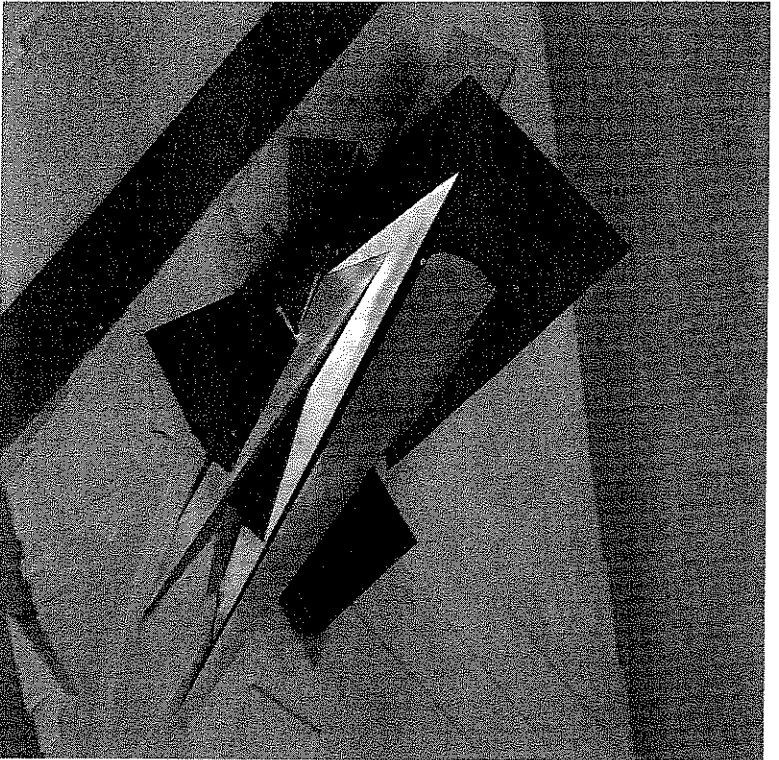


# The Holocaust

Critical historical approaches

Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner



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To Jo Reilly, for her contribution to the study of the  
Holocaust in Britain, and to Colin Richmond, fellow non-  
driver who has taught us all to think more carefully

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## The victims: dealing with testimony

This chapter provides an overview of the different genres of victim testimony, both contemporary and post-1945, including ghetto diaries, post-war memoirs and autobiographies, oral and video histories. It employs a critical approach to such testimony. Such an approach may appear dubious, potentially undermining those who suffered so much, and devaluing people who often took great risks during the war or suffered personal pain after it in the act of creating their testimony. On the contrary, the purpose is to take seriously the testimony, recognising its intrinsic importance, and through it to explore the category of victim and how this fits into Holocaust historiography and, more widely, the study of the contemporary world. Whilst enormous progress has been made in recent years in both the collecting and the respect paid to survivor testimony, the use that is to be made of this material has hardly been subject to debate. This lacuna is especially striking as, adding together the written, oral and video testimony, it is the largest body of material on one event produced by those who experienced it, perhaps already totalling some 100,000 individual accounts.<sup>1</sup>

The Italian survivor Primo Levi related in his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, how many in the camps had the nightmare that should they survive, they would not be believed or 'indeed were not even listened to'.<sup>2</sup> For some, in the immediate post-war period, this nightmare was realised.<sup>3</sup> Now the survivors' words, in text and speech, are cherished. And yet, as Henry Greenspan suggests, despite all this surface respect we have still not learned

how to listen to survivors properly. 'It takes time to get to know recounters, not as abstract "witnesses", but as particular people who bring to retelling their specific concerns, identities and styles ... It also takes time to discover one's role as a listener, both in its particularity and as survivors have come to anticipate listeners' expectations in general.'<sup>4</sup>

Historians have been prone to approach Holocaust testimony largely with the wrong expectations. Raul Hilberg, particularly, for many decades the most important student of the destruction process, has been dismissive of the 'reliability' of post-war written and oral testimony and its 'limits and limitations'.<sup>5</sup> He writes in his autobiography that he has 'read countless accounts of survivors. I looked for missing links in my jigsaw puzzle. I tried to glimpse the Jewish community. I searched for the dead. Most often, however, I had to remind myself that what I wanted from them they could not give me, no matter what they said.'<sup>6</sup>

Hilberg, however, describes the diary of Adam Czerniakow, head of the Warsaw Jewish Council or Judenrat, as 'the most important Jewish record of that time'.<sup>7</sup> But why is Czerniakow's diary so significant for Hilberg? The answer is that it gives a unique insight into the mechanics of how the Jews in the Nazis' largest ghetto were organised from initial concentration through to deportation. For Hilberg, the Jewish councils were an integral part of the destruction process, without which the 'final solution' would not have run so smoothly. Hilberg has rightly been criticised for the crudity of his analysis and for the lack of understanding and knowledge he shows of Jewish history. Certainly as literature, and even as an insight into the impact of persecution on an individual and collective level, it is hard to make the case that Czerniakow's is any more important than the many other remarkable diaries written in the ghettos. Whilst Hilberg's work has subsequently become more balanced, it remains the case that his interest lies outside the Jewish experience of persecution.<sup>8</sup> As he wrote in the preface to *The Destruction of the European Jews*, the book was not 'about the Jews. It is a book about the people who destroyed the Jews. Not much will be read here about the victims. The focus is placed on the perpetrators.'<sup>9</sup>

Levi wrote in his last book that

we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so ... are ... the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance.

