

INTRODUCTION

He who knows no fear and is ready to risk his life will be able to preserve for the coming generation an exact account of what is happening to us at this time.

—Zelig Kalmanovitch,
Vilna Ghetto diary, June 22, 1941

SPEAKING AT A 1975 CONFERENCE, THE POET AND FORMER PARTISAN Abba Kovner recalled opening the door to a room in the Vilna Ghetto and finding a man seated at an old sewing machine who was not sewing cloth but blank paper, without thread. What, Kovner asked in astonishment, was he doing? “I’m writing,” the man said. On a sewing machine? “I’m writing the history of the Ghetto.” Without thread? “I will thread it later. When we survive this, I shall put the thread into the holes.” What such a peculiar text might have told us we can only guess. Looking back, Kovner saw it as a challenge for posterity—“Our problem is really that of taking the white paper and trying to thread the holes without going mad,” he remarked—but we may also find it emblematic of the vicissitudes of written witness, remarkable in its diversity and tantalizing in its fragility. There are many such evanescent texts. A young woman known to us only as Leah blindly threw a note from a train whose undisclosed destination was Auschwitz:

Please kindly toss this into a box.

I’m in the Praga station, writing a few words to you. It is unknown where we are traveling.

Be well.

Ravensbrück survivor Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat recounted secret letters written in code to her family in Poland using invisible ink made with urine. When her pencil and the scraps of paper on which she recorded her experiences were confiscated time and again in Bergen-Belsen, recalled Agnes

Sassoon, “my brain became my pencil, and my memory became the paper on which I wrote.”

Writing might also be called upon to take the place of memory. Ruth Altbecker Cyprys and her three-year-old daughter Eva, after jumping from a train bound for Treblinka, were hidden separately by gentile protectors during the remainder of the war. Afterward, as a result, Eva did not even recognize her mother when they were reunited, so that her mother’s retrospective journal, written in Israel after their postwar emigration, became Eva’s only memory of their prewar relationship. Carefully set down for future reference, the writer’s own personal record might later offer little to go on. Reconstructing the deteriorated journal that she kept first in the Płaszów labor camp and then in Auschwitz, Ana Novak reflected on the tenuous connection between writing and the experience it was meant to preserve: “*What could I have written on this page? I don’t know. And on the one before? It’s all obliterated. The paper is a faded scrap, devoured by time. From what tomb of memory have they escaped, these drunken letters? Memory? No, the thread that leads there has been cut a long time. . . . It’s a stranger who [now] deciphers these ancient pages.*” For others, by the same token, the twisting path to memory only became clear through the discipline of writing. Jean Améry, after twenty years of silence, felt compelled to write the first essay in what became his classic study *At the Mind’s Limits* on the occasion of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1964. His experience had not been forgotten or repressed. Rather, Améry maintained in an appropriately circuitous formulation, he had always been “in search of the time that was impossible to lose,” but “only in the process of writing did I recognize what it was that until then I had indistinctly caught sight of in half-conscious intellectual rumination and that hesitated at the threshold of verbal expression.”

Writing in the ghettos and camps themselves, where there was little time for rumination, was a different matter altogether, subject to multiple dangers and contingencies. At extremity, writing might have to stand in for a self that was being slowly annihilated. You lose your house and personal belongings, you are pressed into a ghetto, separated from family, and reduced at last to a “famished body that moves from place to place, without the divine image,” remembered survivor and novelist Aharon Appelfeld. A journal in this case represented “the final effort to preserve a shred of one’s self before it is rubbed out. Naked anonymity was the gateway to death.” Appelfeld himself

may not have been able to keep a journal when, at age nine, he escaped a concentration camp and went into hiding, but his later assessment helps us to account for Primo Levi's near abhorrence of the *Muselmänner*, those skeletal figures who "drag themselves on in an opaque inner solitude" and die "without leaving a trace in anyone's memory." Erased in anonymous masses, wrote Levi, they have "the same story, or, more exactly, no story," following "the slope to the bottom, naturally, like streams running down to the sea." Only a writer of Levi's stature, it might be said, could take such a jaundiced view of the unwritten life. Like Appelfeld, however, he tells us of the psychological urgency of writing or at least somehow telling one's story in the face of annihilation, as well as the moral urgency of speaking for the dead, an obligation felt by writers as different as Elie Wiesel and Yehiel Dinur, better known by his pen name Ka-Tzetnik 135633—his name derived from "KZ," the abbreviation for *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp), and the number from his Auschwitz tattoo.

