

**Narratives of Death  
In Diaries and Memoirs of The Holocaust**

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## Table of Content

Preface	3
Introduction	5
Transportation	13
Selection	23
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	35

## Preface

There has been an enormous amount of work published on the Holocaust, in a variety of forms and with different purposes: some to inform, some to memorialize, and some to entertain. There are diaries, memoirs, and testimonies that try to convey the depth of humanity's capability to murder and to preserve the memories of the events in order to prevent similar events from happening in the future. These works, along with other forms such as poetry, music, and art, attempt to demonstrate the intense emotions felt both by the victims during, and the survivors after, these traumatic events took place. In addition to historical works that outline the ways in which the Nazis and their collaborators tried to destroy human life through systematic murder, there are monuments, memorials, and museums that force the world to confront and try to come to terms with the darkest events in human history. However, there is not a single work, in any medium, that can exactly recreate the atrocious experience of suffering for those who have not walked in the victims' shoes. Therefore, one cannot answer judgment-based questions, such as who suffered the most? What was the worst experience endured by survivors? Whose memoir or testimony is most accurate or complete? What prevented the survivors from perishing with the majority of the victims? These are just some of the questions that can never be fully answered.

In this comparative work, it is not my intention to judge the memoirs of the Holocaust victims. Each memoir, diary, and testimony is a different unique account of an event that defies human comprehension. Rather, in analyzing the works, it has

been my intention to discover how the narratives of Holocaust literature have changed over time, and what aspects, themes, and motifs are relatively constant. The sources used in this work have not been chosen from any specific list, as doing so would have meant categorizing the works, and therefore determining those that would fit into the end goal of this project. I had originally hoped to situate my work on a time frame that compared works depending on when they were written. Although that is a worthwhile task, the dimensions of this thesis would not allow for the in-depth analysis it would require. While the list does include some popular accounts, among it are also works that one would not find on a best-sellers list, or even on every library shelf.

In order to analyze the memoirs used in this work it has been necessary to use quotation and description that includes Nazi terminology. To prevent any questioning I shall state here that I do not agree with or condone anti-Semitism, nor do I support the platform of the Nazi Party in any way. I use their terminology in this work for the sole purpose of providing examples, and to try to create context and meaning for an event that is otherwise unfathomable.

## Introduction

Each survivor had a unique experience in the Holocaust, and no two memoirs are the same. However, in analyzing over twenty different first-hand accounts, I have found many parallels that are worth exploring. While the systematized method of the Nazi genocide makes it highly probable that many victims went through similar catastrophic events, they also undoubtedly have different memories of how these events played a part in their survival experience, and how they would later choose to depict them in their testimonies. By closely examining the ways in which these events impact the narrative of the memoirs, we can look at the impact time has had on the views of the survivors, and discover what specific events remain as clear as if they happened yesterday. While it may seem disrespectful to question the memoirs of the survivors of such a trauma, it is the job of the historian to analyze and find the significance of the sources we encounter. In this case, that significance is determined by the relationship between the memories, the act of witnessing, and the expectations of both the writer and reader of the finished work. Survivors did not write their works in a vacuum. The memoirs were inevitably shaped by the environment in which they were written. Henry Greenspan explains how the writing environment impact survivors in his book *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond testimony*. He states that:

In the context of survivors' experience, however, finding what is both tellable and hearable is not a typical challenge. Every version is not only "selective" but precarious, often contested by memory at the same moment that memory is given voice. As listeners, however, we hear what we hear—which includes what we anticipate hearing and what survivors, anticipating our anticipations, have constructed to be

hearable. As a result, what we take as 'the testimony' may turn out to be radically unlike the terror actually recalled.<sup>1</sup>

It has been the work of many scholars, such as Geoffrey H. Hartman, to go beyond the reconstruction and repetition of survivor testimonies to the analysis and understanding of the deeper meanings of the Holocaust and the impact it still has on our world today. It is a time in history that has been thoroughly documented and studied, and yet is impossible to understand or accept. This study has gone beyond the events themselves, and has looked to the way history, testimony, and language are created and impacted by major world events like the Holocaust. Despite the enormous differences in the historiography of the Holocaust, one thing that is constant is the changing nature of history and testimony over time. As the survivors die and the second and third generations absorb the responsibility to remember, they also inherit the dilemma of the Holocaust. Geoffrey Hartman, who has written multiple works on memory, culture, and the Holocaust, says, "it is the 'generation after' that struggles against as well as for Holocaust remembrance".<sup>2</sup> This important struggle is what had helped to build the overwhelmingly in-depth scholarship on a subject that I wish to briefly discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Greenspan, Henry. *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*. 2nd ed. St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2010. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hartman, Geoffrey H. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. 41.

In analyzing the narratives of my chosen sources, I discovered a number of main events that were mentioned in almost every memoir. The closure of schools to Jewish children, the implementation of anti-Jewish decrees such as curfews and wearing the Star of David on their clothing, being transported in overcrowded boxcar trains, the selection process once arriving at the dreaded destination, being shaved, and sleeping in overcrowded bunks, are just some of the experiences one expects to hear about in an account of the Holocaust. These expected motifs are found in almost every work and have become symbols of Nazi persecution of the Jews of Europe. Although these motifs are common, the way they were experienced is not. Therefore, the differences in these accounts are not found in what they included, but in the way in which the author describes the acts and relates them to their lives.

