

Part One

BEGINNINGS

1

Why seek out the past in a land where so much killing has taken place? By way of answering a question often posed to me regarding my deep attachment to Lithuania, I turn to neuroscience. Our brains contain a map of our bodies. It is not a straightforward map with perfect equivalencies, but a complex cartography. For the eye alone, some thirty regions are required. But if we were to imagine this three-pound umbrella, which presides over our physical parts as a kind of guardian that keeps us intact, we might have at least one of the myriad functions the brain carries out without our having to tell it to.

Once, as director of an artist's community, I found that my body image changed. It was like a large net spread out over hundreds of acres, the land of Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York—its buildings, artists, staff, my knowledge of the morning and what I imagined lay ahead of me that day. Before ever stepping from bed, I mentally reviewed furnaces, water sources, septic fields, buildings, keys, foxes, moose and owls, algae in the lakes, gas lines, phone circuits, structural supports. I went over the rooms, their inhabitants, weather conditions, roads plowed for snow emergencies. I reviewed the topography of the landscape. By the time I actually got to my feet and started the daily walk across the grounds, my template was in place, the extension of my body to shelter all of Yaddo.¹ My proprioceptive sense had far more work to do. When I returned to teaching and to my former life, it was strange indeed to diminish that expanded body image.

To recover Lithuania, the home of my family for centuries and generations, I needed to walk the pathways of Lithuania, wherever they might take me, not only through the study of modern history but through the “archives of the feet,” as Simon Schama has written. I shall always be grateful that it has been possible to do so in my lifetime, that the freedom from domination under the Soviets that came to Lithuania in 1990–91 enabled people like me to wander without restriction through the lands of our people, to come to know something about them and to complete the map of the body, to reintegrate the body through a renewed understanding of the physical and mental landscapes where our forebears lived and died.

I am reminded of a legend about a great Kabbalist, told to me in 1970 in Safed, Israel. When he was buried, he was unable to rest. He called and called for his son. And until he was buried next to his son, he could not achieve eternal rest.

As Michael Steinlauf writes in “Beyond the Evil Empire: Freedom to Remember or Freedom to Forget?”:

First and foremost, there is the powerful, pervasive sense of place. Cities, towns, streets, marketplaces, courtyards, mezu-zahs still outlined over doorways; synagogues and cemeteries . . . the Vistula River, cutting through the Polish heartland, whose water, the writer Sholem Asch once declared, spoke to him in Yiddish; these and countless other sites saturated with the visible and invisible traces of Jewish presence, are all still there, a Jewish geography as yet unmapped, but as real as any. Side-by-side, sometimes in the same places, are the death sites: remnants of camps, graves, crematoria. Can we deal with this? Can we finally accept the challenge of seeing everything, the life as well as the death?²

2

Lithuania is a country only slightly larger than West Virginia, its population approximately 2.5 million in 1940. Imagine, then, Lithuania’s position during the Soviet occupation (population 191.7 million) from

1940–41. And from 1941–July 1944 under German occupation (population 87.1 million).

It is a country that has been occupied multiple times—from the ninth to eleventh centuries by the Vikings, with raids between Lithuania and Poland in the twelfth century, military confrontations with German settlers, with a series of wars between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden, with the occupation by the Soviets from 1940–41, by the Germans from 1941–44, and from July 1944 until 1990–91 by the Soviets. That Lithuania has managed to hold onto a common language and any sort of a common heritage is remarkable.

And if what I have been told by those who lived through the German occupation is true, when the Germans arrived in Lithuania in 1941, many thought by the strength of their forces that this was to be a permanent occupation. Therefore, when a person or a family or a community decided to rescue a person, they assumed that it was for an indefinite period of time. It was not a brief commitment. And the retribution for doing so might result in the murder of the rescuer, of the entire family of the rescuer, of the whole community.