Even if words could be put on paper, either the writer or the text or both might be swallowed up in the whirlwind of destruction. "Razglednica," one of Miklos Radnoti's poems testifying to the massacre of Hungarian Jews during the Nazis' retreat from advancing Soviet forces, was found in a notebook in his jacket when his corpse was exhumed from a mass grave. Abraham Goldfarb, who survived Treblinka, later testified that he and other members of the forced labor group known in that camp as *Arbeitsjuden* (Work Jews) and in Auschwitz as *Sonderkommando* (Special Operations Unit)—those prisoners, mainly Jews, who helped force victims into the gas chambers and then processed the bodies afterward—put scraps of paper in bottles buried with skeletal remains in hopes of leaving a record of their witness to genocide. In this case the writer survived while the messages did not. Conversely, a group of Auschwitz prisoners set out to collect their writings in an anthology, but all that survived was the introduction by Abraham Levite, who wrote: "The noose has been thrown round our necks . . . [but] let us take full advantage of this moment when the hangman sucks down his swill, and seek to use the gallows as our writing desk . . . to tell our story."

Although many survivors elected or felt constrained to remain silent, others were eager to write their own stories or have them written down. "We, the survivors, the surviving witnesses," wrote Moshe Yosef Feigenbaum in the first issue of *Fun Letstn Khurban* (*From the Latest Destruction*), a

Yiddish-language journal published in Munich by Jewish Displaced Persons, must make a record “for the historian . . . so that he can create for himself a clear picture of what happened to us and among us.” To make that record, however, was not easy. “No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it,” wrote Robert Antelme, in his 1947 preface to *The Human Race*. “And then, even to us, what we had to tell would start to seem *unimaginable*.” Nella Rost, who collected testimony in Kraków, likewise feared that she would be able to “find no words to express such suffering and crimes.” We need a new language to describe a mother “hearing the screams of her children being buried alive, or the feelings . . . of people incarcerated in a narrow and dark gas chamber. . . . Who can reproduce the fear and pain of human beings locked in burning synagogues?”

A number of contemporary scholars have taken up the idea that the Holocaust is beyond representation. Indeed, Jean-François Lyotard famously used the analogy of an earthquake that had destroyed “not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes.” What is remarkable about self-disavowing assertions such as those of Antelme and Rost, however, is that they quite often set the stage for perfectly clear, sometimes sharply eloquent, writing. Telling his story in the aftermath of the war, Daniel Bennaïm despaired of finding adequate words—“I don’t know what they are. I can’t discover them . . . my mind goes blank”—before proceeding to describe the ordeal of his mother during the family’s train transport to Auschwitz when a woman sitting next to her died and slumped into her lap: “My mother froze in absolute terror; she averted her head and neither moved nor spoke again. Two entire days—the last two days of her life—were spent in this way. The corpse lay in her lap and putrefied there. No one could do anything; no one could say anything. I looked at my mother; and my father looked at my mother. That was all. We were helpless.” Or, consider an example of Jewish leadership at the endpoint of exhaustion. On the eve of his death in late 1943, Elchanan Elkes, chairman of the Kovno *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), sent a last testament to his son and daughter in London, counseling them to remember Amalek, in the Bible the archetypal enemy of the Jews, and to settle in Palestine: “I am writing this in an hour when many desperate souls—widows and orphans, threadbare and hungry—are camping on my doorstep, imploring us for help. My strength is ebbing. There is a desert inside me. My soul is scorched. I am naked and empty. There are

no words in my mouth.” Like many of those who professed helplessness in the face of what must be, but *could not* be, described, Elkes found a simple, moving language. In his case, it was a language blended of paternal council and a quiet counting down of his authority, his life, and the life of the ghetto. His paradoxical act of declaring, in such powerful metaphors, that he had no words left concluded a wrenching portrayal of his own tragedy and that of those who had looked to him for help.

The words had been found after all by Bennahmias and Elkes, and they were physically alive with suffering. Writing might provide solace, as it did for Warsaw’s Chaim Kaplan: “This diary is my life, my friend and ally . . . in keeping this diary I find spiritual rest.” More often, however, it gave voice to the writer’s frightening encounter with an intolerable burden. In his introduction to a study of the effects of hunger in the Warsaw Ghetto, smuggled out and published after the war, Dr. Israel Milejowski, head of the *Judenrat’s* medical department, confessed: “I hold the pen in my hand, and death looks into my room from the vacant, sad houses and from the empty streets. Our language is too weak to convey the depths of the catastrophe. I am looking for the right words. I am living through the pain of the word.” In this case and others, such pain came from no particular atrocity but just the slow, sure erosion of body and mind. An anonymous child writing in 1944, after four years in Theresienstadt, the “model” camp whose charade of normalcy was intended to deceive the world about German intentions, described pain that was inchoate, nearly sourceless. Here, the writer said,

... the cannons don’t scream and the guns don’t bark
 And you don’t see blood here.
 Nothing, only silent hunger,
 Children steal the bread here and ask and ask and ask
 And all would wish to sleep, keep silent and just go to sleep again . . .

