

Psychoanalysis and Genocide:

Two Essays

by Dori Laub, MD

**Genocide Studies Program
Yale University
Ben Kiernan, Director**

www.yale.edu/gsp

Text

**Yale Center for International and Area Studies
Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue
New Haven, CT 06520-8206**



Video Testimonies of Genocide: The Struggle for Narrative of Trauma

Dori Laub, MD

On the nature of Testimony

Testimony, as I view it, *proceeds* not from a (real) event but from a personal (perhaps communal) experience; from its registration (i.e. coming into awareness), from its remembrance (i.e. becoming a memory), from its being forgotten, from the integration of such memory (i.e. becoming a part of one's conscious and unconscious inner self and world representations) and from the vicissitudes of the process of its recall.

When an experience assumes the proportion of massive psychic trauma, the capability to perceive, to register, to know, to transmit, to record and to remember, even to see the whole *Gestalt*, is largely impaired. It takes a profound ability to remain stable in the midst of the hurricane of trauma and to keep the registering and the instruments that do it, fully functional. That taxes not only cognitive abilities to their very limits but works likewise against natural human tendencies to not direct one's gaze towards the center of the traumatic experience, to look away, to overlook, to misperceive, and most of all, to not comprehend. These are often necessary self-defenses in order to continue one's self-preservation. Therefore, the record of traumatic events is so frequently lacking, and those events, which are transmitted, may completely lose their essence, often, because the pivotal details are missing.

My witnessing of the Holocaust, is not in the format in which the Holocaust is commonly described - as an event framed by the Nazi era, that began in 1933 and ended in 1945, and that took the lives of six million Jews, as well as many other tens of millions of people who lived in Europe at that time. From my perspective, it is an event that is witnessed primarily "from inside," and my pursuit is not so much historical accuracy as it is a virtual internal truth. It is a truth that belongs to the past at the same time that is also contemporaneous. It is continuously evolving, and impacting life, reaching beyond the specific generation during which the actual event occurred. It is a method and an approach that revisits and reinterprets, both the historical record (the public discourse)

and the narrative of the event (the personal testimony), thus trying to reach a “beyond”. This approach operates through a very special alertness to subtle cues and mostly unintended signals, an alertness to resonance’s of the traumatic event. The method pays attention to obscurities, to paradoxes, and applies a free-floating attention that both invites and ventures into the incomprehensible, the cryptic and the “closed”. This is the context within which personal, historical testimony unfolds as a composite, a mosaic, of exquisite existential, detailed and profound knowledge, side by side with vast voids, absences and ignorance’s. It is in this dialectic - between rich, unacknowledged and often pre-conscious knowledge on the one hand, and public oblivion and private amnesia on the other - that personal, historical testimony is born and continues to unfold.

What follows is an example of a witness who gave her testimony to the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale and who has difficulty in witnessing because she is not fully in possession of her own testimony of what she has herself witnessed. Jolly remembered and could describe in detail and in color her survival of Bergen-Belsen as an adolescent, together with her mother, but she was unable to come to terms with an atrocity that she had witnessed in another, less ominous concentration camp. The experience she could fully be a witness to, goes as follows: ¹ These were the last days at Bergen-Belsen. Jolly and her mother knew that freedom was around the corner and that the British were nearby. The Germans needed volunteers to bury corpses. Jolly volunteered for the task and spent all day burying bodies, for which she received a bowl of soup. She described walking back to her mother holding the bowl of soup in her hands, traversing a large field strewn with dead corpses, while the sun was setting on the horizon. When she finally reached her mother, the two started fighting. Each wanted the other to eat the soup. “You are weaker than I am. You have to eat to survive. It is only a few more days and we’ll be free.” “No, you are young. You have a life in front of you. You have to eat the soup.” Finally, they decided that they would share it, and each took a spoon of soup, but the amount of soup in the bowl remained the same because the spoons they brought to their lips were empty. Each woman wanted the other to be the only one who ate. Finally Jolly says her mother had a brilliant idea. They would each fill up the spoon and feed the other. They did so and they both survived.

¹ HVT-34, Holocaust Testimony of Rosalie W. and Jolly Z.

Jolly could testify to this moving event, but she failed to recognize herself as a witness to another event.² She was brought to Bergen-Belsen from Neuen gamme – Aussen Kommado Eidelstedt. In that camp, a woman was pregnant, and the inmates protected her. When the pregnant woman gave birth to her baby, the SS commander of the camp whose name is Walter Kummel took it away from her, brought it to a sink, opened the water tap and drowned it, saying to the baby, “There you go, little Moses, down the stream.” Forty years later, Kummel was brought to trial, accused of killing this baby and another baby born in the camp. He was acquitted because no eyewitness to the murder came forward to testify. This was in spite of the fact that Jolly had years earlier, in her videotaped testimony, described herself witnessing the event. When she read about the court case in the papers, she did not recognize herself as the eyewitness that was badly needed and did not volunteer to testify. She could be a witness to her and her mother feeding each other, but not to the atrocity that had been perpetrated in front of her eyes. It was as though it had happened to someone else. She could not integrate this event into her life as she had managed to do with her other mutually nurturing experiences. This atrocity represented a rupture in the fabric of her identity that she was not able to mend.

The testimonial process and Holocaust knowledge

The testimony is not a ready-made text. It is a process that is set in motion in a place that provides safety, through the presence of the witness (interviewer) to the witness (interviewee). People who come to bear witness do not know what they know. Once the process of the interview is set in motion – the process of reflection, of self-reflection, and of telling to oneself and to the listeners – it has a cascade effect. Memory leads to memory, perhaps even to an explosion of memories. In most instances, very few questions need to be asked. Only a certain structure needs to be provided, like the sequence of time, so that the process can both proceed and be contained, leading from one event to the next. Questions like asking for the completion of a story or what happened next, or what transpires during a silence, are the ones that are more frequent. The presence of the witness, the companion on the journey of the testimony, encourages

² HVT-220, Holocaust Testimony of Jolly Z.

the “address” to oneself, to the internal other, perhaps the perished family, to one’s past, to things one might have wanted to say to people that are no more, and to one’s future – to one’s children, to future imaginary audiences, and even to future generations.

Why is the testimonial process, in all its complexity, so essential in achieving, accruing and maintaining Holocaust knowledge? The answer to this question lies in the fact that we are dealing here with massive psychic trauma. In order to understand this phenomenon, the following four assumptions have to be explicitly stated:

1. Massive trauma has an amorphous, a historical presence, not delimited by place, time or agency. Lacking a beginning, a middle, and an end, it weaves through the memories of several generations.
2. Massive psychic trauma colors and shapes the entire representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by children. Because of trauma’s historicity, its effect tends to be trans generational, establishing a process of evolution that requires several generations through which to work itself out.
3. This is a more controversial statement: whoever partakes of trauma, whether victim, perpetrator, bystander, or even remote historical witness (such as children), is affected by it, albeit in very different ways.
4. Trauma precludes its knowing. Not knowing trauma, or experiencing and remembering it in a dissociative way is not a passive shut-down of perception or of memory. Not knowing is rather an active, persistent, violent refusal, an erasure, a destruction of form and of representation. Not knowing is an active process of destruction.