Some have written about the alternative. If the Lithuanians had risen up against the Germans and even if they had succeeded, which is totally improbable, would they have fared better than under the Soviets? Of course, they had no knowledge that they would eventually end up exactly in that way, not for a year or two but for forty-five years under the Soviets. There *are* examples of whole communities refusing to kill but they are rare. Le Chambon in France is one, where each member of the community hid and rescued Jews.³ The townspeople of Le Chambon were an anomaly in France as descendants of the Huguenots who had been persecuted since the sixteenth century. Each person had fought his own battle against those who would crush him. Their rebellion was whole. It was not a matter of a leader establishing the position of resistance for the rest, but a position that rested squarely within each inhabitant of the town. One example of the reliability of the individual consciousness may be seen in the transformation of Bible study leaders. There were thirteen groups led by youngsters for the purpose of study. When the Germans occupied France, these groups became the communications network and their leaders the moving spirits of the rescue operation. Pastor Trocme

gave most of his instruction (Bible and resistance!) to these leaders. He saw to it that he was the only person in Le Chambon who knew of the entire operation, that the groups operated independently of one another, so that if one leader was caught and tortured, he would not reveal enough to destroy the whole rescue machine. Each leader had to make swift, intelligent decisions on his own when Trocme was not available.

When Pastor Trocme, in the French Army in 1921, was sent on a mapping mission in Morocco, he was issued a gun and cartridges. As a believer in nonviolence, he left his equipment at the depository. Asked to explain, his lieutenant pointed out that he had endangered the lives of the entire group by his action and that he should have made such a decision earlier. This lesson was invaluable. Thus, the forms of resistance in Le Chambon began early with small refusals: no ringing of the church bells for Marshal Philippe Petain, the head of the Vichy state, no Fascist salute. This was the form of the “kitchen struggle” in Le Chambon. When the Vichy police came to take Pastor Trocme to prison, the people of Le Chambon came with gifts: candles, biscuits, toilet paper upon which verses of consolation from the Bible had been written to remind him that he was still human. Magda Trocme, the pastor’s wife, when confronted by the first Jew asking for help, simply opened the door and said “Come in.” I had occasion to meet her and her daughter Nelly when they came to this country more than thirty years ago. She spoke of those war years. The plainspoken woman before me made no claim for what she had done. And though the war ended, her work never did. The Trocmes became a model and an encouragement for the conscientious objectors in this country during World War II, according to our former U.S. Poet Laureate, William Stafford, who worked in C.O. camps during the war because of his decision not to serve in the military. “When did you decide to go another way?” I asked him once. It was a hard decision in the face of a patriotic war. “I didn’t,” he responded. “The world went a different way.”

These important lessons—that one must be prepared to be human, and that timing is crucial—remind me of what I have heard said by concentration camp survivors: one must be wary of the first, smallest injustice. Through the entryway of the first injustice does the next come.

The decision to act in the face of injustice does not come when a man is being shoved into a ravine with a bullet in his neck.

3

How do we behave under dire threat? How do we remember extreme danger and its recurring trauma as if it were happening in the present? Hopefully, what Lithuania has to teach us can be applied to the future and future behavior under duress. How does the individual response differ from the group response? How do subsequent generations deal with their histories—whether as descendants of the killers or the killed, of those who witnessed what happened, of those who rescued others, and of those who do not know their origins.

Two powerful examples include the request of a young man from Austria who decided that he wanted to serve his required military time in community service—an option made available in Austria through the *Gedenkdienst*, Austrian Holocaust Memorial Service begun in 1992. He requested a fourteen-month service in the Vilna Gaon Jewish Memorial Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1996. Though there was some initial resistance and uncertainty by employees of the museum, he was invited to do so. When I asked him why he decided to come to Lithuania, he said that he discovered later that his grandfather and his uncle had served in the Wehrmacht in Lithuania during the war and were involved in the killing of the Jews—something he had not known initially. Thus began a series of remarkable volunteers from Austria, every fourteen months or so, who were invaluable in sharing what they were learning with teachers and students about their former Jewish neighbors, and about events they had not known of, in editing and writing documents, in preparing museum exhibitions, in presenting symposia on the Holocaust, and in learning about a country known only vaguely to them. In one case that I know of, this activity was costly to the young volunteer in terms of the severance of family relations. In September 2006, this activity culminated in a symposium, “Commemoration of Holocaust Victims: 10 Years of Gedenkdienst Activity in Lithuania.” This work of

education and understanding continues to this day. I was able to get to know these young people during my times there, helping to edit documents for the museum.