We can claim to know only aspects of what was experienced during the Holocaust, since most people did not survive to tell their tale. Even if we were able to discover the stories of all those who perished, it is not likely we would be able to fathom the excruciating suffering- both physical and mental- of the victims. This inability of the modern reader to comprehend is further confirmed by the fact that many of those who lived through the Holocaust are still unable to understand it.<sup>3</sup> Helena Jockel stated it well when she said, "When the train finally stopped and we arrived at Auschwitz, I realized that until then I had no clue what hell really was. Hell is beyond

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27.

human understanding.”<sup>4</sup> This inability of the reader and the survivors themselves, to comprehend fully what took place under the Nazis was one main objective of the Nazis, who did all they could to prevent witnesses from surviving. In the introduction to her book, *The Memory Of Pain*, Camila Loew uses the work of Felman and Laub to explain this problem.

One of the main paradoxes of Holocaust texts comes forth within the notions of *witness* and *testimony* themselves, which require certain conditions that the massive Nazi extermination project questioned. According to Dori Laub, the defining feature of the Holocaust is that it was – or rather attempted to be – an event without witnesses. The Nazis intended to exterminate the physical witnesses to the crime and the complex psychological structure of the event prohibited the act of witnesses, even for the victims. The dehumanizing, totalitarian, coercive annihilation project made it unthinkable for a witness to exist, someone who could come away from Nazi oppression to offer an independent subjective frame from which to observe the event after seeing it from the inside. The Holocaust created a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself (Felman and Laub, 1992. P. 82).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the attempt by the Nazis to prevent any witnesses from surviving their murderous project, thankfully some did. As a result of the perseverance of the victims, we have an incredible number of sources from which we can glean a sense of what was suffered by those innocent people. While all of these works can tell us a little of the story of those about whom it is written, by their very nature they cannot be complete. Historians of Holocaust diaries and memoirs are in general agreement that the first hand accounts could never be a complete representation of events. Patterson states, “those that emerge from the antiworld are records not of

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<sup>4</sup> Jockel, Helena. *We Sang in Hushed Voices*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2014. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Loew, Camila. *The Memory of Pain: Women's Testimonies of the Holocaust*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2011. 10.



increasing insight but of increasing blindness."<sup>6</sup> Primo Levi, a historian and a survivor of Auschwitz, confirms that while the information remembered by the survivors is of the utmost importance, and should be the basis for what can be known about the victims' experiences, they should not be taken as historical works of complete accuracy or truth:

It is natural and obvious that the most substantial material for the reconstruction of truth about the camps is the memoirs of the survivors. Beyond the pity and indignation these recollections provoke, they should also be read with a critical eye. For knowledge of the Lagers [camps], the Lagers themselves were not always a good observation post: in the inhuman conditions to which they were subjected, the prisoners could barely acquire an overall image of their universe... In short, the prisoner felt overwhelmed by a massive edifice of violence and menace but could not form himself a representation of it because his eyes were fixed to the ground by ever single minute's needs.<sup>7</sup>

The focus of the victims on their daily struggles and needs rather than on the overall events can be seen in the repetitive nature of these daily struggles in the testimonies themselves. The daily fight to find enough to eat, and to find ways to ration the limited food they were given to make it through the day is a prime example of how needs dominated every thought and made many human actions such as analysis or imagination, nearly impossible. William Tanenzapf said that he "had to think and that I couldn't do that when I was starving."<sup>8</sup> Manny Drukier noted that "those who [were] better fed also had other things on their mind besides food and survival".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patterson, David. *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Summit Books, 1988. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Tannenzapf, William, and Renate Krakauer. *Memories From the Abyss*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2009. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Drukier, Manny. *Carved in Stone Holocaust Years, a Boy's Tale*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. 130.

The survivors managed an impossible feat when they managed to live despite all the attempts of their Nazi captors to annihilate them, so why could they not manage another and remember the details? The answer is that some did. Some victims did manage to glean information about their circumstances, and remembered many of the shocking incidents that made up the worst periods of their lives. Attempting to maintain a sense of humanity in the midst of such cruelty, and trying to survive to tell the tale of their torment was a way for many to persevere under inhuman circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of survivor memoirs used in this study begin with information about the early lives of the victims before the Nazis came to power. They talk about their lives as children: school, sports, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends, religion, and most often family. They mention their family dynamic, including their financial situations, the professions of their fathers, and the roles of their mothers and grandparents in their lives. They mention favorite memories, or times of trouble, and the ways in which everything changed with the implementation of Nazi anti-Semitic laws. The importance of relating their lives before they were destroyed by the Nazis is clear: to show themselves as people situated in the real world, before they became victims and then survivors of the perpetrators' world. Scholarship on the diaries of the Holocaust, such as the work *Along the Edge of Annihilation* by David Patterson, argue that while the diaries are testimony to those who died, they are also used as a way for the survivor to write themselves out of the Holocaust and the camps. They write

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<sup>10</sup> Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, 142-143.

their experiences, and the lives they created afterwards, as a way to “recover a life despite the day’s destruction.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, many survivors include this information as a tribute to those who perished in the Holocaust, and act as a witness to the suffering of those who cannot share it themselves.

