkungsvoll" (qtd. in Stengel XV) and that they should, under no circumstances, bore the readers. At the same time, they made sure not to include any form of exaggeration or factual mistakes to avoid any possibility of compromising the credibility of the survivor accounts.

The editors did not want to leave the book's success to chance. Therefore, they not only included accounts, photographs, maps, and reports, but they also went beyond the printed medium and created a radio program, adding an audio component to their project that would potentially reach an even broader audience than the book. The program was titled "Auschwitz. Topographie eines Vernichtungslagers" and was broadcast on October 18, 1961 on the West German radio station *WDR* (Möller). It lasted almost three hours and consisted mainly of survivor accounts and interviews. For the first time, people in Germany were able to *hear* detailed descriptions of the camp and its structure, the daily life, the torture, and the organized mass murder. In order to make the program possible, Adler and Langbein interviewed and recorded Auschwitz survivors from Austria, Poland, Germany, and Israel. Most of the interviewees testified later at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, and in some cases, their interviews were transcribed and became part of the *Auschwitz. Zeugnisse und Berichte* anthology (Stengel XVI).

Despite all these considerations and preparations, the correspondence between Langbein and the anthology's publisher, reveals that there was still reason for concern. For one, West Germany found itself in the middle of the Cold War. Riepl, the publisher, for instance, praised the literary qualities of an account provided by Tadeusz Borowski, one of the authors, but also pointed out that many readers "wie die Dinge hier nun einmal sind, [sich] daran stossen [werden], dass es bei ihm sich offensichtlich um einen Kommunisten handelt" (qtd. in Stengel XV). At the same time, the editors and the publisher agreed that it would be neither fair nor representative to withhold the great number of communists among the former prisoners. That the perception of and the interest in learning more about the concentration camp experience and the ideas in terms of how to deal with Nazi perpetrators varied greatly from today's perspective,

shows Riepl's concern in 1963 that there might be too much literature on concentration camps. Today, it is the general perception that there cannot be enough literature or information on any aspect of the Holocaust, especially given the fact that soon, no survivors will be left to provide first-hand accounts of their experiences. During the 1960s there seems to have been an increase in publications on concentration camps and survivor experiences.[13] Riepl took this as a reason to worry about the "Flut von neuer Literatur über Konzentrationslager [,die] schon zu gewissen Ermüdungserscheinungen geführt hat" and that the recent Eichmann trial in Jerusalem would only add to this "flood of new literature" (qtd. in Stengel XV).

Although the increase in publications was only marginal in comparison with the number of literary texts, films, documentaries etc. that are available today, Riepl ultimately ended up being correct with his pessimistic prediction that, given the amount of competition and the "overexposure" of Holocaust related publications, the anthology probably would not sell well. In the fall of 1962, 3000 copies of the book were published and by May 1963 only 1500 had been sold — this was not even enough to cover the expenses and also did not even get close to the number of sales of Höß' book (Stengel XXIII). However, in 1979 a second edition of *Auschwitz. Zeugnisse und Berichte* was published. This was due to a new public interest in the Holocaust, caused by the US television show *Holocaust* that aired in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1979 for the first time. While 17 years separated the first two editions of the book, another four editions appeared between 1979 and 2015.

This change in public interest, caused in this case by a television series, demonstrates once more, how interdependent form, content, reception of Holocaust survivor testimonies are. Since 1962, much has changed regarding Holocaust research, the status of survivors and their memories. In 2005 the *United Nations General Assembly* — and that is a big step compared to

13 For instance: Primo Levi's *Ist das ein Mensch?* published in 1961.

the general silence and almost disinterest of the 1950s — decided to declare the day Auschwitz was liberated, January 27th, as *International Holocaust Remembrance Day* which has been commemorated ever since.

5. The Need for Narrative: Late Testimony in the 1990s

5.1 The Role of Popular Culture and Mass Media

In general, it is safe to say that Holocaust survivors' memories, for a long time, have been considered an unreliable and even distorting source for historians. During the last three decades, however, something began to change and memory started to be acknowledged as a helpful and crucial factor in the reconstruction of the Holocaust (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 261). One might think that there would have been a decline in memory activities with the increase of temporal distance to the Holocaust but paradoxically, there has been an increase since the 1980s. Saul Friedländer, a survivor and historian of the Holocaust, who has published a memoir of his experiences in hiding during the war, attributes this new or reawakened interest, which can be observed not only among Holocaust survivors, but especially among historians, to popular culture and mass media (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 262). Memory, published in the form of books or appearing on television, such as the American television series *Holocaust* in 1979 or Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah* in 1985, prompted historians' interest in the history of the Holocaust, particularly from the perspective of the individual experience, which, then again, stimulated Holocaust survivors' memory and motivated them to share their experiences.

This, of course, does not mean that survivors had not shared their experiences before this point, nor does it mean that historians had not been interested in researching the Holocaust. As discussed above, Holocaust testimony has had an evolving history that already started before the camps were liberated and before Nazi Germany was defeated by the Allies. In recent years, however, the historiography of Holocaust testimony, in contrast to the history of the Holocaust itself, has somewhat faded into the background. This, too, is caused by technological

advancement. To be more specific, it was the overwhelming success of audiovisual video testimony projects, in particular Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation* and Yale University's *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies* that outshone earlier (forms of) Holocaust testimonies (Rosen 12). The Shoah Foundation alone includes almost 54,000 video testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses with most of them having been recorded between 1994 and 2000. The Shoah Foundation is the largest archive of its kind. Its mission, explicitly stated on its website as "to overcome prejudice, intolerance, and hatred — and the suffering they cause — through the educational use of the Institute's Visual History Archive" differs significantly from the strict documentary function of testimonies in the 1940s and 50s or the role of testimonies as evidence in courts in the 1960s.

Especially in the case of courtroom testimony, the function and value of witness testimonies seem very limited. As Aleida Assmann points out in her article "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony," the legal testimony presented in court has no independent value outside the legal frame (270). This becomes particularly obvious in light of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials. Due to the vast amount of witnesses, the different languages they testified in, and in order to have the option to potentially verify certain aspects of the witness accounts, people in charge decided to record the trials. However, they also decided that these tapes were to be destroyed immediately thereafter.[14] The recorded testimonies lost their value after the sentences were passed. In the case of the Shoah Foundation and the Fortunoff Video Archive, however, preservation and storage were the main purposes for recording video testimonies. As mentioned above, the Shoah Foundation has a clear goal, they want to collect Holocaust

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14 For some reason, this never happened. The recordings were stored in the basement of the State Archive of Hessen in Frankfurt and forgotten. After 30 years, filmmakers Rolf Bickel and Dietrich Wagner discovered the tapes and used them for their documentary *Strafsache 4 Ks 2/63*, published in 1993. The tapes obtained a new function: they now were used as a historical source instead of a strictly legal tool (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 270).

testimonies and make them available for educational and research purposes. Assmann refers to a crucial distinction, stating that an (video) archive is not a museum. While a museum is "designed for public access and popular presentation," it is "the function of an archive [...] to preserve information that is relevant to the identity of a society, [...] it collects and stores information, it does not arrange, exhibit, process, or interpret it" (270-271). The preservation of testimonies became particularly urgent in the 1990s not only due to the technical advancement that made audiovisual video testimony possible but also because the number of Holocaust survivors was, and is today even more, drastically declining. Although an archive cannot keep the survivors alive, it can at least preserve their testimonies, which can be used in the present and by future generations.