Levi added that in relation to the Holocaust the 'submerged' are 'the rule' and those who survived and gave their testimony are 'the exception'.<sup>10</sup> There will always be, as Levi was forced to recognise, an ultimate barrier to bearing witness. His fellow survivor, Elie Wiesel, has gone even further: 'Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation ... The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes.'<sup>11</sup>

It is essential not to expect the impossible from survivor testimony: one does not have to mystify the Holocaust,<sup>12</sup> as does Wiesel, to accept that we will and can never know the horror experienced by the six million Jews and others, the vast majority of whom left no form of testimony; for many, there are no traces of existence whatsoever. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has asked, in the context of Indian women in British colonial India and especially the practice of *sati*, or widow self-immolation: 'Can the subaltern speak?' Her answer is categorical: due to the political, economic and ideological power of British colonial rule, the 'othering' process is such that the unproblematic representation of the Indian woman, under the triple burden of being 'poor, black, and female', is impossible. In short, argues Spivak, '[t]he subaltern cannot speak'.<sup>13</sup> The situation with Holocaust testimony cannot be classified so starkly. Even taking into account survivors' experiential limitation and inherent marginality in power relations, as well as their untypicality, the potential of this staggeringly large resource of autobiographical acts is remarkable, if so far largely unrealised. In contrast, American slave narratives run into the scores,<sup>14</sup> and there are similarly small numbers of Nazi era testimonies from Gypsies, those deemed 'physically and mentally unfit', and Soviet prisoners of war. Indeed, the scale of Holocaust victim testimonies is the exception rather than the norm in the history of the persecuted and exploited.

### The nature of contemporary testimony

In October 1943 Himmler infamously told a group of SS leaders that the 'annihilation of the Jewish people' was to be 'an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory' in German history. It was glorious not only through the service rendered to the wellbeing of 'the body of the German nation' but also because the 'final solution' had been executed without those carrying it out compromising their morality. It had been a triumph '[i]f]o have stuck this out and ... to have kept our integrity ... our inward being, our soul, our character'.<sup>15</sup> There is bitter irony in the fact that, although the Nazis came close to realising their dystopian dream, few historical events have subsequently achieved such historical attention. It is intensified when the quantity and quality of Holocaust victim testimony is taken into account. Indeed, the scale of the disaster itself both at the time and subsequently acted as a stimulus for Jews to '[w]rite and record', as the great historian Simon Dubnow is reported as imploring, in his last words before he was murdered in the Riga ghetto in December 1941.<sup>16</sup>

Admiration for the tenacity and bravery of those who followed Dubnow's command during the war has become widespread in the last decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first. It has developed, in contrast to initial disinterest and even antipathy, into something akin to a state of awe. Such respect, often verging on sanctification, has sometimes obscured the importance of the writing process in constructing contemporary testimony.<sup>17</sup> As the Nazis moved towards a policy of extermination, the voluminous writing in the ghettos, as well as the fragments that survive which were produced inside and in transit to and from the concentration camps, including the diaries of the Sonderkommandos in Auschwitz (the Jewish inmates of the camp responsible for the disposal of the victims' bodies), often had a public quality.<sup>18</sup> The public purpose incorporated either one or both of two time-frames. First, accounts were written to inform contemporaries of what was happening so action could be taken by the Jews themselves or the Allies to avoid/stop the killing. Second, they were designed for posterity, so that the murder would never be forgotten. As Zalman Gradowski of the Sonderkommandos stated, resigned to death but still hopeful that the capsules in which they hid their diaries would survive and be

discovered: 'Let the world regard [their writings] at least as a very incomplete testimony from the tragic world in which we have lived'.<sup>19</sup> The historian Emanuel Ringelblum established the Oneg Shabbath archives in October 1939 with the aim of presenting 'a photographically true and detailed picture of what the Jewish population had to experience, to think and to suffer'. Those working for the archive, he wrote, 'understood how important it was for future generations that evidence remain of the tragedy of Polish Jewry. Some also understood that the collected material served the present as well, informing the world of the horrors perpetrated against the Jews.'<sup>20</sup>

Such writings, however, also had a private purpose: they helped the individual retain a semblance of personal identity at the point when the Nazis and their allies were attempting to destroy not only the physical but also the spiritual and moral well-being of their perceived enemies. As the novelist Aharon Appelfeld perceptively comments, Jewish journals written during the war 'are the final effort to preserve a shred of one's self before it is rubbed out. Naked anonymity was the gateway to death.'<sup>21</sup> The last entry of Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw ghetto diary, written on 4 August 1942 before his deportation to Treblinka ('If my life ends – what will become of my diary?'), is worth exploring further in relation to Appelfeld's analysis.<sup>22</sup>

