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Troubled Memories: Researching Holocaust Testimony

By Jennifer Anne Duke

Abstract: Modernity's largest episode of mass killing occurred between the years 1931 to 1945, throughout which over forty-five million people died. The Holocaust, the Nazi experiment into industrialized mass murder during World War II, was responsible for a significant portion of these deaths, including the deaths of six million Jews, from which the term "genocide" was coined. Experiences documented by hundreds of survivors can be seen in documentaries and films or read about in books. But the psychology behind the testimonies is not so often discussed. This essay will use Harvard-educated professor and Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer's Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory as a framework for investigating examples of the five types of memories recorded in eight books by seven Holocaust survivors. By understanding the five different types of memory (deep, anguished, humiliated, tainted, and unheroic) expressed by Holocaust survivors in their testimony, one can better understand the psychological and physical implications of the Holocaust on a deeper level.

Lawrence Langer is a well-respected scholar who specializes in Holocaust testimonies and how best to understand them. In his first book on Holocaust testimony, *Preempting the Holocaust*, Langer articulates his purpose for the book and the importance of reading survivors' testimonies: "When I speak of preempting the Holocaust, I mean using, and perhaps abusing, its grim details to fortify a prior commitment to an ideal of moral reality, community responsibility, or religious belief that leaves us with space to retain

faith in their pristine value in a post-Holocaust world.”¹ California State University, San Bernardino professor Timothy Pytell further explains Langer’s view of “preempting the Holocaust”: “His focus on Holocaust preemption focuses on attempting to stay honest and truthful in the face of the extreme experience and the cultural rupture that is the Holocaust.”² In Langer’s later book entitled *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, he examines his ideas further and introduces five types of memory that exist in the testimonies included in his book: deep, anguished, humiliated, tainted, and unheroic memories. These types of memories can also be found in other survivors’ testimonies as well, such as Victor Frankl of Austria, Primo Levi of Italy, Gerda Weissman-Klein of Poland, Olga Lengyel of Hungary, Elie Wiesel of Romania, Charlotte Delbo of France, and Felix Weinberg of Czechoslovakia. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl provides his interpretation of Holocaust testimonies as well, introducing the concept of “the delusion of reprieve,” “emotional death,” and resilience. The voices of Holocaust survivors can be heard by reading and listening to their testimonies which offer not only information but personal insight. Understanding their testimonies is imperative to understanding the immortal implications of one of history’s most notorious acts of genocide.

Before further exploring deep, anguished, humiliated, tainted, and unheroic memories hidden within several different pieces of Holocaust testimony, it is important to understand the differences between oral and written testimonies. While both are useful in investigating and understanding testimony, the latter may be more valuable, especially when examining more painful and troubling memories. With written testimonies, survivors can explain their experiences in a way that the reader will better understand. The literary devices, such as metaphors and idioms, that are prevalent in written testimonies may help the reader

¹ Timothy Pytell, “Revisiting Preempting the Holocaust: Frankl vs. Levi,” *Psychology Today* (December 18, 2017).

² Pytell.

imagine and picture the experience of the survivor, bringing them closer to what the experience was really like. Langer introduces this concept by analyzing the rich literature provided in the written testimony of Holocaust survivor Barbara T: “We are dragged out of cattle cars, vomited into an impenetrable black night...screams knife the air and I cover my ears with my hands. Torches keep licking the sky like rainbows.”³

With oral and recorded testimonies, this is much harder to do. The same woman, Barbara T., also had a recorded video testimony in which the same experience is relayed by saying, “the inmates whipped us out of cattle cars.”⁴ While writing about their experiences, some survivors used literary devices such as the simile used in the above example. Others used different methods to appeal to readers’ emotions. Charlotte Delbo (1913–1985), a non-Jewish French resistance fighter imprisoned in Auschwitz, used poetry in her three books, compiled into the trilogy *Auschwitz and After*. Despite her different writing style, her goal is the same: to paint a vivid picture, not just give a testimony. In the first of these three books, Delbo uses these literary devices to explain her memory of the Auschwitz extermination camp:

