

Testimonies of Survivors and Research on World War II

Testimonies¹ of the survivors of the Nazi persecution and extermination represent a crucial part of our knowledge and understanding of what happened during World War II. In this essay, I will outline the history of the ‘witness literature’ on WW II, focusing on its place in the research history on WW II.

Legal investigation and historical research: the quest for the truth

The first testimonies of camp inmates were written already during the war and imprisonment in the form of reports, diaries, notes, drawings,



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etc., as testimonies of the crimes of the Nazis. One motive for this was to cover the contingency that the writer did not survive to testify in person.

Immediately after WWII, many survivors felt the need and obligation to bear witness, not least to contribute to the documentation of what took place in the Nazi camps. In addition, the

collection of witness reports (both oral and written) took place as part of the preparation for the trials against the persons responsible for the crimes committed in the camps. Common for the mode of writing in these early testimonies is the focus on the transmission of facts, descriptions and observations. The focus in these early testimonies was on the crimes committed in the camps (abuse, mistreatment, punishment, medical experiments, executions, extermination, etc.) and the perpetrators. The texts can also be seen as part of the attempted illumination of the general public about the Nazi crimes. Also, in Germany, the Allied forces were afraid that their own reports of the Nazi crimes might be interpreted as propaganda and rejected by the German population, so they started publishing testimonies written by German survivors of different camps (as books and in newspapers and magazines) as part of the denazification of the German population (Peitsch 1999).

Historical research, e.g. the research pursued in connection with the different Camp Memorial Sites, focuses on the testimonies of former inmates as part of the attempted reconstruction of the events in the camps. The research focuses on *what* the texts can tell about the construction of the camp, the everyday life, the work, the prisoners, the barracks,

1: A testimony can be defined as 1) a sign that can be used to reconstruct the past or as 2) a result of a testimonial process, that is, of the transmission of a memory of an experienced event like for example a concentration camp survivor's telling of his or her own experiences in imprisonment.

the executions and extermination, and so on. The testimonies are seen as material and a source of knowledge about the camps, and they are viewed as more or less trustworthy when it comes to the accuracy of details and facts.

The writing of testimonies: phases and characteristics

There have been two waves of written primary testimonies: 1) Shortly after the war until the end of the 1940s, and 2) Since the 1980s, with an explosion in the number of publications since the 1990s. After relative 'silence' in the 1950s, the interest in the WW II and in the Nazi camp system rallied in the late 1950s/early 1960s. This increasing interest was inspired by two events: The trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Auschwitz trials in 1963–65 in Frankfurt am Main. These events focused world-wide attention on WW II as something more than a military war. During the period, testimonies were published that ultimately formed the canon of "witness literature": Primo Levi *If this is a man?* (1958)², Elie Wiesel *La Nuit* (1958), Jorge Semprun *Le Grand Voyage* (1963), Jean Améry *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1966). New aspects in the testimonies written since the 1980s include less focus on crimes and more focus on everyday-life in the camps, on the feeling of being a prisoner and on existence as an inmate. In addition, the testimonies written in the 1980s devote more attention to reflection (about the camp and about the process of witnessing) than to 'pure' observation and description. A plurality of writing witnesses has also emerged. Shortly after the war, the majority of writing witnesses consisted of former political prisoners. Since the 1960s, however, more and more Jewish survivors have written about their experiences. Since the 1990s, witnesses from other prisoner groups, e.g. homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses and Gypsies, have presented their testimonies.

Why this extreme rise in number of written and oral testimonies since the 1990s? First, the many years that separate the witness from the events that he or she will witness about, may make it easier to write or talk about experiences because the events have grown more distance, or because the witness has now worked through his or her traumas. Second, it may be a survivor's last chance to bear witness before dying. Third, the enhanced focus on oral history, the history of everyday life and autobiographical writing since the 1970s may have helped increase interest in testifying helped make it easier to bear witness. Fourth, the interest in WWII in general has picked up since the end of the cold war. This conflict probably overshadowed and thus obliterated important questions and discussions about the war. Last, the change of climate of discussion, more public interest in WWII and the fact that some survivors told their stories may have inspired or encouraged others to write or talk about their experiences.