Furthermore, Holocaust trauma and genocide trauma for that matter, refuses knowledge because at its very core lies the complete failing of the empathic human dyad. The executioner does not heed the victim’s plea for life and relentlessly proceeds with the execution. Human responsiveness came to be non-existent in the death camps. A responsive “thou” to one’s basic needs no longer existed. Faith in the possibility of communication died and intrapsychically there was no longer a matrix of two people, a self and a resonating other. The victims felt that there was “no longer anyone on whom

to count” (Eli Wiesel).³ The natural outcome is a lonesomeness in one’s internal world representation “In the Lager.....everyone is desperately and ferociously alone.” (Jean Amery).⁴ This despair to communicate with others, diminished the victims’ ability to be in contact, an in tune with themselves, to be able to register, reflect, to themselves, about their own experience. To quote Jean Amery, “After the Holocaust, I was a person who could no longer say we.”⁵ The testimonial process with the listener is therefore essential in re-establishing the internal dialogue with oneself, which was destroyed when the victim discovered there was no longer a “thou”, a you, either outside or inside himself. The video testimony functions as a dialogue, not only with the listener, but also with oneself and beyond that, with one’s family, and with imagined audiences in the world at large and in one’s future. It’s a step in the restoration of one’s own humanity and the humanity of the world one lives in. It is a step in the rebuilding of mutuality and of trust.

The video testimony is a way of remembering, re-experiencing and reenacting, that in essence constitutes *history in the making*, on an intergenerational and communal level.

Overlooked dimensions in the historical record

Historiography no matter how meticulously realized, can never be a replica of personal experience. By its very nature it leaves certain aspects out. Yet it is largely personal experience that shapes life after trauma. One such overlooked aspect is the concept and the experience of time.

We often see the photographs of people waiting in line on the selection ramp. When I ask audiences to estimate how long it took for the selection process to take place, the answers vary from a couple of hours to three or four. The still photographs portray people *waiting* and that is the impression that one gains. Listening to testimonies, one gets a completely different picture. Trains arrived and people were driven out at maximum speed. There was not even time to say goodbye to a beloved. Everything was done running. Time estimates for the processing of a train were probably closer to fifteen

³ Wiesel, Elie (1970). “A Plea for the Dead,” in *Legends of Our Time*, New York: Avon Books, 1970.

⁴ Amery, J. (1966). *At the Mind’s Limits*, tr. S. Rosenfeld and S. P. Rosenfeld, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁵ *Ibid.*

or twenty minutes. Historians could calculate these time episodes by simply dividing the number of hours per day by the number of trains that arrived. But this is not considered to be a question of importance, so this calculation is usually not done and the impression remains one of almost timelessness in waiting, when in essence, the opposite is true.

The considerations raised around the dimension of time apply to the consideration of other aspects of the physical context in which the traumatic experience occurred. One such dimension is color. Most of the film strips and the still photographs are in black and white except for some recently found color film footage of the death camps and color photographs of the Lodz Ghetto, presented in the film "The Photographer".⁶ While this colorless experience or the ubiquitous gray may accurately reflect how survivors remember those times, we also hear in testimonies mention of a red sun, of a black sun, of the blueness of the sky, and of other colors. The red dress of the little girl in the movie "Schindler's List" is an example of that. The experience of color may have come and gone for many survivors, depending on what happened to them.

Another dimension is that of sound. The film footage we have is mostly without a sound strip, as though everything happened in complete silence. This is mostly an artifact of the medium used, although I suspect that the sound track that existed on some of these films, was deliberately removed. From testimonies, we hear a much higher level of sound, of marching of boots, of shots, of screams of terror, even the loudness of silence, and also of singing. The Check hymn and the Hatikvah sung by the people facing their gassing in Auschwitz, reported in Filip Mueller's testimony in Claude Lanzmann's film "Shoah" is such an example. Documentary footage cannot convey smells, either. They are, however, a very strong and even-present element in oral testimony. They seem to have been an integral part of the "real" experience.

Even specific directions are not a simple matter. Some survivors, recounting selections mentioned "left" as the direction to the gas chambers – others mentioned "right". It is likely that Nazis in the camp were consistent, although other factors may be involved. It is possible, however, that survivors telling of selections – do not specify from *whose* perspective they speak: their own or that of the Nazi carrying out the

⁶ Photos taken by Walter Gennwein, chief accountant of Ghetto Lodz, discovered 1987 (some of the first color slides in the history of photography). "The Photographer" (Poland 1999), Director: Dariusz Jablouski.

selection. What is “left” for the Jews arriving in Auschwitz is “right” for the Nazi. Realistically and symbolically, there cannot be a compromise between these two positions.

The video testimony is of crucial importance for the emergence of the “virtual truth of the historical experience,” particularly in light of the fact that the vast majority of the documentation of the Holocaust, both written and photographic, originated with the perpetrators of the event. It is likely that 80 to 90% of the film footage and of the photographs we have were taken by Nazis and the intent of those filmmakers and photographers was the very same of the actual killers. They wanted to kill the truth by photographing it, filming it, in a very specific dehumanizing way. Restoring the victims voice and perspective is therefore crucial to preserving historical truth.

A Case Vignette

To illustrate the importance of the process of witnessing and of giving testimony and the struggle involved in it, I would like to relate the story of a man who was a high-ranking officer in the Israeli army when I met him and whom I interviewed during a sabbatical year he spent at Yale.

As a little boy of about five years old, he was placed with his parents in the Plashow labor camp, in the vicinity of Krakow city. A rumor, which eventually materialized, began spreading that all children were going to be rounded up for extermination. The parents started to make plans to devise ways to save their son by smuggling him out of the camp. They would talk about it at night when he should have been asleep, but he overheard them. One night, while the guards were being distracted, they indeed managed to get him out of the gate. His mother wrapped him up in a shawl and gave him a passport photograph of herself as a student. She told him to turn to the picture whenever he felt the need to do so. His parents both promised him that they would come and find him and bring him home after the war. With that, and with an address where to go, he was sent out into the streets. The address was a whorehouse, a marginal institution itself and therefore, more hospitable to the homeless. He was received with open arms. For years he used to speak of the whorehouse as a hospital, with the color white featuring predominantly in his memory, because the first thing he

was given on arrival was a white glass of milk, and, in his imagination, the place could not be anything but a helping hospital. Eventually his hideout became too dangerous and he had to leave. He roamed the streets, joined other gangs of boys and found refuge in the homes of generous, gentile families who took him in for periods of time. The task of making it from day to day preoccupied him completely and in moments of solitude he would take out his mother's picture and talk to her.

In one of the gentile houses he stayed in (living on the papers of a child that had died), the family was in the habit of praying together every evening. When everybody knelt and prayed to the crucifix, the lady of the house, who may have suspected he was Jewish, was kind enough to allow him to pray to whomever he wished. The young boy would take out the photograph of his mother and pray to it, saying, "Mother, let this war be over and come and take me back as you promised." Mother indeed had promised to come and take him back after the war, and not for a moment did he doubt that promise.

In my interpretation, what this young vagabond was doing with the photograph of his mother was, precisely, creating his first witness, and the creation of that witness was what enabled him to survive his years on the streets of Krakow. This story exemplifies the process whereby survival takes place through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life.

This early internal witness in turn played a crucial role not only in his actual physical survival but also in the later adult testimony the child survivor gave to himself and to others by augmenting his ability to create a cohesive, integrated narrative of the event. This testimony to himself came to be the story of the hidden truth of his life, with which he has to struggle incessantly in order to remain authentic to himself.