The Shoah Foundation was not founded by a Holocaust survivor or a historian but by producer and director Steven Spielberg. While Spielberg was shooting his now famous film *Schindler's List* in the early 1990s, many survivors expressed the desire to talk about their Holocaust experiences on camera and thus make their testimonies available for posterity. As a result, Spielberg founded the nonprofit organization *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation* in 1994. *Schindler's List*, based on true events and also on witness testimonies (see McBride 425), is not only important in terms of the Shoah Foundation but also when it comes to the influence it has on collective memory and people's awareness and understanding of the Holocaust. Similar to the television miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978 or Lanzmann's *Shoah* in 1985, *Schindler's List* was seen by an extraordinary number of Americans.[15] The miniseries and the

15 It is important to emphasize what sets Lanzmann’s documentary apart from fictionalized representations that are rooted in historical facts, such as the Holocaust miniseries and Spielberg’s feature film. Lanzmann’s documentary is made up of interviews with Holocaust survivors, and he made the conscious decision to neither include archival footage and photographs nor to follow a chronological or narrative structure. A chronological structure would have "implied an explanation in the form of cause and effect" and archival footage and photos were usually created either by Nazis or after the camps were liberated, therefore not showing the victims' actual experience or trauma (Cesarani). However, that the audience is ultimately "drawn into the unending suffering of

movie both reached over 120 million viewers. In his book *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* Alan L. Mintz, a professor of Hebrew literature, analyzes how popular movies such as *Schindler's List* have shaped the popular perception of the Holocaust. He points out that the airing of the movie was an event of great magnitude (125). Increasing the movie's influence even more, *Schindler's List* not only received countless positive critiques but its production was also accompanied by vast educational campaigns. Ordinary viewers, the popular media, and communal organizations praised the movie (and the same holds true for the miniseries *Holocaust*) as being able to impart "an awareness of the Holocaust to millions of other people who would otherwise remain ignorant of the event," and the movie was also credited with "success in 'moving' people" (Mintz 126).

Especially the latter aspect, touching people emotionally with the pictures, stories, and events depicted in the movie, I would argue, is crucial to the emergence and perpetuation of collective memory of the Holocaust. Jeshajahu Weinberg, the first director of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, which opened its doors only eight months before *Schindler's List* aired for the first time, stated that the goal of the museum is for people to change and develop emotionally, mentally, or morally, and to understand and appreciate the full significance of the exhibits (Weinberg 49). In other words, the movie has achieved what the museum is officially aiming for: to make people internalize what they learn about the Holocaust and, therefore, to enable them to apply this knowledge to their personal lives in the present and future.

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the survivors," is not only due to this immediateness of the survivors, their visible and hearable emotions, and their struggle for words, it is also heavily reinforced by the staged nature of many scenes in the documentary (ibid.). Lanzmann persuaded a number of the interviewees to restage some of their experiences. He, for instance, convinced Henryk Gawkowski, who was a locomotive conductor at Treblinka, transporting approximately 18,000 Jews, to drive a train that Lanzmann rented for the documentary. Simon Srebnik, a survivor of Chelmno, is shown sitting in a rowboat singing a Prussian military song, and Abraham Bomba, who had to cut the hair of women who were to be gassed in Treblinka, is interviewed while cutting someone's hair in his barber shop. It was not until later, as can be seen in the approach the Shoah Foundation took, that witness testimonies were recorded and presented in a more neutral setting, focusing solely on the survivors and their testimonies.

Yet, the film's reception was not exclusively positive. Especially intellectuals and academics argued that Spielberg's movie "had absorbed the catastrophe into these sentimental and melodramatic conventions of popular entertainment and in so doing had betrayed the event" (Mintz 126). The movie prompted the growth of professional and academic attention and it also raised aesthetic and moral questions regarding the representation of the Holocaust. Critics expressed ethical concerns regarding Spielberg's professional background. Should someone who was mostly known for producing fantasy and adventure movies shoot a movie about the Holocaust? John Gross, for instance, an internationally accredited critic, was rather skeptical before seeing the movie: "I... was afraid of seeing terrible events sentimentalized, afraid of sentimentality proving all the more insidious for being applied with sleek technical skill" (qtd. in Mintz 127). Concerns like Gross' were not new, nor were they specific to *Schindler's List*. Already in 1949, Theodor Adorno formulated his well-known statement that "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" (30). Although this statement is often taken out of context, it can still be seen as the beginning of the ethical and aesthetical discourse concerning the representation of the Holocaust. Adorno poses the question if one can, and more importantly, if one should try to represent the Holocaust at all, if this representation would also always mean to, in some degree, validate the culture that lead to and allowed for the Holocaust to happen. At the same time, not representing the events would result in silence and stand in direct opposition to the need to remember as, for instance, expressed by the historian Simon Dubnow in the Riga ghetto using the words: "Shreibt und farshreibt [write and record]" (qtd. in Lipstadt 13). Jürgen Bassfreund, whose testimony I analyzed above, addressed another difficulty inherent in the representation of the Holocaust when he was interviewed by David Boder in 1946. At the very end of the interview he thanks Boder for giving him the opportunity to share his experiences,

however, he points out that these are only "isolated incidents", and furthermore, that one cannot describe these events and experiences "the way they really happened" (Boder 59). The fact that it does not seem possible to describe an experienced event the way it "really happened" was not only noted by Holocaust survivors themselves but also, as mentioned before, by various scholars, such as, for example, Berel Lang. This means that it is impossible to represent an event or an experience without being influenced by the situation in which the representation is produced. The question then is, if it is impossible to get to the "real" experience, is it morally and ethically acceptable to try to represent the Holocaust at all? And, given that question, who should be allowed to make this decision?