For many survivors, the drive to record their memories of the Holocaust comes not only from the desire to memorialize their experiences and those of the dead, but to educate future generations against committing such horrendous acts against their fellow humans. Survivor Leslie Meisels tells us why he wrote his memoir, and why he is involved in different organizations throughout Canada to help educate the youth on the Holocaust with the following:

I don’t enjoy reliving my experiences, but people who were fortunate enough to have lived life without going through the Holocaust, and new generations growing up, have to be told about it so they can help prevent it from being repeated for any person, group or nation. I always tell the students that they need to remember that every survivor’s story is different and unique.<sup>12</sup>

Michael Kutz states a similar reason in his memoir:

I tell my story to the world and to young people in Canada because I feel an obligation to keep the legacy alive for future generations to be vigilant so that the Holocaust never happens again, to recognize the rights of all people regardless of colour, religion, or nationality, and to live together and respect one another because we are all God’s children.<sup>13</sup>

Passing on the knowledge of the Holocaust is an integral part of the lives of many survivors. They do so by sharing their experiences in the communities in which they

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<sup>11</sup> Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation*. 23-26.

<sup>12</sup> Meisels, Leslie. *Suddenly the Shadow Fell*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2014. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Kutz, Michael. *If, By Miracle*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2013. 97.

live, and by recording them for posterity. Whether it was to honor their loved ones by sharing their story, or to fill the gaps in their knowledge of the events, each testimony has helped to build the collective memory of the Nazi genocide. This work will focus on two main elements found most often in survivors' testimonies. First I will be looking at the experiences of Jews who were transportation in cattle-cars to various destinations, most notable the concentration/extermination camps. Second, I will be examining the way they describe the selection process that took place once the victims arrived at the dreaded destinations.

## Transportation

The relocation of undesired peoples was one of the main tenets of Nazi racial policy, and was carried out in many different forms. Often called 'resettlement' it was believed by most people, at least early on in the war, that the Jews were being sent to live in the East. However, for many this 'resettlement' began in ghettos, and ended with the murder of millions of innocent people in 'secret' extermination camps in Poland. Due to the incredible amount of human movement during the Nazi era, undesired transportation in cattle-cars or freight trains is a common theme that runs through almost every diary and memoir, as almost everyone who could not escape before the Nazis occupied his/her region experienced it. The descriptions of the victims' experiences on these transports are dominated by vivid images of overcrowding, hunger, thirst, and death. Regardless of when the survivors wrote their memoirs, these images remain dominant in the work, and are described in great detail.

In his influential work on Holocaust memoirs, *The Drowned and Saved*, Primo Levi noted that: "Among our many such accounts there is not a diary or story in which the train does not appear."<sup>14</sup> Not only does the train appear in all the works I have used for this study. It has also generally been used as a starting point, or departure for the unfolding dehumanization of the Holocaust. "Almost always, at the beginning of the memory sequence, stands the train, which marked the departure

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<sup>14</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*. 108.

towards the unknown, not only for chronological reasons but also for the gratuitous cruelty with which those (otherwise innocuous) convoys of ordinary freight cars were employed for an extraordinary purpose."<sup>15</sup> Many scholars share Levi's opinion on the importance of the transportation. In *Still Alive*, Ruth Klüger dedicates four pages of her book to relate her experience of the transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, which she describes as "an unforgettable event in [her] life."<sup>16</sup> Not only does she describe her experience, she also relates her troubles in discussing it amongst her peers, stating that because it is not something that others have experience,<sup>17</sup> it is hard to discuss with people without bringing the conversation to an end. The difficulty in discussing it lays not only in the fact that there are relatively few who share that experience, but that there are few other experiences that can compare. Although Ruth Klüger, and many other survivors, says how difficult this experience is to discuss, they obviously find it unavoidable since it continuously appears in the memoirs.

Jack Weiss describes his experience on the trains in *Memories, Dreams, Nightmares: Memoirs of a Holocaust Survivor*. He says, "the six day train ride was a nightmare", and although the hunger, and the fatigue of standing the entire trip, was excruciating, it "was nothing compared to the endless torture of that journey."<sup>18</sup> The torturous journey into the unknown, that most assumed (correctly) would be their

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>16</sup> Kluger, Ruth. *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Weiss, Jack. *Memories, Dreams, Nightmares: Memoirs of a Holocaust Survivor*. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2005. 102-103

death, was marked by extreme degradation. For some the moments on the way to the cattle cars, and their time within them, were marked by the overwhelming fear of the death they expected would soon come. For others, such as Benjamin Mandelkern, the overriding emotion was shame: "It was not the imminent fear of death that overwhelmed me then, although I realized that this was my end; it was shame. I was ashamed of the terrible dehumanization of myself and the others."<sup>19</sup>