My memory is more bloodless than an autumn leaf.
My memory has forgotten the dew.
My memory is drained of its sap. My memory has
bled to death.
This is when the heart ought to stop beating—stop
beating—come to a stop.⁵

Written testimonies can also reveal things that might have otherwise remained undiscussed because there is only one party

³ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: the Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 113.

involved and the testimony is not typically subject to outside or third-party influence. One potential problem that can come from a third-party influence is understood by referencing the legal term “leading the witness,” which is often present in oral testimonies, but not present in written testimonies. Langer explains that

former victims are not the only ones threatened by the ordeal of oral testimony. The subtle urging of the interviewer can lead a witness to shift from one form of memory to another, and control and shape the content of each.⁶

Written testimonies might also be easier to share than oral testimonies since they are not told in person to someone living in contemporary society, who may have a very different moral code. Therefore, written testimonies are not subject to judgment by an interviewer, and because of this, more of the experience may be included in the written testimonies. In oral testimonies, interviewers may judge some of the witnesses’ former actions, or perhaps the witness feels that they might, despite the actions having been done out of necessity and the instinct to survive. Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) states that “the lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice...argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty...adopting instead the precepts of self-preservation.”⁷ Survivors may intentionally or unintentionally omit information that they deem not part of their natural character and just something that they had to do in the interests of self-preservation.

Alternatively, they may alter that information, or become upset by the information. One such example is understood through the testimony of a Jesuit priest who was asked by an interviewer “why he did not say something to someone about what he had

⁶ Langer, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

seen. Suddenly before our eyes he is wrestling with the deep memory of his inaction, which common memory clearly disapproves of today.”⁸ Another example can be witnessed in Primo Levi’s (1919–1987) essay “Shame.” When discussing inaction in hindsight, he states that, “this is a judgment that the survivor believes he sees in the eyes of those who listen to his stories and judge with facile hindsight, or who perhaps feel cruelly repelled. Consciously or not, he feels accused and judged, compelled to justify and defend himself.”⁹

Videotaped testimony has its value as well, as it helps to put a face to a story. Just the presence of the survivor on camera can have a moving effect on someone watching who may then be more inclined to identify with the struggles of the survivor and their emotional turmoil. Because of this, oral testimony likely maintains a stronger appeal to the empathy of the person watching than written testimony would. Nevertheless, the best way to observe and understand testimony about the Holocaust is to investigate both written and oral testimony simultaneously.

Part One: Deep Memory and the Diminished Self

“Deep memory” refers to the memory that gets embedded into the subconscious mind, that only resurfaces once triggered. Everyone has these memories, but to survivors of the Holocaust, these memories are often traumatic. Langer calls the memories that reside in the subconscious “deep memory,” which differs greatly from the idea of “common memory,” the type of memory that resides in the conscious mind; this kind of memory is easier to retrieve. Langer quotes Delbo to emphasize this point: “The skin covering the memory of Auschwitz is tough. Sometimes, however, it bursts, and gives back its contents.”¹⁰ Langer explains this

⁸ Langer, 31.

⁹ Primo Levi, “Shame,” in *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1986), 64.

¹⁰ Langer, 6.

concept more in the introduction he wrote for Delbo's Holocaust memoir, *Auschwitz and After*:

[Delbo] developed a crucial distinction to help us discriminate between two operations of memory, speaking of the 'me' of now, living under control of what I translate as 'common memory', and the 'me' of then, the Auschwitz 'me', living under the dominion of deep memory.¹¹

Delbo explains this further when she states that she lives a double life, and without that split existence she would not be able to survive. Some years after liberation, Delbo traveled back across France to visit the women she was imprisoned with; these women all describe the same feeling. Nothing seemed real to them.¹² It can be understood by reading Delbo's memoir that a part of them still felt like they were back there, still in Auschwitz, and still in danger. In one of her poems, Delbo writes, "I've come back from another world and I know not which one is real, as far as I'm concerned, I'm still there, dying there."¹³

Scholar Robert Jay Lifton, who has studied the Holocaust extensively and wrote several pieces on it, calls this process "doubling," an event that he describes as "an active psychological process, a means of adaptation to extremity."¹⁴ Lifton attributes this act of doubling to perpetrators of the Holocaust rather than victims, stating that it is how they were able to commit such heinous acts. According to Lifton, "The way in which doubling allowed Nazi doctors to avoid guilt was not by the elimination of conscience but by what can be called the transfer of conscience.