Yet, again, given the amount of movies, books, memoirs etc., it seems as if many survivors, scholars, and the general public are still convinced that it is better to try to represent the Holocaust than to remain silent. As mentioned above, Donald Niewyk stated that survivors' testimonies allow us to get as close as we can get to the essence of the Holocaust and the way people experienced the events (I), and I think this view reflects the general perception as well. However, there is still *Schindler's List* and the negative critique the movie received despite its great success. Cause for criticism was not only the genres of Steven Spielberg's previous movies but also the fact that he chose to depict a story in which people were saved rather than murdered. Given the millions of Jews, Roma, Sinti, communists, homosexuals and other individuals who were killed, a story of people being saved is very exceptional, and not necessarily representative of the Holocaust in its entirety. Well-known scholars such as Tim Cole, author of the 1999 book *Selling the Holocaust,* and Peter Novick, whose book *The Holocaust in American Life* appeared in the same year, criticized the movie for this exact reason (Lipstadt 143). Deborah Lipstadt agrees and adds the movie's "melodramatic ending" to the list of critiques (ibid.). All this

criticism leaves the question if there are, and if not, if there should be limitations to Holocaust representation. Roberto Benigni's movie *Life is Beautiful* (1999) also had to endure harsh reviews accusing the director of trivializing the Holocaust and of thinking the Holocaust "was a big joke" (Logan). The *Chicago Tribune* in 1989 revealed about the miniseries *Holocaust* that it was widely criticized for its "overwrought melodrama," but also, that despite its flaws it had one important effect: when it was shown in West Germany for the first time, "it broke the conspiracy of silence" (Sanello). Given that these works (which only constitute a very small selection of existing movies and series about the Holocaust) — melodramatic or not — were successful in moving the viewers and in prompting interest in the Holocaust and its victims, it remains a point of discussion, whether there should be limitations to Holocaust representation or not.

5.2 Audiovisual Video Testimonies Collected by the Shoah Foundation

When the Shoah Foundation started to videotape and collect audiovisual video testimonies in 1994, they, like Boder, had an objective that influenced their decisions in regards to the choice of medium, the training of interviewers, the choice of interviewees, and the general approach and form of the interviews. The Shoah Foundation did not record the interviews in order to document the atrocities of the Holocaust nor to serve as evidence in the courtroom; they were conducted so that they could be used for educational purposes. The idea was to gather as much material and information as possible, to store it — not to arrange or interpret it — and thus make it available to scholars, students, curators, and artists, who then will be able to use the interviews in order to answer specific questions they are working on. In short, they will be able to "transform this virtual information into actual knowledge" (Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 271). What is so striking about an archive like the one created by the

Shoah Foundation is the potential to rearrange and transform the raw material into books or movies or similar objects that can be passed on and received by future generations. Future generations, as Assmann points out, "by witnessing the witnesses, will themselves learn, know and remember" ("History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony" 271), and in turn become a sort of witness themselves. The archive, therefore, is a very effective means to counteract the process of forgetting, especially in terms of collective memory, and not only to store but also to restore knowledge and, to some degree, even memory of the Holocaust.

As indicated above, the Shoah Foundation had to decide on certain aspects of the interview and archive project, which means that the information is necessarily arranged and interpreted in some way. The question is, however, if it is possible at all to remain completely objective and to not interfere in any way, especially in a process that so heavily relies on human action and interaction. The Shoah Foundation, in order to at least standardize the interviews, has developed a methodology for structuring and conducting interviews with Holocaust survivors and other witnesses to insure that each testimony captures the witness' "life history and describes events before, during, and after the war" (USC Shoah Foundation, Guidelines 3). To include these three stages of the witnesses' lives and to give a narrative structure to testimony is a conscious decision and proves that it was the Shoah Foundation's goal to gather as much information as possible and not to focus solely on the years of persecution. David Boder, for instance, given that he had a different goal in mind, followed another approach when he conducted his interviews in 1946. His attention was directed toward the effects of trauma, hence, he usually asked his interviewees to start their accounts by recalling where they were when the war and/or their persecution started.

Another crucial aspect that distinguishes the two approaches and that points to its

potential effects on (especially the content) of testimonies, is the preparatory work that has been conducted. According to the Shoah Foundation's guidelines, the interviewing process is compromised of four stages: the pre-interview, research and preparation, the interview, and after the interview. This means, half of the interviewing process consists of preparatory work. The interviewer, for instance, first has to meet with the witness, establish a rapport, explain the interview's format, gather basic facts about the interviewee's life, and fill out a pre-interview questionnaire. The questionnaire is meant to gather specific biographical information in order to provide "the interviewer with a general chronology of the interviewee's life," and to guide the interviewer's preparational background research. The idea of the research is to give the interviewer the opportunity to, for example, read about the witness' city of birth so he or she can get an idea of the "historical, political, social, and cultural forces at work in the interviewee's prewar life" and to inform the specific interview questions (Shoah Foundation, Guidelines 4). For Boder, on the other hand, it was of utmost importance that the survivors had as little time to prepare their testimonies as possible, which is why he usually only stayed two days in each displaced persons camp. He also did not have a pre-formulated set of questions, because he viewed — and analyzed — the form, language, and even the often non-chronological structure (that the Shoah Foundation tries to circumvent) of the witness accounts as residue of the survivors' trauma.

It is important to keep in mind that almost 50 years lie between Boder's interviews and the interviews conducted by the Shoah Foundation. Therefore, I will argue that although many differences can be explained based on the two parties' different approaches and goals, there are also many differences in terms of content and form of survivors' testimonies that are caused by the amount of time that has passed between 1946 and 1994. In order to do so, I will closely read

and analyze selected (video) testimonies and compare them with the testimonies recorded by Boder.

5.3 Audiovisual Video Testimony and Audio Testimony - A Comparison

Since the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive is comprised of almost 54,000 video testimonies, it was necessary to select a few interviews for the current analysis. In order to allow for a comparison that is as informative as possible and to point out possible effects of time, (public or collective) memory, the interview setting etc., I decided to search the Visual History Archive in order to see if any of Boder's interviewees had also been interviewed by the Shoah Foundation. Ultimately, after a rather difficult search, I was able to identify four survivors: Israel Unikowski, Jürgen Bassfreund, David Hirsch, and Edith Zierer.[16]

What made the process of finding witnesses who had been interviewed in 1946 and also in the 1990s so complicated is the fact that many survivors used different names over time. Many people already had multiple names during the war, often including false names to conceal their identities and to avoid persecution. In addition, many women married and consequently changed their names. Most strikingly, however, is that some survivors changed not only their family name but also their first name after the war, especially when they immigrated to another country. Jürgen Bassfreund and Israel Unikowski, for instance, both changed their first names to Jack when they emigrated to America and Australia.

