

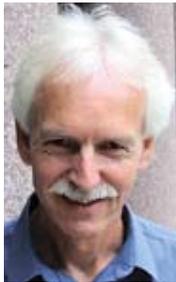
## Time Witnesses: Narratives from Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen

One significant aspect of the research project “Narrative theory and analysis” concerns the study of witness accounts of the crimes against humanity committed in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. The need to bear witness for these crimes is accompanied by the problems associated with doing so: How can a survivor talk or write about events so horrible that they threaten to defy description and render language unusable? Now in the beginning of the twenty-first century, a large number of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps have passed away. However, the fact that many are still alive is a pertinent reminder of the proximity of World War II, and of the Holocaust as a historical event within that war.

I want to briefly discuss the issue of testimony by linking it to that of narrative, and I want to relate both of these issues to a book I have been editing with team member Anette Storeide in 2005–06. Entitled *Tidsvitner: Fortellinger fra Auschwitz og Sachsenhausen* (Time Witnesses: Narratives from Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen), the book features the stories of eight survivors of two of the Nazi concentration camps. Before commenting on the book and the stories it presents, I make some observations on the concepts of witness, testimony, and narrative.

### Professor Jakob Lothe

Department of Literature, Area Studies  
and European Languages,  
University of Oslo, Norway  
E-mail: jakob.lothe@ilos.uio.no  
CAS Group Leader 2005/2006



### The concepts of witness, testimony and narrative

In present-day Norwegian usage, the phrase “time witness” refers to survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. Accordingly, texts written or stories told by such witnesses are commonly considered testimonies. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes that the Italian word *testimone* is etymologically related to the Latin word *testis*: a third person’s account of a conflict between two other persons. It is also linked to *superstes*: an account given by someone who has experienced an event and is therefore in a position to testify about it (Agamben, 14). Both these Latin words are applicable to the narratives of concentration camp survivors. Their narratives are examples of *superstes* because they report events from a period of imprisonment experienced by the survivor himself or herself. Moreover, they can be examples of *testis*, since a survivor’s narrative can also deal with the brutal treatment and killing of other prisoners. In the narratives presented in *Tidsvitner*, both these facets are observable and, typically, they are combined in the narrative discourse.

As indicated already, the task of bearing witness to the atrocities committed by the Nazis in their concentration camps – and it needs to be specified that Auschwitz was also an extermination camp – is particularly

important and especially difficult. The survivors are witnesses, or more precisely: they become witnesses by telling or writing about their camp experiences. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas finds that the witness “testifies to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said ‘here I am’ before the other” (Levinas, 115, original emphasis). This dimension of testimony is very significant. At the same time, there is a sense in which the ‘real witnesses’ of the concentration camps are those who were murdered by the Nazis. Seen thus, the Holocaust is ‘the event without a witness’ as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub put it in their influential book *Testimony* (Felman and Laub, 80). If that is the case, then the problem of adequately representing and remembering what occurred in the camps becomes acute.

Bearing witness is a communicative act, and the act of bearing witness often assumes narrative form. Testimony which is not communicated to someone else is not testimony. However, and this point is argued by many Holocaust scholars including Agamben, in the case of the Holocaust the communication between the witness and his or her audience is complicated by the fact that, using language, the witness is attempting to tell or write about an event radically different from normal life. The vastness and incomprehensibility of the Nazis’ crimes seem to be located somewhere beyond the realm, and organizing power, of language. Yet I reiterate: this is not just a problem, it is also a challenge and a possibility.

Bearing witness is both a form of remembering and an act of remembrance. As Lawrence Langer notes in *Holocaust Memories: The Ruins of Memory*, “the faculty of memory functions in the present to recall a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles. Simultaneously, however, straining against what we may call a disruptive memory is an effort to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence” (Langer, 2–3).

If the narratives told by the eight men in *Tidsvitner* illustrate the problem of remembering “a personal history vexed by traumas,” they also reveal these men’s insistent efforts to reconstruct what Langer calls “a semblance of continuity” in their lives. Seen thus, their stories provide a forceful illustration of narrative’s capacity to communicate what is painful to remember and hard to express. Even though the narrators in *Tidsvitner* are aware of the difficulty of putting their experiences into words, they use the medium at their disposal – language – and in some ways their mastery of language, and of narrative, is remarkable. Paradoxically, this kind of linguistic and narrative competence becomes particularly striking at the points where it threatens to break down (for instance, when the witness’s voice fails).

## The approach

Approaching the survivors whose stories we wanted to hear, and then to present as first-person narratives in *Tidsvitner*, we first sent them a letter of invitation. In this letter, we asked them to try to tell their story by responding to two questions: first, “what was the background for your arrest?” and second, “can you tell us something about the life inside the camp?” To these two questions we added a third: “considering your unique experience from the concentration camp from the vantage point of 2006, what strikes you as particularly important not to forget?”