The heaviest wheel rolls across our foreheads
 To bury itself somewhere inside our memories.

The man writing on the sewing machine, the would-be Auschwitz anthropologists, the young Theresienstadt poet—all these and countless more were contributing to the salvaged written works that are the primary foundation for our knowledge of the Holocaust. Whether consciously or instinctively,

these writers were driven by the famous exhortation of the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow to collect and record (“search and research”) documents of Jewish life during times of crisis. Coined in 1891 in response to the persecution of Jews in Russia and then reiterated on the eve of his death in December 1941 in the Riga Ghetto, where he is reputed to have shouted, “Brothers, write, record, and report this to the coming generations,” Dubnow’s famous challenge became a virtual commandment during and immediately after the Holocaust. Whatever their provenance, the contemporaneous accounts we read today come to us because of courageous effort. In the last will and testament that he buried annually along with an array of documents collected in the Kovno Ghetto, Avraham Tory spoke of the conditions in which he worked: “I overcame the fear of death which is directly connected with the very fact of writing each page of my diary, and with the very collection and hiding of documentary material. Had the slightest part of any of this been discovered, my fate would have been sealed.” Many memoirs and other texts composed after the war, even some years later, are no less important, but those written during the events with the explicit goal of leaving a testimonial archive for the future share a distinctive feature—they survived even when their authors did not.

The most extensive repositories grew from acts of deliberate, organized resistance. The Warsaw group who took the name *Oneg Shabbat* (or *Oyneg Shabes*, Sabbath Joy) while creating the largest ghetto archive collected materials ranging from eyewitness testimony to poetry to restaurant menus to ration cards to theater scripts to photographs to German posters to penciled appeals for rescue written by those on the verge of annihilation, all of it buried in three milk cans and ten metal boxes, the majority of them recovered after the war. Even if the many voices of Polish Jewry went unheard during the war, Samuel Kassow has written, *Oneg Shabbat* was determined “to record those voices and ensure their survival until someday someone would listen.” It was not only their own writing and community documents that ghetto archivists wanted to save but also the historical corpus of Jewish written life. Although the Nazis routinely burned synagogues and destroyed Torah scrolls, Talmuds, and other Jewish texts and artifacts, often in humiliating and violent rituals—it is estimated that one hundred million Jewish books were destroyed—they also determined to collect a large sample of Jewish materials for future research so as to take scholarly control of the Jewish Question.

As the headline of a Munich newspaper put it in 1942, “For the First Time in History: Research on the Jews without Jews.” But the Germans’ penchant for documentation in the midst of murder and plunder also provided, on the margin, a chance to preserve at least a few treasures from destruction or theft. Those Jews employed in Vilna by the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*, a special task force under the direction of Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, and charged with the confiscation of Jewish libraries, ritual objects, and art, managed to hide valuable books, manuscripts, letters, and other materials in the ghetto or in the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), their base of operations, among them manuscripts by Sholem Alecheim, Theodor Herzl’s diary, and drawings by Marc Chagall.

In addition to the diaries and the documentary materials recovered after the war in Warsaw, Łódź, Kovno, Vilna, and elsewhere, numerous prisoners left names, messages, dates and calendars, and other graffiti in the camps and ghettos. On the walls of a synagogue in the Ukrainian *shtetl* of Kovel, where the altar had been pulled down, the Torah scrolls burned, and the interior strafed by automatic weapons fire, a Soviet soldier, S. N. Grutman, came upon an astounding set of testimonies written in pencil in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Polish. As Sergeant Grutman reported in a letter to the journalist Ilya Ehrenburg, “I was filled with horror. The walls began to speak. . . . There was not an empty spot on the wall. These were the last words of the doomed, their farewell to the world,” written before they were robbed, stripped, and led out to be shot or shipped to Majdanek. Amidst personal farewells and cries for revenge, one witness, Tania Arbeiter, left a poem, dated August 23, 1942, poignant in its erratic immediacy:

Silence,
 The murderers are coming.
 Silence prevails in the world.
 Listen to the sounds of hearts dreaming with all their might.
 Listen to the sounds of hearts ceasing to beat.
 Lord, let us take You in Your eternity
 The murderers will pay, pay with their blood!!
 How can I rejoice—if I am already in the grave?
 But I wanted to be alive.
 Their children will cut down the last to remain . . .