¹¹ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, xviii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 337–346.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁴ Robert Lifton, "The Nazi Doctors," in *Problems in European Civilization: The Holocaust*, ed. Donald Niewyk (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 66.

The requirements of conscience were transferred to the Auschwitz self, thereby freeing the original self from responsibility for actions there.”¹⁵ Proof that many of the worst Nazis “doubled” is seen in the Nuremberg trials, where several war criminals stated that the acts committed were committed in a state of war, and therefore cannot make them guilty of breaking any laws. The common excuse of “I was just following orders” is a clear example that post-war, they no longer identified with the other part of themselves, a part that existed in a state of war but not after.

Although Lifton attributes doubling to the perpetrators, the act of doubling is seen in Holocaust survivors as well as survivors of other kinds of trauma. Instead of having trouble distinguishing between their “war self” and “original self,” however, they have trouble distinguishing between their original self and their post-trauma self. Their post-trauma self can also be referred to as their “diminished self” which will be explored later in the article. Many Holocaust survivors struggled to find a will to live after their experience under their Nazi overlords. One of the ways they did so was by burying the memory associated with their trauma. For example, Delbo explains how she goes about her daily life while retaining these troubling memories: “I’m living without being alive. I do what I must, because I must, because that’s what people do.”¹⁶ These debilitating and traumatizing experiences live in the person’s deep memory where the post-trauma self will eventually reside.

Deep memory is repressed by the mind for self-preservation, but it reappears when the survivor unintentionally calls upon it. In his memoir, *Boy 30529*, Felix Weinberg recalls his deep memory. The pathos, or emotional appeal, that he uses in his writing shows that recalling the memories at the back of his mind pains him but claims that his memoir is written by him solely to honor the memory of his mother who perished in the camps. This type of repressed memory lives on long past liberation, an event

¹⁵ Lifton, 65–66.

¹⁶ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 258.

that was not entirely a relief to him. He states, “Nine days after my seventeenth birthday, my [physical] life was given back to me, [but] the camps changed me permanently.”¹⁷ Deep memory residing in the subconscious mind of Weinberg brought back uncharacteristic feelings and actions that he had to adapt to survive; this is the “skin,” or “other self,” that Delbo refers to. The person writing the memoir or recalling their deep memory is not the same as they were during their imprisonment in the camps. Common memory operates on the surface, as the players in a play, but deep memory is always there in the background, running the lights and sounds backstage.

Part Two: Anguished Memory and the Divided Self

Although similar to deep memory, “anguished memory,” or “the divided self,” focuses more on the confusion about the two different lives—the pre and post-trauma lives of the Holocaust survivors—and how it affects their testimonies. Langer introduces two facets of survivors’ personalities which he calls the “lived event” and “died event” personalities. He describes the “lived event” personality as the one that lives in the present and blends in with the current society and adheres to current societal norms. He calls the “died event” personality the one that clings to the life once lived, the Holocaust experience, and the survivors’ stories of survival.¹⁸

Numerous survivor testimonies explain anguished memory in the same way that Langer explains it. In their testimonies, they state that there are two different realities that they live with daily. One is their contemporary personality, which goes to work every day, raises children, and attends parties, as well as participates in everyday life. The other personality is the one who lived and survived the Holocaust. That personality is never really gone and is a prime example of what Langer would refer to as the “died

¹⁷ Felix Weinberg, *Boy 30529: A Memoir* (London: Verso, 2014), 14.