These questions provided a basis for the time witnesses' narratives. Whether the questions were the 'right' ones is impossible to know, but at least they helped to make it possible for the men to talk, thus enabling them to become narrators engaged in the act of bearing witness. During a witness' act of narration, Anette Storeide and I said as little as possible. Our primary function was that of being listeners – two people to whom the time witness could talk, and who by virtue of their presence made the narrative act possible.

The narrators in *Tidsvitner* can be divided into three groups. First, there are three stories told by Norwegian men who participated in various kinds of resistance activities in Norway. (As is well known, Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany from 9 April 1940 to 8 May 1945.) This is another way of saying that they were arrested because, according to the representatives of the Nazi rulers, they had done something illegal. One prime example is the distribution, in the simplest possible manner, of a leaflet entitled "BBC Norwegian Service", giving summaries of news bulletins from the BBC.

In striking contrast to this first group of time witnesses, the second group was not arrested and deported because of something they had done but because of something they *were*. Since the Nazis were of the opinion that no Jew could satisfactorily expiate the "crime" of being Jewish, there was very little they could do except try to flee. However, in most of the occupied territories – including, sadly, Norway in the autumn of 1942 – it proved very difficult to do so. As Samuel Steinmann puts it in his contribution to *Tidsvitner*: "I had nowhere to go, so I remained at home." Thus, he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz. Against all odds, Samuel Steinmann survived, but his brother, Harry Steinmann, was murdered in Auschwitz. Samuel Steinmann's witness account is also a testimony on behalf of his brother.

Those belonging to the third group of time witnesses in *Tidsvitner* occupy an intermediate position between the first two groups. This group consists of Simon Øvretveit and Anfinn Midttveit, who lived – and still live – in the village of Telavåg on the west coast of Norway. Situated on the island of Sotra outside Bergen, Telavåg became a centre of illegal traffic across the North Sea during WWII. In spring 1942, the Nazi authorities in Bergen were informed that two agents (who had come to Telavåg from the Shetland Islands) were in hiding in Telavåg. Two high-ranking Gestapo officers travelled to Telavåg to arrest the two men, who, acting in self defence, shot and killed the German officers. As an act of reprisal, the whole village was burnt down and the men between the ages of 16 and 60 were sent to Sachsenhausen, where nearly half of them died. What the Nazis did to Telavåg and its inhabitants can be seen as an example of state terrorism; it was an act of systematic revenge comparable to what they did in Lidice in the Czech Republic in 1942 and in Oradous-sur-Glane in France in 1944.

### **Narrative theory and time witnesses**

Seen in the light of narrative theory, the stories told by these eight time witnesses are very interesting. A narrative presents a series of events, and it typically has a beginning, a middle and an end. One reason why narratives are important to human beings seems to be that, in a fundamental sense, we communicate with others by telling stories. Perhaps we tend to do so because our lives resemble a story (complete with a beginning,

middle and end); and as human beings we are inclined to link the different parts to each other and to explain and justify the choices we make. Inside the concentration camp, opportunities to make choices were of course severely restricted, but that did not mean that the need for some kind of connection and meaningful life progression disappeared.

Since they refer the reader to, and are anchored in, an extreme situation, these narratives illustrate some of the basic mechanisms and problems of story telling. I offer two brief examples: One important issue in narrative theory is that of narrative beginnings. When exactly does a narrative begin? Is the beginning the title, the first sentence or the first event? And, as a corollary, how do we conceive of our own narrative beginnings? When asked why they were arrested, some of the time witnesses responded by telling us about their illegal activities in Nazi-occupied Norway. But one of them simply said: “My name is Samuel Steinmann.” Meaning: I was arrested because I am Jewish. Thus in his case the beginning – the reason for his arrest – stretches a long way back; and it is linked not just to his familial history but to the history of anti-Semitism in Europe.

My second example is the occurrence, or perhaps rather emergence, within these narratives of elements of subgenres of fiction such as the episode. An episode (from Greek *epeisodion*, meaning addition or insertion) is an event or action relatively independent of what precedes or succeeds it. The narratives in *Tidsvitner* feature a number of different episodes. One interesting aspect of them is that they tend to highlight a particular event to which it is difficult to ascribe meaning (in the normal sense of the word). This event often involves violence, and it tends not to be closely linked – as least not in a meaningful way – to what precedes and succeeds it. It is as though the episode simultaneously illustrates and reflects the problem of making connections, i.e. of establishing a sense of progress and meaning, inside the camp. But for precisely this reason it becomes meaningful – helpful to the reader – as a descriptive narrative tool.

The narrators in *Tidsvitner* tell their stories long after the occurrence of the events which form the basis for their narration. They are not historians. But they were there, inside the concentration camp, during a time (1942–43) when no one knew who would win the war. Their episodic, unavoidably fragmented narratives bear witness to events that have occurred, very recently, in Europe – events that they will never be able to forget. And in the event we may wish to forget or to ignore these events, their testimonies are there to remind us that we do so at our own peril.

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