Another hour . . . another moment . . .
 I bid farewell to my beautiful world
 Before I was able to know you . . .

Other witnesses, recognizing the inevitable loss of documentary evidence, placed the cataclysm in historical perspective. For the diarist Helena Doremus, the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto evoked the history of Jewish persecution and resistance, as well as the fragility of its written record:

This almost seems like a repetition of Maccabean times, an echo of long-forgotten heroism.

The shriek of shrapnel, the whistle of bullets. Red lashes cut the darkness.

Flocks of tiny birds soar over the Aryan streets—thin, burnt pages of sacred books veined with sacred letters, like Jewish death lists. When I pick up one of these scorched pages, it crumbles into bits. Each bit becomes the skeleton of a word.

Given the significant number of manuscripts that we must assume disappeared along with their authors, it is all the more remarkable that we have some written in the very crucible of mass death. At least two groups of craftsmen working at the Chełmno death camp, where the first extensive murders in gas vans took place, managed to leave messages giving their names and short last testaments. A more surprising record was left by members of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*. As many as thirty-six boxes and other containers were buried—one concealed by a cook contained a prayer shawl, a set of *tefillin*, a prayer book, and hair and teeth taken from the dead—and the title under which a group of them was later published, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, was meant by their editor, Ber Mark, to capture the reverence with which such testimony might need to be approached. Here, after all, were eyewitness accounts from a few of those whom Primo Levi called the “bearers of a horrendous secret,” men who scrutinized their own compromised lives with painful deliberation.

The *Sonderkommando* writings and other such eyewitness accounts present us with a dilemma. How much can we bear to know, and what is the writer’s obligation with respect to that knowledge? Here we must follow the lead of Rachel Auerbach, a member of *Oneg Shabbat*, who wrote at the outset of her postwar report on Treblinka:

I know that what I am now sending off for publication is far from easy reading, and definitely not for people with weak nerves. But if something like this could happen to Jews, if Jews who witnessed such things were able to tell about it and I was able to write it down, then other Jews should not spare their own feelings but should acquaint themselves with what in fact is only an infinitesimal fraction of that which was done to Jews. Let all Jews know it: it is their national duty *to know the truth!*

To tell was not easy, but neither was it taboo—and not for Jews alone. Richard Böck, an SS truck driver who witnessed an early gassing in an abandoned farmhouse converted to a gas chamber in Auschwitz, searched for the means to describe the gassing of some one thousand Dutch Jews, men, women, and children:

I simply can't describe how these people screamed. It lasted about 8–10 minutes, and then all was still. A short time later the door was opened by prisoners, and one could still see a bluish fog hanging over a huge tangle of bodies. The bodies were all twisted together in such a way that one could not tell to whom individual limbs and body parts belonged. I saw for example that one of the gassed had stuck his index finger several centimeters into the eye socket of another. . . . One cannot describe this scene with words.

And yet, of course, Böck has just done so. We can find more excruciating detail in Kurt Gerstein's report about the gassing at Belzec or the testimony of Zalmen Gradowski, a member of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*, who buried a lengthy account of what he had witnessed before he himself was killed. (Gerstein's testimony may be found in "The Final Solution," while Gradowski's is in "The Gray Zone.") Such details fulfill Auerbach's instruction to "know the truth," but they also underscore a further question that has troubled many post-Holocaust commentators: can the most horrific manifestations of the Holocaust truly be apprehended through conventional descriptive or analytic language?

"I don't think you can focus on the horror of the Holocaust," the novelist W. G. Sebald once remarked. "It's like the head of the Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified." Sebald echoed Primo Levi, who famously argued in *The Drowned and the Saved* that

the “true witnesses” were those “who saw the Gorgon, [but] have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute.” It is not only later writers and critics, or filmmakers such as Claude Lanzmann, creator of the famous documentary *Shoah*, who have embraced such an oracular view. “The verbatim records presented in this book make uneasy reading,” wrote David Boder in a preface to his early collection of survivor testimony. “And yet they are not the grimmest stories that could be told—I did not interview the dead.” Even Nikolaus Wachsmann, the author of a comprehensive study of the concentration camp system, demurs at the last moment: “What happened next, when dim suspicion became horrible certainty—with prisoners squeezed against one another in the darkness of the gas chambers, barely able to breathe even before the gas pellets were inserted—cannot be described.”