What also deserves special attention is the language of the interviews. All four Jewish Holocaust survivors — Israel / Jack Unikowski, Jürgen Bassfreund/ Jack Bass, David Hirsch, and Edith Zierer / 'edit Tsirer — used German in their interviews with Boder and English, Hebrew, or Italian in the interviews with the Shoah Foundation. It would have been interesting to

16 These are the names the survivors used in their interviews with Boder.

learn more about their motivation to change their names, but neither the survivors nor the interviewers address this topic in the video interviews. It is possible that they did not want people to know that they were immigrants by merely looking at their names. Another possible explanation, especially in combination with the language choice, is that taking on a new name and also a new language potentially helped them deal with and emotionally distance themselves from their Holocaust experiences. Alan Rosen, for example, agrees with Yaffa Eliach, a historian and scholar of the Holocaust, who speculated that writing in a new language, and I would like to expand this to speaking as well, can "buffer" the survivor from his trauma (Rosen 202). This means, if survivors recount their experiences in the same language that they spoke, used, or heard during the Holocaust, they have to live through those experiences and feel the same pain again. Rosen also points out, and this seems to apply to the four survivors whose testimonies I will be examining here, that the "new language, moreover, may not only buffer the pain but offer prestige, a sense of accomplishment, or a changed identity" (202).

Especially in the case of Jürgen Bassfreund not only the name changed to Jack Bass but, in comparison to the interview Boder conducted with him, also the way he talks about his Holocaust experience changed. In his audio-recorded interview in 1946, Bass seemed very eager to answer Boder's questions and always, usually without being specifically asked to, provided details and additional context to his account. He tried to help Boder and the American people to understand what he and so many other innocent people had to endure during the Holocaust. At the same time, he appears to be afraid that people might not believe him. He uses the last 25 seconds of his interview to thank Boder that he provided him with the opportunity to talk about his experiences. However, he also emphasizes that he is not exaggerating anything. If anything, the experiences were even worse than he described, but, due to the impossibility of putting this

horror and suffering into words, it is hard to convey what "really happened":

> Ja, vor allen Dingen danke ich Ihnen dafür, dass Sie mir Gelegenheit gegeben haben, hier einmal über diese ganzen Erlebnisse aus dem Lager zu sprechen und damit die Leute, damit man ihnen mal ein Bild geben kann, von dem was wirklich geschehen ist, und das, was ich gesagt hab, sind nur einzelne Fälle und es ist nicht übertrieben, das kann ich mit gutem Gewissen sagen. Im Gegenteil man kann es nicht so schildern, wie es wirklich gewesen ist (Voices of the Holocaust Project 01:09:47-01:10:12).

On the one hand, he is eager to help Boder and the American people to understand the events of the Holocaust. Part of his motivation might be a feeling of gratitude towards Americans since he was liberated by U.S. soldiers. On the other hand, however, it also seems as if he needs an audience. He needs people so he can tell them about his experiences and "was wirklich geschehen ist." Yet, most importantly, he needs people to believe him. Therefore, the relationship between Boder and Bass, between interviewee and interviewer, appears to be mutual in nature.

In the 1997 video interview for the Shoah Foundation's archive the relationship between Bass and the interviewer seems to be, compared to the 1946 interview, rather one-sided. Bass is very aware, and possibly even expects that people have historical knowledge of the events of the Holocaust. He no longer seems concerned that people might not believe him. In more than one instance, he rebukes the interviewer or takes a didactic tone. At one point, she for instance asks Bass to explain how exactly one of his friends was forced to join the Hitler Youth and how he knew that his friend did not want to join voluntarily.

> Jack Bass: I remember one fellow was from a religious catholic family, he did not want to go in, but he had to, he was forced. He was crying. But they forced him into it.
>
> Karni Perez [interviewer]: How did you know that they forced him in any...

> Jack Bass [interrupts]: Because if somebody cries ... joining it, that means that he didn't want to go in the first place.
>
> Karni Perez: Did you see him cry?
>
> Jack Bass: Yes.
>
> Karni Perez: Can you describe what happened? How that happened?
>
> Jack Bass: Nothing happened. He was just ... They just incorporated him in the Hitler Youth like anybody else.
>
> Karni Perez: Where did that happen?
>
> Jack Bass [interrupts]: Don't forget, there was always a propagandistic way of teaching these kids what to do and after a while they probably believed it or maybe they didn't ... some of them, but most of them did (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 1, 16:58-17:42).

The increase of Bass' speaking rate, the fact that he interrupts Perez, and an increased movement of his head indicate that Bass seems slightly annoyed by Perez' question as to how he knew that his friend was forced into the Hitler Youth; he already stated that he was crying. Although Perez does not only ask pre-formulated questions, the nature and form of her questions are determined by the Shoah Foundation's Interviewer guidelines. There are, for instance, "clarifying questions," used to check dates of events or the spelling of names, "probing questions," used to elicit information in greater depth and to ask the interviewee to reflect upon events, and "follow-up questions" (10). Furthermore, interviewers are encouraged to only use open-ended phrasings and to avoid "questions and answer" sessions. This regularly causes the overall atmosphere and the questions of the interviews to be rather impersonal and without trust or empathy, which might explain why Bass sometimes seems frustrated with the interviewer, as his answer clearly demonstrates ("Because if somebody cries ... joining it, that means that he didn't want to go in

the first place").

The excerpt also reveals that Bass expects the interviewer to have exhaustive knowledge of the war and the Holocaust. He uses the phrase "don't forget that" multiple times during the interview, each time telling the interviewer something that he thinks she could or maybe even should already know. In 1997, more than 50 years after the Holocaust, he is now in a position in which he is no longer afraid that the world at large might never learn about the Nazi atrocities. The world already knows. Bass is therefore in a completely different position in his later interview than he was in his 1946 interview. He does not need to convince the interviewer or an audience anymore that the events he is talking about really happened. The relationship between interviewee and interviewer, therefore, is not completely mutual anymore; the dynamics of the interview have changed. Bass is not dependent on Perez as he was on Boder but Perez and the Shoah Foundation depend on Bass. He is the only one who can provide his particular life account.

