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SURVIVORS AS SUBJECTS OF
DOCUMENTATION.
THE *WITNESSES AND EDUCATION*
FILM SERIES BY YAD VASHEM AND THE
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Dialogue and Medium

The “end of testimony” has been a subject of discussion for decades now, as has the appropriate response. The debate often focusses on the question of a substitute, as it were, for encounter with contemporary witnesses in the educational context, which in turn leads to the subject of digital formats. In fact, the concept of the contemporary witnesses is itself problematical as, historically speaking, it is completely decontextualised: The term defines neither *what* has been witnessed (the Shoah, the Second World War, dictatorship in the GDR) nor *by whom*. In Germany, television formats that make use of eye-witnesses to authenticate historical events encourage this moral and factual levelling (see Keilbach 2003: 287–306). The apparent objectivity of such media productions creates a “juxtaposition of consensually possible positions” and thus neutralises the contradictions (Ibid.: 288). In order to avoid such levelling, the term “contemporary witnesses” is avoided in the following and “survivor” or “Shoah witness” used instead. Apart from that, the attempt to employ digital testimonies as compensation for the “end of testimony” is a product of faulty reasoning. Digital formats such as interviews with Shoah witnesses – the most prominent are doubtless the collections of the *Fortunoff Archives* and the *USC Shoah Foundation* – or biographical documentary films like the *Yad Vashem* films discussed below are artefacts sui generis. The idea of using them as a substitute for personal contact and talks with Shoah

witnesses fails to take account of the realities of the medium – as it is not simply an additional factor but a part of the artefact. The related fact that working with digital formats is not the same as participating in a dialogue. It is about watching and listening to a recording of a dialogue or an encounter without being able to ask questions or contribute remarks. The latest formats like the hologram developed by the USC Shoah Foundation ¹¹ reinforce the tendency to veil this distinction insofar as they simulate a dialogue where algorithms are in fact at work. It is questionable whether such an approach is compatible with the competent use of digital formats. It would seem to be more profitable to treat digital testimony as a format *sui generis* and to consider what potential it has for educational work and how that potential can be developed.

Digital Testimonies

Like other forms of testimony (memoirs, autobiographies, reports), audiovisual testimonies differ from other historical sources in that they incorporate the aspect of personal experience. It is the subjectivity of the experience that confers authority on the testimony, because in most cases the goal is not the formulation or confirmation of an “objective” truth but its subjective appropriation and processing. For their part, audiovisual and literary testimonies differ in terms of their specific mediality and production context: Whereas authors of autobiographies in which they write about their sufferings during the Shoah normally do so over a longer period of time, and read and re-read what they have written, making corrections and changes and possibly choosing to rewrite it completely, the witnesses in audiovisual formats face an interviewer and supply immediate answers. That gives audiovisual testimony a situative and interactive character; it is a snapshot in time produced jointly by at least two persons acting together. This does not mean that audiovisual testimony is automatically more immediate or authentic than written testimony, all the more so as some witnesses are not standing in front of the camera for the first time. There are simply other factors that play a role. Not only the questions and the behaviour of the interviewer form part of the result; the setting chosen for the interview and the possible presence of other

persons, etc. also have an influence on the final product. Through their specific mediality, audiovisual testimonies also differ from personal talks with Shoah witnesses; the medium blends with the content and becomes inseparable from it. In many ways, the difference between audiovisual testimonies and personal talks with Shoah witnesses is comparable with that between cultural and communicative memory (Barricelli 2012: 45).

Subjectivity

Treating subjectivity as the decisive characteristic of Shoah testimonies in general and audiovisual testimonies in particular raises the critical question of the effect of the subjectivity of the testimony on its truth, precision and credibility. It is well known that witnesses' memories incorporate items which derive from subsequently acquired knowledge, from reading or hearsay and become a part of the testimony (Hartman 2007: 141). While some historians criticise such inaccuracies of memory, especially so many years after the event, others see a danger in the tendency of the audience to idealise or over-identify with the witness. Such problems raise the question of the specific value of audiovisual testimonies, a question that is dealt with below. What is also clear is that the apodictic contrast between subjective testimonies and those historical sources that are considered objective, such as official documents and official photographs, is misleading. Shoah testimonies are not primarily aimed at historical accuracy in the reconstruction of historical events or confirmation of traditional sources. The documents of the perpetrators remain essential for reconstruction of the processes, institutions, actors and methods involved. But equally, one has to be aware that such sources are perpetrator sources. The euphemistic terms employed for the organised mass murder alone – "Evakuierung" ('evacuation'), "Sonderbehandlung" ('special treatment'), "Endlösung" ('final solution') – reflect the attitude of the perpetrators and show that the perpetrator sources are anything but objective. They were created as instruments of domestic propaganda, of concealment from the outside world or simply to humiliate the victims. Geoffrey H. Hartman rightly says that all these sources reveal is "the picture of a self-

