

PREFACE

About six years ago, when I first began looking at videotaped Holocaust testimonies, I was watching an interview with a Mr. and Mrs. B., who were on camera together. Each had been in several camps, including Auschwitz; both had lost virtually every member of their families. Their son and daughter are present at the interview too, and at the very end the camera draws back to reveal the entire family sitting together. The interviewer asks Mr. and Mrs. B. what they are left with, what their ordeal has done to them.

Her children sitting next to her, Mrs. B. confesses: "We are left with loneliness. As long as we live, we are lonely." Mr. B., his children sitting next to him, looks down, an utterly forlorn expression on his face, shrugs his shoulders, and whispers barely audibly: "Nothing to say. Sad." Then he shakes his head and weeps

quietly as his wife describes how deprived her children were because while growing up they lacked grandparents and relatives to give them the affection and small presents that other children received.

The interviewer then asks the daughter the same question: How does *she* feel about her parents' experience (which, in addition to Auschwitz, included the Lodz ghetto, as well as Dora-Nordhausen for Mr. B. and Bergen-Belsen for Mrs. B.)? The daughter seems to speak from a different world:

First of all, I think I'm left with a lot of strength, because you can't have parents like this who survived some very, very ugly experiences [a *mammoth* understatement, for anyone who has seen the interview] and managed to build a life afterwards and still have some hope. You can't grow up in a household like that without having many, many strengths, first of all.

And second of all, something that I have as a child of survivors which second and third generation American people don't have is still some connection with the rich Jewish cultural heritage which is gone now. That is my connection.¹

As if some mocking spirit of irony were supervising the enterprise, the tape runs out at this very instant, severing and silencing the "connection" and leaving the screen blank. The interview never resumes (at least, not until eight years later, when I reinterviewed Mr. and Mrs. B. myself, separately, to give them a chance to tell their stories more fully).

While watching this sequence of moments on the initial tape, I remember thinking: "Wait a minute! Something's wrong here! Either someone's not listening, or someone's not telling the truth!" This was of course a naive response. But what I was reacting to was this: Despite the presence of their children, the parents speak of being lonely and sad. The daughter, if we listen carefully to the tenor of her words, sees her parents as people who have

"managed to build a life afterwards and still have some hope," and who have been able to insure for her a "connection with the rich Jewish cultural heritage which is gone now." *She* draws on a vocabulary of chronology and conjunction, while *they* use a lexicon of disruption, absence, and irreversible loss. It took me some time to realize that *all* of them were telling a version of the truth as they grasped it, that several currents flow at differing depths in Holocaust testimonies, and that our understanding of the event depends very much on the source and destination of the current we pursue.

Nevertheless, the longing for connection continues to echo in our needful ears. Too often, unfortunately, it turns out to be a hollow echo, its sound bounding and rebounding off the walls of sealed chambers. If I have discovered anything in my investigation, it is that oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives, not only by the vicissitudes of technology but by the quintessence of the experiences they record. Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses, they exhaust themselves in the telling. They do not function in time like other narratives, since the losses they record raise few expectations of renewal or hopes of reconciliation. This does not mean that witnesses have no future. In spite of their final words, Mr. and Mrs. B. are very much parents to their children (and indeed grandparents to their grandchild, whom they discussed with undisguised joy during the lunch break between their second interviews). But they are also hostages to a humiliating and painful past that their happier future does little to curtail.

Moral formulas about learning from experience and growing through suffering rapidly disintegrate into meaningless fragments of rhetorical consolation as the testimony of these interviews proceeds. When I began to examine them, I was already suspicious of commentaries and memoirs that celebrated the resourceful human spirit in the face of the Holocaust disaster. As I continued to watch them, I felt that my suspicions were con-

firmed. A heritage of heroism encountered the awful facts of this particular catastrophe and found that the only honest judgment was to declare the confrontation "no combat." When former victims, entreating our sympathetic understanding, insist that the situations in which they found themselves in ghettos and camps were "different," they are making a specific appeal to us to abandon traditional assumptions about moral conduct and the "privileged" distinctions between right and wrong that usually inspire such assumptions. The events they endured rudely dispel as misconception the idea that choice is purely an internal matter, immune to circumstance and chance.

Recently a friend surprised me—I suppose "stunned" would be a more precise term—when he condemned all Jews who worked in any capacity for the Germans in the camps as "collaborators." With a few rare exceptions, nothing could be further from the truth, though I was not sure whether to blame his attitude or his vocabulary. If I use "former victims" rather than "survivors" to describe the witnesses in these testimonies, one reason is to mark my belief that their morally quarantined situation then is still so little understood nearly a half century later. My friend's rebuke was more than a trifle self-righteous, but I wondered at the time whether its origin lay in an area of spiritual repose that would be disturbed by his accepting an alternative point of view. The mind in search of sedatives and antidotes—my friend was a physician—is understandably wary of stimulants whose unpredictable sway may do more to destabilize than to cure.