A Passage through Difference, or the Broken Promise

Knowing one's real truth, however, can also be very costly, as is demonstrated by what happens to the little vagabond boy after liberation. He manages miraculously to find his parents, but when he and his parents are reunited, they are not the people he remembers: they no longer even resemble the image he has carried in his mind for so long. His mother does not look like the person in the photograph. His parents have come back as death camp survivors, haggard and emaciated, in striped uniforms, with teeth

hanging loose in their gums. Their return does not bring back the lost safety of childhood the boy has so ardently prayed for. He finds that he can only address them as Mr. and Mrs., not as Mom and Dad. I read this story to mean that in regaining his real mother, he inevitably loses the internal witness he had found in her image. This loss of his internal witness to whom he has addressed his daily prayers causes the boy to fall apart. He begins to have a nightmare that will recur all his life. In it he finds himself on a conveyor belt moving relentlessly toward a metal compactor. Nothing he can do will stop that conveyor belt and he will be carried to his end, crushed to death by the machine. Every time he has this dream, he wakes up, totally disoriented and utterly terrified. Because he has lost the life-sustaining internal witness he found in his mother's image, after the war, he becomes, paradoxically enough, a mere "child victim" deprived of the holding presence of a witness. Many of the things he consequently does, as he grows up to be a man, are desperate attempts to subdue the abandoned child victim within himself. As a high-ranking officer in the Israeli army he becomes known for repeated acts of bravery, risking his life as he rescues wounded soldiers under heavy fire. In speaking about these brave acts, he will later state, however, that he did not consider them brave at all. They simply partook of his feeling of being invulnerable. He was convinced he could walk in a hail of bullets and not be hit. In my understanding, this conviction is part of a psychological construction which centered his life on the denial of the child victim within himself. He becomes instead an untouchable and self-sufficient hero. Because he had lost his inner witness and because he could not face his horrors without a witness, he was trapped. He could neither allow himself to experience the horrors nor could he move away from the position of the child victim, except by relentlessly attempting to deny them.

It was years later that I happened to meet him and invite him to give his testimony to the archive at Yale. This provoked a crisis in him. At first he refused. A prolonged struggle with himself ensued.

My initial reaction was "NO." My wife said, "Why don't you think it over? ... What are you afraid of?" I said "I'm scared that everything will come back, my nightmares, and so on..." She said, "You've been living with this thing for thirty-five years after the war, and you're still afraid. You never talked about it. Why don't you try

the other way?" We spent a lot of time talking about it; I began to see the logic. This particular night we went to bed very early in the morning, because we had talked very far into the night, the next night I had my nightmares again. But this time it was different. It was again the conveyor belt, it was again the rolling presses; it was again the feeling of helplessness and of terrible anxiety. But for the first time in my life, I stopped the conveyor belt. I woke up, still feeling anxious, but the anxiety was turning into a wonderful sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. I got up; for the first time I wasn't disoriented. I knew what happened... I feel strongly that it has to do with the fact that I decided to open up.

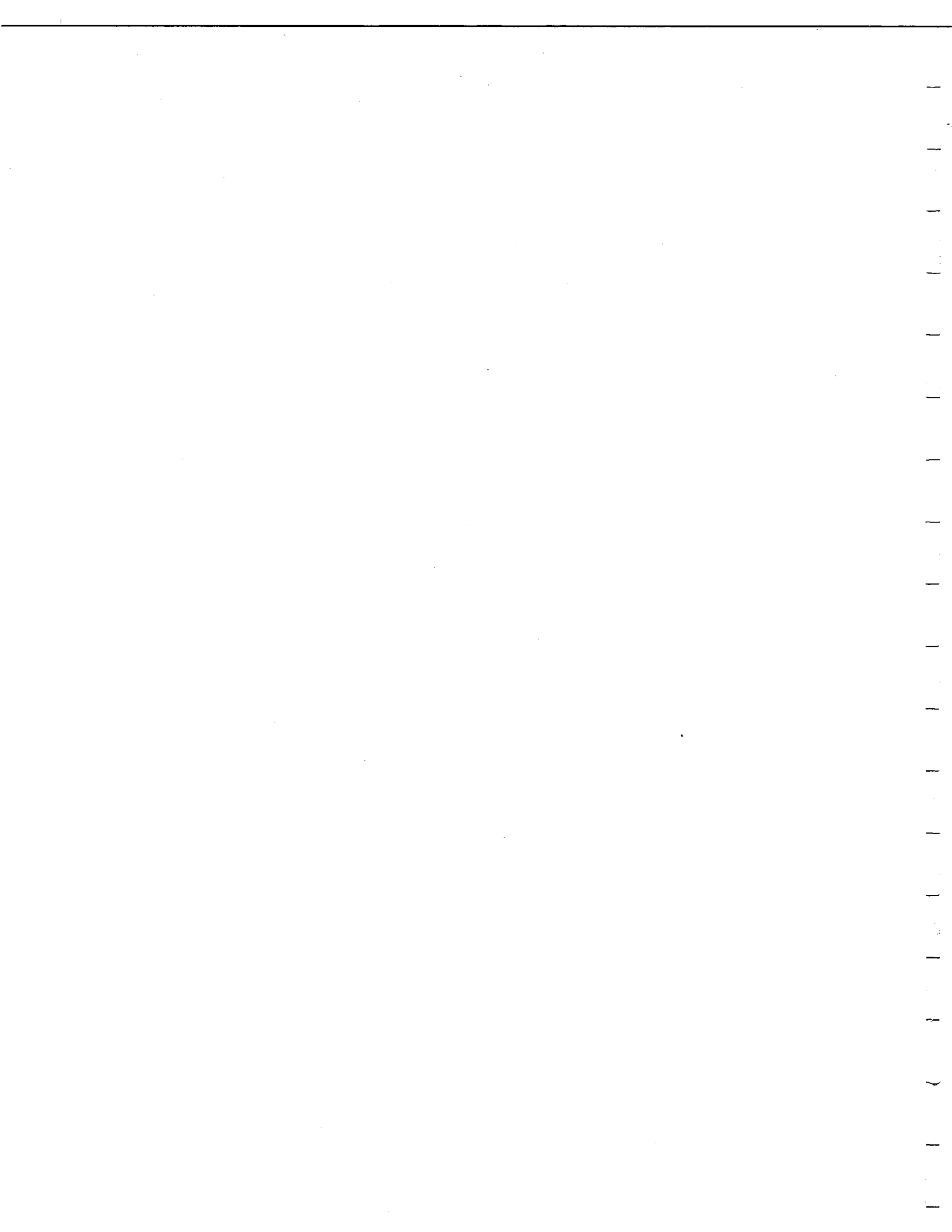
Once the link to the listener has been reestablished in his mind, once no longer alone and without a witness, he is able to stop the death machine in his dream without having to wake up. Coincidentally he expresses the fact that for the first time in his life he was able to experience feelings of fear as well.

As is evident in the example of this child survivor, the act of bearing witness at the same time *makes* and *breaks* a promise: the promise of the testimony as a realization of the truth. On the one hand, the process of the testimony does in fact hold out the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal and connected world. On the other hand, because of its very commitment to truth, the testimony enforces at least a partial breach, failure and relinquishment of this promise. The mother who comes back not only fails to make the world safe for the little boy as she promised, but she comes back different, disfigured, and not identical to herself. She no longer looks like the mother in the picture. There is no healing reunion with those who are, and continue to be, missing, no recapture or restoration of what has been lost, no resumption of an abruptly interrupted innocent childhood. The testimony aspires to recapture the lost truth of that reality, but the realization of the testimony is not the fulfillment of this promise. The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, differences, rather than an exploration of identity, just as the experience it testifies to — the Holocaust—is inassimilable, because it is a passage through the ultimate difference—the otherness of death.

Yet it is this very commitment to truth, in a dialogic context and with an authentic listener, which allows for a reconciliation with the broken promise, and which makes the

resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible. The testimony cannot efface the Holocaust. It cannot deny it. It cannot bring back the dead, undo the horror or reestablish the safety, the authenticity and the harmony of what was home. But neither does it succumb to death, nostalgia, memorializing, ongoing repetitious embattlements with the past, or flight to superficiality or to the seductive temptation of the illusion of substitutions. It is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss—of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing—which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss. It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it.

It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer—that someone can be there as your companion—knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: “I’ll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness.”



Can Psychoanalysis Enhance Historical Understanding of Genocide?