These words of Kaplan are often reproduced as evidence of such diarists' greater 'concern for preserving a record of the incredible events they were witnessing than for their own survival'.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, such writings were undoubtedly a form of resistance in the light of the Nazis' determination to destroy not only the Jewish world but also all evidence of the destruction process. On the other they were deeply personal and individualised. Reflecting on the achievements of Oneg Shabbath some three years after its founding, Ringelblum wrote: 'Comprehensiveness was the main principle of our work. Objectivity was the second. We endeavoured to convey the whole truth, no matter how bitter, and we presented faithful unadorned pictures.'<sup>24</sup> One of the milk cans in which the Oneg Shabbath archives were hidden has been transferred to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Its founding director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, described it as 'perhaps the Museum's most important historic artifact'. Indeed, great efforts have been made to make

sure that the mud that attached to it underground will be preserved – a past that was in hiding designed for posterity is thus exposed for all future generations. The sanctification of this object and the writings it represents is clearly central to the purpose of the Washington museum – it is designed to show, following the 'objective' tradition set by Ringelblum, the factuality of the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup>

The editor of Kaplan's diary, Abraham Katsh, suggests that his subject's mission at the beginning of the Second World War was 'to devote all his efforts to preserving a record for posterity'. Kaplan's 'intention of objectivity', argues Katsh, was 'carried out with remarkable tenacity'.<sup>26</sup> Yet as early as October 1939 and the Nazi assault on Warsaw, Kaplan describes, in deeply personal, subjective terms, how 'I find it hard even to hold a pen. My hands tremble; I have lived through a catastrophe that has left me crushed and physically broken. And what is worse, even as I sit writing these lines, I am still not certain that the catastrophe is over: I only comfort myself with the hope that I will come out of this alive.'<sup>27</sup> Kaplan called his diary 'my scroll of agony'. Although there are many detailed accounts of the impact of persecution on Warsaw Jewry within it, it is the diary's literary quality and his wide-ranging references to Jewish religious and secular sources, as well as its very personal elusiveness, that gives the 'scroll of agony' its power: 'a living, active truth', in Kaplan's words.<sup>28</sup> In November 1940 Kaplan records that he had not written in his diary for six days. Kaplan's sense of duty to record, his 'responsibility to Jewish historiography', battles against his feeling of being 'completely broken. Jewish Warsaw has turned into a madhouse. A community of half a million people is doomed to die, and awaits execution of their sentence.'<sup>29</sup> Some twenty months later as the great deportations of Warsaw Jewry to Treblinka got under way and the terrible end seemed in sight, Kaplan reflected again on keeping his diary: 'Some of my friends and acquaintances who know the secret of my diary urge me, in despair, to stop writing. "Why?" For what purpose? Will you live to see it published? Will these words of yours reach the ears of future generations? But Kaplan is unmoved and refuses to listen to them. The continuation of the diary 'to the very end of my physical and spiritual strength is a historical mission which must not be abandoned ... Therefore I will not silence my diary!'<sup>30</sup>

In his last weeks Kaplan became obsessed with 'hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations. As long as my pulse beats I shall continue my sacred task.'<sup>31</sup> Yet the emphasis placed by Kaplan himself and later commentators on his historical mission to record should not disguise the importance of the writing process not only as a form of resistance but also as a form of personal survival: 'Were it not for my pen, my delight, I would be lost'.<sup>32</sup> With obvious resonance of Anne Frank, he described his diary as 'my life, my friend and ally'.<sup>33</sup> Katsh points out that Chaim Kaplan began a personal diary 'as early as 1933', which then 'trained him' for his wartime writing.<sup>34</sup> It would be less anachronistic to suggest that to Kaplan, diary writing, often self-consciously, was his way of coming to terms with the complexities and difficulties of the world around him. His wartime diary is particularly significant as a piece of Holocaust literature and testimony because he constantly questioned the genre within which he was trying to express his own experiences and those around him. Chronology and especially the daily entry – that is, the very essence of a diary – cumulatively break down under the Nazi assault. Kaplan writes in June 1942: 'I do not exaggerate when I say that we have reached a state of lack of breath. There is simply no air. Every minute is like a thousand years. Every day is a never-ending eternity.'<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the school teacher Abraham Lewin wrote a few months later after the majority of Warsaw Jews had already been deported that whilst the 'days themselves are full of radiance and light, glorious sun-filled days at the close of autumn', for the Jews 'here in our cramped and gloomy little world, the days are black, desolate, with a tedium which is in itself almost deadly'.<sup>36</sup>

Historians, literary scholars and others have been anxious to point out the difference between contemporary accounts such as diaries and post-war survivor accounts, generally favouring the former over the latter in terms of their usefulness and validity. They have failed, generally, to focus on the *genre* of writing and to explore how the form of the diary, for example, has influenced the mode of expression as well as its significance to the individual who created it. Anxious to treat the diaries as either sacred objects to be honoured or as sources of information to be mined scientifically, their importance as 'works of art' or as part of a longer intellectual and cultural tradition have often been ignored or

relegated in importance.