This is a book I would gladly not have written, if somehow I could have prevented the reality on which it is based from having happened. Writing about Holocaust *literature*, or even written memoirs, as I have done in my previous works, challenges the imagination through the mediation of a *text*, raising issues of style and form and tone and figurative language that—I now see—can deflect our attention from the "dreadful familiarity" of the event

itself. Nothing, however, distracts us from the immediacy and the intimacy of conducting interviews with former victims (which I have done) or watching them on a screen. Struggling to identify with the voices of the witnesses, who themselves are struggling to discover voices trustworthy enough to tell their *whole* stories (and not all have the courage or stamina or resources to succeed), I often found myself naked before their nakedness, defenseless in the presence of their vulnerability. Perhaps my own effort to develop a style and form and tone and language to capture the implications of their ordeal, in addition to reflecting a tribute to their raw frankness, represents a desire to find moral and intellectual garb more relevant than my discarded attire. I am still not sure how durable such raiment may be in our post-Holocaust era; but in our age of atrocity (a label certified by the personal evidence in these testimonies), one dons such clothing as one can.

The result is an unfashionable challenge, requiring risks from all participants. From the point of view of the witness, the urge to tell meets resistance from the certainty that one's audience will not understand. The anxiety of futility lurks beneath the surface of many of these narratives, erupting occasionally and rousing us to an appraisal of our own stance that we cannot afford to ignore. A locus classicus of such confrontation appears in the testimony of Magda F., whose husband, parents, brother, three sisters, and all their children were engulfed in the tide of Nazi mass murder. Another brother and sister had emigrated to the United States in the 1920s. She joined them there in 1948. After a while, she says, her brother and sister and their children began to beg her to talk about "it," to tell them the details of what happened to the rest of the family. Magda F. recalls:

And I looked at them and I said: "I'm gonna tell you something. I'm gonna tell you something now. If somebody would tell *me* this story, I would say 'She's lying, or he's

lying.' Because this can't be true. And maybe you're gonna feel the same way. That your sister's lying here, because this could not happen. Because to understand us, somebody has to go through with it. Because nobody, but nobody fully understands us. You can't. No [matter] how much sympathy you give me when I'm talking here, or you understand . . . you're *trying* to understand me, I know, but I don't think you could. I don't think so."

And I said this to them. Hoping [they] should never be able to understand, because to understand, you have to go through with it, and I hope nobody in the world comes to this again, [so] they *should* understand us. And this was the honest truth, because nobody, nobody, nobody . . .²

A main effect of these testimonies (and, I hope, of this book) is to begin to undo a negation—the principle of discontinuity which argues that an impassable chasm permanently separates the seriously interested auditor and observer from the experiences of the former Holocaust victim. In spite of Magda F.'s misgivings, listening to hundreds of witnesses' stories is a form of "coming to this again" that changes her segregated nobodies into sharing somebodies. "You won't understand" and "you must understand" are regular contenders in the multiple voices of these testimonies; Magda F. is representative, not exceptional.

Once we tear off the convenient mask that makes of these narratives spiritual odysseys leading to an easy familiarity with their content—and no more than 1 or 2 percent attempt to follow this pattern—we are left with the charge of transforming the dreadful anonymity that Aharon Appelfeld speaks of in the epigraph to this book into a "dreadful familiarity." Near the end of her own testimony, Magda F. turns to one of her interviewers (I was the other one) and in genuine amazement exclaims: "You're crying!" They were tears of pity, I am sure; but they may also have been tears of fear and despair, resulting from a direct encounter with

the melancholy universe that had consumed most of Magda F.'s family. A statement like "to understand, you have to go through with it," however authentic its inspiration, underestimates the sympathetic power of the imagination. Perhaps it is time to grant that power the role it deserves.

One preliminary issue remains, and that is the reliability of the memory on which these testimonies must draw for the accuracy and intensity of their details. How credible can a reawakened memory be that tries to revive events so many decades after they occurred? I think the terminology itself is at fault here. There is no need to revive what has never died. Moreover, though slumbering memories may crave reawakening, nothing is clearer in these narratives than that Holocaust memory is an insomniac faculty, whose mental eyes have never slept. In addition, since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy. Factual errors do occur from time to time, as do simple lapses; but they seem trivial in comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the versions of the self that we shall be studying in this volume.

When human beings ceased to be emissaries or legatees of love and became instead agents or victims of power on such a massive scale, we may have witnessed a shift in civilization's priorities with whose psychological bequest we continue to struggle. The Holocaust threatens to be a permanent hole in the ozone layer of history, through which infiltrate the memories of a potentially crippling past. These testimonies remind us how overwhelming, and perhaps insurmountable, is the task of reversing its legacy.

¹ Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony, Yale University (hereafter FVA), tape T-94. Testimony of Max and Lorna B.

² *Ibid.*, tape T-1185. Testimony of Magda F.