David Patterson devotes an entire chapter in his work *Along the Edge of Annihilation* to the destruction of the human image and the increased shame felt by the victims. The chapter, *The Human Image Defiled*, discusses the ways in which the Nazis distorted the 'image' of the Jews by making them appear more like criminals or animals than human beings.<sup>20</sup> The result was the increased isolation of Jews from one other and the feeling of shame towards both themselves and those around them. This "chronicle of shame and disgrace" was different depending on the situations one was in, and the privileges they acquired to try and save themselves.<sup>21</sup>

This feeling of shame and degradation appears to have been made worse by the conditions of the cattle-cars. Overcrowding, hunger, thirst, the overwhelming odor of excrement, and the complete lack of privacy and decency marked the transports. But like everything else involving personal experience, there are a million variations on the horrors each individual faced during their time in the transportation trains,

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<sup>19</sup> Mandelkern, Benjamin, and Mark Czarnecki. *Escape from the Nazis*. Toronto, Ontario: J. Lorimer, 1988. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation*, 211-232

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

and these cannot be described other than by the victims themselves. In her chapter

"Auschwitz: A Journey to Hell" Helena Jockel summarizes her time in the trains:

The Jews in the Uzhorod ghetto were stuffed into freight cars and transported to Poland... If horses had been transported in the same type of container, only twelve of them would have fit into each car. In that same space, the Germans packed in two hundred Hungarian deportees. We were deprived of the most minimal human needs: we couldn't stretch; we couldn't wash or use a bathroom; we couldn't take a sip of nice cold water. Nothing was allowed. Nothing. For three or four days we endured this journey to hell. Without food or water, people began to die.<sup>22</sup>

Hedi Fried used the same animal comparison when talking about the transportation:

"Freight wagons stood before us, their windows nailed up. These were for us. A hundred of us were pushed into each wagon, which normally held eight horses. We were tired, hungry, thirsty, and rather apathetic."<sup>23</sup> Using barn animals as a comparison is an illustration of both the congestion inside the cars, and of the dehumanizing nature of the events that unfolded during the trip. In Nazi propaganda, Jews were often depicted as savage animals or rodents. During the Holocaust much was done to make these images a reality. The Nazis made it impossible for the Jews to fulfill their basic human needs with some decency. While written descriptions cannot do justice to the sensory nature of these experiences, they are one of the only options that can be made widely available. Any mode that would recreate the sights and smells of the cattle-car to allow a better understanding of what was experienced would be too overwhelming. Brief, clear, descriptions of the experience force readers to confront the situation with which

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<sup>22</sup> Jockel, *We Sang in Hushed Voices*. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Fried, Hedi, and Michael Levenson Meyer. *Fragments of a Life: The Road to Auschwitz*. Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1990. 75.



they are presented. Hedi Fried says simply “the bucket in the corner began to overflow, and the smell of sweat, urine, and excrement was nauseating. Our supply of water ran out and thirst became unbearable.” In this statement, she is trying to convey something that few will ever experience. The journey became so unbearable that she then said, “If we were to die, let it happen soon; it could not be worse than this.”<sup>24</sup>

Relocation by train was a concept known to everyone during Hitler’s war, but the concept meant something completely different depending on your background, beliefs, or position. For those in the army, trains and movement meant being sent to risk one’s life and fight the enemy. However, for those Hitler no longer believed useful for his new world, relocation meant travelling by packed cattle-car, and that almost always meant they were being sent away to die. Not only was death to come for many at the end of the line; it was also a possibility on the trip itself due to the fact that the travellers were given little or no food or water—depending on the time of their transport and where they were being sent. As the war progressed, the knowledge of what deportation actually consisted of grew, and many, especially those in the more prominent ghettos who had news from the outside, no longer believed the Nazi lie that the people were only being sent to different work camps. As the Nazi empire grew, Hitler needed more space to which ‘undesirable’ peoples could be relocated. The ghettos became overcrowded and people had to be removed before others could take their place. For those who managed to remain in the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 79.

ghettos until the liquidation processes began, the waiting became a torment of its own.

While the actual trip in the unlivable cattle-cars is widely considered to be the nastiest aspect of the transportation, it was not the only horror that was involved with the journey. Jana Renée Friesová gives the reader great insight into what it must have been like to wait for ones own turn to be deported from the ghetto:

The time for departure came... gradually even those in privileged positions disappeared never to return. The transports dominated everything; nothing else was important. The dreadful waiting, Bunks emptied. Until now, life in the ghetto, with a little imagination, could have been called 'normal', but that had ended.<sup>25</sup>

She describes the fear associated with the nightly summons for more people to be taken to the unknown, and how with each departure came a mix of hope and fear. The hope was that the deportations would end and everyone else would remain safe. The fear was that the next transport would include you.