David Roskies is one of the most sophisticated scholars of Jewish literary responses to extreme physical persecution in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> He has, however, effectively written the Oneg Shabbath archives out of the realm of comparison by suggesting that they alongside what he calls 'the vast Library of Jewish Catastrophe written during the Nazi occupation', show that a new archetype of catastrophe emerged even as the events were unfolding ... [a] new consciousness in the midst of the Nazi terror'. They 'constitute a closed canon' and 'require a separate hermeneutics'. Ultimately, argues Roskies, 'they are sacred' but their sanction 'does not come from God. They derive their authority from the dead whose deeds they chronicle'.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly Sara Horowitz has written of ghetto narratives from Warsaw and how they 'place special interpretive responsibilities on us':

Shimon Huberband's [from Oneg Shabbath] difficult handwriting, his idiosyncratic Yiddish, and the physical erosion of his manuscripts make it impossible for us to read him clearly. The series of slim notebooks which form Adam Czerniakow's diary are often so cryptic and spare that we cannot assuredly recognize the events to which he refers. Jan Korczak's writing is even more impressionistic, personal, enigmatic. That we cannot ask Huberband to clarify, Czerniakow to elaborate, or Korczak to explain is a measure of our loss. Yet, however fragmented, these works must stand in for their authors.<sup>39</sup>

We need to ask: are the responsibilities and difficulties located by Horowitz different from those placed on any examination of a diary or memoir? There will always be elements to a diary that are unknowable, even to those who are writing them: the diarist is often exploring questions of identity and experience, and not, through the written word, producing a definitive account of them.

In the case of diaries written in the ghetto the need is to contextualise them through time and place and the individuality of the author. It is also crucial in the case of a collective body such as Oneg Shabbath to place them in the context of its intellectual forbear, YIVO, the Jewish Scientific Institute, formed in Vilna in 1925. YIVO encouraged and trained ordinary Jewish people to collect material concerning their everyday lives and encouraged



autobiographical writing.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, as Samuel David Kassow has pointed out, 'YIVO, of course, was a diverse institution, and one need only point to the diary of Zelig Kalmanovitch [in Vilna] to realize that YIVO veterans could see the ghetto experience in radically different ways' – unlike Ringelblum, Kalmanovitch was a supporter of the Judenrat.<sup>41</sup> Moreover it would be wrong to place YIVO in an exclusively Jewish context. It owed, for example, much to the interdisciplinary work and the development of the life story approach developed first at the University of Chicago, especially by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their *Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20).<sup>42</sup> Holocaust testimony, like all testimony, needs to be treated with care and subtlety. If it is regarded as unique and incomparable, however, its dynamic quality, indeed its very richness, is in danger of being lost.

The horror of the Holocaust and the contemporary impulse it created to record have clouded consideration of the point that [t]he motives for diary writing are perhaps as many and varied as are the diaries themselves.<sup>43</sup> Diaries, including those which are less articulate, have still to be analysed for their literary qualities.<sup>44</sup> As James Young has highlighted in his *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, '[i]f the diarists' and memoirists' literary testimony is evidence of anything else, it is of the writing act itself. That is, even if narrative cannot document events, or constitute perfect factuality, it can document the actuality of writer and text.'<sup>45</sup> It is necessary to go further than Young, however, and differentiate as acts of writing the diary from the memoir (and, as will be shown shortly, the genres within the latter category).

The diary is a particular form of autobiographical writing with its own traditions and possibilities. Diaries are often presented as an early form of or the notes towards an autobiography. Instead they should be seen, as Felicity Nussbaum argues, as 'the thing itself, not a failed version of autobiography'. In many ways, diaries are more complex than other forms of autobiography: 'Diary serves the social/historical function of articulating a multiplicity of contestatory selves, of unstable and incoherent selves at an historical moment when that concept is itself the object of contest'.<sup>46</sup> Such comments need to be kept constantly in mind when dealing with Holocaust diaries. The author, paediatrician, educator and broadcaster Janusz Korczak was the head of a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw during the war, his life a constant battle to provide

physically and spiritually for the two hundred children under his charge. Food and medicine had to be begged for and yet in spite of his efforts, and those of his equally remarkable staff, sickness was all around him. Yiddish poet Aaron Zeitlin highlights the vital role diary writing played for Korczak: 'In such surroundings, in that state of health, after such a day, he no longer has the strength or will to write for publication: he can only talk to himself on paper, making notes in haphazard abbreviations, almost a cipher; something of his chance thoughts, some memories, a fleeting impression ... The *Diary* has become no more than a register of psychological moments.' Zeitlin also lyrically stresses its complexity as an autobiographical act, confirming Nussbaum's analysis: 'This is neither the legendary Korczak nor the real Korczak. This is a man fragmented into moments, impulses, fibers – a third being, uncoordinated; the writing is more mysterious in its trembling close-up, in its burning sincerity.'<sup>47</sup>

Even Anne Frank's diary, written and rewritten by its author in contrast to Korczak's to achieve cohesion and narrative progression, reveals what she herself describes as a 'bundle of contradictions'. Her last entry, dated 1 August 1944, ends, having describing herself as 'split in two', by outlining her desire 'to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if ... if only there were no other people in the world'.<sup>48</sup> Veteran or novice writers, those who kept diaries in the Holocaust show that the relationship between writing and self, events and their descriptions, is never straightforward.