Dori Laub, MD¹

In some instances, the psychoanalyst has first-hand experience of genocide in his or her own life and thus can serve as a witness to history. I have written elsewhere on my experience in treating psychiatric casualties on the Syrian front in the Yom Kippur War.² Most of these Israeli soldiers were children of Holocaust survivors; their frontline war traumata triggered their re-experiencing what they knew about, or what they imagined their parents had lived through during World War II. In one instance a military policeman, who was quite psychotic when I saw him, had lost his self-control and kicked a Syrian POW in the face after seeing a car with the mangled bodies of civilians in it. The car was one that he had earlier tried to prevent from going to the front. The MP recalled that his father had watched his baby son smashed against the wall by a Nazi soldier. The difference from listening to his father's stories, for this witness of the Yom Kippur War, was that this time the violence and destruction had grown beyond an isolated individual story. It was a communal, societal, not quite conscious reliving and reenactment of a past historical event, namely the Holocaust. Under the daunting threat of renewed annihilation, the Holocaust was reawakening. In fact, the Yom Kippur War seemed to have created a new awareness of its continuing presence.

The American psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg has coined the term "transposition" for this phenomenon whereby one generation relives the experiences of another as though it were their own, without conscious awareness of it.³ It is as though the Holocaust experiences had been "transposed" from the generation of the parents to that of the children. The French psychoanalyst Haydée Faimberg uses the term "telescoping of generations," by which she means an unconscious identification process

¹ I wish to thank Dr. Rebecca Frey for her scholarship and editorial assistance with this paper.

² Dori Laub, MD, "Testimonies in the Treatment of Genocidal Trauma," in a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 4, 1, Jan. 2002, pp. 63-87.

³ Judith Kestenberg, "Transposition Revisited: Clinical, Therapeutic, and Developmental Considerations," in P. Marcus and A. Rosenberg, eds., *Healing Their Wounds: Psychotherapy with Holocaust Survivors and Their Families* (New York:), pp. 67-82.

linking three generations that condenses a history that at least in part does not belong to the patient's generation.⁴

The Holocaust is not the only traumatic historical event that revisits, returns, perhaps never ceases to be present. The Rwandan genocide had its precursors in massive atrocities carried out against the Tutsis in the wars and revolutions of 1959 and 1972. The affinity between the atrocities committed in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the carnage that took place in that country-- in particular, in Bosnia-- during World War II, will be further elaborated at the end of this paper. Historical examples of the perpetuation of an undigested (and perhaps indigestible) past abound: we need only to sharpen our skills to detect, observe, trace, and describe them-- to pick up on these subtle links and connections.

At a meeting in Barcelona organized by the Genocide Studies Program in 2000, many of the participants had indeed themselves done field research at the actual sites of such genocidal events as Bosnia, Rwanda, Bali, East Timor, etc. I could witness their struggles with their experiences and their efforts to organize their material and present it in an orderly fashion. Their papers conveyed without exception a sense of immediacy, of being in touch with the experience which put their writers at the cutting edge of research work in the field of Comparative Genocide Studies. The data often contradicted the official versions of the events, which had been believed as truth for decades. While hardly ever drawing directly from anecdotes or testimony, the presenters nevertheless reflected a quality of direct personal involvement with their sources, not to say their source material. There was a certain degree of immersion in the actual event that characterized them all, even if the event had occurred decades ago. There were also attempts to make sense, to comprehend, and to explain their findings to others. I discerned two strands of a dialectical process that were intertwined in subtle and complex ways: there were *data obtained by direct observation* and there were initial formulations of a more *theoretical grasp* of these data. By and large, one had to hold on to both strands for the sake of the truth; losing either led ultimately to distortions and arid abstractions. Sometimes this balancing act became difficult, and foreclosing short cuts were taken. Frequently, there seemed to be no bridges between the observational data and the theoretical implements that allowed interpretation and understanding of the observed. This gap does not come as a surprise to the psychoanalyst; unlike other disciplines in the social sciences, psychoanalysis makes consistent use of methodical considerations of

⁴ Haydée Faimberg, "The Telescoping of Generations: Genealogy of Certain Identifications." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 23:4 (1988): 99-118.

the human mind (on an individual or collective level) as an *intervening variable*, and utilizes psychological processes in its theory building. The explanatory power of any theories of observed human behavior that are not based on and validated by data derived from a field in which such phenomena can be most closely observed, such as clinical work, is limited at best.

It seems to me, therefore, that my work as a psychoanalyst can be helpful to historians and social scientists in two ways. The first concerns attempts to bridge the gap between immersion in raw field data that lend authenticity and truth to such scholarly presentations on the one hand, and intellectual efforts to comprehend and make sense of these raw data on the other. The second function, very much connected to the first, is to forge such bridges through the use of time-honored psychological mechanisms and concepts with which an analyst is quite acquainted through clinical work — such as the unconscious, projective identification, repression, denial, rationalization, the return of the repressed, and so forth. What cannot be sufficiently emphasized is that the collaborative work of analysts with scholars in other disciplines, and with historians in particular, is a two-way street. A real world exists out there; and analysts cannot help their patients, especially those with traumatic experiences, if they limit themselves to acknowledging no more than the intrapsychic reality of those patients. Beyond that, both historical reality and psychic reality can be infinitely refined, nuanced and rendered truly authentic when informed by their mutual interdependence.

Psychoanalysis and the Rediscovery of Historical Reality

Let me illustrate the importance of the two-way street with a case vignette from my practice as a psychoanalyst. This particular patient was the son of an Auschwitz survivor and of a mother who was a *Mischling*, i.e. the "mixed-blood" offspring of a German mother and a Jewish father. There was a story in the family that at some point while they were living in Berlin, the Gestapo came and arrested the Jewish grandfather. The grandmother, who came from the Prussian nobility, marched down to the Gestapo office, pounded her fist on the desk, and said to the German officer, "I am a better German than you are; free my husband at once." The Gestapo officer got frightened and started nervously clicking his ballpoint pen. I thought to myself that there were no ballpoint pens in 1942-43, an observation that reflects my skepticism when I first heard this story in 1989. The officer then said to the grandmother, "Take him, take him, just go away." Well, at that time I knew of nothing written in the history books that would support the possibility of such an occurrence, so I treated it as a family myth. I said to my patient, "Why don't you try to look it up in the histories written by Hilberg or

Davidowitz? If you find accounts of events that resemble that of your grandmother, we will consider it a true memory." As neither of us was able to find any such corroborating historical material, we worked for a number of years with a family myth incorporating a powerful image of an Aryan grandmother who was protective and rescuing. But in 1992, a history professor from Long Island College mentioned to me an article on German resistance in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September, 1992.⁵ I asked him to send me a copy.

And there they were, the three known incidents of German communal resistance. One was a movement against euthanasia led by Bishop von Galen; the second concerned the town of Passau, whose people demonstrated and wore the cross in defiance of a Nazi order not to wear Christian religious symbols. The third incident was a group action taken in Berlin in March 1943, by two thousand Gentile women whose husbands and children had been arrested for transport to Auschwitz as a last act of making Berlin *Judenrein* as a present to the Fuehrer for his birthday. The final roundup began on February 27, 1943. Ten thousand Berlin Jews, working in the ammunition factories, were arrested. Eight thousand were sent to the camps, primarily Auschwitz. Two thousand of the arrested men were husbands of German wives. They were interned along with children of mixed marriages in the former social welfare center of the Berlin Jewish community on Rosenstrasse 2-4. The Gentile relatives of the detainees demonstrated day after day, chanting "Give us back our husbands." They dispersed when machine guns were trained on them. After they ran away, all the gates in that neighborhood were locked. Within ten to fifteen minutes, however, the women all came back. They returned repeatedly, day after day, until every single one of the two thousand men had been freed, including 25 who had already been sent to Auschwitz. These men were returned and brought to a local prison. The release of the prisoners began on March 6, 1943.