I accompanied one of these volunteers to religious services on the Jewish New Year. He had never before entered a synagogue. It was cold that day and a cold rain made the walk there unpleasant. After the service, as we walked down the stairs toward the street, a double rainbow illuminated the entire sky.

A second example occurred during Holocaust Remembrance Day in Lithuania on September 23, 2011. I was standing in the town square in Kaunas among a group of a hundred people. Various people took turns speaking. One was a Holocaust survivor who had been hidden as a child, one of the few who survived. After the event, some of the younger people, who had never before heard a survivor tell her experiences, gathered around her to ask questions and to continue the conversation. Among official speakers, a young man stood up and walked to the microphone. His words: “My grandfather and my grandfather’s brother have done terrible things during the War and they have placed a burden on my whole life. I ask forgiveness.” The priests comforted this young man after he spoke. His grandfather was a man who, when the killing was too much for the other killers, would take their places. He was part of a killing unit that traveled from village to village. And I knew that his grandson speaking publicly would bring shame to his family. Standing there that day, we understood how difficult it was for this young man to speak.⁴

4

I have started this book many times. Perhaps it wants to be brought into existence as a series of beginnings . . . no middle, no end. As in Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*—a book built of multiple openings. Yet its contents are too serious to concern the reader with its difficult birth. Still, the writer wonders why the writing is so difficult. Can it be more so than standing in the killing fields? Or walking the periphery of a tumuli filled with the murdered who were once members

of her family? Is it in that ditch that I now walk among these pages, trying not to let my words desecrate their graves, keeping my balance?

And will it seem strange to some that we are a people who often do not know the precise birthplace of our grandfathers? As for a grandmother—records were scarce. Military records. Yes. Revision lists. Yes. With the man's name. Box tax records. Candle tax records. For that reason—that I may never know precisely where my grandmother was born, apart from the province, Kovno (Kaunas) Gubernia—I will leave on my gravestone the name of my maternal antecedents along with my father's name.

This is a book about memory. "I think that if I recall something," Borges's father once told him, "for example, if today I look back on this morning, then I get an image of what I saw this morning. But if tonight, I'm thinking back on this morning, then what I'm really recalling is not the first image, but the first image in memory. So that every time I recall something, I'm not recalling it really, I'm recalling the last time I recalled it, I'm recalling my last memory of it. So that really, I have no memories whatever. I have no images whatever, about my childhood, about my youth." Borges notes that "if in every repetition you get a slight distortion, then in the end you will be a long way off from the issue."⁵

This is a book about forgetting. And about the ways in which memory is constructed. And it is a book about trauma, the ways we devise to bring harm to one another. It is about the different kinds of responses to trauma.

"The highest form of revenge," according to Borges, "is oblivion."⁶ So perhaps instead of a book, what took place here should be relegated to silence, to oblivion. Better to let it be a gathering place for what is remembered. May the voices of many come to inhabit these pages.

5

In the history of nations, the stories have sometimes been buried. As in Pompeii, its citizens caught in the ash and fire rain of an erupting volcano. In the midst of their afternoon. We see them at the moment

of their transformation. From living souls to frozen immobility. Even the household creatures. What they knew, they have taken with them. What we know of them, we have taken from parchment, from conjecture, from scientific reconstruction.

In Lithuania, even years later, it still seems too dangerous for full openness. Thus, we read that three thousand documents—Soviet Lithuanian secret documents from the late fifties and early sixties—have “accidentally” been recycled for use as toilet paper, documents that clearly could incriminate some still alive.

We speak of those who attempted to hide their bodies that they would not be murdered. And we speak of those who even now must still hide from the truth of those years. For here is a country occupied more often than not in its long history, by virtue of its placement in the world between powerful nations, often at war with one another, who thought nothing of scooping up Lithuania, binding her first to one territory, then another.

The hope is that the avenues of exploration and the work that has resulted might be of use to others as they do research in this field. It may be possible, by hearing out—as carefully as we know how—the stories we are told by those who lived these years, to come to the faint outlines, to the threshold of understanding of what may, in fact, never be understood.