In 2002, two remarkable books of contemporary testimony relating to the ghettos in Vilna and Warsaw were translated into English. Their publication in the early twenty-first century reflects the progress that has been made in accepting the importance of ordinary people's writing in the Holocaust. A close examination of the presentation of these diaries and accounts shows the way forward with a more sophisticated response to such writings, but also some of the earlier lingering limitations of dealing with various genres of Holocaust testimony.

The first was published under the title *Words To Outhave Us: Eyewitness Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto*. Edited by Michal Grynberg of the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw and published in Polish in 1993, it consists of the written testimony of twenty-nine individuals and is organised into six sections – 'Life

Within the Walls', 'Ghetto Institutions', 'Roundups, Selections, and Deportations', 'Passive and Active Resistance inside the Ghetto', 'On the Other Side of the Walls', and 'Liberation'. As the English translator of these documents, Philip Boehm, highlights, the twenty-nine were of different age, background and experience. Moreover, these previously unpublished testimonies varied in form from diary to report. Boehm, a playwright and author himself, acknowledges that their 'styles range from exceedingly simple to overtly literary; one account is written as a dialogue, and one was transcribed from dictation immediately after the war'.<sup>49</sup> Further acknowledging the individuality of the authors and the nature of their texts, biographical details and information about their writings are provided in the volume. Recognising that what is provided in this respect is often fragmentary and incomplete, Boehm encourages readers able to provide additional information to contact the publisher.

None of those whose work is reproduced in *Words To Outlive Us* were particularly prominent in the Warsaw ghetto. That care and attention has been paid to ensure that the reader is not simply left with their words alone shows that it is now possible to take seriously the testimony of ordinary people who suffered in the Holocaust. Yet Boehm's brief comments on the style of the writings are not pursued further in the collection. Instead, the reader is given small chunks of writing, edited so that they fit more or less neatly into the six categories chosen. As Boehm concedes, '[o]ut of these various points of view, a collective story unfolds'.<sup>50</sup> With care, readers can piece together the individual elements of testimony which weave in and out of the six categories. Furthermore, they can compare and contrast the various genres of writing from individuals with very different backgrounds and explore how the variations in literacy practice impact on specific subject matter such as resistance and leadership. Nevertheless, such neat 'packaging' of this testimony into categories inevitably undermines the integrity of each individual writing and the complexity of even apparently 'simple narrations' can be obscured. The publication of *Words to Outlive Us* thus recognises the importance of ordinary people's testimony for its own sake even if the presentation of the writing is uneven and at times unhelpful. At its best, the collection encourages the reader to get to grips with the full potential of the material as both literature and history. One excellent example is

provided by the diary of Helena Midler, in hiding in the 'Aryan' side of Warsaw. Nothing is known about the author, but her diary, written in Polish, for November–December 1944 survived the war. Her entry for 16 November is typical of her self-reflexive approach to diary writing, which in spite of or even because of its scarcity of detail provides a remarkable insight into her situation:

Long for the patter of autumn rain, long for the monotonous music of tiny droplets against the windowpane, for the sad, gray, overcast November sky, and I long for thoughts at twilight, which – sad though they may be – never begin with the words 'If I survive' and are never burdened with the heavy doubt that all thinking is pointless and empty because in the end I won't survive anyway ...

Like a miser I eagerly lock all my pain in the strongbox of my heart, from where, in occasional outbreaks of sincerity, I take out a coin to give to whomever I'm talking to; then I close the box and carefully turn the little key, since there is no one who can help me. The person in the crowd is always alone, always alone.<sup>51</sup>

The second example of translated testimony published in 2002 was the diary of Herman Kruk, covering the experiences of the Vilna ghetto and related concentration camps from 1939 to 1944. Kruk was, in many respects, a one-person version of Oleg Shabbath in Warsaw. He was, like Ringelblum, linked to YIVO. As the librarian in the Vilna ghetto, and a political activist (a member of the left-wing Bund), he was in a good position to gather material as well as write his detailed diary of life during the Second World War. His diary was first published in Yiddish in 1961. The English version is complex, including the footnotes provided in the earlier version, corrections, and material written by Kruk that had not come to light by 1961. Piecing the material together, related its later editor, Benjamin Harshav, was like putting together 'a half-lost mosaic'.<sup>52</sup>

The approach to publishing Kruk's testimony is the reverse of that adopted in *Words to Outlive Us*. Even though edited to exclude the related documentation gathered by Kruk, it amounts to several hundred thousand words. Moreover, Benjamin Harshav, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Yale University, provides a detailed introduction to Herman Kruk, including not only the context of the diaries but also an analysis of what he calls the 'three concentric circles' of Kruk's writing. These were 'his private life and personal responses to events; the life of his



party and extended family, the "Bund" and the Bundists; and the world of the ghetto as a whole'. Harshav also identifies four 'modes of discourse' in Kruk's diaries: Kruk's own notes on developments in the ghetto, his reactions to documentation, recording witness accounts, and an attempt at an overview chronicle of the whole situation. As Harshav adds, 'Kruk did not decide between these genres and their rather diverse tones of discourse. He wrote them simultaneously as complementary kinds of documentation'.<sup>53</sup> It is disappointing, given this subtle and multi-layered analysis of Kruk's writing, that Harshav does not pursue this literary approach further. Indeed, Harshav ultimately dismisses the diarist for the quality of his language, which was 'rather poor'. Such an elitist approach to ordinary testimony is bound to lead to its importance being limited to the historical information contained, which in the case of Kruk happens to be of major significance. Harshav therefore concludes that he 'shall let the diaries speak for themselves'.<sup>54</sup> But this is hardly to do them justice as pieces of the remarkable literacy practice of an ordinary man: diaries, like any genre of writing, never simply 'speak for themselves'. Kruk's diaries were, as he stated in his last writings, to provide a 'trace' for future generations. His motive, however, was not simply to be a contemporary historian, or a provider of material for the future historian: 'I write because I must write – a consolation in my time of horror'.<sup>55</sup>