We all desperately hoped that the autumn chain of transports would be the last. It was not. Another night would come, and with it, the narrow strips of tissue-paper with numbers and the times of boarding. Nightmares were not dreamt, they were lived. Who? When? Where to?<sup>26</sup>

John Freund, who was in the Terezín ghetto at the same time as Jana Renée Friesová, also talks about waiting, and then receiving his notice:

Fear started to spread about who would be in the next transport... Each of us wondered when his number would come up. On one gloomy day in November 1943, I was handed a little slip. No one knew who made the selections, but there it was—my notice.... Anticipation

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<sup>25</sup> Friesová, Jana Renée. *Fortress of My Youth: Memoir of a Terezín Survivor*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. 163.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

and fear filled the air. So started the journey into the worst part of my life.<sup>27</sup>

While there were many established ghettos that functioned as their own cities, such as Lodz, Warsaw, and Terezín, some ghettos were put together for only a couple of days or months in order to congregate Jews to be deported elsewhere. In her memoir, Eta Berk describes how the ghetto experience was different for her: "In Hungary, with the war rushing to a close, this ghetto process, the process of brutalizing and breaking a people, was more swift, lasting barely one month."<sup>28</sup> In those situations, there was no question about if one would be transported, but when and to where. "The anxiety alone was enough to make your heart stop." Said Helena Jockel. "Waiting out the days, hours and minutes before deportation was sheer torment."<sup>29</sup>

For those who have never experienced such traumas it is perhaps difficult to imagine that one would be relieved at not being deported. But for many, being left behind, or separated from family and friends, was worse than being sent away. Jana Renée Friesová, having escaped the transports multiple times despite being summoned, said, "Staying did not bring [her] happiness. It brought only sorrow and a guilty conscience."<sup>30</sup> Having to continuously say goodbye to all of one's family and friends for what could be the last time disrupted the attempts of the people in the

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<sup>27</sup> Freund, John, and Martin Gilbert. *Spring's End: A Memoir*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2007. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Berk, Eta. *Chosen: A Holocaust Memoir*. Fredrickton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1992. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Jockel. *We Sang In Hushed Voices*. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Friesová. *Fortress of My Youth*. 164.

ghetto to live, rather than merely survive, and made remaining in relative safety compared to their loved ones unbearable. For others, like Henia Reinhartz, the waiting was so excruciating that when the time came for deportation it almost came as almost a relief.<sup>31</sup>

Detailed descriptions of survivor's memories of transportation are common. More rare are those accounts that only mention it in passing, or omit it from their testimonies altogether, even though the other events they endured required that they be transported by the Nazis. Bronia Sonnenschein used only three sentences to report her experience: "We were still together when we were herded into cattle wagons. For four days we could still draw strength from each other despite lack of food, lack of air to breathe, lack of proper facilities. There were about 50 of us in each wagon on the long journey that took us to Auschwitz."<sup>32</sup> This simple description of an event deemed to be incredibly traumatic by many others is in sharp contrast to the extended space she gave to describe her life as an adult after the war. This does not mean that the experience did not have a profound impact on her life. Rather, it conveys the feeling that many survivors share. The stories of the way they have rebuilt their lives are more valuable than the well-documented experiences forced upon them by the Nazis. Her short, yet sharp and clear, account of the trip is positively focused on the things that did remain in her life, her family, rather than on the excruciating experience.

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<sup>31</sup> Reinhartz, Henia. *Bits and Pieces*. Toronto, Ontario: Azrieli Foundation, 2007. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Sonnenschein, Bronia, and Dan Jacob Sonnenschein. *Victory over Nazism: A Holocaust Survivor's Journey*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Memory Press, 1999. 13.

While most of the Jews who were deported from their homes by the Nazis were packed into cattle-cars that left in the darkness of the night, there were some instances in which the Nazis used regular passenger trains. Those victims, who were transported in passenger trains in order to keep up the appearance of a 'relocation' of the Jews to the East, and who survived to write their memoirs, tend to include a comment about cattle-cars despite not having experienced them. Although this might seem to some as a way for the survivor to gain more credibility, it was not done in an effort to deceive readers into believing that the victim experienced all of the characteristic horrors of the Holocaust. Instead, it can be explained as an homage to those who did not survive to tell their tale, or as an indication that being privileged in one way or another had a major impact on people's experiences.

As with everything else associated with the Holocaust, obtaining certain privileges could make the suffering a little less traumatic. These privileges could be anything from having access to move food, clothing, or other valuable necessities, to having a position in the ghetto or camp that gave one access to information. Primo Levi discusses the notion that everyone who survived the Holocaust must have obtained some sort of privilege that allowed him or her to defy the Nazis. Such privileges certainly existed in the realm of transportation, with some managing to avoid the common mode of being transported in the deadly cattle-cars, and instead travelling in a more dignified manner. Jana Renée Friesoá was one such survivor: "Perhaps the Germans did not want to arouse attention by herding us into cattle wagons in the

middle of Bohemia during the Christmas season. Instead, we went to the Terezín ghetto in a passenger train."<sup>33</sup> It was not only the more humane accommodations that made this a privilege. Arriving at the camp after a journey in a cramped cattle-car meant that the victims usually looked to be in a worse state than those who were allowed to travel with their own goods, such as food, water, and clothes. And as the section on the selection process will show, how strong and healthy one appeared to the Nazis upon arrival often meant the difference between life and death. On the other hand, it can be argued that without experiencing the horrors of transportation the victims in the passenger trains were less prepared for what they would experience once they got to camp.

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<sup>33</sup> Friesová. *Fortress of My Youth*. 69.