6

Who is qualified to tell this? As a participant in a Holocaust conference some years ago with presentations largely by historians, I was surprised to learn that Holocaust testimony was viewed by many as “unreliable.” Its subjective nature often contained historical inaccuracies, according to some. I had been interviewing survivors, witnesses, rescuers, and some collaborators in Lithuania for many years and had become aware of the importance of the inconsistencies in testimony. In the case of one particularly horrendous massacre that initiated the freedom to commit others, I gathered testimony from twenty witnesses. Some had been children at the time, others adults. We had everything to learn from

the great variety of testimony, the entire panorama of human response, the inexact nature and selectivity of memory.

Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, speaks of testimonies as supplying not only documentary evidence but also an understanding of “experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses.” LaCapra cites the experience of Dori Laub, psychoanalyst and interviewer for the Yale Fortunoff collection of survivor videos and himself a survivor. Laub tells of a woman who in Auschwitz recalls “four chimneys going up in flames, exploding,” as an uprising takes place. Colleagues at a conference later determined that the fact that only a single chimney exploded rendered the woman’s memory fallible and therefore they could not rely on her entire account of events. Laub comments that the number of chimneys blown up was not of importance but that the woman actually “testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen. . . . That was historical truth.”⁷

Perhaps some fixed truth is there to be found. Perhaps, unlike our knowledge in physics where our very presence observing a phenomenon alters what we see, there is some truth to be captured. But what is it we have when we gather twenty or fifty or a hundred accounts of a single episode—9/11 or the recent tornados or the crash scene of an airplane or a holdup—and find as many versions of the events as there are people observing.

What can we learn from these disparate accounts? Does it matter if the witness is a child or an adult? Related to those who are in harm’s way? Previously traumatized and therefore more vigilant than others? Trained to observe or taken unawares?

Many years ago I was called to testify in a medical malpractice case where a patient who had gone in to the hospital for elective surgery had suddenly stopped breathing and ended up in a vegetative state. The lawyer called upon the surgical technicians, anesthesiologist, nurses, surgeons to testify. Had the anesthesiologist failed to turn on the apparatus that measured breathing levels or heart rate; had he ignored the signals when they showed up? At that time no surgical checklist was in place. Had any of the others in the operating theatre neglected their roles in this procedure? As the trial proceeded, day after day, as each made his

case to prove his innocence, it became clear that for whatever reason, we would not learn what the failing had been. Had the patient, with an existing malformation that made intubation difficult, been the unwitting culprit in this drama?

Would we invalidate the Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto police records kept daily because they do not contain the larger knowledge of events and circumstances that were more fully available to Dr. Elchanan Elkes and other leaders of the Kovno Ältestenrat? Does this diminish their authority and enormous value?

Or banish the writings *in extremis* of the Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti whose small notebook was found in his trousers pocket when the mass grave was exhumed in 1946 containing a poem he wrote as his violinist friend was shot in the head and as Radnoti was about to die: “You’ll be finished off like this—/I muttered to myself—so just lie still.”⁸ Will we ever decipher the meaning of a man who opens his eyes to what is to befall him and is able to write in that critical moment, to record for others? Or would we dismiss Dan Pagis: “I am learning/the declensions and ascensions of/silence.”⁹ As Robert Alter writes: “[T]his use of distanced and multiple voices is linked with an impulse to pull apart the basic categories of existence and reassemble them in strange configurations that expose the full depth of the outrage perpetrated.”¹⁰ Pagis, drawing on the *Yigdal*, writes: “And he in his mercy left nothing of me that would die./And I fled to him, floated up weightless, blue,/forgiving—I would even say: apologizing—/smoke to omnipotent smoke/that has no face or image.”¹¹ And the miraculous transformation that such a survivor could become the expositor of the “luminous horizon of medieval Hebrew poetry,”¹² We have only begun to learn what Pagis had to teach us.

Or Avrom Sutzkever, who could create poems while hiding in a coffin or struggling to stay alive in a lime pit where he sees his own blood run into the lime like lines of poetry. Who refused the victim’s role, transforming his life into art. Or Ephraim Sten, who could address the child he had been, hiding in a hole in the earth, and cross the chasm back to his earlier days with the full weight of adult life. Others chose to radically alter their language, or abandon it altogether. Amir Gilboa calls upon the biblical Isaac, only this time no angel comes

to his rescue. Nelly Sachs uses liturgy to express the loss. Paul Celan once said: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language.”¹³ Celan, who cauterized German, who implanted human feeling into the “time-crevasse,” into the “honeycomb-ice.” Kadya Molodovsky pleads with God to choose another people. S. Y. Agnon forecast the degeneration of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. Yehuda Amichai once told me that after two uncles had washed the bodies of two relatives who had been beaten to death, the entire extended family from Wurzburg, Germany, packed up and left for Palestine. How was it that some could read the signs of danger and take action, even this family deeply embedded in the religious culture of its place and time?