I realized that what we had interpreted as a myth in my patient's story might also have a genuine historical dimension to it. When I pursued the matter, I found out how little had been known or published on the Rosenstrasse demonstrations until the late 1980s and 1990s. There had been two brief film clips shown on German television; a book published by Gernot Jochheim in 1993 under the title *Frauen Protest in der Rosenstrasse*;⁶ and finally, Nathan Stoltzfus' book *The Resistance of the*

⁵ Nathan Stoltzfus, "Dissent in Nazi Germany," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1992): 87-94.

⁶ Gernot Jochheim, *Frauenprotest in der Rosenstrasse: gibt uns unsere Männer wieder* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1993).

Heart, published in the United States in 1996.⁷ The 1995 edition of the official city guide to Berlin—Droste's *Berliner Städte Chronik*-- accurately chronicled week by week the major events that took place in the city during World War II-- including March 1943. The *Städte Chronik* described the fierce Allied bombings that pounded the city that month, but had not a single word to say about the women's demonstrations in the Rosenstrasse.⁸ For me, this episode was a convincing reminder that listening to a patient may inform the analyst and alert him or her to the existence of hitherto suppressed or overlooked historical knowledge. In this case, at least, the official historical record had dismally failed me, and it was my patient and others like him who were the only bearers of this information. The lacunae in the chronicle reminded me of the ubiquitous phenomenon of public oblivion and private amnesia that has proven again and again to be an integral ingredient of genocidal events.

I would like to reemphasize the central point: As long as I had no clue to the historical reality of the event, I could interpret my patient's story of his grandmother only as a family legend. Once I found out about the Rosenstrasse communal resistance, my patient's account began to look much more like a historical possibility. That is not to say that I thought that my patient was talking about his grandmother being one of the women in the Rosenstrasse, but with this historical context – the fact that there had been such an act of communal resistance – in mind, I could listen to my patient more attentively both as an analyst and as a historical witness. Oscillating between the two above-mentioned positions, moreover, enabled me to hear also the informational silence I encountered and to which I fell victim. This is a silence that can be so tightly sealed and so densely knotted because it is constituted by powerful intertwined strands: the guilty silence of the perpetrators, and the repressed memories and voices of the victims and resisters. The different strands have to be teased apart in order to break the seal and untie the knots.

Psychoanalysis as Interdisciplinary Translation

I propose that interdisciplinary dialogue, or disciplines in dialogue with one another, are better suited to capturing the phenomena of massive psychic trauma, the raw data of genocidal events, than any one scholarly discipline by itself. I further propose that psychoanalysis can be regarded as a method of translating from the "language" of one discipline to the "language" of another. The work of

⁷ Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996).

⁸ Georg Holmsten, *Die Berlin Chronik*. Droste's Städte Chronik (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag Düsseldorf, 1990).

psychoanalysis has always implied listening to a number of different languages simultaneously while one's patient is speaking, as well as switching from one language to another. Memory, present life enactment, transference, and countertransference imply a variety of languages. Separated from one another by the dimensions of time (past or present), place (geographical locations in the patient's past, current living situation or therapeutic space), and characters involved (figures from the past, figures from the present, and the potential relationship between the therapist and the patient), a multiplicity of languages is present in therapeutic discourse. Free association in itself implies a permeability and crossing of linguistic boundaries. Psychoanalytic listening intuitively and without self-consciousness hears and translates the different tongues in ongoing fashion. The language of the body, the language of speech, the language of silence, the language of action, and the language of speech-acts — all are part of the patient's communication, as well as the languages of different time frames, different settings, and different *dramatis personae*.

This work of translation may require the analyst to create a new vocabulary for verbal, cognitive, and affective lacunae and silences. Beyond all that is conveyed through manifest verbal content, psychoanalysis focuses even more intently on what is *not* expressed. This latter property may represent its most important contribution to the study of traumatic phenomena, especially genocide. In order to fully grasp its importance, we must consider the crisis of traditional historiography in light of the impact of trauma on three aspects of historical writing: the decommissioning of memory, the shattering of narrative structure and coherence, and the exposure of the inadequacy of "rational" explanations of human motivation and historical causality.

Historians who report on genocide, taking one of the recent instances in which 800,000 people were massacred within two months in Rwanda in 1994 as an example, typically describe the events, the numbers, the locales, sometimes the methods by which atrocities were perpetrated. The writers go on to say that beyond the actual killing and physical destruction, people were affected by an enormous psychological trauma. At this particular point, however, most of them fall silent as though they are unable to say more about it. Historians' silence at this particular moment emphasizes the unspeakable, an aspect of *history as trauma* that defies description in coherent narrative and ordinary human vocabulary. It takes a witness like Romeo Dallaire — the Canadian commanding officer of the U.N. troops in Rwanda, who asked for and was denied permission to intervene in the slaughter — to finally bear witness to the psychological effects of the Rwandan genocide. General Dallaire decompensated

psychologically two years after his return home, suffering from full-blown PTSD -- which he attempted to drown in alcohol.⁹

The general's difficulties in coping with flashbacks and other sequelae of witnessing genocide are corroborated by other survivors of overwhelming trauma. Their accounts, however, place the additional burden on the historian of finding a language and concepts sturdy enough to contain experiences that shatter traditional descriptive frameworks and categories. The wars and genocides of the twentieth century put historians in an unprecedented situation, of having to report and reflect on events of an unfamiliar, overpowering nature. The historiographic problem may have started with World War I, when large-scale killing in itself became a prime motive for continued fighting; the mass slaughter of combatants was chosen as the best, perhaps the only strategy to achieve conquest or victory. In the battle of Verdun, the winner was assumed to be the side that killed (and thereby depleted) larger numbers of the enemy. Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Storyteller," describes the resultant untransmissibility, the demise of both story telling and sharing of experience.¹⁰

With the (First) World War, a process began to become apparent, which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent -- not richer, but poorer in communicable experience: What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

It was indeed the impact of combat experience in World War I, of confrontation with death on a massive scale in the subhuman conditions of trench warfare, that led Freud to focus his attention again on the "traumatic neurosis" (which he put into a distinct category, that of the "actual neuroses") and to formulate the concept of the *death instinct*. The distinctive symptom of this neurosis-- the recurrent traumatic dream or flashback -- repeats the traumatic event or parts of it, as it happened in reality, without any modification. The traumatic experience or event recurs again and again in traumatic dreams in its literality, without the reparative effects of dream work, which is driven by wish

⁹ Tina Rosenberg, "The Unbearable Memories of a U.N. Peacekeeper," *New York Times*, Editorials/Letters, Sunday, October 8, 2000.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, tr. Zohn, ed. Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 84.

fulfillment. The latter is indeed the impetus, the driving force for all *non*-traumatic dreams, according to Freud. Wish fulfillment brings about in the dream a desired, pleasant outcome to a painful, terrifying intrapsychic or life situation. The traumatic dream is therefore "beyond the pleasure principle" according to Freud, stuck in its lifeless endless repetition of sameness. It is not part of an evolving process of healing and working through: it thus offers us an opportunity to observe the death instinct at work.¹¹

In addition to the pulverizing of historical narrative under the impact of combat trauma, the problems of postwar historiography were multiplied when it came to the mass killing of unarmed civilians in genocides-- in particular, the Holocaust. Historians found themselves confronting events that had no precedent, and could not be articulated in the customary categories of traditional historiography. They were rendered speechless. I do not mean to say that historians fell silent, which occasionally was the case. On the contrary, they increasingly assumed the role of chroniclers of and commentators on contemporaneous events. Yet in doing so, they also increasingly began to experience the constraints and the limits of their methodology. To repeat Walter Benjamin's words, "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent-- not richer but poorer in communicable experience?"