## Selection

Although a limited few evaded the trains dreaded destination, such as Benjamin Mandelkern, who managed to escape from a cattle-car train by cutting his way out,<sup>34</sup> most who endured the awful journey only saw its end with the beginning of a entirely new nightmare: the selection process at the concentration/ extermination camps. When survivors later wrote their memoirs, many echoed Helena Jockel's comment about the beginning of the selection process when she said: "What we experienced then [during deportations] was cruel but none of us could imagine, or comprehend, what was awaiting us. Nobody could. Nobody."<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the tracks, when the trains finally came to a stop, the Nazi selection process began. By the time Jews were being sent to extermination camps, many people had already endured a selection of sorts, usually done as a way to discern who could work or perform certain duties. While these selection processes could have made a major impact on one's life, the decision made at these selections were not about immediate death. The more conventional workplace selections would occur again for those who were fortunate enough to make it past the train platform and into the camp proper. But getting through the first inspection was not easy. The process that occurred at these train platforms is well documented, and contains few variations. It consisted mainly of new arrivals being separated by gender, and then being sent right or left depending on whether the Nazis thought they could extract a

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<sup>34</sup> Mandelkern. *Escape from the Nazis*. 59.

<sup>35</sup> Jockel. *We Sang In Hushed Voices*. 17.

little more use out of each individual prisoner. Young children, the sick, and the elderly were immediately selected to go to the gas chambers. Elizabeth Raab, who came to camp with her mother and young daughter heard the train workers ask her, "Has the child a grandmother? Give her to the Grandmother. Children and Grandmothers will be together."<sup>36</sup> Assuming that "Grandmothers do not have to work. They will take care of the children,"<sup>37</sup> Raab allowed her mother and daughter to be sent left, while she went right. She says that "I marched on in the belief that I am sacrificing myself for my mother," when in reality her mother and daughter had been sent to die.<sup>38</sup> The people who remained were given a brief look over by one of the Nazi medical officers before their fate was sealed. Typically, it is at this point in the memoirs that most survivors take some time to mention the importance of luck, bravery, or their bodily strength, that allowed them to pass this deadly inspection. For example, many recognized immediately what the Nazis were looking for, and did all they could to appear to meet these needs, even if doing so could cost them their lives. Some young teens lied and said they were fourteen or fifteen, while some adults pretended to be years younger than they were, all hoping not to get caught. When going through the selection process, "men in striped uniforms" told Felix Opatowski that "when they ask your age, if one of you is too young, don't tell the truth. If one of you is too old, don't tell the truth."<sup>39</sup> Others tried to sneak those who were sent to the left with them when they were sent to the camp by pretending to

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<sup>36</sup> Raab, Elizabeth M. *And Peace Never Came*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1997. 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Opatowski, Felix. *Gatehouse to Hell*. Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2012. 38.



misunderstand, or blatantly resisting what they were told. Some succeeded in this risky mission. For most, the selection process meant the death of family members and friends, usually without being able to say goodbye. As a result, it is at this point in their stories that many writers say a farewell to their loved ones, and acknowledge and memorialize their shortened lives.

All survivors indicate the fates of their loved ones, whether they were by their side during the trauma, or learned of their deaths later through other sources. In recalling the fate of her entire family, Helena Jockel describes how she found out from people who knew her that her mother was killed upon arrival at the death camp, and that her sister Rosie had survived the war but died from typhus shortly before being liberated from the camp. She also recounts reconnecting with the surviving family members after the war, namely her brother Joseph, who had survived the war in England fighting for the Czechoslovakian Air Force.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, William Tannenzapf's memoir contains a two-page list of all his family members and how, if the information was available, they perished.<sup>41</sup>

The survivors include this information not only to show how their lives were impacted by the death of their loved ones, but also to give voice to the lives and sufferings of those who died at the hands of the Nazis. Felix Opatowski explains his reasons for writing his memoir: "I know that I owe something to the people who

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Tannenzapf. *Memories From the Abyss*. 83-34.

didn't survive. Maybe I was spared in order to tell their story, in the hope that the world won't forget them."<sup>42</sup>

Analysis of first hand accounts written at different times in the lives of the survivors shows that those who wrote down their memoir later in their life included more historical fact and details than those who shared their experiences right after liberation. It is not that the authors have necessarily done research to make their works 'more historical' than a memoir. Rather, time and life experience have allowed the survivor to add to and update their memories both intentionally and unintentionally in order to comprehend what they experienced. Hearing news reports, talking to other survivors and reading other works, inevitably influences what the author includes. This is especially true when it comes to specific details that would not likely have been known at the time. One example of this that appears in almost every work that mentions the selection process at the extermination camps is the victim's encounter with the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele, or the Angel of Death. Bronia Sonnenschein mentions Dr. Mengele when retelling her experience of the selection process in Auschwitz in 1944:

The dreaded segregation started to take place. Men were separated from women, children from their mothers. Stark naked we stood before some of the SS men, one of them being Dr. Mengele. The slightest blemish on our body, in insignificant scar, grey hair, and the death sentence was pronounced just by moving to the left side as indicated by the finger of the SS man's hand.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Opatowski. *Gatehouse to Hell*. 141.