Another crucial difference between the audio-recorded interviews and the video interviews is how the interviewers' deal with the chronological order (or lack thereof) of events. If witnesses jumped back and forth through time, Boder usually did not intervene because he would perceive a missing chronological order as a possible effect of the interviewees' trauma. Only if he was not able to follow the account at all, he would ask for clarification of the timeline. The Shoah Foundation's guidelines, on the other hand, clearly state that the interviewer needs to provide some guidance if "the interviewee jumps around to different time periods [...]," in that case, the interviewer should "guide the interviewee to give eyewitness testimony and maintain the chronology of events" (8). That this is a decision that has significant influence on the content of the witness account becomes apparent in the following segment when Jack Bass talks about

the last days in Berlin before his deportation to Auschwitz:

> Jack Bass: I was with one fellow who was a very good friend of mine, a fellow of the name Heinz Rödler. And his wife had just given birth to a boy. [...] And... but we were arrested before [they could celebrate] and his wife was still in the hospital. If they wouldn't have given birth... she joined.
>
> Karni Perez: You saw them [wife and baby]?
>
> Jack Bass: Yeah. [6 second pause] And I, in fact I saw him even in the concentration camp. Yet, because he went with me to Auschwitz.
>
> Karni Perez: What happened from here?
>
> Jack Bass: All of the sudden, we had to go in the court yard. And then they put us again on trucks (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 3, 13:25-14:50).

Throughout most of the interview, Bass does not get visibly or audibly emotional. However, in this particular case, after telling Perez about his good friend, his friend's wife and baby, Bass suddenly seems pensive and possibly even sad. He remains silent for about six seconds and appears to be thinking about his friend. Bass then mentions that he saw him again in Auschwitz. Yet, Perez ignores Bass' emotional state and does not ask any follow-up questions about this friend. Instead, she wants Bass to go back to the day of his deportation and to continue to talk about those events. Keeping the account in chronological order seems to be of such high priority that Perez, knowing that having met someone in Auschwitz might very well mean that this person died there, still decides not to prompt Bass to talk more about his friend. And indeed, due to the Shoah Foundation's strict guidelines, this is an information that was not recorded. Neither Bass nor Perez get back to talking about the friend during the entire interview, not even during the segment on Bass' experiences in Auschwitz. During the audio-recorded interview conducted

by Boder, Bass did not mention this friend at all. This can potentially be explained by the limited amount of time of the interview (82 minutes versus almost 180 for the video interview) or the fact that in 1946, Bass in general talked more about his own experiences or about his immediate family than about friends and acquaintances. Maybe a temporal and at the same time emotional distance to the Holocaust was needed for him to be able to reflect on events that did not directly concern him or his family.

Although the Shoah Foundation's particular interview guidelines impose some constraints on the interviewee (and also the interviewer), the rather vague questions also enable the survivors to remember and talk about things they might have left out otherwise. This is the case in the 1998 video interview with Jack Unikowski (Israel Unikowski in 1946). Unikowski, who lived in an orphanage when the war broke out, tells the interviewer, Reuben Zylberszpic, about having to do forced labor in a carpet factory. After learning that Unikowski worked there between 1941 and 1942, Zylberszpic asks, in a very open-ended manner: "That period from 41 to 42. Were there any... before these deportations are there any incidents that you remember that you experienced or witnessed, be they actions or arrests?" (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 3, 14:26-14:39). This so-called probing question gives Unikowski the opportunity to think about the time period in question, to remember certain events, and to talk about whatever comes to his mind. Although he answers with "no," he still immediately continues to recount an occurrence he probably would not have talked about otherwise and that also allows for some valuable insight into how Nazis used propaganda to deceive people who would most likely not have agreed with how Jewish children were treated under the Hitler regime.

> Jack Unikowski: No. I remember one episode. That the Germans brought in a film crew into the orphanage. And that day, maybe a half a ton of potatoes were cooked. And every

child, every boy got a plate full as much... not only as they wanted, as high as the plate could have been filled... of potatoes. And a film crew, a German film crew filmed how everyone is getting his plate full of potatoes.

Reuben Zylberszpic: Were you filmed?

Jack Unikowski: Yes. And I remember Panja(?) Hinja, she was giving out... new, a sort of a propaganda film. And from memory, her face was solemn because she knew at this time, I will say there were... the way people were going around with trucks [...] collecting dead people. [The amount of] people dying from starvation in ghetto was very, very great (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 3, 14:40-16:02).

Another noteworthy aspect about Unikowski is how different his two interviews are in regards to their form. As mentioned above, Unikowski was very hesitant to be interviewed by Boder without using his previously prepared notes. In his 1946 interview, for example, he regularly jumps back and forth through time and forgets to mention seemingly crucial aspects of his experience. It seems as he wants to provide a coherent and chronological account of his experiences, maybe because it would help him to cope with his past and allow him to be in control of his life again. However, at that moment in time, he cannot do so without his notes. In his video interview in 1998, on the other hand, he recounts his experiences in a very calm, collected, and coherent manner. He seems to be much more in control of his own story than he was in 1946. While Boder had to constantly interrupt him, because he was not able to follow his account, Zylberszpic hardly ever needs to ask for clarification. Unikowski most likely gained more control over his story over time but he also benefits from the chronological framework that is imposed on him by the Shoah Foundation's interviewer. That his account in 1998 follows a (more) narrative form than it did in the immediate postwar period becomes particularly evident

in the way he talks about his brother. As a reminder, during Boder's interview, he often forgets to talk about his brother although he was his only living relative at that time. For instance, he tells Boder how he escaped deportation in the Lodz ghetto. It is not until the end of this episode that he mentions that his brother was with him. He recounts this same event in the video interview:

> Jack Unikowski: In 1942, the Germans asked for all children to be deported, including the patronage of Rumkowski's orphanages. And on one day, we were told, we got to go to a certain place [...]. And to march out to trucks to be taken away.
>
> Reuben Zylberszpic: Did you know where you were going, where your destination was at the time?
>
> Jack Unikowski: No, I didn't know, but the instinct of self-preservation, I will call it, that made us escape [...].
>
> Reuben Zylberszpic: [...] Were you working at the carpet factory at that time?
>
> Jack Unikowski: Yes, [...] but at that period we didn't work. We came to that place and we were encircled. [...] And there was an encounter with the head of the... of the Germans with my brother. My brother was tall, was very thin, and he made some derogatory remark [...]. The German. I don't know remember exactly... to my brother. My brother looked him straight in the face and walked away. But I remember this quite clearly, he walked away. And when we came, when we were encircled by the German police, there was a wooden fence on one side. We ripped away, it was mainly my brother's idea, we ripped away a peeling and we escaped (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 3, 20:48-23:20).

