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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS BY CANADIAN HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS¹

This study is based on a project initiated in 1995, whose main objective was to collect unpublished memoirs by Canadian Holocaust survivors. Our intention was to gather such autobiographical records and assure them a “safe haven” in the Archives of Concordia University. These memoirs will be part of the Azrieli Holocaust Collection, the foremost endowed repository of Holocaust publications in Canada, where they will be available for future scholarship.

Because we were under the impression that there might be a large number of memoirs, we initially planned to rely on word-of-mouth to make our project known to the community of survivors. It turned out, however, that our fear of being flooded with manuscripts was quite unwarranted. So we spread the word more widely, including an article in the *Canadian Jewish News*, the community weekly, and a meeting of survivors convened by the Montreal Holocaust Centre where the project was outlined. As a result of these efforts we received twenty-four manuscripts of varying lengths ranging from 10-15 pages to book-length manuscripts ready for publication. Two-thirds of them were written by men and one-third by women; three quarters of the contributions came from Montreal, one quarter from Toronto. The date of writing varied considerably from wartime diaries or narratives written shortly after the described events to memoirs set down in the 1980s and 1990s, nearly half a century after the recalled circumstances.

When contributors were asked why they had chosen to write their memoirs so many years after the event, their responses were fairly uniform and included two chief factors. First, they were prompted by the fact of their own aging and their consciousness of personal mortality encouraged them to take up a long-postponed task. In effect, some spoke of the written memoir as a kind of testament to their having lived, as a way of rescuing from oblivion their sense of being. The autobiography would give voice to the long-repressed unspoken memories and would now constitute an anguished legacy for their children and grandchildren. At the same time they were encouraged to make their memories public because they felt that finally attention was being paid to the testimonies of survivors. In this context it is interesting to note the number of contributors who referred to the popularity of the film “Schindler’s List” as a factor which helped them overcome earlier reluctance. The very popularity of the film attested to the change in receptivity to the Holocaust narratives—from indifference to concern—and this offered positive encouragement.

The second factor cited by many writers for taking up the painful task of transcribing their wartime histories was the upsurge of Holocaust deniers in Canada. In their anger, they sought to counter the outrageous falsehoods of the revisionists by providing a detailed eyewitness account of their experiences. Their stories would be incontrovertible evidence of the Nazis’ war against the Jews and, as such, would help counter the specious arguments of the Holocaust deniers.

In meeting with the contributors we made only one specific request. From the evidence of previously read memoirs, we knew that most concluded their story at the point of their arrival in Canada. However, since one of our interests was to explore how survivors had rebuilt their lives and how they had integrated into the new world, we asked them to add a final chapter relating their post-war experiences. The response to this request was very poor, with very few manuscripts providing that information. This reluctance may confirm that for the survivors their

wartime experience was the sole motive for writing. They consider that period of historical importance and their testimonies bear witness to its significance. By contrast, the post-war years—despite the renewal of family life and the opportunity for education and vocation—are judged to be unremarkable, not meriting special attention.

Each manuscript was submitted to some light editing, which amounted to minor changes in tense and grammar. We made no effort to alter the texts in the name of style, diction, or syntax, preferring to retain the form and quality of the writer's English. To each manuscript we added an abstract of the narrative and a list of key-words designating the place-names of cities, towns, villages, concentration camps, and labour camps mentioned, as well as the names of any prominent figures referred to, for example Rumkowski and Mengele.

The decision to focus only on unpublished memoirs was prompted by the fact that in recent years we had become aware of the existence of such unpublished records when, on numerous occasions, we were approached by survivors who had written the story of their wartime experiences and were seeking editorial or financial aid for the publication of such materials. In many cases these memoirs were too fragmentary or lacking in literary qualities to warrant publication, but we were convinced that this did not vitiate their importance as eye-witness accounts and, as such, a crucial resource for historical information.