Philosophical and literary debates: the death of the witness and the failure of language

At the same time as the testimonies of the Nazi camps survivors were closely connected to the quest for the truth about the camps in legal investigations and historical research, there is some discussion about 1)

2: The book was first published by a small publishing house in 1947, but did not receive broad public attention until it was republished in 1958.

who the 'real' witnesses are and about 2) the representation of the Nazi crimes based on the thesis of the incomprehensibility of the Nazi extermination and of the crimes defying description. This has mainly been a discussion in the field of philosophical and literary studies, although some 'prominent survivors' have participated as well. This discussion identifies the exterminated people as the 'real witnesses' because only they have seen death from the inside. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub present the Holocaust as an "event without witness" (Felman and Laub 1992, 80) and that is the case in two different ways. First, the first-hand witnesses are dead, and second, language is incapable of describing events that should be witnessed. This position of testimony as testimony about the impossibility of the situation is also held by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998). He draws upon the writings of the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi and his statement about the dead as the real witnesses (Levi 1986). Most of the inmates of the camps were killed, therefore the dead are the real witnesses. The survivors are only pure exceptions from the rule. The opposite position is held by Jacques Derrida, who holds the survivors as the only witnesses (Derrida 2000). If a witness did not survive the event that was witnessed, there can simply be no testimony. Derrida says that the only one who can testify about one's death is someone who survived it. Thus it becomes obvious that Agamben and Derrida postulate two very different concepts of testimony: Agamben presents testimony of the impossible to bear witness, whereas Derrida presents the testimony of unexperienced experience.

As regards the question of the representation of the Holocaust and whether it is even possible for literature and the arts to represent the Holocaust, the two main positions may be illustrated by two famous survivors. Elie Wiesel said that there can be no novel about the Holocaust (Wiesel 1975)³. It is either not about Holocaust or it is not a novel. Literature and the Holocaust are incommensurable. On the contrary, Jorge Semprun has argued that the Holocaust can only be represented by the arts and that the thesis of it being beyond description is just an excuse for not having to talk about it (Semprun 1994)⁴.

"A narrative turn"⁵ of testimony

Although testimonies have been important in legal investigation and historical research, such texts have generally occupied a difficult position in the interface between history and literature. On one hand, they have been seen as too subjective to be history and, on the other, as too focused on documentation to be valued as literature. In addition, discussions have revolved around the definition of witness and the possibility of representation. However, since the 1980s, the testimonies of the camp survivors have generated expansive new interest. Since the growing focus on memory began in the 1980s, the perspective of research on memory

3: Elie Wiesel, "For some Measure of Humility", in *Sh'ma* 5 (1975), 314. Reference in, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Problematics of Holocaust Literature", in *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Alvin Rosenfeld et.al. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press), 4.

4: Jorge Semprun, *Schreiben oder Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 199 f., 239, 309 f.

5: Term by James Phelan, *Narrative Theory, 1966–2006: A Narrative* (forthcoming), 3.

has switched from *what* to *how*. The central question no longer concerns just which memories the survivor presents, but also *how* the memories are represented as a text. Lawrence L. Langer – who was one of the initiators of this change of perspective – calls this the second phase of the reaction to the Nazi extermination (Langer 2000). After the phase of the *questioning of the representation*, comes the phase of the *analysis of representation*. While the discussion about the possibility of representation and transmission of memories in many ways has calmed down, the focus on forms of memory and its representation has grown. These developments are connected, because the focus on the forms of the presented memories implies that the Nazi crimes can be described. If they are not viewed as describable, it would make no sense to analyze their forms of representation. Today, the focus of interest lies on the attempted solution to resolve the difficulty of representation, and the testimonies are valued as individual expressions and not reduced to being pure potential transmitters of facts. The testimonies are now understood as far more than sources of knowledge, i.e. they are valued as textual expressions, as testimonies of individual memories, of the witnessing process and of the resistance against death.

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