This account, although covering the exact same event, varies greatly in regards to content and form from the account Unikowski provided in his interview with Boder. In his audio-recorded interview, it seems as if he almost forgot to mention that his brother escaped with him. In his

interview with the Shoah Foundation, he not only mentions his brother right from the start but it also sounds like his brother, by having the idea to run to the fence, saved his own, Unikowski's life, and the lives of a few other children. The focus of Unikowski's story in 1998 lies on his brother rather than on himself. This shift in focus might have multiple causes. For one, neither Unikowski nor his interviewer are under any time constrains. This particular interview, being almost six hours long is in fact one of the longest recorded by the Shoah Foundation. Unikowski's interview with Boder, on the other hand, lasts only 78 minutes. Another possible explanation focuses on Unikowski's trauma and emotions. In the immediate postwar period, it might have been too difficult and painful to think of or talk about his brother because he had lost him, his only relative, in 1944. It therefore might have been some kind of coping mechanism to remember events he (and his brother) experienced without his brother being part of these events. Over 50 years later, however, Unikowski is able to talk about his brother, and it even seems as if he now wants to remember him in order to establish an emotional connection. A third potential explanation for the differences in Unikowski's accounts is the strictly enforced chronological form, which potentially provides some support and helps Unikowski to perhaps remember and to tell his story in a narrative form.

It is, however, not always emotions, trauma, other psychological aspects or the nature of the interview questions that can influence a witness and his account. At a crucial moment of his interview, when Unikowski talks about the circumstances of his brother's death and where he was buried, the technical equipment fails and the interviewer asks Unikowski to "take a break" (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 4, 06:50-06:52). As stated above, Unikowski does not often get visibly or audibly emotional. In fact, when he talked about his brother's death during the interview with Boder, his voice, pace or way of speech did not change in any noticeable way.

This, however, is different in the interview with the Shoah Foundation. As soon as he recounts how he lost his brother, he starts to speak more slowly and more quietly, pauses more often than normal, swallows heavily, and clears his throat. It is an emotional moment for Unikowski and this time, he, to some degree, allows his emotions to take over, something that was not yet possible during Boder's interview. It is exactly in this moment that the interview is interrupted by the interviewer. There is no indication of the duration of this break but what is noteworthy is that it appears as if the interviewer, Reuben Zylberszpic, tries to return Unikowski to his emotional state. He resumes the interview with the following words: "Jack, after your brother died, do you remember what went through your mind seeing you lost your, your only connection to your family and someone who you've been... sharing with up to that point?" (USC Shoah Foundation, Tape 4, 07:00-07:19). According to the Shoah Foundation's interviewer guidelines, the interviewer is only advised to remind the interviewer where he or she left off before the break (usually because the tape needs to be changed). In this particular case, however, it seems arguable if reminding Unikowski of the fact that his brother was his only living relative and that they always had been together until this point is a mere reminder of where he left of before the break. It seems more likely that the interviewer was aware of the significance of the moment and of Unikowski's emotions' significance, either on a personal level or in regards to the Shoah Foundation's mission, and that he did not want the camera to miss this crucial moment. Yet, the technical difficulties disrupted Unikowski's train of thoughts and emotions. Although Unikowski continues to talk about his brother, he seems to have regained control over his emotions again. The video camera, therefore, on the one hand, is able to capture and preserve a survivor's witness account for posterity but on the other hand, as this particular case has shown, it can also cause disturbances that irrevocably disrupt the witness account.

One last observation I would like to discuss is the striking correlation of the interview length between the interviews conducted by the Shoah Foundation and those conducted by Boder. The Boder interviews I considered here run in length from between 22 minutes to one hour and 13 minutes, while the interviews gathered by the Shoah Foundation range between one and a half hours to five hours and 43 minutes. David Hirsch's interview with Boder, for instance, lasted about 26 minutes and his interview with Shoah Foundation took a little bit more than one and a half hours. Bassfreund, on the other hand, recounted his experiences for almost one hour and 13 minutes in his interview with Boder and spoke for close to three hours with the Shoah Foundation's interviewer. Similar correlations can be found for 'edit Tsirer (22:16 minutes / 02:02:46 hours) and Jack Unikowski (01:18:30 hours / 05:43:04 hours). At this point, I can only speculate about possible reasons why the rather short interviews from 1946 (Hirsch and Tsirer) remain relatively short in the 1990s and, respectively, why the more lengthy interviews (Bassfreund and Unikowski) stay relatively lengthy when conducted by the Shoah Foundation. Maybe Unikowski and Bass can simply talk about their experiences in a way that drew both Boder and the Shoah Foundation's interviewers in, and they wanted to learn as much as possible about the two men's experiences. However, considering the four survivors' individual experiences, it might be more likely that the content of their accounts played a decisive role in terms of the interview lengths. Tsirer and Hirsch, who provided the shorter interviews, both did not experience any events that later became synonymous with or symbolic for the Holocaust experience. They were not interned in Auschwitz or any other extermination camps, and they were neither forced into cattle cars nor on death marches. 'edit Tsirer lived in two different ghettos, Krakow and Częstochowa and had to work in two different forced labor camps, Plaszow and Skarżysko-Kamienna, before she was liberated by Russian forces. David Hirsch was

interned in different internment and concentration camps in France before he manages to take refuge in Switzerland and is later saved by the Œuvre de secours aux enfants (OSE), a French Jewish organization. Jack Unikowski and Jack Bass, on the other hand, were both interned in Auschwitz, in addition to other concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Dachau or Gross-Rosen, and both were sent on death marches.

There are two possible implications in case the individual experiences really are the reason for the different interview lengths. First, that would mean that the Shoah Foundation, although trying to only record and store interviews for educational purposes and to not arrange or interpret them, in fact, indirectly decides that some witness accounts are more important or useful than others. The Shoah Foundation's archive, therefore, possibly (a more detailed and comprehensive analysis is needed at this point) paints a rather subjective and biased picture of the Holocaust by allowing witnesses whose accounts match the already existing idea of the Holocaust experience to take up more disc space and therefore to be seen more easily. The second implication concerns Boder and the immediate postwar period. If it is the case that Boder, already in 1946, spent more time with survivors of extermination camps or death marches than with survivors who, for example, survived in hiding, then this would mean that the notion of the Holocaust experience we have today, has already been filtered through, that is to say influenced by subjective questioning and approaches in the immediate wake of the Holocaust. In other words, the human element has always been part of testimonies, not only in form of the witness but also in form of a testimony-shaping listener.