Literally, of course, this is true, yet it is hard to know what details a witness miraculously returned from the dead might add to the accounts of Böck, Gerstein, Gradowski, and others who spared their future readers no details. Without question, such accounts are terrifying, but they are not, it turns out, indescribable. As Yehuda Bauer once observed, “the history of the Holocaust tells us of horrors and brutalities that are ‘indescribable,’ by which we mean we view them with revulsion—but they have of course been described, which is how we know about them.” The delicate balance between blunt force and subtlety exercised by these writers suggests, moreover, that it is not the language of autopsy that most moves us but the language of implication and revelation—which is to say language in which some aspect of the aesthetic, the figurative, comes to the fore.

Writing about the Holocaust has long labored under the weight of Theodor Adorno’s notorious declaration that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Although Adorno qualified his claim on two subsequent occasions, obfuscating if not exactly retracting what Auschwitz survivor and novelist Imre Kertész once called his “moral stink bomb,” any suggestion of an aesthetic approach to the Holocaust, or perhaps even any documentary approach, has had to negotiate his protest. “Is it not equally barbaric to write footnotes after Auschwitz?” Raul Hilberg once asked. At the least, however, one must suspect artistic approaches to the Holocaust of exploiting their subject. In a poem entitled “The seven words,” the Polish writer Jerzy Ficowski addressed this issue head-on. The title of his poem refers to its epigraph, which records an eyewitness’s recollection of the last words of

a child being shut up in the gas chamber at Belzec: “Mommy! But I’ve been good! It’s dark!” Playing upon the Third Reich’s use of every conceivable part of the possessions and bodies of Jewish victims, Ficowski issued a searching judgment of his own act of writing:

Everything was put to use
 a use was found even for that voice
 smuggled this far in the bottom of another’s memory
 like lime unslaked with tears

and Belzec opens sometimes right to the bone
 and everlasting darkness bursts from it . . .

As Ficowski’s poem suggests, objections to the literary representation of atrocity must face the possibility that only language stretched to the boundaries of meaning may be capable of rendering life at its limits. Examples are not hard to discover. In numerous concentration camp testimonies about standing for hours at roll-call in the bitterest conditions, sometimes as a matter of individual or collective punishment, sometimes as a matter of routine, we can find descriptions of freezing, but can the most exacting literal account match Charlotte Delbo’s description?

Each breath drawn in is so cold that it strips the whole respiratory system. Skin ceases to be the tight protective covering for the body. The cold strips us nude, down to the bowels. The lungs flap in the icy wind. Wash out on a line. The heart is shrunk from cold, contracted, constricted till it aches, and suddenly I feel something snap there, in my heart. My heart breaks loose from my chest and everything that holds it in its place. I feel a stone falling inside me, dropping with a thud. It is my heart.

Then again, why should we think of Delbo’s description of wintertime Auschwitz as figurative rather than literal? Her writing takes us inside the body; we see and feel its organs stripped bare and set adrift in an icy wind; we are brought as close as possible to human life reduced to bare organic existence.

Nowhere do we see this problem of the figurative more clearly than in the language of the crematoria. Few images are as emblematic of the Final

Solution operating at its most technologically efficient as ashes spewed from the crematoria chimneys or, at times, from crude gasoline-drenched grills, pyres, or ditches. Many survivors remembered the choking, greasy smoke that wafted through the camp. Those hardened to the nightmare might resort to slang such as becoming “gas meat,” being sent to the “frying pan,” or escaping “up the chimney,” but most either did not live that long or could never get past their initial shock at discovering the source of the smoke. Hungarian Laszlo Gerend, desperate to find the rest of his family after the initial Auschwitz selection, accosted his block leader, who replied: “You idiot! Where do you think they are? In the air! Everyone’s in the air!” What kind of figurative language is this—is it figurative or not? Or this, Isabella Leitner’s memorialization of the deaths of her sister and mother:

How does one bury smoke?

How does one place headstones in the sky?

How does one bring flowers to the clouds?

Leitner’s questions appear on the page as though they could be a stanza of verse, and it was just these commonplace experiences that Yankev Glatshsteyn (Jacob Glatstein) incorporated into his elegiac poem “Cloud-Jew”—“The cloud-Jew writes Yiddish letters / on an alien sky ... They run like tears, / threads of tears, / before I can make out their meanings”—and that Paul Celan, writing soon after his liberation from a Romanian labor camp, consolidated in his poem “Death Fugue”:

we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined ...

... then as smoke you will rise into air

then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined ...

In *The Deputy*, his 1963 play about the complicity in the Holocaust of Pope Pius XII, Rolf Hochhuth objected that in Celan’s poem “the gassing of the Jews is translated entirely into metaphors.” Notwithstanding their force of suggestion, he contended, those metaphors “still screen the infernal cynicism of what really took place,” the businesslike murder of human beings. In point of fact, however, Celan’s metaphors, like Delbo’s, are powerful because they are hard to distinguish from the literal. Subtract only a few gestures of the imagination and we are in the everyday world of the Holocaust as it was lived—graves in the air.