documenting machine” (Ibid.: 134). And yet these sources still seem to dominate public perceptions of the history of the Holocaust; even today, they are used in German school books without any further discussion of their origins (see Liepach 2016). In this context, survivors’ testimonies provide a corrective, an alternative version to the “official” narrative. The witnesses speak for themselves and provide information on the reflection of history in the individual, on the individual view of history, on the processing of past experiences in the present. In Hartman’s words: “They [testimonies of survivors, B.H.] can be a source for historical information or confirmation, yet their real strength lies in recording the psychological and emotional milieu of the struggle for survival, not only then but also now” (Hartman 2007: 142). Instead of seeing Shoah testimonies as a secondary source of confirmation of the traditional sources, it must be understood that what we can learn from such testimonies is something completely different, for example “what it was like to exist under conditions in which moral choice was systematically disabled by the persecutors and heroism was rarely possible” (Ibid.: 134).

To that extent the subjective character, which here at least is also revealed openly, is a specific asset of the source. Overcoming the expectation that Shoah witnesses should be historians facilitates the realisation that these witnesses and their testimonies have other qualities. One might even go so far as to say: That is when the apparently objective view of the Shoah can appear questionable. The writer Jean Améry, who was tortured by the Gestapo and then deported via Breendonk to Auschwitz, wrote a number of autobiographical essays about his sufferings in the 1960s. They are the narratives of a witness who was a victim and for that reason alone he chooses not to claim anything like objectivity. On the contrary, his response to the idea that he could produce an objective report on what happened to him is as follows:

“The atrocity as an event has no objective character. Mass murder, torture, injury of every kind are objectively nothing but chains of physical events, describable in the formalised language of the natural sciences. They are facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system.” (Améry 2009: 70)

Améry thus wants to confront society and the perpetrators who are still alive with the deeds and their moral implications that go way beyond the “facts within a physical system”. Apart from that, however subjective survivors’ experiences may be, they are also underpinned by a collective fate, so that such accounts of crime transcend the subjective level, too. This relates perhaps to the fact that some survivors of the Shoah do not feel that they are speaking primarily for themselves but rather for those who can no longer bear witness because they were murdered or fell silent for ever. Similarly, for the witnesses who speak in his film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann does not use the word “survivors” but

“revenants, who returned after hovering almost in the beyond above the floor of the crematorium. These people never say ‘I’, they do not tell their own stories; they say ‘we’ because they are also speaking for the dead.” (Nicodemus 2001)

So what exactly is it that these witnesses relate that goes beyond a report on “chains of physical events”?

Witnesses and Education

Witnesses and Education is a joint project of the *International School for Holocaust Studies* (ISHS), *Yad Vashem* and the *Multimedia Center of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem*. It comprises a series of – so far – fourteen testimonial films made with Shoah witnesses since 2007. The films tell the life stories of Jews who were persecuted in the Shoah and now live in Israel. In the films, the protagonists are accompanied on a journey that takes them to the places of their childhood and to the scenes of the crimes, where they speak about their experiences and sufferings. Insofar, these films differ from the format of video interviews. The testimonial film format allows the protagonists to show us the locations that were crucial to their lives. By going back there, embodied experience is revealed and we are given insight into the protagonists’ world, which helps us to relate to them in an empathic way. Letting them show us the places where they grew up, we furthermore understand

the richness of Jewish life in Europe before the persecution as well as the dimension of loss. The witnesses are speaking about a deceased world. On the other hand, we learn about continuation and persecution of Jews when we follow the protagonists to Israel, where they chose to relocate.