<sup>43</sup> Sonnenschein. *Victory over Nazism*. 13.

While it is possible, it cannot be certain that every survivor who identifies Dr. Mengele as the man who chose if they were to live or die upon arrival at the camps is correct in this claim. Nevertheless, he appears in almost every memoir that was published in the later years after liberation as the man who sealed the fate of millions of people who were murdered. Geoffrey Hartman describes this phenomenon as metonymies, or as simplifications of the memories.<sup>44</sup> Some survivors mention Dr. Mengele's name as though they knew it immediately when they encountered him. Others did as Jack Weiss and included his name, but stated that he learnt of both his existence, and his importance, later in life:

We are marched in a line towards an SS officer who is standing between two armed guards, directing traffic. 'To the left, to the right, to the left...' It would be years before I learnt this man's name: Joseph Mengele. If I bumped in to him on the street, I wouldn't know him. He was just an ordinary looking German who had usurped the power of the almighty. With a wave of his hand, 'Dr. Mengele' would decide who would live and who would die.<sup>45</sup>

The association of Dr. Mengele and the Nazi extermination camps is so well known that readers expect to hear about him in the memoirs of people who survived Auschwitz. The infamy of Dr. Mengele, and the expectations thereafter that his role would have been important, could be the reason why he is so often mentioned by name, when few other officers are given such great responsibility or blame. Although Dr. Mengele was not the only Nazi doctor to conduct the selections, or the gruesome medical experimentation for which he is also well known, he is the only one mentioned in any of the sources used for this study. There are also incidences in which the survivors know that Dr. Mengele did not play a direct role in their

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<sup>44</sup> Hartman. *The Longest Shadow*. 141.

<sup>45</sup> Weiss. *Memories, Dreams, Nightmares*. 106.

suffering, and yet mention him in their accounts. Felix Opatowski does just that: "This was our first 'selection'. Although the notorious Josef Mengele was known for doing many of the selections, he did not do ours that time. Another SS officer did the selection."<sup>46</sup> This inclusion can be seen as a mode of identifying with the other victims who did perish at his hand. And although the madness of such an experience would impact the ability to remember everything clearly, the rarity of the experience may also make it an unforgettable one. John Freund remembers his encounter with Dr. Mengele clearly:

The day after I said goodbye to Karel and Father, on July 6, exactly one month after my fourteenth birthday, all boys aged fourteen to sixteen were gathered together. We lined up nude in front of the most feared man, Dr. Mengele. He was handsome, dressed in the most elegant uniform. As we passed him, he motioned with his finger, either to the left or right. How do I remember the date? "Wie alt bist du?" he asked. How old was I on that day? "Fourteen years and one month," I said in as confident a voice I could muster. He sent me to the right.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of John Freund it is possible that the conversation he had with Dr. Mengele was what helped to solidify the memory so clearly. It is also likely that while others were too swept up in the chaos of the selection on train platform after days inside a sealed car to remember the exact details, John had the unusual advantage of having just been walked into camp from the neighboring Family Camp, and thus knew what the selection process entailed because he had already seen it take place:

More people were dumped out of the cattle trains. Day and night, the killing went on. We could clearly see men, women and children advancing towards the large crematoria. No one who entered those

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<sup>46</sup> Opatowski. *Gatehouse to Hell*. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Freund. *Spring's End*. 55.

buildings ever left. The feared 'selection' took place on the railway platform less than a kilometer from our camp. There the drama unfolded as those destined for death were separated from the few permitted to live.<sup>48</sup>

While knowing one's fate does not make it easier to deal with, it does seem to have an effect on one's ability to remember it- since it would have been a scene repeated in one's head even before it eventually took place. For others, the overwhelming nature of the chaos involved with the selection process, as described by many survivors, meant that few people would have been able to absorb details about their individual experience, or the specific perpetrators who were involved. An example of this chaos can be found in Henia Reinhartz's memoir *Bits And Pieces*:

Auschwitz was like a mad house. Upon our arrival we were thrown out of the cattle cars and immediately surrounded by SS men with huge dogs and people in striped clothing. They were the Jews who worked at the train station. We were not allowed to take anything with us. The men were separated from the women. My father was taken from us and pushed to an area where the men were. We were then kicked into rows as an SS officer walked past, indicating with his thumb whether a person should go to the right or the left. We did not know at the time that this SS officer was the infamous Dr. Mengele, known as the Angel of Death, and that going to the left meant going to the gas chambers and to the right meant going to work camps...<sup>49</sup>

Reinhartz makes it clear that the chaos of the day, and all the subsequent days spent at the camp, made knowing absolutes- such as names and dates- difficult, and ultimately unimportant. These details only became important to some survivors later as they tried to comprehend what they had suffered, and as a way to help them patch together their memories. Camila Loew says, "testimonies can be read as an individuals' search for a form to complete the gaps, silences, the paradoxes, the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>49</sup> Reinhartz. *Bits and Pieces*. 40.

incomprehension, the scars—of history."<sup>50</sup> For many survivors there are certain details that could never be confirmed since many of the documents made by the Nazis were destroyed, or never existed in the first place. Nevertheless, people incorporate elements from similar stories by other survivors and other available documents to help fill in their memories with historical details. Helena Jockel adds historical details when she remarks on the selection process:

We were ordered to move quickly and stand in a line with other women and children. We were all crying. We had to pass by a row of armed female SS guards who appeared brutal and ugly in their grey uniforms as they looked upon us with hatred. At the head of the line was a good-looking man, standing on a platform, with a few helpers. He was one of the camp's Nazi doctors—it could have been the Angel of Death himself, Josef Mengele. By profession, Mengele was a doctor who worked as a medical officer at Auschwitz. In reality, this man, who had sworn the Hippocratic oath, performed the most abominable medical experiments on women and children—especially on twins. He was obsessed with twins.