The Nazis “turned words back into rocks,” Leslie Epstein once observed, weaponizing their figurative properties, one might say, as in the example he cites, “When Jewish Blood Spurts from My Knife,” a popular Nazi anthem of the 1930s. Valentin Senger remembered first hearing the song as a boy in Frankfurt: “I froze on the sidewalk. An image rose up in front of me: Mama and Papa and me with knives in our bellies and throats, the blood spurting from our wounds.” Senger heard the word; the rock, as he intuited, was soon to follow. In response to the Nazis’ transformation of ordinary language into a tool of torment and extermination—in the relentless onslaught of antisemitic rhetoric, songs and slogans, and perverse bureaucratic euphemisms for murder such as “resettlement,” “emigration,” and “special treatment”—victims needed their own linguistic weapons. It was not only those writers whom we think of as literary—Delbo, Celan, Abraham Sutzkever, Piotr Rawick, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, and others—who took imaginative liberties and turned figures of their own into instruments of protest and judgment. Attention to different genres of writing about the Holocaust makes clear that an easy separation among them is not always possible. Not only in poetry and fiction, but also in the nonfiction writings of victims, bystanders, and even perpetrators themselves the need to “imagine” events deemed incredible, including eyewitness testimony that stunned the senses, played a role in representations of the Holocaust from the very beginning. For some, modern literature, popular song, and classic works in many traditions and languages—no single classical text is cited or alluded to more often than Dante’s *Inferno*—helped rouse their determination to resist, to create, and to leave for future readers an eloquent form of history written as it happened. For others, as a number of the selections in “Holy Days” tell us, no antecedents were more important than the Bible and rabbinic texts, along with Jewish literature from many eras and in many genres. In this respect, as David G. Roskies has shown, much Holocaust writing placed itself within a long tradition of literary response to attacks on the Jewish community, this new catastrophe acting once more as “a crucible” in which previous responses and archetypes were dialectically refined and reworked in new historical circumstances.

Consider just one example. In a November 16, 1942, diary entry Zelig Kalmanovitch ruminated on Martin Weiss, the Nazi administrator of Vilna, by all evidence a vicious man:

His face, the face of a murderer, becomes him. He drinks blood and is not sated. I am stupefied. How does a man like this live? The very thought that nearby at the table, before the electric light, sits such a monstrous creature is simply dreadful. He is inscrutable. There has never been anything like it. And does he not feel anything? Do not black shadows come to frighten him and to disturb his peace? Will not some small insect enter his brains and put an end to him?

Kalmanovitch alluded here to the emperor Titus, who, according to *Leviticus Rabbah*, was punished for having entered the Holy of Holies and fornicated with two harlots upon a Scroll of the Law, when a mosquito entered his nose and burrowed into his brain for seven years. When Titus himself demanded that doctors split open his brain to discover the cause of his pain, they found a pigeon weighing two pounds; when it resumed its original insect form and flew away, so did the soul of Titus. To which a subsequent Midrash added: “When Titus lay dying, he said: Cremate me and scatter my ashes over the seven seas, so that the God of the Jews should not find me and bring me to trial.” Martin Weiss was convicted of war crimes in 1950 and sentenced to life in prison, not a just punishment, surely, for a man arguably responsible for more than one hundred thousand deaths. Zelig Kalmanovitch died in an Estonian labor camp in 1944—but his diary, with its brilliant, merciless judgment of Martin Weiss, brought to trial and condemned, survived for us to read.

WRITING IN WITNESS COVERS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE Holocaust as it was experienced and set down in a written record. The selections have been chosen with several criteria in mind. Regardless of genre, each exhibits some degree of self-consciousness about the importance of writing or, in one speech and one example of courtroom testimony, having one’s spoken words put into the historical record. In some cases this is reflected in the writer’s attention to style, in others commentary on the power and limitations of writing in the face of events often thought, at the time and subsequently, to be beyond representation. Because one purpose here is to capture the psychological turmoil and existential urgency of contemporaneous accounts, *Writing in Witness* is confined largely to the 1940s, and to the Holocaust as such—the

deliberate, if sometimes inchoate, attempt to annihilate the Jews of Eastern and Western Europe that unfolded in conjunction with Nazi Germany's plans for military conquest and occupation. The Nazis had non-Jewish enemies, of course, and writings by a number of them are included here, but the destruction of the European Jews, to borrow the title of Raul Hilberg's landmark study, was one of Nazi Germany's principal goals, and it is the principal story here. Other kinds of documents that are widely available elsewhere—antisemitic tracts; speeches by major Nazi leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels; the Nuremberg Laws and other anti-Jewish decrees; early German protests against Nazism; planning documents such as the Wannsee Protocol; military directives; and so on—are not included, although a number of them are taken up in the headnotes to each topical section. The focus in *Writing in Witness* is on the Holocaust as it was experienced by those targeted and their response in writing.