The Crisis of Contemporary Historiography

Contemporary historiography indeed faces a crisis. It is confronted with past events that continue repeating themselves in the present but do not yield to traditional historiographic approaches, like computer files that cannot be read by an outdated machine. New tools must be developed and employed in order to give form, structure, and intelligibility to that *incomprehensible past that does not have an ending*. Literary genres and formats must be found or invented in which to tell the full truth; the long-established shaping of historical narratives around political processes and military campaigns simply will not suffice. The definition of "source" must be reopened, in that official documents cover a mere fraction of what has happened. Neither do traditional historiographic

¹¹ Cathy Caruth's observation on the connection between Freud's formulation of the concept of the death instinct and the traumatic legacy of World War I is *a propos*: "Understood as an attempt to explain the experience of war trauma, Freud's difficult thought provides a deeply disturbing insight into the enigmatic relation between trauma and survival: the fact that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic: that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*." Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited, with introductions, by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 9. Italics in original.

approaches account for the continuation of the past into the present, of its impress on present and future events. Nor can the public echoes of such a past be properly heard and contribute to its comprehension when traditional methodology is the only one that is employed.

Ultimately, in order to evade the crisis, an approach to the writing of history emerged that literally breaks with the past, and more importantly, totally discounts its impact. Historian Carl E. Schorske, from the University of California at Berkeley, put the matter quite succinctly:¹²

In the last one hundred years... 'modern' has come to distinguish our perception of our lives and times from all that has gone before, from history as a whole, as such. Modern architecture, modern music, modern philosophy, modern science – all these define themselves not out of the past, indeed scarcely against the past, but in independence of the past. The modern mind has been growing indifferent to history because history, conceived as a continuous nourishing tradition, has become useless to it. This development is, of course, of serious concern to the historian, for the premises of his professional existence are at stake in it. But an understanding of the death of history must also engage the attention of the psychoanalyst.

From the perspective of a certain type of "modern" historian, admission of one's speechlessness in the face of trauma or acceptance of the limits of rational thought in attempting to comprehend or explain events beyond one's grasp and imagination, represents a surrender to mystification and sacralization. It is tantamount to self-betrayal, or rather betrayal of the self-ideal, for scholars and scientists with this mindset. There is an alternative, however-- acknowledging the presence of the irrational, the unconscious, and the roles they play in the control of the rational mind, an alternative that calls for the involvement of the psychoanalyst who has become acquainted with these processes through clinical work. Once familiar with the psychoanalytic approach, one can understand the phenomena of *speechlessness and incomprehension "as countertransference"*, as the historians' own vicarious traumatization through witnessing to an instance of genocide. Loss of coherent speech constitutes the ultimate step in an unconscious empathic identification with the victim or the bystander, for whom the perpetrated atrocities make no sense whatsoever and cannot even be experienced as real. It is thus through their very speechlessness and inability to comprehend that historians register and begin to know and to transmit historical traumata in their utmost authenticity.

¹² Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Random House, 1981), Introduction, p. xvii.

Trauma and Historical Accuracy

Recoiling from the impact of the crisis precipitated by massive psychic trauma, historians — and to a lesser degree experts in the other social sciences — first attempted to restrict source material to the documentary. The work of historians writing on the Holocaust in the early decades after World War II (e.g., R. Hilberg and L. Davidowitz) illustrates this selective approach. No assertion was considered substantiated unless documentation existed, even though questions were not always vigorously pursued regarding the slant, the distortion, or the motives of those who produced the documents. This documentary emphasis created a constricted field of knowledge composed of barren facts that did not merge into patterns or stimulate reflection and self-reflection or open questions of meaning. Testimony that could have given texture to the facts is treated to this day as an unreliable source for the pursuit of truth. We still need to develop a historical method that will respond adequately to testimonial sources. Omer Bartov's comments in his review of Christopher R. Browning's book *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* are quite informative regarding the difficulties, bordering on the speechlessness mentioned earlier, that historians experience when exposing "all the sordid and pitiful details" of genocide and trying to work with testimonial sources.¹³

One specific area in which an understanding of psychoanalysis can inform historical investigation of testimonial sources concerns the impact of trauma on human recall of the traumatic event. I will illustrate this point with reference to an interdisciplinary debate in which several historians questioned the veracity of the videotaped testimony of a survivor who described her experience as an eyewitness of the Jewish revolt in Auschwitz in October 1944.¹⁴ The woman spoke of four chimneys being blown up during the uprising rather than of the one chimney that was actually destroyed. The extraordinary occurrence of a Jewish armed revolt in Auschwitz, of all places, was such a marvel for her that she told it in the form of four chimneys exploding in the Auschwitz crematoria. She found no other words to convey to herself and belatedly to her listeners, what she witnessed happening. Had she indeed spoken of one chimney only, she might in fact have misrepresented the magnitude of the historical event. One has to emphasize that this woman was not delusional or consciously falsifying

¹³ *New Republic*, April 10, 2000, p. 41.

¹⁴ Dori Laub, MD, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, MD, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 59-60.

what she saw. That is how she probably remembered it, and she translated her historical experience into numbers, numbers that were greater than the one that was historically accurate.

The giver of testimony, like the historians, was speechless, at a loss for words to describe what she had observed. Unwilling to compromise her testimony, she unconsciously chose the inaccurate larger number as a metaphor to transmit what she had experienced. Understandably, historians cannot permit themselves to do such things. The problem, however, begins with their refusal to read the metaphor as such, and their dismissal of such testimony as falsified information. The impact on reality of the Auschwitz revolt was indeed negligible. Over five hundred inmates of the camp who took part in it or tried to flee during it were murdered. Although the gassing never resumed, it is hard to say that the uprising saved any lives. The same could be said of the impact on reality of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. Several score German soldiers were killed, but the revolt hardly made a dent in the process of destruction of European Jewry. The Warsaw revolt had, however, a vast symbolic impact on postwar Jewish identity and Jewish history, shaping Holocaust memory and political action (the state of Israel) for generations. It is therefore *not* the magnitude of historical reality itself but the magnitude of historical representation that leaves its mark on future generations -- on survivors and on the public at large. Hearing survivor testimonies is one of the most direct and authentic approaches to such historical representation in the memory of those who lived through it, and thus bridges the gap between history and the future.

Trauma and Historical Explanations of Causality

Another aspect of the contemporary crisis of historiography is the inadequacy of rational explanations of human motivation and historical causality in accounting for genocidal atrocities. Some explanatory theories were put forward in attempts to deal with the historians' sense of bewilderment and having nothing to say. Two kinds of theories were advanced to explain the phenomena that were observed. One relied on the logic of common sense or the notion of "rational self-interest" borrowed from the department of political science. According to this type of explanation, people became murderers strictly for financial gain, to acquire the house of a neighbor or a cow from the next-door villager. Or they became perpetrators of mass murder in order to advance their military or political career. Invoking people's supposed need for approval from a peer group or to comply with orders was another more sophisticated way of psychologizing. The second kind of theory was informed by the methods of a particular discipline, be it political science, anthropology, religion, or history itself. Changes in power

structures, the preaching and internalization of particular religious beliefs, commonly held utopian myths, doing away with rivals or potential rivals, stabilizing military conquests, are examples of such field-related theories. No intervening variable even remotely related to the functioning of the human mind on the individual, communal and societal levels was postulated between a motive – be it political, religious or economic – and the actual commission of an act.¹⁵

Trauma and the Loss of Reality

What is missing in the previously enumerated defensive maneuvers is the bold recognition that the crisis historians face in the twenty-first century is *indeed very real*. Historians are no longer limited to being chroniclers of the past through reconstructing it. In recent times they have been assigned the task of interpreting the present as well. Their falling silent about historical trauma is testimony to the muteness and the stifling effect of the process of traumatization that robs its partakers, victims, and perhaps even perpetrators, of the ability to register trauma, to know it, to transmit it and to remember it. By attempting to bear witness to it, they are, as I mentioned before, vicariously traumatized by it. Their falling silent bespeaks the full erasure of knowledge and memory effected by trauma far beyond the physical destruction it brings about. Moreover, historians are confronted by events that refused knowledge, comprehension and memory, events that refused their own perception and registration. Such events of mass genocidal killing could only happen if their actors -- perpetrators in particular, but to some extent also bystanders and even victims -- took no notice of what had taken place; in other