Educational Guidelines

The films have been created by the Educational Unit at Yad Vashem with the aim of making the life stories of the survivors available for educational work. For that reason they are also based on the main principles of education developed at Yad Vashem: The films strengthen the Jewish perspective of the Shoah, for example, by relying on the persecuted Jews' own perceptions instead of talking *about* them or even presenting them in propaganda films and photographs and thus through the eyes of the perpetrators. The way in which the witnesses present and interpret the historical events is their choice; they are the subjects, not the objects of documentation. It is their voices that we hear and their faces that we see. Nor is their narrative limited to the period of National Socialism. That is the main focus, but space is also devoted to life before persecution and its continuation afterwards. As a result, the survivors are not reduced to their status as victims at the hands of the perpetrators but are seen as complex, self-determined individuals. ¹² The protagonists' narratives are set in various regions of Europe, and even within one and the same film, their life stories take them to various places, either through flight, deportation or expulsion, or on the basis of a conscious decision to make Aliyah (Hebrew for Jewish immigration to Israel). The descriptions of the life stories of different families also offer an insight into the diversity of Jewish life in Europe prior to 1933. The key elements in all the films in the series take the form of decisions, dilemmas and turning points. The testimonies of survivors are the only way to present such moments, because their relevance goes far beyond the purely external and quantifiable facts and figures. The survivors' testimonies also show just how much their freedom of action had already shrunk as a result of the measures taken by the perpetrators. But equally, they could not choose not to act; they had to take decisions under conditions that

Lawrence Langer refers to as “choiceless choice” (1982: 72). Much depended on the arbitrary decisions of the perpetrators, the actions of other actors and also on chance, while they themselves had little ability to influence their fates and yet still tried desperately to save their families and themselves. The history of the Shoah is therefore above all a history of human actions: All the protagonists, with their decisions and deeds, had a direct or indirect influence on the course of events, although the conditions under which they did so could not have been more different – depending on which side of the events they stood.

A sequence from the testimony of Malka Rosenthal (2009), who was born in Stanisławów ¹³ in 1934, illustrates this constellation: She speaks about how she escaped from the Stanisławów ghetto with the help of her Polish nanny and hid, together with her mother, in the house of her mother’s former professor in Lviv. After a few months, however, Malka and her mother had to find a new hiding place because their presence had been noticed and it was becoming too dangerous there. In order to hide in a small village, they took a very great risk and boarded a train to Otynia in the hope that no-one would recognise them. But the worst came to the worst: A fellow passenger suddenly shouted, “A Jewess and her Jewish brat!” (TC 19:15). and a tumult ensued; all the people in the compartment turned violent towards mother and daughter and some of them wanted to activate the emergency brake and call the Gestapo. But at that moment, Malka continues, a Ukrainian appeared on the scene, warned the others of the possible consequences of pulling the emergency brake and said that he was getting off at the next stop and could take the two with him and hand them over to the Gestapo there. When the train stopped, he brutally pushed mother and daughter off the train and got off himself. But then, when the train had set off again, he revealed his identity as a friend of the family and helped them reach the hiding place where Malka’s father had already found refuge (TC 16:43–24:17). The sequence illustrates collaboration and resistance, help and betrayal in the Shoah. While people who were not involved in any way chose betrayal and wanted to hand mother and daughter over to the German authorities, which

would probably have been tantamount to a death sentence, a man decided to resort to deception to help them, thus placing his own life at considerable risk. The sequence raises a number of questions, which are worthy of discussion in an educational context. ¹⁴ One could start by *describing* which actors took which decisions and measures. The next step would be to *analyse* the background to the decisions and actions taken, taking care to distinguish between the context in which Malka and her mother acted as persecuted Jews and the context that framed the actions and decisions of non-Jewish Polish and Ukrainian civilians. Various questions could be addressed with regard to Malka and her mother: Did they have any other options? What was the risk they took by choosing to take the train? What were the possible consequences? What could the alternatives have been? Questions could also be asked with regard to the other passengers: Did they know what betrayal to the Gestapo would mean for Malka and her mother? What benefits could such a betrayal have for them? What was the ideological background to their actions? What alternatives did they have? And finally there is the helper: What personal risk did he take? Was he aware of the possible consequences of his actions? In answering the questions, the goal must be historical accuracy; private speculation is not enough. Historical evidence is available, for example, on the punishments imposed for helping Jews in occupied Poland. There is also evidence for antisemitic attitudes in Polish and Ukrainian society. The objective is not to explain the psychology underlying the decision of one person to act differently from the others. We know from Malka's testimony that the man did what he did and we can try to analyse the background factors and the potential and actual consequences of his actions. We can also *compare* his actions with those of other actors, which varied between passivity and collaboration or help. Finally, by comparing actions that took place in a similar frame of action, we can *evaluate* these actions and decisions.