Even within that constraint, however, the great diversity of responses must depend on representative examples. Diaries, journals, letters, poems, and other writings were produced in many different conditions, ranging from the ghettos created in great centers of European Jewish life such as Vilna and Warsaw to the cattle pavilion of a former fairgrounds turned into a concentration camp, and with many different intentions—to spark resistance and undermine Nazi authority, to comfort family and community, to beseech God, and to leave a memorial record for posterity. Such diversity in genre and purpose was also a function of scale. The reach of the Nazi genocidal machine was immense and so was the geography of the Holocaust, ranging from the Baltics to the Balkans, from the Atlantic coast to the heart of the Soviet Union. As a result, written testimony comes to us in a wide array of languages. Although it cannot be comprehensive in this respect, *Writing in Witness* nevertheless includes texts originally written in Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Norwegian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and English—although in the last case one would have to add an asterisk since Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive* is her own English version of her original German, and Elie Wiesel's "Why I Write," though published in English, may well have been drafted in Yiddish or French. Because English was one of the *least* important languages of the Holocaust, a reader composed of English translations is entirely dependent upon those who have rendered, in a foreign language but as scrupulously as possible and frequently as a labor of devotion, the many native tongues of

writers who, in most cases, had little in common with one another and many of whom did not live to know if their words would ever be read by others.

Writing in Witness consists of six topical sections—"Prisoners: A Prologue," "In the Ghetto," "The Final Solution," "The Gray Zone," "Holy Days," and "Survivors." Along with the readings, the headnotes to the sections and the shorter headnotes to each individual selection are meant to provide a comprehensive picture of the Holocaust as a historical event and the early written evidence through which it came to be understood. Within each main section, the individual selections take up diverse but related issues, each having a focus conveyed in its title (in some cases this is the title of the work from which the selection is taken). It will be immediately apparent, given the degree to which they overlap in the issues addressed, that many entries could be placed in two or more categories. At the same time, the separation according to broad topics is intended to underscore each section's distinctive features. As its subtitle suggests, "Prisoners: A Prologue" is meant to function as a preface to the volume as a whole, encompassing some of the many forms of imprisonment experienced in the Holocaust, almost all of them effectively a death sentence, and focusing on the Nazi state's identification and pursuit of enemies, Jews in particular. Often writing in a contemplative vein, notwithstanding their anguish, these writers show us that the physical imprisonment leading to genocide was accompanied by psychological and spiritual imprisonment, while at the same time it was the product of a delusional worldview that held perpetrators in their own kind of prison and drove their irrational search for victims. The writings that appear in "In the Ghetto" provide representative views of the widespread, though by no means universal, experience of Jews (as well as some Roma and Sinti—Gypsies) subjected to conditions often meant to kill them through slave labor or deprivation, and thus reduce their numbers prior to one or another form of outright murder. "The Final Solution" includes a wide range of perspectives on the decision and the multifaceted means used to seize and kill Jews wherever they came under Nazi rule. "Holy Days" takes up the role of religious faith and religious practice under genocidal duress, while "The Gray Zone" (the title is borrowed from Primo Levi) concerns the kinds of moral compromise and collaboration that prisoners, here Jews in particular, were compelled to undertake. "Survivors" is by design made up of works across many decades since the writer's distance from his or her own experience often determined what "survival" meant and how it came to be embodied in written form.

Beyond the inherent malleability of these six rubrics, it should be noted that other ways of sorting the selections into groupings that cut across them are readily apparent. The experience of transport, or more simply “transit”—being forced to walk to a mass grave to be shot; being loaded into a gas van and murdered in route to a mass grave; being put aboard a train in suffocating, filthy conditions for a trip that might take hours in some cases or weeks in others; being evacuated from one camp to another in death marches as the Nazi regime collapsed; being sent into postwar exile from one’s native land—was integral to the Holocaust. One could thus compose a survey of transit narratives using aspects of the selections by Levite, Kruk, Tory, Shayevitsh, Slipchenko, Graebe, Mechanicus, Gerstein, Winer, Krzepicki, Lévy-Hass, Kirshnbaum, Klüger, and Appelfeld. Likewise, resistance took many forms, ranging from the armed resistance in the Kraków ghetto documented by Gusta Davidson Draenger to the more subtle spiritual resistance counseled by Etty Hillesum. In one way or another, resistance or its opposite (the often tendentious accusation that Jews went “like sheep to the slaughter”), including frequent commentary on the virtual impossibility of resistance, is taken up in many of the selections, but most prominently in those by Améry, Aaronson, Lingens-Reiner, Golfard, Tory, Ringelblum, Zelkowicz, Rawicz, Perl, Gradowski, Kahane, and Shapira. Of special note here are the testimonies of the two Nazis included: while they recount their own direct or indirect participation in mass murder, Kurt Gerstein and Hermann Graebe also give vital evidence of their own dissent and resistance in the face of the atrocities around them.