¹⁸ Langer, 69.

personality.”¹⁹ One survivor included in Langer’s book states in her testimony that in order to live again, she had to die in the camps, if not physically then emotionally and spiritually. Bessie K, whose infant was taken from her and killed by Nazis, remarried after liberation and raised a family. She states: “In order to survive, I think I had to die first. I was born on that train and I died on that train.”²⁰ Delbo’s explanation is very similar to Bessie’s. She wrote, “If I confuse the dead and the living, with whom do I belong? Everything was false, and I was in despair at having lost the faculty of dreaming, of harboring illusions. This is the part of me that died in Auschwitz. This is what turned me into a ghost.”²¹

Another example of a lived and died event in a survivor is seen in the testimony presented by Magda F., who was deported at first to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. Despite this late departure, she was still sent to five different camps and upon returning to Hungary after liberation, she found out that almost all of her family had died. The only survivors were two of her brother-in-laws. She married one of them and he had a significant amount of trouble separating his two lives, or his lived event and died event. In her testimony, Magda F. recalls,

My daughter told me one day, ‘Mom, I don’t think in dad’s eyes I am Ellen. I am still Eva. And my brother is not Tommy, he is Freddie.’ That was not the truth, but his mind was still back in the same story, and those two children he saw were Fred and Eva.²²

His children from his first marriage, Fred and Eva, had been killed in the gas chambers during the Holocaust, and his split mind had trouble sorting his old life from his new one, where his children’s

¹⁹ Langer, 69.

²⁰ Weinberg, 49

²¹ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 236–239.

²² Langer, 74.

names were Tommy and Ellen. One survivor compared the two realities to a feeling of being on two different planets:

We [survivors] have these double lives. You have one vision of life and I have two. I—you know—I lived on two planets...we were herded onto Hitler's planet of annihilation zones and torture and slaughter areas, and herded back again, while no longer having anything in common with the inhabitants of this planet. And we had to relearn how to live again.²³

Another example of this incredible difference in the two lives that anguished memory represents is seen in the testimony of another unnamed woman who survived the Holocaust. She “saw” two different versions of the same sun. While on the train to one of the camps, the woman looked out of the small, barred window and saw a family at the station dressed in normal clothing and the sun was high in the sky and bright and beautiful. In her testimony, she compared that image to paradise. However, she saw that same sun rise every day while in Auschwitz, and it did not represent the same thing; it is like it was an entirely different sun: “I saw the sun in Auschwitz, I saw the sun come up, because we had to get up at four in the morning. But it was never beautiful to me. I never saw it shine. It was just the beginning of a horrible day.”²⁴ Langer cites an additional comment on the significance of the sun as it pertains to an anguished memory from another survivor's memoir: “I swear to you, the sun was not bright. The sun was red, or it was black to me...the sun was never life to me. It was destruction. It was never beautiful.”²⁵

Based on the content in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, author and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1905–

²³ Langer, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

1997) uses his own experience gathered while in camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau to describe the various psychological stages that prisoners went through from the point of their arrival to the point of their selection for death. These psychological processes often cause anguished memory to appear later, as trauma is stored in the unconscious mind to allow the physiological body to survive.

The first stage, according to Frankl, is made up of a psychological condition called “the delusion of reprieve,” or the psychological state where “the condemned man, immediately before his execution, gets the illusion that he might be reprieved at any moment.”²⁶ Prisoners were hopeful of their treatment and began bargaining with their minds that maybe their situation would not be so bad. For example, Weinberg describes how the Jewish prisoners in the Theresienstadt ghetto, including his parents, repeatedly heard the news of what awaited them in the other camps once they were transported like those who came before them. Most shook it off and said things like, “it couldn’t possibly be much worse than being here!”²⁷ They were sadly mistaken. Once deported to camps, the likelihood of surviving until liberation was very minimal.

Unfortunately, this idea of reprieve made the Nazis’ killing much easier. As author Isaiah Trunk (1905–1981) explains in his essay, “Why the Jewish Councils Cooperated,” “the instinct of self-preservation, which prompts people to resist the thought of imminent destruction and to cling to even a spark of hope played into the hands of the executioners.”²⁸ The Nazis kept the façade up until the last possible second. When trains were boarded, the prisoners were told they would be resettled. Of course, this was a lie. When trains arrived, they were told they would be separated

²⁶ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017), 110.

²⁷ Weinberg, 19.