The publication of these two books in 2002 is thus hopeful as a way forward in confronting victim testimony – even if the tendencies towards expecting a 'collective' voice to emerge to honour the memory of those murdered, and a degree of patronisation, still persist. Understanding the richness and complexity of testimony such as that of Herman Kruk or Helena Milder requires an approach that draws from many disciplines, one that recognises the intrinsic worth of ordinary people and one that takes seriously the literacy practices and individuality of their writing. The attempt by the doyen of Holocaust studies, Raul Hilberg, in his analysis of sources, to divide and prioritise diaries as 'documents' and post-war recollections as 'testimony' is therefore simplistic and misleading, but unfortunately widely adhered to by many scholars of the subject.<sup>56</sup> Utilised to show the reality of the experience of the Holocaust, ghetto and other diaries, the literariness and complexity of these forms of testimony have been underval-

ued, including the most famous text connected to the Second World War, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.<sup>57</sup> The same is true as we will now see for post-war testimony, with the additional burden that its 'reliability' has been seen as fundamentally suspect.

### Confronting post-war testimony

From the late twentieth century, the apparently obvious need and rectitude of collecting testimony almost as a form of rescue archaeology<sup>58</sup> as the survivors dwindle in numbers has subsumed almost all the energy of those involved, even to the extent of obscuring the dilemma of whether it has been appropriate to the needs of all those interviewed. The remaining sections of this chapter will outline how this mass of post-war material has been collected and has subsequently been used by historians, film and documentary makers, museums and others, how survivors have responded to it, and how it might be taken forward. Before then, however, it is necessary to summarise briefly the place of survivor/victim testimony in Holocaust representation in the years following the Second World War.

The testimony of Holocaust victims has not been static in relation to quantity, focus or purpose. Yad Vashem has estimated that from 1945 to 1949 some seventy-five Holocaust memoirs were published, and for the first half of the 1950s the numbers were even smaller. From the 1960s, however, with an initial impetus from the Eichmann trial, the numbers started to show a year-on-year increase, with only a few exceptions. In 1995 alone the number of memoirs had increased to 180. Analysing these figures, Robert Rozett, director of the Yad Vashem Library, has placed the emphasis on changes in the survivors themselves. The impulse in more recent years, he argues, has been to leave a record for children and grandchildren as the survivors reach the end of their lives.<sup>59</sup> The internal factors certainly must not be dismissed, but they cannot be taken in isolation in explaining why survivors have and have not provided their testimony since 1945.

Immediately after the war, many of the accounts were written in Yiddish and Hebrew, clearly for a Jewish audience in some ways as memorials to the loss. It has been suggested by his son that Wladyslaw Szpilman in 1945 wrote his account of survival, published in Polish the following year as *Death of a City*, 'for him-

self rather than humanity in general.<sup>60</sup> A powerful memoir of life in the Warsaw ghetto and then in hiding on the Aryan side, it slipped into obscurity, suppressed by the Stalinists within Poland.<sup>61</sup> It was then rediscovered and published in English in the late 1990s, before being made into an award-winning film, *The Pianist* (2002).<sup>62</sup> Szpilman was involved with the Jewish resistance, helping to smuggle arms into the ghetto, although he 'mentions this brave deed modestly and only in passing'. His is an anti-heroic account of the Warsaw ghetto and his experiences in general. After several months in hiding he related his mood of despair: 'it seemed to me quite likely that this state of affairs might never end. And then what would become of me? After years of pointless suffering I would be discovered one day and killed.' As Wolf Biermann suggests: 'Wladyslaw Szpilman describes it in such a way that we can get a deeper understanding of something we already suspected: prisons, ghettos and concentration camps... are not designed to ennoble the character. Hunger does not bestow an inner radiance.'<sup>63</sup> The critical and commercial success of Szpilman's memoir over half a century after it was originally written suggests, perhaps, a greater maturity in the reception of Holocaust testimony. It highlights again Greenspan's comments about the importance of taking account of the expectations of the reader in understanding the dynamics of survivor accounts.