6. Conclusion

Holocaust survivor testimonies have played, and still continue to play, a crucial role in the attempt to understand the events of the Holocaust and also the effects these traumatic experiences had on survivors and their lives. Yet, the status of personal witness accounts has greatly fluctuated over time, depending on the purpose for which testimonies were used. In the immediate postwar period it was mainly Jewish survivors who, shattered by their losses and traumatic experiences, made it their priority to chronicle and research the Holocaust, and to gather evidence so that the rest of the world would learn about the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their supporters. At that moment in time, however, the world was largely indifferent, if not even hostile to survivor memories. Psychologist David Boder, by collecting accounts by survivors and other displaced persons of their personal experiences, formed one of the few exceptions to this general attitude. In addition, his approach, including the audio-recording of the interviews and the witnesses' voices, and his unscripted interruptions and questions, allows for valuable insight into the nature of Holocaust testimony, especially in direct comparison to more recent witness testimonies. The analysis conducted here of interviews recorded in the immediate postwar period, the analysis of interviews videotaped by the Shoah Foundation in the 1990s, and the comparison of testimonies provided by the same survivors, has shown that language, form, and content of survivor testimonies are prone to change, especially over time. These changes can be originated in the survivors themselves, the interviewers, their approaches, and questions, in the language survivors use, in the medium used for interviews, or in the public perception and the respective purpose of Holocaust survivor testimonies at the time.

When I decided to take a closer look at Holocaust testimonies and to compare witness accounts from different historical moments, I already suspected, as the title of this thesis

suggests, that the form, the public perception, and most likely the content of testimonies would change over time. In order to confirm this assumption, I identified three different moments in time: the immediate postwar period, the early 1960s, and the 1990s, when witness testimonies of individual and personal experiences started to be acknowledged as a crucial factor in the reconstruction of the events and experiences of the Holocaust. My analysis has shown that the status of testimonies, especially in the public and scholarly discourse, indeed, significantly varied. In the mid- and late 1940s, (with Boder being an exception) the general focus did not lie on personal tragedies but on survivors' contribution to the recording and confirmation of the crimes committed by the Nazis. The various historical commissions, for instance, tried to gather as much evidence as possible, and asked survivors and other witnesses to answer very specific, pre-formulated questions during their interviews, mostly concerning dates, timelines, events, names, and similar aspects. During the 1960s, the public, especially the judicial system, still did not consider witness testimonies to necessarily have any intrinsic value. Witnesses were usually only asked to testify in court in order to provide additional information or evidence on events that have already been established on the basis of documents or other material sources. The individual experience was only of secondary interest (if at all), the witness was merely valued for the function he served. It was not until the 1980s and 90s that there was an increase in memory activity in form of films and publications, and Holocaust witness testimonies were no longer expected to provide objective, verifiable facts. Scholars and also the public began to see personal accounts as a means to complement the 'cold' facts about events of the Holocaust with personal views from within, allowing for some indication of how it *felt* to go through these experiences.

What I did not anticipate, however, is the enormous extent to which factors such as language, terms, the public perception, specific interview projects and interviewers, including

their questions, medium in which to record the interviews, and their motivation influence the form and content of survivor testimonies. My analysis has shown that differences in terms of content and form are not so much caused by the moment in time a testimony is given in but by the specific circumstances in which a survivor account is provided. This is a valuable contribution to the field as it emphasizes that there are different ways to approach survivor testimonies, and most importantly, that the listener or interviewer plays an active role in the interview or testimony process. The listener, consciously or unconsciously, greatly affects content and form of witness accounts.

As shown here, some scholars, such as historian Donald Niewyk, hold the view that unbelated testimonies are more "reliable" than testimonies provided or recorded decades after the Holocaust. Niewyk refers to "fallibility of long-term memory and its vulnerability to a broad range of interfering stimuli" (2) and also to Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi, who perceived of his own memory as unreliable as well. The question, however, should not be if a testimony is reliable or not; the general events and timelines of the Holocaust can generally be established externally. As more recent scholarship has shown, testimonies can provide insight into possible consequences of the Holocaust on the present and future, into how human tragedy can be represented, into how events from the past are remembered, and as Boder analyzed, into the effects of inhumane treatment on personality. If the focus lies on aspects as the ones just mentioned, the notion of reliability or unreliability in regards to witness testimonies becomes irrelevant.

My analysis of specific interviews conducted by Boder and by the Shoah Foundation has revealed that, although content, language and form might change over time, these changes still represent or are effects of the survivors' traumatic Holocaust experiences. Variations in accounts

provided by the same survivors, should therefore not be seen as flaws but as aftereffects that still allow scholars and people who have not experienced the Holocaust to learn about these events. Henry Greenspan, psychologist and Holocaust scholar, for example, pointed out that the act of recounting experienced events is generally "a series of what are always compromises that *always* point beyond themselves" (xvii). He, like Boder or the Shoah Foundation, conducts interviews with survivors of the Holocaust, however, he follows yet a different approach, focusing on the above mentioned variations within testimonies. Instead of interviewing one survivor only once and as many different witnesses as possible, he conducts a series of interviews with only a few people over several months, years, or even decades. It is in this context that he makes his crucial distinction between *retelling* and *recounting*. *Recounting* represents a process that emphasizes the survivor's own perspective, that allows insight into the nature of memory, the limits of the communicable, and the impact of the listener (Greenspan, "Survivors' Accounts" 415). Although this multiple-interview approach was initially suggested by survivors themselves who indicated that they would like to meet and talk again another time, Greenspan, as a clinical psychologist, knew that time and the establishment of trust between listener and survivor are crucial in order for significant communication to take place (Greenspan, "Collaborative Interpretation" 86). Similar to Boder, he also was convinced that *how* survivors talked about their experiences — their narrative stance, their speech rhythms, the pauses etc. — is as informative as the content of their accounts (ibid.). His way of proceeding, therefore not only shows that there are alternative approaches to, for instance, creating a digital archive with as many survivor accounts as possible, and that there most likely could be many more, but that all approaches come, in addition to benefits, with real costs. Boder made this particularly clear when he reflected on the nature and effects of his own questions during interviews. Guiding or influencing a witness account by

asking questions, or imposing a particular form on the account, most likely means that some different aspects which would have been told otherwise, get lost. Another example are the technical difficulties that interrupted Jack Unikowski's (emotional) account during an interview with the Shoah Foundation. Although he continued to speak about his brother after the forced break, he did so in a much calmer and less emotional way. In other words, Unikowski was actively remembering something, but this process was irrevocably disrupted in that moment.