In many cases, however, it was not only the actions of other actors that could decide between life and death; chance and unforeseen turns in the chain of events could also play a major role. The film *From Where Shall My Help Come?* (2011) tells the life story of the two sisters Fanny and Betty Ichenhäuser, who

were born in Frankfurt am Main in 1919 and 1923 and fled to the Netherlands following the Nazi rise to power. Their lives took completely different turns following the German occupation of Holland, when they decided to separate. Together with her husband, the elder sister Fanny found refuge and concealment with a Dutch family on a farm, while her newborn son was concealed by various persons all the way up to the end of the war. We learn en passant that such helpers did not always act on the basis of a mature plan with a firm theoretical foundation but simply considered it the natural thing to do, as in the case of the Dutch family that hid Fanny and her husband (TC 54:47). Her younger sister Betty, on the other hand, decided to remain with her mother as it would have been too dangerous if the mother had gone into hiding with them. ¹⁵ While the elder sister and her husband survived in their hiding place, having spent years living in a desperately confined space and constant fear of discovery (which almost happened a few times), the younger sister and her mother were taken from their house during the night in September 1943 and held in Westerbork before they were deported to Bergen-Belsen in January 1944 where they lived in mortal danger every minute of the day. The decisions taken by the two sisters changed the courses of their lives in ways they could never have anticipated. Their biographies, too, show the extent to which the persecuted Jews' scope for action had been limited by the perpetrators and how they therefore found themselves in terrible dilemmas: Fanny, for example, had to part from her little baby so as to improve the chances of survival for all concerned, and Betty had to choose between saving herself and helping her mother. Such films are suitable for use in an educational context, first of all to create empathy with the protagonists and counteract both (over-)identification with the victims and unfeeling criticism as reflected in ignorant questions such as why the victims did not "simply" flee or put up some resistance. Users come to see the protagonists as complex, autonomous individuals, who were affected in different ways by the historical events of the Shoah and also had a life before and after persecution. Analysis of actions and decisions in their specific context also facilitates a more differentiated assessment in place of prejudiced generalisations. The history of the Shoah is

seen as a history of human actions and decisions, thus disproving the fallacy of the lack of choice in a dictatorship. The process also raises questions that are relevant for life today and makes it possible to find common ground with the present, without trivialising the Shoah.

The Dimension of Loss

It is finally worth considering the question whether this series of films is suitable for educational work in different national and cultural contexts. Most of the films do have subtitles in various languages. The protagonists are all people who settled in Israel after the Shoah and were living there when the films were made. At the end of the films, the continuity of Jewish life in Israel is emphasised by showing or at least mentioning the survivors' families, their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren etc. The film with the Ichenhäuser sisters might illustrate this. At the end they are to be seen sitting on a terrace with panoramic views in Jerusalem. One by one, the various members of their families appear and the audience learns that the sisters have a total of four children, fourteen grandchildren and thirty-two great-grandchildren. Two of Fanny's grandchildren, Aharon and Yonatan Razel, provide the music for part of the film. The final shot is of the two sisters sitting in a big family circle comprising all age groups (TC 57:23–57:41). The question is whether this ending, with its focus on survival and continuity, runs the risk of glossing over the deaths of millions? Does it veil the fact that most of the victims of the Shoah were not given an opportunity for a new start in life? Is it simply a happy end? Of course, a narrative that ends in complete destruction would be difficult to use in an educational context, but a considered response to these questions must be negative for other reasons, too. Without exception, all the testimonies in the films are narratives of loss and annihilation. The protagonists speak of the destruction of their families, their homes and of the permanent trauma that represents. Avraham Aviel who was born in what was then Poland and lost his mother and brothers in the Shoah, remembers his father's words: "My son, I am an old man, but you will survive, you will have a family and forget everything." (2010: TC 38:01) Avraham's reply

denies the reality of the “good fortune” of survival: “I have a wonderful family. But I cannot forget.” (TC 38:42). It was not until the Germans had finally been defeated that he became aware of the extent of the catastrophe: He returned to his former home country, only to find it no longer existed: “There was no-one there; no-one had survived.” (TC 47:36) In no way, then, are these films stories with a happy end; they are biographic narratives delivered by people who took the conscious decision after the Shoah to build a future in the Jewish state of Israel. The fact that survival, which was the prerequisite for any such future, was the exception and not the rule is something that these films make us painfully aware of.

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- 1 See <http://sfi.usc.edu/collections/holocaust/ndt>, accessed 30 July 2017.
- 2 The witnesses speak of the violence and humiliation they suffered, but they are presented not as passive victims but as active narrators, see Ebbrecht-Hartmann, T., unpublished manuscript.
- 3 The city now lies in the Ukraine and is called Ivano-Frankivsk.
- 4 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann has written a paper with proposals for the use of these films in the classroom, unpublished manuscript.
- 5 “My mother could not remain silent. She could not be quiet. It just wasn’t in her nature,” said Betty. (Ibid: TC 36:34).