²⁸ Isaiah Trunk, “Why the Jewish Councils Cooperated,” in *Problems in European Civilization: The Holocaust*, edited by Donald Niewyk. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 168.

from their families for only a short while. In the undressing room immediately before the gas chamber, they were told to make sure to keep their clothes and shoes together to find them afterward. In the moving Holocaust documentary film, *Shoah* (1985), directed by Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018), a witness even recalled that SS guards would sometimes ask arriving prisoners their professions, and tell them, “we need you for the war effort,” only to send them to their deaths minutes later.²⁹ Desperate to cling to hope, most prisoners willingly entered the gas chambers. According to Delbo, hope even helped kill some prisoners:

Every day we witnessed death of this one or that, at the end of their tether, who might have lived had they been liberated on that day. They died as a result of the emotion, and the disappointment. Died of having allowed hope to beat in their hearts.³⁰

After Frankl’s “delusion of reprieve” comes the sobering second stage, the “emotional death.”³¹ This stage coincides with Langer’s idea of the “died event”: “the prisoner who had passed onto the second stage of his psychological reactions did not avert his eyes anymore. When the prisoner passed between the first and second phase of relative apathy, he achieved a kind of emotional death.”³² The emotional death is what split the lived and died event, the self from the diminished self. According to Frankl, this split often happened within the prisoners’ first few days at the camp, again, suppressing traumatic memories to enable the physical body to survive.

For Gerda Weissman-Klein (b. 1924), an eighteen-year-old Jewish girl who grew up in Bielitz, Poland, the emotional death

²⁹ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (1985; New York, NY: New Yorker Films, April 1985).

³⁰ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 204.

³¹ Frankl, 110.

³² Langer, 20–21.

happened after she was split from her family. In her memoir entitled *All but My Life*, Weissman-Klein remembers the years before her deportation to the camps. First, she witnessed many of the townspeople in Bielitz shout “Heil Hitler” and wave Nazi flags above their homes, celebrating the Germans as liberators.³³ Things changed quickly for Weissman-Klein and her family. When her father and his business partner lost their fur factory, the Germans confiscated everything in the factory and put a sign on the factory doors that read “No dogs or Jews allowed.”³⁴ Her father’s business partner came to her room one night beaten and bloodied after trying to enter the factory. He eventually went into hiding around the same time that the Germans enforced a new law requiring all Jewish men to register. After registration, her brother, her only sibling, was taken away for “labor” near the Russian border. Soon after, her father was taken away on a train to a destination unknown. Her mother and herself were then separated the following day and put onto two separate trucks. At first, Weissman-Klein feared for the fate of her family members that had been stripped away from her one-by-one, and the tortuous things she feared they would be subjected to. Then finally, she died her emotional death: “Finally, I could suffer no longer. My eyes remained dry. I felt my features turn stony. ‘Now I have to live,’ I said to myself, ‘because I am alone and nothing can hurt me anymore.’”³⁵

A similar feeling is seen in the testimony of Mordechai Podchlebnik (1907–1985), one of the only two survivors of the Chelmno extermination camp. In an interview for *Shoah*, director Claude Lanzmann asked Podchlebnik what had died in a fellow prisoner. Podchlebnik answered, “Everything died. But he’s only human, and he wants to live. So he must forget.”³⁶ The film also includes the testimony of Abraham Bomba, a Jewish barber.

³³ Gerda Weissman-Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁶ *Shoah*.

During his interview with Lanzmann, he was asked, “How did that feel?” To which Bomba answered, “I will tell you something. To have a feeling over there was hard to do. It was hard to feel anything at all. You work day and night with dead bodies; you were also dead.”³⁷

Delbo expresses this same void in her book, *None of Us Will Return*, in which she states, “The will to resist was doubtlessly buried in some deep, hidden spring which is now broken, I will never know. I thought of nothing. I felt nothing.”³⁸ Delbo also describes this feeling when she writes about an hours-long roll call in Auschwitz: “Someone says, ‘I think we’re being ordered back.’ But within us, nothing replies. We have lost consciousness and feeling. We had died to ourselves.”³⁹ The emotional death Frankl describes occurs in almost every Holocaust survivor, as their ability to push all needs aside in favor of their instinctual will to stay alive is what makes them resilient when faced with the trauma of living in the camps.