We have heard for years—“No poetry after Auschwitz.” Or to put it more accurately, “*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch*” (After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric). What did Theodor Adorno, writing in 1949 and so often quoted, mean by this? And how did this become such an essential criticism of Holocaust representation?

Michael Rothberg¹⁴ speaks of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka’s internalization of the disaster and its sustaining of an absent “presence,” where “art’s barbarity is not refuted but enacted in order to present the barbarity of the age.” Sixteen years later, Adorno wrote in “The Liquidation of the Self” that his words had given “rise to a discussion [he] did not anticipate . . .” He intended “to point to the hollowness of the resurrected culture of that time—it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one must write poems.” Adorno objected not to the representation of the Holocaust in art but to the transfiguration of the Holocaust as it is made into art which removes some of the horror. He objects to the redemptive function of art, the notion that the Holocaust could yield something positive. Adorno’s writings suggest the need for new forms of representation capable of registering the traumatic shock of modern genocide, to translate knowledge of extremity to a mass audience. Adorno brought together the questions of Holocaust representation and education at a moment when they had not yet been fully articulated. Others have talked about the untranslatable trauma of the Holocaust whose only language is silence.¹⁵

Jean Amery has written: “To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave. . . . Our sole right, our

sole duty was to disappear from the face of the earth. Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. Trust in the world, which already collapsed . . . at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules."¹⁶

Peter Kenez, a Hungarian survivor, writes in his memoir when asked what he was afraid of: "People."¹⁷ Elie Wiesel, in a figure in *The Gates of the Forest*, writes: "My name left me. You might say that it's dead. It went away one day, without reason, without excuse, it forgot to take me along. That's why I have no name. Of course, I looked for it, but without success."¹⁸ In a few words he has encompassed the issue of loss of identity. We will return to this subject later. Who are we when we must give up our language, religion, parentage, culture, landscape, even our sense of wholeness of body, in order to survive? And does it matter if we are four years old or fifty?

Whatever we decide about how the Holocaust is to be transmitted and how survivors were able to take up their lives once more, I know of one person who was able to live afterward through art. Leiser Wolpe, who survived the Kovno Ghetto, the murder of his father, the burning alive of his brother, the death of his mother in a concentration camp, and of all whom he held dear, who survived Dachau and forced marches and tuberculosis, believes that he could not have lived afterward had he not married an artist, a painter, who painted him in the garden and whose work stood as a veil between him and the darkness from which he emerged.¹⁹ But even this did not erase from him the image of a sea of blood, which he saw the first time he entered a body of water after the war ended.

7

History and Memory: Once history was permanent as a mountain. Until I read in my father's book the tale Pliny the Younger reported to Tacitus about his uncle's death and the sudden appearance of a peculiar cloud:

I cannot give you a more exact description of its figure, than by resembling it to that of a pine-tree, for it shot up a great height in the form of a trunk, which extended itself at the top into a fort of branches . . . it appeared sometimes bright and sometimes dark and spotted, as it was either more or less impregnated with earth and cinders.²⁰

This was Mt. Vesuvius erupting. Prelude to the annals of a town abruptly closed: Pompeii. So much for the permanence of mountains. And soon enough thereafter, skepticism rendered textbook history open to debate.

8

Perhaps the earliest doubt occurred in 1941: I was just seven. I had come home from school one day to find my mother and father sitting on the stairs halfway between the first and second floors of our house. What terrible news had brought my father home from work? We had, for weeks, been practicing air-raid drills in school, hiding under our desks or in hallways to avoid the bombs that could fall at any moment. Or the amphibious tanks (I wasn't sure what that word meant) that could come crashing through the classroom window. Our precautions, in retrospect, were flimsy.