Our determination to collect the written memoirs of survivors, rather than follow the more common method of inquiry based on taped interviews, was predicated on the differences between these methodologies. Unlike the formal interview, where the survivors' narratives are prompted by the interviewers' leading questions, the memoir-writers exercise a greater degree of control over the presentation of their recollections. In writing their account, they alone decide the range of experience and the degree of personal revelation to be made public. The readers of memoirs are granted a double view: we witness the remembered historic events as evoked by the writers own

words, and at the same time we are aware of the present-day writer composing the memoir, translating the recalled actualities into words. The writer is not dependent on the mediation of an interviewer, usually a stranger, but can unfold his/her story in accordance with personal choice and sensibility. We thought it would be of interest to study the written versions of these memories, to engage with the recalled past through the idiosyncratic verbal form selected by each author, to get a sense of how, and to what extent, the written compositions conveyed the terrible realities they were addressing.

I

This project was quite deliberately planned as an exploratory effort. It did, however, lead us to a number of observations which this paper is intended to explore and open to discussion.

There has been extensive critical discussion on the nature of written testimony (see Langer, Des Pres, and Young) and we were certainly cognizant of the contingent factors which qualified the form and which had to be considered in the reading of the manuscripts. A number of important factors can be elaborated:

a) *Intended Audience*: As in other forms of written communication, the memoirs are shaped, in part, by the writers' awareness of addressing a specific audience. Our collection presents a spectrum of intended audiences ranging from the self-addressed diary to the formal historical essay. It is evident that the writer of a personal diary, meant for diarist's eyes alone, is free to set down thoughts and descriptions of a private, intimate nature that might be taboo in a narrative intended for publication. Certainly, the diarists note the surrounding wartime events which impose themselves on them and their families, but these events are generally perceived through the prism of emotional need and sensory deprivation. In the case where the intended audience is the writer's own family, the manuscript tends to focus on

genealogy and offers a chronicle of the family history, beginning with nineteenth or early twentieth century ancestors and concluding with their fate during the war years. In some cases these family histories are accompanied by photographs of family members, commemorating the deceased and describing the lives of survivors in the postwar world. Finally, a number of manuscripts seem intended for publication. Usually, these are lengthy, well-organized with tables of contents, maps of the region, and appendices listing the names of friends and family who perished. The tone of the narration is objective, and the exposition includes the history of Jewish settlement, political history, the rise and effect of nationalism and antisemitism in the region. In these cases the author is interested in setting the social and political context for an understanding of personal fate. The narrative still follows the trajectory of personal experience, but the author, in the role of self-conscious historian, is equally concerned with the external circumstances that shaped personal life. (See Appendices A and B for examples.)

Perhaps the best way to summarize these observations is to ask: What was the intended audience that the author was addressing? That question is equally relevant for interviews and for written materials. The answer fundamentally affects the content of the evidence as well as the manner in which it is presented.

b) *Reliance on Second Language*: Since all the survivor-contributors are European-born, the writing of their personal histories in English involved the use of a second language which most of the subjects acquired as young adults only with their arrival in North America some years after the war. For many, it remained a language imperfectly assimilated and they often expressed their sense of discomfort and frustration with the medium. This factor undoubtedly limited the verbal range of the manuscripts—although there are exceptions—and may account for the general simplicity of diction and syntax of the story-telling. Of course, the elementary nature of the survivor's English may be regarded as a validation of authenticity, a

naturalistic rendition of the witness's speaking voice. The very absence of sophisticated diction or complex sentence structure attests to the veracity of these unembroidered texts; the plain language devoid of verbal artifice speaks to the primacy of truth-telling over literary refinement. In fact a number of contributors were unable to write in English and submitted their memoirs in their mother tongue, i.e., Yiddish or Hungarian.

c) *Narration and Memory*: With few exceptions the submitted manuscripts were written many years after the occurrence of the events they describe. The writers were therefore at a remove of several decades, in some cases nearly half a century, from their wartime lives when they undertook to record them. Each memoir, resulting from an act of remembrance, inevitably participates in the processes of forgetting, selecting, and censoring, which characterize human memory. Accordingly, each manuscript should be seen as the particular version of the captured event made available by the writer at the time of writing and subject to the conditions of memory. As a personal statement, each memoir should be seen as a fragment, a singular truth validated by the subject's bearing witness, giving a subjective view of a vast historic event which no single version can encompass in its entirety. Only in the collective memoirs of countless survivors can something like a totality emerge. It is this notion that justifies our small project and the many other current large-scale projects committed to interviewing and assembling the records of survivors.