The emotional death, though necessary for survival according to Frankl, is present but not obvious in the memoir written by Weinberg. While many other Holocaust testimonies reveal several instances of self-reflection about the circumstances of camp life, including the moment when the survivor decides that the only thing they have left is to live, Weinberg’s does not. Instead, he chooses to focus on what happened, and not how it affected him. He writes about his work assignments, traveling between the camps, the people he meets, and the news he hears about the war, but writes on very few occasions about his own self-reflection. At the beginning of his memoir, Weinberg discusses how he “saw without seeing, smelled without smelling, and

³⁷ *Shoah*.

³⁸ Charlotte Delbo, *None of us will return* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 64.

³⁹ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 35.

touched without touching.”⁴⁰ This is the closest to an emotional death that he provides the readers with throughout his memoir.

Frankl, believing that the choices man makes are always completely his own, may argue that it was intellectual stability that made Weinberg more resilient to the emotional death and other emotional turmoil suffered during his time in the camps. Frankl does not believe that traumatic events like the Holocaust could alter an individual’s true self. This ideology is in stark contrast to Langer, who believes it is the experiences that shaped the person, not their mind. Based on Frankl’s ideology, Weinberg was more resilient than other survivors because of his intellectual background. But according to Langer’s ideology, Weinberg was just more reluctant to share the less-than-human instances of his time in the camps for fear of their decisions being held to the moral standards consistent with contemporary society.

There is, however, another explanation for some survivors’ reluctance to share self-reflection in regard to their anguished memories. Langer mentions that sometimes survivors have trouble believing their own stories because such a traumatic event is difficult to understand, especially in a time where that horror no longer exists. To survivors of the ordeal, the events of the Holocaust seem like a different reality. Testimonies often reveal survivors actively trying to deal with their own disbelief at their stories while telling them.

In some cases, an interviewer may lose the memory of some of these stories unintentionally, which is the case with the testimony of Hanna F., a Holocaust survivor who lived through Auschwitz twice. During an interview disclosing her experience, the interviewers asked Hanna F. how it was she was able to survive. When she stated that she survived out of stupidity, the interviewers “laughed deprecatingly, overriding her voice with their own ‘explanation,’ as one calls out, ‘you had a lot of guts!’”⁴¹ When she tried to explain herself, the interviewers laughed again

⁴⁰ Weinberg, 67–79.

⁴¹ Langer, 64.

and the interview was cut at this point, robbing the world of information, and robbing the survivor of her testimony. Langer argues that interviewers should be careful of offending or interrupting the survivor. By interjecting where unnecessary, interviewers deprived the historiography of the Holocaust of some vital information that could have been extracted from Hanna F.'s testimony.

Langer also introduces French philosopher Maurice Blanchot's idea of "wounded space." This concept argues that survivors must separate themselves from their current identities to go back to their repressed and haunted personalities, or their "wounded space," to retrieve memories.⁴² This is perhaps a good explanation for the lack of self-reflection in Weinberg's memoir. He did not want to have to revisit the horrors of his wounded space, so he skipped over them altogether, opting instead to mainly focus on the day-to-day details of camp life. Levi did the same in *Survival in Auschwitz*, a book that is lacking in self-reflection but heavy on the psychological observation of others. The majority of the self-reflection found in Levi's own anguished memory can usually be understood by reading his collection of essays, *The Drowned and the Saved*.

Langer adds his idea of "wounded time" to explain Blanchot's "wounded space": "As memory plunges us into the past to rescue the details of the Holocaust experience, it discovers that cessation plays a more prominent role than continuity."⁴³ He then gives two examples of survivors having to come to terms with "wounded time," a world that went on without them while they were trapped in another. Survivors often wondered about their family, whether they were alive or dead, even though some felt it no longer mattered, especially as their time in the camps went on.