\* Those published in English immediately after the war were there to inform, to add to the proof of evidence. Primo Levi, according to his biographer, found that the hardest part of writing his account of the camps, published as *If This Is a Man* (1947), was containing his anger: he feared that if 'he gave way to grief or moral outrage it would tarnish his credibility as a witness'.<sup>64</sup> The difficulty faced by Primo Levi in getting his memoirs published is indicative of the struggle for recognition not of Nazi crimes, but of the impact they had on their victims – it was rejected by a major American publishing house and then seven Italian publishers and sold only half of its print run of 3,000 copies.<sup>65</sup> If Jewish victims were marginalised, this is even more so of the others persecuted under the Third Reich. In the post-war trials, for example, in the thousands upon thousands of pages of evidence and testimony there was little mention of the Romanies, perhaps half a million of whom were murdered in the war.<sup>66</sup> Over fifty years later, the

Gypsy Holocaust, or Porajmos, remains to be recognised, historicised and memorialised. In 2000, at the Fifth World Romani Congress in Prague, a 'Declaration of a Nation' was proclaimed. Its second sentence tellingly reads, with the style and spelling of the original preserved: 'We, a Nation of which over half a million persons were exterminated in a forgotten Holocaust, a Nation of individuals too often discriminated, marginalized, victim of intolerance and persecutions, we have a dream, and we are engaged in fulfilling it.'<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, there were projects to interview Jewish survivors or to encourage them to write down their testimony in the last months of the war and immediately after. In some cases their use was intended as a form of memorial to those who had been murdered, as in the creation of Yizkor Books for the destroyed Jewish communities in east European towns and villages. The material collected was largely confined to the personal domain or in small-scale publications in Yiddish. The Yizkor Books represented the printed version of what Deborah Dwork has referred to as the survivors' 'islands of speech' in a post-war world that was largely indifferent or hostile to their memories. Revealing the dynamic nature of such testimonies which have never been fixed in time or place, Rosemary Horowitz suggests that the Yizkor Books 'reflect an ongoing interpretation of the Holocaust by the survivors themselves'.<sup>68</sup>

Survivor testimonies were also used as both legal and historical evidence of atrocities in order to confirm the 'real' nature of Nazism.<sup>69</sup> With regards to the latter, underfunded bodies created before, during or immediately after the war, such as the Wiener Library in London, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, carried out early and often uneven interviews with Jewish survivors about their war experiences.<sup>70</sup> The only major independent academic study of survivors that was more concerned to gather information on the impact on the individual, rather than to act as qualitative proof of the evils of Nazi-Fascism, was carried out by the psychologist David Boder. In 1946 Boder interviewed 109 people, largely but not exclusively Jewish, in displaced persons camps across the continent. Significantly, funding of the project and publication of its results proved difficult.<sup>71</sup>

With regards to the legal sphere, post-1945 war crimes trials

tended to marginalise or discount survivor evidence in favour of documentary evidence – an eclipsing which reflected legal tradition, especially in the USA, as well as the lack of status and respect given to the victims of Nazism.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the early historians of the Holocaust from Leon Poliakov to Raul Hilberg not only based their work on the material collected at the trials, but shared the prejudices of those responsible for them against using the testimony of the survivors. Poliakov, for example, in his *Harvest of Hate*, first published in French in 1951, stated that 'wherever possible, to forestall objections, we have quoted the executioners rather than the victims'.<sup>73</sup> The tiny number of scholars who were engaged in the early stages of creating a history of the Holocaust were thus part of a world that at best told survivors to forget and get on with re-building their lives and at worst dumped them in displaced persons camps, an integral part of the mass of 'unwanted' refugees across Europe.<sup>74</sup>

In the sphere of historiography, the social history revolution in which the collection of oral testimony was central did not gather serious momentum until the 1960s. Thus in 1952 Gerald Reitlinger, the British Jewish historian and author of *The Final Solution* (after Poliakov's account the first overview of the Nazi policy of extermination), could write that he did not consider using the testimony of the 'hardy survivors', because they 'were seldom educated men'.<sup>75</sup> Reitlinger, typical of the history profession, was a product of an education at an exclusive private school and Oxford University.<sup>76</sup> Equally, in sociology, the dabbling in life history analysis coming out of the Chicago school in the inter-war period suffered from 'utter rejection' by the 1950s in favour of mass quantitative social survey work in which the individual was totally subsumed.<sup>77</sup> It was significant that when Yad Vashem in Jerusalem did begin to actively collect written and oral testimony in the mid-1950s it was part of what its director called 'scientific research', following in many ways the approach of pre-war Jewish research bodies such as YIVO and Oneg Shabbath during the war itself.<sup>78</sup> The questionnaire it developed to interview survivors included nearly five hundred questions, enabling standardisation (and presumably quantification) of responses.<sup>79</sup> In terms of general intellectual currents, it has taken the 'history from below movement' (alongside the more recent return to favour of qualitative, interdisciplinary approaches to the study of society, partly

prompted by the pluralistic impulses of postmodernism) to enable fresh responses to Holocaust testimony. If we move from a theoretical level to one of implementation, however, it is apparent that we have reached a stage where few would seriously replicate the view of a Poliakov or a Reitlinger in terms of using Holocaust testimony, but that problematising its use and collection is a different matter again.