d) If, as discussed above, memory affects narrative, it should also be noted that narrative itself is a powerful determinant in the shaping of memoirs. That is, the very act of personal storytelling conforms to the conventional modes that prevail in the culture. In western culture the conception of tragedy—personal suffering, loss, and death—has been related to the compensatory act of redemption. We have been instructed, both by our theologians and secular philosophers, that the affliction of

human misery and pain is answered by the redeeming effects of self-knowledge and restorative understanding. Of course, it has been argued (see Steiner, Langer) that the reality of the Holocaust contravenes this conception. The story of the mass murder of innocent millions lacks all redeeming elements, and the conventional definitions of a tragic act simply do not apply. However, even if this is the case, for writers raised in accordance with western literary presuppositions, there is a strong compulsion to shape one's personal story in conformity with traditional precepts. This is especially so in the case of the survivor, whose point-of-view is that of a victim, one who has undergone the worst of degradation and evil and still emerged from that darkness to live on, and in many cases, to rebuild their broken lives and to create families and careers in the post-war world. Such lives would seem to exemplify the paradigm of heroic transfiguration, where the victim is liberated and the sufferer outlives the oppressor. Whether, and to what degree, conventional narrative method has influenced the writing of these memoirs would be difficult to ascertain. But one might refer to the opening of many chronicles as sharing a "Once upon a time" quality, most evident in the descriptions of pre-war family life. Invariably, the story of childhood is rendered in idyllic terms. Family relations seem devoid of conflict or frustration. And even the hardships of harsh poverty are somehow ameliorated in the glow of reminiscence. Does this indicate the near-universal tendency to remember childhood as uninterrupted bliss? Or might this be an example of the persistence of ancient narrative which pictures the beginning of life as Edenic, and in this particular case, an Eden reverentially magnified because of its catastrophic ending?

Yet, as these and other memoirs attest, memories of pleasurable incidents, and even the vast relief of having survived, are subverted by the torment of staggering loss. One of the writers tells us that on the day the transport from Hungary delivered her to Auschwitz, she lost her son, parents, two sisters, mother-in-law, seven sisters-in-law, four brothers-in-law, fif-

teen nieces and nephews, two uncles, and many cousins. Understandably, there can be little capacity to celebrate when memory includes the murder of entire families. And in many cases, grieving is cruelly compounded by the sense of guilt felt by the survivor for having survived, for having come through those fateful events while others have perished. Many memoirs describe the liberation of the camps and the immediate disbelief that somehow, against all odds, they find themselves among the living. But this sense of personal deliverance is always followed by an account of the terrible losses they incurred, the knowledge of which became available once they had returned to their native towns and villages.

One of the contributors (Mr. K.) gives a moving account of the persistence of guilt in the mind of a survivor. In the post-war years he emigrates to Canada and begins to establish a new life for himself. As part of his efforts at creating a new beginning, at constructing an identity detached from the horrors endured in the camps, he decides to have his concentration camp tattooed number removed from his arm. He does so, and for some time he experiences a new sense of freedom. His identity—it seems to him—has been cut loose from the weight of the past, and he finds himself encountering experience as someone new-born, as a self liberated from the prison of oppressive memory. But this exhilaration lasts a short time. The consequences of his act begin to haunt him. He realizes that the removal of the tattooed numbers, while erasing the outward signs of affliction, cannot erase from his conscience the fact that in doing so he has consigned his own past to oblivion, and forsaken the memory of his lost loved ones. Realizing that his personal integrity depends on the continuum of past and present, regardless of how disruptive those past episodes may be, he restores the numbers to his arm.