Yet, form and content of witness testimonies are not only influenced at the time the recounting takes place, but also when these testimonies are read and analyzed. Boder, for instance, approached his audio-recordings in a very unique and, most likely, unprecedented way. As mentioned above, Boder had to make a few changes to his book in order for it to be published. Among other things, he had to leave out his essay, "The Tale of Anna Kovitzka: A Logico-Systematic Analysis or an Essay in Experimental Reading."[17] In this essay Boder takes a single interview and interprets it like a poem. This allowed him to not only focus on the content but also interpret each sentence, phrase, and sometimes even words, the language, the form, narrative gaps, and pacing. Boder, as part of his analysis, takes for example a single, seemingly simple remark Anna Kovitzka made towards the beginning of her interview, "In 1939, I was still with my parents" (Kovitzka qtd. in Rosen 221) and explicates it in the following way:

> Seven years have passed—nevertheless, the narrative begins by placing herself [sic] as an integrated part of a "snug" family circle. There are frequent references [in the interview] to parents, father, father-in-law, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, husband, daughter, but not a single episode involving her mother, although she definitely states that at the start of

17 The essay is part of an unpublished manuscript that, according to Alan Rosen, can be found at several locations, including the the David Boder Museum file, Archives of the History of American Psychology/M16, and the David P. Boder Papers, Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA/Box 6. Since I did not have the opportunity to physically consult these places, I have to rely on Rosen's book *The Wonder of Their Voices* for information about Boder's essay.

> the war she was with her parents, and that after the father went into hiding she remained with her mother (Boder qtd. in Rosen 221).

Unlike, for example, what historians would do, Boder focuses on what Anna Kovitzka (and other survivors did in a similar way and context) leaves out, and deduces from this gap that "the thought of the mother who has presumably perished in the crematories is so unbearable that it suffers the utmost degree of repression" (Boder qtd. in Rosen 221). Boder's approach of "experimental reading," as he called it, therefore enabled him to interpret the interviews and find meaning in words and phrases that might have been overlooked by a listener who only focuses on the content itself rather than the testimony's form, language, and literary features. Although Anna Kovitzka never explicitly states that she cannot bear the thought that her mother has been murdered by the Nazis, Boder was observant enough to read between the lines that she either consciously or unconsciously left her mother out of her account.

In summary, my analysis has confirmed that Holocaust testimony is not a straight forward process, in which there is some kind of objective, quantifiable knowledge that simply needs to be communicated to a passive listener. Survivors and listeners do not live and experience events in social vacuums, they are always influenced by an ongoing personal and public discourse in which they are, knowingly or unknowingly, participants. A powerful reminder of these discourses and influences is the emergence of certain terms and symbols that began to be closely associated with the Holocaust. These terms and symbols became part of individual survivors' memories but also essential to public and collective memory, ultimately shaping form and content of survivor testimonies as well. Most crucially, however, my analysis has emphasized and highlighted the multi-layered nature of survivor testimonies, and in particular, the deciding role the alleged neutral listener, interviewer, the different interview approaches or ways of

interpretation play. The goal of this thesis was not to formulate any kind of guidelines as to how to approach Holocaust survivors and ask for and interpret their testimonies. As I have shown, there are many different approaches from which scholars can draw. And as Boder and Greenspan have proven, there is always the potential for new interview and analysis strategies. However, it is important to keep in mind that the questions we decide to ask not only determine the content of the answers we will receive but also the aspects that will not be remembered or mentioned by the survivor as a result.

In fact, the overarching goal of this analysis was to draw more attention to the complexity of Holocaust testimonies and to demonstrate that it is not only the past, or in this case the events of the Holocaust, that shape survivor testimonies and also memories but that the present plays an, at least, equally crucial role. It is not just the words we have to listen to — provided we are interested in how the survivor has experienced the Holocaust and not only in learning and confirming dates, names, and other facts —, but also to the brokenness of language. It is crucial to reflect on implicit and explicit expectations on testimonies in order to allow for individual survivors to actually be heard, and in order to talk with the survivors rather than about them, and for a better understanding of the individual experiences of the Holocaust.

In particular the efforts made by the Shoah Foundation and the vast number of Holocaust related autobiographies, memoirs, documentaries, monuments, museums, movies etc. indicate that there is a general awareness that there is not much time left to actually talk to Holocaust survivors and to listen to their stories. Again, there are many different approaches, to interview the survivor over and over again, to collect as many survivor testimonies as possible, to audio-record them, to write them down, to videotape them or to store them in a digital archive. The most recent effort to secure not only survivor testimonies but also survivors themselves and the

possibility to "talk" to them (to a certain degree) is the *New Dimensions in Testimony* project, a collaboration between the USC Shoah Foundation and USC Institute for Creative Technologies. The goal is to develop interactive 3-D exhibits: a combination of holograms of and virtual conversation with survivors. The USC Institute's website reads: "New Dimensions in Testimony is an initiative to record and display testimony in a way that will continue the dialogue between Holocaust survivors and learners far into the future." The idea is to be able to have simulated, educational conversations with survivors and to overcome the limitations of time. In other words, people will be able to verbally ask the "survivor" questions (and to receive answers), encouraging them to reflect on "the deep and meaningful consequences of the Holocaust" (ibid.). This endeavor, once more, shows the effects technological advancement can have on the forms of representation of the Holocaust and survivors' experiences. However, what also becomes clear is that the limitations in terms of actual engagement and talking *with* the survivors rather than about them remain. The holograms, including their visual, audible and limited conversational components might, indeed, encourage and even allow people to establish some kind of connection to (the representation of) a Holocaust survivor, but that does not change the fact that the set of questions the survivor was asked to answer for the hologram was pre-formulated, and that the answers, in consequence, will be limited by these questions as well. The focus lies on the content, on *what* survivors say, and not on *how* they say it. An aspect that was crucial to Boder's approach and still is important to Greenspan's work.

What this shows is that there are limitations that we have not yet overcome, and most likely never will, when it comes to representations of survivor experiences of the Holocaust. Yet, as shown, it is important for the survivors to remember and also for the world to remember, commemorate, and learn from the past. What, therefore, is crucial, is to continue to work with

survivors as long as possible, and also to record their testimonies in one way or the other for posterity. Yet, what is even more important, and I hope to have shown in this thesis, is to develop a critical understanding of memory, survivor testimonies, the role we as a society and as listeners play in the process, and to reflect on the limitations that confront both survivors and ourselves. Since there are always human beings involved in the process of recounting past events and also in process of listening to these recountings, there will always be choices involved as well. As mentioned above, these choices not only determine what will be included in the witness accounts and in what we hear, but they also determine what will be left out. Ultimately, we will never know what survivors know, their memories will never be our memories. As shown, there are countless factors that influence content and form of Holocaust survivor testimonies, and many of them originate from us, the listeners. What then is left to do, is to take into account and accept the implications of the fact, that we will never completely *know* what a survivor experienced.

On that note I would like to conclude this thesis by referring, one last time, to Henry Greenspan, who points out that, one way of honoring Holocaust survivors is to grant them inconsistencies and, most importantly, the sustained attentiveness that comes with such a grant ("Collaborative Interpretation" 97).

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