¹⁵ Peter Novick's book on Holocaust remembrance, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York, 1999), is a tangible example of the total negation of such psychological processes. In spite of its remarkable erudition, the reductionistic approach of this work is closer to a dilettantish style of psychologizing – one based on a commonsensical market psychology of supply and demand – than to true scholarship. By invoking the French psychologist Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory as an explanatory model ("Instead of viewing the collective memory as the past working its will on the present, Halbwachs explored the ways in which present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we remember it"), Novick proceeds with his own thesis. "As I remarked earlier, there is a circular relationship between collective identity and collective memory.... We choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what is central to our collective identity. Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity. And so it has been with the Holocaust and American Jewry. The evolution of Holocaust memory in the United States has been, in the main, the result of a series of choices made by American Jewry about how to deal with that memory – in practice, usually choices made by Jewish leaders.... As we've seen, through the mid-1960's, Jewish communal leaders downplayed the Holocaust, believing, for various reasons, that to center it wasn't in the best interests of American Jewry.... Over the last quarter century, American leadership, in response to a perception that needs had changed, has chosen to center the Holocaust – to combat what they saw as a 'new anti-Semitism,' in support of an embattled Israel, as the basis of revived ethnic consciousness." (Novick, p. 3).

words, didn't give themselves a full account of the real. Only through such refusal to *acknowledge reality* and recognize one's place in it, could such massive murders even begin, and needless to say, unabatedly continue.

A remote example of this phenomenon can be found in the sociologist Jerry Markle's study of news reports of the Holocaust in a local newspaper, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* (Michigan), between 1939 and 1945.¹⁶ When he reviewed such reports, he found no fewer than 350 items, sometimes front-page or headliner articles, which reported separate atrocities committed against Jews all over Europe, yet nowhere was the conclusion drawn that these episodes added up to genocide. The atrocities remained a series of discrete, if outrageous, events in the eyes of the reporters, the commentators, and the newspaper editors. No genocidal pattern emerged for them or was recognized. (One can only imagine the self-inflicted ignorance and blindness of the actual perpetrators in the killing fields).

The haunting question remains to this day: How is it possible that the symptomatic patterns of genocide went undiagnosed? What is the nature of such blind spots in public perception and in the historical analysis of a genocidal situation? And while a great deal of progress has been made, including the fact that public recognition of genocidal patterns is now almost immediate and universal – the same reactions of political paralysis, helplessness; feeling at a loss for an effective response – even when the stark evidence stares in one's face -- persists as evidenced by the recent genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. (To some extent this loss of a sense of reality results from the perpetrator's imposition of his framework on the events, which often leads to the *abuse of language* itself). The perpetrator usually does three things in the course of committing the atrocity, two of which can be subsumed under political scientist's Jacques Semelin's concept of "delirious rationality." a) He claims a position of grandiosity ("I am your God"), to which no conventional rules apply and for which impunity reigns; and b) he dehumanizes the victims. Rats, lice or cockroaches are killed, not people. It is in this way that the perpetrator shields himself from any empathic urges he might have had. But what is ultimately most malignant, though least recognized as such, is c) the distortion of reality. The infliction of torture and other enormities is denied by the perpetrator during their very occurrence through the abuse of language. Reality is smothered under a thick layer of euphemisms. People are "relocated" to new work places, not deported to death camps. They are brought in to "a shower bath," not into a gas chamber. I do not imply that the perpetrator does not fully know what he is doing: I only

¹⁶ Jerry Markle, "From Auschwitz to Americana: Texts of the Holocaust," *Sociological Focus* 25 (1992): 179-202.

highlight the creation of a certain *unreality* bestowed upon the event by the self-deification of the perpetrators, the dehumanization of their victims, and the negation of the event itself. This unreality is then internalized by the victim who, after it is all over, doubts that the atrocity ever happened. To quote one survivor, describing the lines of children waiting to be gassed in Auschwitz, "I cannot believe what my eyes have seen."¹⁷ Another survivor who bore witness to the murder of a baby by the SS commandant of a labor camp did not recognize herself as the eyewitness who was needed when this perpetrator was brought to trial forty years later. Thus she helplessly watched his acquittal.¹⁸ One might consider this result a version of identification with the aggressor, or with the aggressor's frame of mind while perpetrating the atrocity. It is also in part a result of the perpetrator's mislabeling of the act. During the process of testimony, this very unreality is part and parcel of remembering and re-experiencing. When this *unreality* is not dismantled by the passionate opposition of the listener to the testimony, when the self-deification or the dehumanization or the atrocity are not named as such, when the witness is not fully present to the experience of the traumatic event -- this distorted perspective, this very particular property of unreality of the trauma, can recur not only for the victim, but also for the historian who attempts to produce a record of historical truth.

Survivors of genocide experience a great deal of hesitation, struggle and ambivalence regarding their own traumatic memories. As they come closer to them in their associative network, they also enter the affective ambience of unreality, propagated by the perpetrators of the atrocities. The closer the survivors come to their memories, no matter how vivid and how compelling, the less convinced they are of their reality, and in particular, their relevance. The historian of atrocities faces the same danger of losing his or her way in the perpetrators' created fog of unreality. In addition, of course, survivors want to protect themselves and protect their listeners from the impact of traumatic memories, and not to create a situation in which they will be again rejected for their very victimhood. In such an overdetermined context of bearing witness, it behooves the listener and the historian to be on the alert. He or she has to be completely present and inviting, to the historical witness and to himself. The historian's own emotional responses, his or her "countertransference feelings," can be valuable clues and guideposts as to what the victims had lived through. Historians cannot limit themselves to written

¹⁷ HVT-58. Testimony of Helen K., Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale.

¹⁸ HVT-972. Testimony of Jolly Z., Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale.

documents -- they must be present and inviting to what there is to come; moreover, they must confirm and acknowledge what indeed has come.

Breaking the Grip of Trauma

An attempt to grasp these phenomena theoretically can be found in the writings of Walter Benjamin. As a narrator of the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century, Benjamin bears witness to historical shocks and convulsions through which culture falls silent. Reading "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" begins, according to Shoshana Felman,¹⁹ to suggest an answer. Just as "The Storyteller" articulates humankind's loss of the capacity to symbolize and to moralize (and documents the inability to narrate the First World War), the "Theses" suggest that the historian is equally reduced to speechlessness. In a (conscious or unconscious) historical philosophy of power, the powerless (the persecuted) are constitutionally deprived of voice. Because official history is based on the perspective of the victor, the voice with which it speaks authoritatively is *deafening*, it makes us unaware of the fact that there remains in history a claim, a discourse that *we do not hear*. The traumatized are deprived of a language in which to speak of their victimization. The task of the historian, according to Walter Benjamin, is to reconstruct what history has silenced; to give voice to the dead and to the vanquished; and to resuscitate the unrecorded, silenced, hidden story of the oppressed.²⁰

To break the grip of speechlessness, incomprehensibility, and impotence in grasping, describing and transmitting the whole spectrum of the genocidal event, it became increasingly evident that other disciplines, contributions had to be drawn from. The courtroom and the truth commission (which offers amnesty and not judgment in exchange for truth) have become loci for the pursuit of historical truth. Examples include the Nuremberg and the Eichmann trials; the various trials of Nazis that followed in Germany in the 1960s; and the Truth Commissions in South Africa and South America. But the courtroom (and to some extent other public fora like the T.R.C.s) by its very nature,

¹⁹ Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999), 208-210.