Langer finishes his explanation of anguished memory by arguing that interviewers should disregard the concept of time while listening or interviewing survivors because time does not

⁴² Langer, 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

exist in the same way for them. Delbo explains that, “We are in a place where time is abolished.”⁴⁴ Later in her testimony, she reiterates this point; her explanation helps name her third book: “The time you measure is not the measure of our days.”⁴⁵ Most prisoners had little or no concept of time. With no sure-fire way to keep track of time, they lived day-by-day. Levi states in his testimony that “we had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment.”⁴⁶ In the words of Blanchot,

The experience of the disaster obliges us to disengage ourselves from time as irreversible. If we are to master the meaning of wounded time, as it afflicts the voices in these testimonies, there appears to be no alternative to immersing ourselves in the shifting currents of its discontinuous flow.⁴⁷

Part Three: Humiliated Memory and the Besieged Self

Langer’s concepts of “humiliated memory” and “the besieged self” refer to the memory of humiliating things a prisoner had to subject themselves to in the ghettos, on the trains, and in the camps.⁴⁸ For example, cattle cars that transported prisoners had no bathroom facilities, so prisoners had to relieve themselves in front of hundreds of others. Humiliated memory violates a survivor’s sense of self. What was humiliating before and after the Holocaust was commonplace during it. As surviving the camps became less likely, morals, laws, and justice ceased to exist. As Levi explains, “We believe that the only conclusion to be drawn is that in the face

⁴⁴ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 32

⁴⁵ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 257.

⁴⁶ Levi, “Shame,” 62.

⁴⁷ Langer, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence.”⁴⁹ Ryan Piccirillo, author and Boston University graduate, supports this idea: “Within the camps, prisoners were not treated like humans and therefore adapted animalistic behavior necessary to survive.”⁵⁰ In other words, the tragedy of the Holocaust launched twentieth-century European society backward, in contrast to the previous century.

The nineteenth century saw the rise in intellectualism and industrialization, bringing forth great minds such as German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875–1961), men who spoke frequently about the power of the unconquerable human spirit. Frankl, being one of these men, frequently mentions the unconquerable human spirit. He explains throughout the book that ultimately, man is self-determining. He argues that “the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.”⁵¹ He supplements this claim by stating that while some prisoners behaved “like swine,” others behaved “like saints.”⁵² Based on the chapter “The Drowned and the Saved” in *Survival in Auschwitz*, not to be confused with the essay compilation of the same name, it seems Levi agrees that some prisoners did not let their circumstances corrupt their morality, but that these “saints” were very few: “Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s own moral world was conceded

⁴⁹ Levi, “Shame,” 87.

⁵⁰ Ryan Piccirillo, “Moral Adaptation in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*,” *Inquiries* 2, no. 3 (2010).

⁵¹ Frankl, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 134.

only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.”⁵³

Frankl also explains that to survive, the prisoners had to give themselves a reason to live: “Any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.’”⁵⁴ Levi explains throughout his testimonies that in order to live, prisoners gave themselves a “why” by focusing on living through subsequent small events rather than living till liberation. For example, in the winter, prisoners were focused mainly on surviving the cold. When the camp thawed in the spring, only then did the prisoners notice their hunger. Then hunger, not cold, became their priority.

They also had to hold onto whatever hope they could find, even if it was small. Levi writes, “Strange, how in some way one always has the impression of being fortunate, how some chance happening, perhaps infinitesimal, stops us crossing the threshold of despair and allows us to live.”⁵⁵ He then gives an example: “It is raining, but it is not windy. Or else, it is raining and windy, but you know that this evening it is your turn for the supplement of soup.”⁵⁶ He believes that the strength the prisoners needed to go on was found this way. Similarly, Delbo believes that the strength to go on living was found in giving oneself a purpose. She states in her memoir that during their imprisonment, she and her block mates “spoke even more of the future, and the future acquired definition. We were making many plans. We never stopped making plans.”⁵⁷

Langer’s ideology about this seems to be at odds with Delbo, Frankl, and Levi’s ideologies. He explains that prisoners

⁵³ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 92.

⁵⁴ Frankl, 76.