II

In so small a number of assembled memoirs there can be no claim made for their being “samples” or “representative” accounts of the Holocaust world. Still, a reading of the memoirs does reveal certain common elements which are worthy of note. The degree of consistency evident in the memoirs is no doubt due to the fact that the majority of the writers shared the experience of the concentration camps.

a) In a number of cases the writers attribute their survival in the camps to the presence of another individual—family member or friend—or their being part of an organized group. In either case they participate with others in mastering strategies for survival. They rely on the aid proffered by others to sustain themselves and to combat starvation, illness, or torture. Such aid was invaluable to camp inmates particularly under conditions of illness which would have been fatal but for the intervention of another person. One notable case describes the narrator’s experience as a worker in the Schindler operation where he spent some months as house painter decorating Schindler’s apartment. He provides a detailed description of Schindler’s method of dealing with the Nazis and protecting his Jewish workers. Others speak of the way in which members of certain Zionist or labour organizations reconstituted themselves within the camps and provided the members with moral and material support.

On the other hand, one of the memoirs that describes survival in a non-camp setting illustrates an alternative strategy. In this case the author’s family of four—parents and two sons—deliberately decide to split up in the belief that this would increase their chances of survival. Each member found a different way of hiding and they all survived. The author, who was quite a young boy at the time, survived as a street urchin, developing the street smarts essential to surviving in a hostile environment. This included exploiting his youthful good looks

and, in periods when he needed food, even in eating and sleeping in houses that served as headquarters of Nazi youth gangs.

b) In at least six of the memoirs the writers acknowledge the help they received from Germans in the form of food, or protection, or simple humane treatment. These Germans were either guards, labour supervisors, or civilian engineers in camp-factories, and even include two commandants of camps. One report describes—without irony—a camp commander as a “wonderful human being.” Another, describes a commandant who displayed not only a humane disposition, but who actually saved the lives of hundreds of Jewish prisoners during the death marches by using his authority to ward off the murderous designs of other officers. In fact, the writer of this particular memoir has devoted many years to the task of having the camp commander recognized by Yad Vashem as a “Righteous Gentile.”

c) By contrast, several of the accounts cite the cruel treatment suffered by the writer at the hands of Jewish kapos. These reports are usually rendered more in sorrow than in anger, expressing the subject’s shock that another Jew, himself or herself an inmate too, would act in such sadistic and brutal ways. This sense of outrage is especially pronounced in those cases where the kapo-perpetrator is recognized as a former neighbour or schoolmate. The inflicted physical pain of these accounts seems secondary to the insult done to the victim’s moral expectations. Suffering at the hands of another Jew strikes the narrator as a sure sign that the old familiar world of custom and personal relationships no longer exists, replaced by a cruel society ruled by blind force and the instinct for survival.

d) While the signal importance of the memoirs lies in their evocation of the subjective drama of the witness, they are no less important as invaluable sources of historic information. From them we learn how people coped under the most extreme conditions in the ghettos, the transports, the labour brigades, the

selections, and the concentration camp universe. Some of the writers seem conscious of their role as historians and give precise descriptions of the structure and organization of the camps, including food rations, clothing, medical care, housing conditions, ethnic and political distinctions of the prisoners, and the treatment by the guards and officer corps. Several include explanations of the various patches worn as identification by the prisoners, designating their identity as political prisoners, criminals, Jews, homosexuals, etc. Nearly all accounts by camp inmates describe the experience of being liberated by the Russian, British, or American troops. They give vivid reports of the chaotic last months of the war when they were forced to join the Death Marches as the demoralized Germans, intent on their own survival and seeking to escape the advancing Russians, moved thousands from the eastern camps westward into Germany.

These and other vital pieces of information are conveyed by these amateur historians, giving us detailed records of the darkest era in Jewish history. They would have given anything to avoid the fate that overtook them and their loved ones. Yet having endured the worst of afflictions, having struggled to reconstruct shattered lives, they still had the courage to confront the demons of their dark memories and to write their stories. For this they deserve our deep gratitude and respect. We hope that participation in our project did not add to their ordeal.

This paper is dedicated to them.