One group of narratives stands apart for a more fundamental reason. The experiences of women in the Holocaust, although they were as diverse as those of men, were joined by the common fact that women were far more vulnerable. Because of physical weakness, they were far more likely to be murdered immediately rather than put to work; they were always at risk of being raped and otherwise sexually abused; in the camps, pregnant women were almost certain to be killed; their access to feminine hygiene was makeshift or nonexistent; their role as nurturing mothers often entailed sending or accompanying their children to their deaths; some of them became the subject of grotesque medical experiments in the service of Nazi racial ideology; and they were less likely than men to have recourse to the biblical or rabbinical teachings, as well as the ritual observances, that might provide sustenance in the face of death. Although some of the most important witness

provided by women appeared in survivor memoirs, along with fiction and poetry, written some years later, the twelve selections by women in *Writing in Witness*, like those writings by women cited in the Introduction and head-notes, depict a wide variety of experiences, including German resistance to the Nazi regime (Lingens-Reiner), a nurse-turned-prisoner unaware that she will soon be gassed (Dajč), armed resistance (Draenger), eyewitness testimony to mass murder on the Eastern Front (Slipchenko), Auschwitz slave labor and punishment at the hands of Nazi women (Szmaglewska), the documentation of genocide (Auerbach), collaboration by Jewish women prisoners (Nomberg-Przytyk), choosing infanticide over Nazi murder (Perl), the last agonies of those about to be liberated (Lévy-Hass), the forms of bodily degradation specific to women (Delbo), and a survivor's recollection of transport and imprisonment with her mother (Klüger). Regardless of their perspective, these writers experienced their physical, social, psychological, or spiritual lives as women and took that fact as their point of departure.

Such categories could be multiplied without exhausting the ways in which the Holocaust can be understood. Those who wrote did so, in any case, one by one, not to contribute to a genre or a collection of writings but rather to say what little could be said. No anthology is complete, but then neither is any history or other mode of analysis. *Writing in Witness* provides, in vital and memorable examples, a picture of the Holocaust by some of those who felt the imperative to give written witness.

A NOTE ON SOURCES AND THE TEXT

IN ADDITION TO THE WORKS FROM WHICH THE READINGS ARE TAKEN and works otherwise cited in the Selected Bibliography and Notes, for general biographical and historical information I have consulted: *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature*, ed. David Patterson et al. (Westport, CT: Oryx Press, 2002); *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, 2 vol., ed. S. Lillian Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2003); *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, 2 vols., ed. Guy Miron (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and several websites, principally those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Bible citations, unless otherwise noted, are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Throughout the text, passages omitted by me are marked by brackets [...], whereas an ellipsis ... is the author's or previous editor's own device. Likewise, words and phrases in brackets such as translations or short explanations are my additions, though in a few cases they belong to the original editor, whereas material in parentheses is always part of the original text. More extensive annotations appear in the Notes, which are associated with key phrases and page numbers rather than superscript numerals (in a few cases that are clearly identified, these notes were supplied by the original editor of the selection). On occasion, I have silently corrected an obvious spelling or typographical error, and I have also tried, without changing any author's usage, to create consistency in place names throughout the volume. In my own text I have used familiar German and French spellings, including diacritical marks (for example, Ravensbrück). With common exceptions such as Warsaw (rather than Warszawa) and Auschwitz (rather than Oświęcim, since

the camp is almost always designated by its German name rather than the name of the nearby Polish town), the same is true of East European names (for example, Łódź rather than Lodz). For the sake of consistency in the case of locations with shifting names depending on language, transliteration, and political control, I have generally opted for one, such as Lwów (Polish) rather than Lvov (Russian), Lemberg (German and Yiddish), or L'viv (Ukrainian), since at the outset of World War II the city was located in Poland before being occupied by the Soviet Union and then Nazi Germany during the war. The selections themselves are reprinted as published, some with diacritical marks, some without, and in a few instances with variant spellings (for example, Cracow rather than Kraków, or Maidanek rather than Majdanek).