²⁰ An interesting recent example of Benjamin's point is the use of newly discovered non-Greek sources to illustrate the "dark deeds" of Alexander the Great. What is significant is not only the discovery of these materials through new archaeological techniques, but the recognition of their importance in telling the story from the viewpoint of the conquered. See Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), Prologue, p. 11. "In this light the Greek adventure in Asia is being reconsidered ... in the light of modern history: [Alexander's] purges and massacres, his reliance on intelligence spies, secret police, his control of information, use of torture, manipulation of images, his state propaganda, his use of terror against civilian populations -- all attested in our sources. They have taken on new meaning in our own time."

and through its strict adherence to jurisprudential procedure, has its limitations. Questions must be specific and narrowly focused. Testimony has its vulnerability and fallibility and is not allowed to evolve freely in the rigorous procedures of the trials. A striking example is the witness Yehiel Dinooor in the Eichmann trial, known by his pen name, K-Zetnik. Under this name he has written extensively about the death camps. At the Eichmann trial, Dinooor began to speak about "that other planet" where people kept leaving him behind as they went to their deaths, but when asked to respond to the court's questions, he collapsed into a faint, followed by a deep coma that lasted for days. He could not bridge the two separate worlds; he could not be Yehiel Dinooor while testifying about Auschwitz. While his testimony was a failure in the formal sense – he is a crucial eyewitness who was called to testify that he had met Eichmann in person in Auschwitz but failed to offer this information to the court – he effectively informed the judges of the limitations of the legal process in articulating historical truth, as evidenced by their own words:²¹

If these be the sufferings of the individual (wrote the judges), then the sum total of the suffering of the millions – about a third of the Jewish people, tortured and slaughtered – is certainly beyond human understanding, and who are we to try to give it adequate expression? This is a task for the great writers and poets. Perhaps it is symbolic that even the author who himself went through the hell named Auschwitz, could not stand the ordeal in the witness box and collapsed.

What is important to note here is that the judges took notice of this event as part of the very testimony they requested and did not get in explicit form, but could experience through Dinooor's collapse. It became clear that law alone could not encompass the experience of trauma, and it joined history in allowing other disciplines to enter. Art became a vehicle for transmitting unrepresentable, unknowable, massive trauma. Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* probably did more for contemporary knowledge of the Holocaust than did many historical and judicial accounts. Testimony became a central pillar of this gathering of truth and its transmission. Literature, poetry, theater, philosophy, dance, all have been summoned to express the unspeakable, for which words did not exist.²²

²¹ Reading of the Judgment of the District Court, " *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, Record of Proceedings in the District Court of Jerusalem, Vol. V (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 2146.

²² A recent example of the power of fiction to speak for the victims of history are the detective novels of Tony Hillerman, set in the American Southwest. Hillerman's detectives are Navajos who draw on the unwritten wisdom of their people as well as standard scientific techniques in solving crimes. In his short autobiography, Hillerman says, "The best review I ever received was from a Navajo librarian with whom I was discussing the work of Indian novelists.... 'They are artists,' I said. 'I am a storyteller.' 'Yes,' she said. 'We read them and their books are beautiful. We say, 'Yes, this is us. This is reality.'" But it leaves us sad, with no hope. We read of Jim

Conclusion

Are we any closer to an answer to the original question of this essay: What role can an analyst play in enhancing historical understanding? Perhaps not -- if what we expect of ourselves is a categorical answer. Categorical answers are frequently informed by an ideological position and therefore useless when the goal is the pursuit of truth. Perhaps we need to stop looking at the event that is outside ourselves and adopt a psychoanalytic approach of introspection, of examining our own responses and feelings (our countertransference) in order to reach a conclusion. By allowing ourselves the freedom to use psychoanalytic concepts and processes, do we feel differently about the various presentations included in this book? Do events become less obscure, do narratives become more thoroughly cohesive, and is their depth enhanced? Do isolated fragments align themselves into a pattern, into a whole -- once missing links, submerged in the unconscious, are brought into the foreground? Do we feel a greater sense of familiarity, can we relate better to the characters and to their stories? Can we put ourselves in their places, grasp their perspectives, once we recognize defensive positions, threatening affects, internal conflicts -- and most of all -- memories that have been repressed? Does the historical process become more readily comprehensible once we allow for the conscious or unconscious transmission of such memories? Do we feel freed up in our imaginative pursuits, less constrained, less perplexed by the unknown and the paradoxical?

Let us attempt to address these questions by looking more closely at one presentation at the conference I mentioned -- the paradigm of a case study -- Jacques Semelin's "Analysis of a Mass Crime: Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia." After an introductory section on categories and terminology, Semelin sets the stage for his exposition of the Yugoslav situation by noting that the history of the region includes mass crimes committed during World War II, the massacres of Serbs, Muslims and Croats. "Bosnia, that had been the stage for incredible atrocities... was hit by horror again. Fifty years later killings were taking place, often in the same villages. The massacre fever spread as if by contagion, and all the protagonists seemed to be joining in the same 'dance of death.'

Chee, and Joe Leaphorn [Hillerman's detectives] ... and again we say, "Yes, this is us. But now we win." Like the stories our grandmother used to tell us, they make us feel good about being Navajos." Tony Hillerman and Ernie Bulow, *Talking Mysteries: A Conversation with Tony Hillerman* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p. 43. The English writer Dorothy Sayers once remarked that the popularity of detective fiction is related to its capacity to speak openly of issues of truth and moral justice.

Does history repeat itself?"²³ While conceding the functionality of atrocities as preparatory, preliminary work leading to mass crime, intended to intimidate and subdue the victims, forcing them to flee on the one hand, while "conditioning" future executioners and preparing them for their ultimate task on the other, Semelin introduces the concept of *delirious rationality*. His point is that the ostensible "rationality" of the perpetrators is at bottom delusional, a kind of "collective psychosis."²⁴ This psychotic element in genocide develops not only because "... repeated perpetration of massacres tends to destabilize perpetrators, adding a 'mad' dimension to their behavior."²⁵ It is because the whole process that leads to mass crime and atrocities is an irrational one, based on an "imaginary" manipulation of the identity of the group targeted for destruction.²⁶ Politicians exploit the process to advance their personal and political goals. The manipulative use of propaganda perpetuates and enhances it, but the forces that drive and propagate it cannot be explained away as utilitarian. Quoting the works of Wolfgang Sofsky on "extreme violence," Semelin states that "perpetration of atrocities has no other goal than itself... cruelty becomes a goal in itself."²⁷ Semelin's concept of "delirious rationality" suggests to the psychoanalyst the intergenerational transmission of unconscious memories-- in this instance, the ungrasped, unarticulated, unassimilated massive psychic trauma of mass crimes perpetrated and unleashed by the Nazis during World War II. The return of the unarticulated historical repressed offers a much more profound comprehension of the "anomalies of civilization" that took place in Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century. Political power vacuums, economic upheavals, opportunistic demagogues, mass media and propaganda, even ancient ethnic hatreds, may all have contributed necessary but definitely not sufficient ingredients to the perplexing massacre that caused this latest European genocide. It is the *delirious* quality that lent this "rationality" its unprecedented power.

²³ Semelin, unpublished paper to appear in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *Mass Murder: Genocide in Historical Perspective*, forthcoming 2003, p. 10.

²⁴ Semelin, unpublished paper, p. 5, p. 7.

²⁵ Semelin, unpublished paper, p. 18.

²⁶ Semelin, unpublished paper, pp. 16-17. This use of the term "the imaginary" comes from Jean-Francois Bayart, *L'illusion identitaire* (Paris: B. Fayard, 1996).

²⁷ Semelin, unpublished paper, p. 17.

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