APPENDIX A

We received one manuscript that was clearly outside our terms of reference. It consisted of a *Landsmanshaft*'s effort to assemble a history of their region and their suffering. In addition to historical background it contains five memoirs of survivors of that region. Although all of them had been deported from the same region and ended up in the same place—that would not have been obvious if the introduction had not said so. The memories of these survivors focused on totally different aspects of the same situation. All of the writers were teenagers at the time of the events described. Two of them contribute diaries written during the events, while three of them wrote their memoirs much later. None of them were in the camps, but were dumped into communities that had previously been cleared of their original populations. There they had to find shelter as best they could in destroyed buildings; they were given no assistance or food. All of these memoirs deal to a greater or lesser extent with deportations, lack of food and sanitation, forced marches, illness, and suffering. But there the similarities end. The diary of a young girl concentrates on her feelings about the hardships, the absence of social life, and her lack of both girlfriends and a boyfriend. The other diary focuses primarily on the miles of walking under unbearable conditions, the hardships, and the suffering. One memoirist, in addition to describing the forced marches and the hardships, explains how his father discovered materials and services which he then bartered with the local people in exchange for food. Another memoir, written in a pronounced academic style, provides a concise history of the region's wars, changes of government and frontiers, and the pre-World War II series of pogroms. In addition to the deportation in cattle cars and the incidents of hardship and illness, he also describes the petty trade that developed in order to barter for food. The final manuscript mentions the deportations and hardships only briefly. Instead, it concentrates on the "leadership committees" that were established almost immediately. These were composed of people who had been prominent in their

peacetime communities and thus had instant legitimacy. They were active in hiring transportation for the sick and the elderly, in finding jobs even though their pay consisted only in food, in organizing soup kitchens, orphanages, hospitals, financial aid from non-deported relatives, Zionist youth groups, cultural programs, and even in arranging for the repatriation of some of the children in the orphanages. Taken together, these testimonies provide a fairly coherent account of what happened in that time and that place. However, taken individually, each memoir presents a different perspective which illustrates the extent to which an author's feelings, attitudes, and concerns shape the transcribed record of a remembered event.

APPENDIX B

One of the memoirs that we received illustrates several of the points raised in this paper. It was originally written in Yiddish using the Hebrew alphabet; then the author transcribed it phonetically into the Latin alphabet; finally he translated it into English. This same process he also applied to some of his poetry. Some time after we received this memoir the author sent us a revised version that he asked us to use instead of the earlier one. We found it very instructive to compare the two versions in some detail.

One of the changes in the revised version concerns the quality of the English. While the author removed some typos and corrected some mistakes, the more interesting change was in the direction of toning down his emotional outrage by using more "politically correct" language. Thus, the characterization of Polish radio news changed from "bragging assurance" to "propaganda statements"; "excesses" became "actions"; and a number of loaded adjectives were omitted. Another change concerned the addition of several incidents and details that the author had found too emotionally upsetting to have been included in the earlier version.

Finally, there were descriptions in the earlier version that we found difficult to understand because they occurred

totally out of context. In the revised version the author quite obviously realized that he had to add information on the setting and the circumstances that were obvious to him but that were not obvious to a reader unfamiliar with his history.

APPENDIX C

A note on research design: The original intent of this project was that it would become part of a larger study, comparing the Holocaust survivor memoirs with those written by members of other victim groups. It seemed reasonable to assume that a good deal might be learned from studying how members of other such groups coped with their history and their memories. Enough was known about some of these groups to expect that there would be quite dramatic differences.

In the event, these expectations turned out to be entirely academic. Even quite cursory inquiries made it clear that most victim groups did not produce such records. In some cases this was easily explained by the illiteracy of most of their members. The Roma (Gypsies) are one example. In other cases, the culture of the group provided no precedent for 'ordinary' people writing memoirs or for their peers reading them. In fact, the only group that seemed to have produced at least a few such documents are the Armenians. One informant claimed to know of about ten unpublished memoirs, albeit written in Armenian. Until funds for translating these can be raised, the hope of studying them and of making comparisons will have to be tabled. The fact that it is impossible to be an illiterate Jew (at least for men), and that Jewish tradition emphasizes the memory of past persecutions in literature and in rituals, does not only make the Jews the people of the book but also gives them the cultural as well as the personal imperative to write. Thus, the intent of mounting a comparative study has had to be abandoned.

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ENDNOTE

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