When a person reached the head of the line and got to where the medical officer was standing, he pointed either to the left or right with his fingers. I didn't know this at the time, but to the left were the gas chambers and crematoria—to certain death—while to the right was the camp for forced labourers. I went to the right, assigned to Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with the other able-bodied young women.<sup>51</sup>

The incorporation of facts in the survivors' testimonies is a way for the survivors to turn their memories from an emotional appeal to one containing more verifiable information. As opposed to other more emotional descriptions of the terrifying experience of being chosen to live or die in the selection process, Helena's retelling is restricted to physical actions and facts. Those that focus on the emotional experience generally provide more information on the family of the author, and can

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<sup>50</sup> Loew, *The Memory of Pain*. 10

<sup>51</sup> Jockel. *We Sang In Hushed Voices*. 20.

be seen as engaged in an act of witnessing, and retelling their deaths, rather than of fact.

Historians have analyzed at length the challenges to memory among victims of the Holocaust. Sarah Gaitanos discusses the issue of misplaced memory in her biography of Clare Galambos Winter. In looking at and listening to the different ways in which Clare divulged her experiences, Gaitanos discovered that as time passed the memories changed and included more details. "Clare now, in December 2010, remembers that at the selection on the ramp when she first arrived, Mengele flicked her shoulder and said, 'this one has strong shoulders for heavy work'. Nearly twenty years ago she wrote in her memoir that this occurred just before she left Auschwitz-Birkenau when she was selected for work in Germany. There was no mention of Mengele—it was 'the Nazi' who 'touched my broad shoulder' and made the comment."<sup>52</sup> Extended periods of time, such as the twenty years mentioned above, have always been known to impact memory. What is interesting about the memories of Holocaust victims is that there were already inaccuracies in the stories written immediately after liberation. In 1946, David P. Boder, discovered that survivor memoirs were unreliable in what details they included, and that the things survivors misremembered, or did not remember happening at all, could be very important.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the 'truthfulness' or 'accuracy' of each individual testimony

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<sup>52</sup> Gaitanos, Sarah, and Clare Galambos Winter. *The Violinist*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010. 241-2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

is less important. What is important is that they convey the depths of the despair and destruction that was suffered by the Jewish population of Europe.



## Conclusion

"While the Holocaust was a mass happening, every victim was an individual with a unique story, with his or her reaction to the particular evils encountered or, on occasion, committed." <sup>54</sup>

The conclusions I have made in my research are consistent with the historical scholarship on the subject. Levi, Patterson, Hartman, Greenspan, and Jacobs all conclude that the changes of testimonies over time occur in part from the difficulty of survivors in remembering events they could not comprehend at the time, but also from the need of survivors to try and fill the blank memories of the past with historical facts learned later on, as well as the need to share their stories as a way to speak for those who perished at the hands of the Nazis.

The analysis in this work has focused on three main motifs associated with Holocaust experiences and memoirs. It is through these motifs that one is able to determine the difference that time, and knowledge, has made on the testimonies of the survivors. As time passes the memories of the dreaded events begin to evolve and change, as memory is known to do; yet the details in the testimonies become more precise. The accounts begin to include more historical details that were not known to the victims during the events, such as the names of their tormentors, the battalions they heard fighting in the distance, and the ways in which their loved ones were murdered. These amplifications are made by the unconscious adapting

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<sup>54</sup> Tannenzapf. *Memories From the Abyss*. Xiii.

from different accounts heard over the years and the shifting of stories after being told many times, and as a conscious act of the survivor to help fill the gaps in their memory sequences and try to make sense of the horrors they endured. Identifying Dr. Josef Mengele as the man who selected them to live, while at the same time condemning others to die, may come from a strong memory or may be the attempt of the author to find something concrete about their past—and as a result find someone to blame for the horrors.

The different accounts of similar events, such as the transportation that everyone who was sent to a death camp experienced, show not only the variation in the suffering endured, but also how people interpret the same tragedy differently. Some works focus on the dehumanizing aspects of the cattle-car ride, while others focus on their families and the hope and fear they felt. The importance of family is a theme that transcends every work, as survivors attempt to act as witnesses to the tragic death of their loved ones at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. As Primo Levi wrote, those who write as witnesses do so only as a proxy for those who perished. The survivors can never truly know all that was experienced by those who died. In order to understand everything that happened one would have had to reach the bottom—and no survivor did.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved* 83.

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