In 1986 Martin Gilbert published his *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*.<sup>80</sup> Until this book, the author was very much an elite political-diplomatic historian, associated particularly with his multi-volume life of Winston Churchill.<sup>81</sup> In apparent contrast, Gilbert's *The Holocaust* attempts a moving social history of the event. It is, in his words, 'an attempt to draw on the nearest of the witnesses, those closest to the destruction, and through their testimony to tell something of the suffering of those who perished, and are forever silent'.<sup>82</sup> In fact, with his insistence on chronology, and the use of extensive contemporary sources, including diaries and reports, as well as later oral and written testimony, Gilbert's *The Holocaust* is more at one with the rest of his prolific writings than first appears. Just as his account of Churchill progresses day by day, so the Holocaust material is brought together 'into a single chronological narrative', which Gilbert himself suggests is 'set out rather like a diary'.<sup>83</sup>

The centrality of victim testimony in its various forms marks out this book as pathbreaking. Its popular reception was and continues to be very positive, reflecting a greater concern not only with the subject matter but also the respect shown to Holocaust survivors, almost all of whom have been very favourable towards Gilbert's work.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* has gained status as an almost semi-sacred text, its use recommended for commemoration of Yom Hashoah. As George Steiner put it, '[t]his tome is an archivist's Kaddish, the never-to-be-silenced act of remembrance and prayer for the dead'.<sup>85</sup> Its reverential approach to victim testimony has clearly met the emotional need of a wide readership, Jewish and non-Jewish. Many reviewers, perhaps inspired by misplaced guilt, have written how they felt duty-bound to read to the end its harrowing descriptions of the terror inflicted on the Jews of Europe.<sup>86</sup>

In some respects Gilbert's book remains exceptional. No one subsequently has attempted a detailed chronology of the Holo-

SOCIAL SCIENCE

caust based on the testimony of the persecuted.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the approach of reproducing testimony as an *illustrative device*, 'used only in a complementary way' to show the development of the Nazis' campaign of extermination, has become almost standard.<sup>88</sup> Many recent documentary series, including the BBC's award-winning *The Nazis: A Warning from History* (1997), use the words of ordinary people to reveal the extraordinary everyday detail of mass murder and its origins, replicating Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, including the antagonistic approach to the interviewing of perpetrators and bystanders. But this new, superficially more inclusive social history has its limitations. Sometimes, the information imparted is banal, sometimes it is breathtaking. It is rarely included, however, in a way that would disrupt the general narrative structure of the documentary. The words of the eyewitnesses are used to bring home the reality of what racism or mass murder meant in practice. Yet the testimony itself, if not always in the form of soundbites, is rarely allowed to have space to reveal its own internal dynamics, especially in relation to the rest of the person's life story.<sup>89</sup>

Returning to Gilbert, a similar approach to testimony has been used in his later *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past* (1997), a diary of a two-week field trip across the continent of Europe. Precise dates from the extermination process are never far from the surface of this moving if somewhat Pooteresque account. Nevertheless, the format forces Gilbert to move beyond the reliance on chronology alone and embrace the importance of geography in confronting the Holocaust. At its best, the interplay between history, memory and landscape in *Holocaust Journey* enables a more interesting and revealing approach to the use of testimony allowing it to be contextualised by time, place and interpretation.

A similar stage of incorporation of Holocaust testimony has been reached, it must be suggested, in historiography, typified perhaps in Saul Friedländer's synthetic overview *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution 1933-39* published in 1997.<sup>90</sup> Friedländer has not only been an outstanding historian of the Holocaust but is a pioneer of the study of the memory of the event.<sup>91</sup> As Michael Burleigh has written: 'Friedländer is the most astute, sophisticated and stylish historian of the Holocaust working in any language today'.<sup>92</sup> The book is a remarkable achieve-

ment, but it is, given Friedländer's general subtlety of approach and his awareness of the potential conflict between history and memory, disappointing in its use of testimony.

Friedländer as a historiographer, is well aware of the tendency to remove the victim when dealing with Nazi antisemitism. He thus states in his introduction that his 'study will attempt to convey an account in which Nazi policies are indeed the central element, but in which the surrounding world and the victims' attitudes, reactions and fate are no less an integral part of this unfolding history'.<sup>93</sup> His justification of this approach will be quoted at length:

In many works the implicit assumptions regarding the victims' generalized hopelessness and passivity, or their inability to change the course of events leading to their extermination, have turned them into a static and abstract element of the historical background. It is too often forgotten that Nazi attitudes and policies cannot be fully assessed without knowledge of themselves. Here, therefore, at each stage in the description of the evolving Nazi policies and the attitudes of German and European societies as they impinge on the evolution of those policies, the fate, the attitudes, and sometimes the initiatives of the victims are given major importance. Indeed, their voices are essential if we are to attain an understanding of this past. For it is their voices that reveal what was known and what *could* be known; theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality. The constant presence of the victims in this book, while historically essential in itself, is also meant to put the Nazis' actions into full perspective.<sup>94</sup>

Friedländer certainly honours his word in including the perspective of Jews throughout this book. And yet ultimately there is a sense that these are tacked on to what is the essence of the narrative structure – one created and driven by the Nazis. The presence of the Jews humanises the text and shows what happens when discriminatory legislation is put in place and violence inflicted upon a minority. But Friedländer's critical approach to sources relating to high-level Nazi documentation is largely absent in relation to the diaries, written and other testimony of the Jews. They are there ultimately to illustrate the nature of Nazism, as is the case with the majority of documentary and museum present-