Though I could not embrace the full meaning of the Holocaust, from that day forward I knew that something quite terrible was happening to Jewish people. And not only to a people in the abstract, but to those in our family who still lived in Europe.

In fact, by then—though we did not know it yet—two-thirds of the Jews of Lithuania, home to my mother's people for centuries, had been murdered. In villages throughout Lithuania, massacres had taken place beginning in late June 1941. Under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet-Nazi treaty of 1939, Eastern Europe was partitioned. The Baltic states came under the jurisdiction of the Soviets. The Soviet occupation began on June 15, 1940. A year later, June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. "Operation Barbarossa" opened its assault on

Lithuania. The Red Army fled. With the arrival of German occupation forces, the entire Jewish populations of more than 200 villages and towns were massacred.

Family letters only now recovered and translated, coded to pass through the censors, indicate the imminent danger:

Kaunas, December 28, 1940

You mentioned in your letter *Gan Eden* [Garden of Eden], but you forgot that there is also such a place called *Gebinom* [Hell] . . . we beg of you to do everything in your power to make it possible for us to meet with you.

Your brother, Jacob

From Kovno Ghetto to Dachau Concentration Camp to his death. His wife to die in Stutthof Concentration Camp. His son, death at Dachau. One daughter drowned moments before reaching shore after being thrown from a ship in the Baltic Sea in a desperate attempt by the Nazis to erase their crimes. A second daughter, a cousin, survived the years in the ghetto, forced labor, a concentration camp, forced marches, washed up on the shore at Kiel, Germany, and was rescued by a British soldier who thinking her dead kicked her. “This one moves,” he said.

This recollection of my cousin reminded me of Miklos Radnoti, mentioned earlier, a Hungarian Jew who wrote—days before his own death on a forced march—of lying next to his violinist friend after a mass shooting, believing his turn would be next: “I fell beside him; his body turned over,/already as taut as a string about to snap./Shot in the back of the neck. That’s how you too will end,/I whispered to myself; just lie quietly./Patience now flowers into death./*Der springt noch auf*, a voice said above me.”²¹ Signs of life brought rescue for my cousin; another bullet for the violinist.

9

Where shall we go for the truth? Where does it reside? In the hands of the murderers? In the records of the Nazis, the Einsatzgruppen reports?

In German photographs showing mothers holding up their small children to witness the clubbing to death of Jewish men in the Lietukis Garage massacre? In the recollections of those very children? In the testimony of survivors? Witnesses? Rescuers? Historians? In the earth itself, uncovered by forensic scientists? In fact, in recent days a team of archaeologists, using ground-penetrating radar and a form of tomography, have located a 115-foot tunnel created by the hands and spoons of Jews whose job it was to dig up and burn the remains of some one hundred thousand (Jews, Poles, and Russians) who had been killed in pits in the Ponar (Paneriai) Forest in 1944 outside of Vilnius. Of the eighty who started the work, some eleven survived to provide witness to what was done at Paneriai (Holocaust Escape Tunnel, NOVA, April 2017).

Shlomo Breznitz has written in his memoir *Memory Fields*: “There are many different truths, all quite plausible, and often very tempting. And then there is time, with tricks of its own. The fields of memory are like a rich archeological site, with layer upon layer of artifacts from different periods.”²²

Is what was told in 1946 more valid than what is remembered in 1990? Are the Displaced Persons reports gathered just after the war more reliable? Why are historians disturbed by the reactions of Holocaust survivors when survivors take issue with their findings? What about the mainstream party line? Is the idea that the number of killers was equal to the number of rescuers valid? And if so, what bearing does it have on our understanding of the Holocaust? How are villagers influenced by the various rationales offered to counter guilt and blame? What does it mean that a man leaned out of an apartment window in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1996 during a walk by Holocaust survivors in the former Vilna Ghetto and shouted: “I thought we had got rid of you all. What are you looking at? We should have killed all of you.” What does it mean that a rescuer, who risked his own life, his family, his neighbors, comes to talk with me and the woman he rescued and brings along his young grandson to translate? Why does he want his grandson to be so deeply involved in the transmission of this information? A man who makes nothing of what he did. Clearly, the child has already learned what so many adults will never be able to.

“Fate brought me together in those terrible days with very good people, some Lithuanians and some Poles,” writes Yocheved Inčiūrienė,

a survivor. “I have to stress the special role Jonas Saunoris played in my life: without any conditions he agreed to take a completely unknown and strange girl and hide her, not being afraid of any dangers . . . he accepted me like a member of his family and guarded me like a true sister. . . . It is a pity that such dedicated people were significantly fewer than was required to help the condemned Jews.”²³

10

“When the past is seriously contended among different groups of stakeholders in a society or when the past has the potential of assigning guilt to large groups of people,” write professors G. E. Schafft and William H. Kincade of American University, “public history becomes contentious.”²⁴

Its stigma may be dispelled through: (1) outright denial—ignoring the events by glossing over them or replacing them with other public deeds; (2) comparisons with similar horrors that thereby render them relatively harmless; (3) creating boundaries through a distancing from the events in time, place, or persons; or (4) even wearing the stigma as a badge of honor. . . . How public figures . . . interpret these symbolic representations of history is also important to the civic persona of a community.²⁵

We find competing versions of history in Lithuania. The generational differences alone are significant. A rare school teacher shortly after the end of the Soviet occupation, willing to broach the subject of the Holocaust, to help open a dialogue between grandchildren and grandparents, has risked censure by the community. For years, Jews were seen as creators of their own downfall for alleged participation in the NKVD, for alleged responsibility in the exile to Siberia of Lithuanians—though more Jews proportionately were deported to Siberia than Lithuanian non-Jews—and for their embrace of the Russian occupation. As we know, a tenet of Nazism was to make the Jews complicit in their own suffering and death: the Sonderkommando forced to lead Jews to the gas chambers, the kapos put in charge of other prisoners in the concentration camps, those shot in mass graves forced to dig the pits beforehand, a man condemned to

hang forced to hang another first, the use of the Judenrat, the Jewish councils in the ghettos, by the Nazis.

Today, organizations and individuals both within Lithuania and beyond her shores are making numerous efforts to bring light into the discussion of the past. The Holocaust is part of the educational curriculum.

11

And what of memory itself? Primo Levi writes, in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. . . .
The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features.²⁶

Charlotte Delbo, in *La memoire et les jours*, speaks of past events not relegated to the distance but always next to her: “Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise . . . enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake’s skin, the skin of memory does not renew itself. Oh, it may harden further. . . . Alas, I often fear lest it grow thin, crack, and the camp get hold of me again. . . . I live within a twofold being.”²⁷ When the skin of memory fails to hold, she becomes the person she was in the death camp—frozen, hungry, filthy, exhausted. In dreams, the act of will cannot hold, the life alongside her life breaks through. Yet in the dream she cries out and the sound of her cry wakes her. She emerges from Auschwitz once again. And gives voice to her experience *in extremis*.

12

And what is the nature of the survivor’s loss? Jean Amery, tortured by the SS, speaks of the loss of “trust in the world” in *At the Mind’s Limits*: “A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—

along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the World as Will and Representation—into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter.”²⁸ One cannot be at home here. “That one’s fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules.”

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In *The Story of a Life*, Aharon Appelfeld, who witnessed the shooting of his mother when he was eight, managed to escape from a labor camp and wandered alone for several years in Ukrainian forests in constant danger. About his memory of those years, he writes:

Everything that happened is imprinted within my body and not within my memory. The cells of my body apparently remember more than my mind, which is supposed to remember. For years after the war, I would walk neither in the middle of the sidewalk nor in the middle of the road. I always clung to the walls, always staying in the shade, and always walking rapidly, as if I were slipping away. As a rule I’m not given to crying, but even the most casual partings can reduce me to tears.²⁹

Every source that can teach us is valuable. From every discipline and every angle, we need to look at what happened, to draw away the *cordon sanitaire* around memory that Primo Levi speaks of and examine all that comes into our view.

And if we could make our way through all that has been written, recorded, filmed, photographed, testified to, if we had time and life enough and the capacity to encompass the record of what has taken place, which of the myriad records would begin to tell us how we might understand this bestial epoch?

In the words of a survivor, “There is a world of difference . . . between the professionals engaged in theoretical, philosophical approaches and the real thing.” He goes on to say that no one can imagine the