⁵⁵ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 131.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁷ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 76.

had nothing to look forward to and that they were incapable of looking forward or hoping for anything because their spirits were shattered beyond repair. For many, there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Survivors' spirits were completely broken; the Nazis had taken everything from them, their family, their health, their morals, their belongings, and sometimes even their faith in God. Even liberation did not provide relief to most prisoners. Instead, they were forced to take on a whole new set of challenges. Langer writes, "the details uncovered by humiliated memory dispute the claim still advanced by many commentators that the invincible human spirit provided an armor invulnerable to Nazi assaults against the self."⁵⁸

The previous century of industrialization made central Europe one of the most advanced societies of the twentieth century but the Holocaust virtually undid everything that the European people had accomplished up until that point. According to Langer, "The quest for pinnacles that infatuated the nineteenth-century mind and left a strong imprint on our own ended in the ashpits of Auschwitz and other death camps, where upward striving could do nothing to allay the human ruin."⁵⁹ Before the Holocaust, people used the lessons of the past to explain the present; the tragedies of the past were understood as a means to an end. They were taught to believe in happy endings. As Nietzsche says, "looking into the past urges them towards the future, it incites them to engage in life, and kindles the hope that things will turn out well and that happiness is to be found behind the mountain toward which they are striding."⁶⁰ According to Langer, this is why the Holocaust is so difficult for many interviewees, and the population in general, to understand. There was no happy ending. No good came from the near extermination of the Jews and others deemed "undesirable" by the Nazis. The tragedy of the Holocaust goes against human nature and the human spirit which needs to believe in happy endings to

⁵⁸ Langer, 77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

survive: “humiliated memory runs contrary to the hopes and expectations of the audience and of its own other self...consciousness is always longing for happy endings.”⁶¹

The testimonies of survivors are repressed by humiliated memory because it requires the survivor to reveal things about themselves that were less-than-human or unhuman-like by current societal standards but that, during wartime, were required for survival. The Holocaust deprived human beings of the very things that make them human not just the physiological things such as sleeping and eating, but psychological things as well, such as their ideas of morality and right and wrong. The physical scars would eventually heal, but the emotional scars would remain far past liberation. As Langer explains, “it is clear from the struggle of many witnesses, from their expressions as well as their words, that they inhabit two worlds simultaneously: the one of ‘choiceless choice’ *then*; the other of moral evaluation *now*.”⁶²

Frankl’s experience did not seem to affect his sense of self the way it affected the others, but during his time in the camps, he carefully observed the mental states of his fellow prisoners and saw many examples of humiliated memory and the diminished self:

Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will—under this influence the personal value suffered a loss of values...he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind; he thought of himself then as only a part of an enormous mass of people, his existence descended to the level of animal life. And we, the sheep, thought of two things only—how to evade the bad dogs and how to get a little food.⁶³

⁶¹ Langer, 110.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶³ Frankl, 50.

But food was scarce in the camps. Prisoners were given tiny fragments of bread with a thin spread of margarine only on certain days. The soup they were served was about as nutritious as hot water. Because of the scarcity of food, many prisoners had to resort to stealing to keep themselves alive. Stealing in the camps was often referred to as other things. Levi refers to stealing as “inheriting.”⁶⁴ In her book, *Five Chimneys*, Holocaust survivor Olga Lengyel (1908–2001) prefers to use the term “organizing” rather than stealing.⁶⁵

The prisoner, as a result of stealing, would begin to bargain with his diminished self about the acts he was committing that did not adhere to the conscience of the person he was before the camps. Levi discusses “inheriting” in Buna, a subcamp of Auschwitz:

Everything that can be stolen is stolen as soon as attention is relaxed. To avoid this, we had to learn the art of sleeping with our head on a bundle made up of our jacket and containing all our belongings...they had to be carried along always and everywhere...if I find a spoon lying around, a piece of string, a button which I can acquire without danger of punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right.⁶⁶

Frankl explains that he had acquired some mittens by means of “inheriting” them from a patient who had recently died of typhus. Langer gives plenty of examples where a survivor describes how they would often, at least in some way, hope for sick patients to die so that they could get warmer clothes, better-fitting shoes, or that person’s food ration.

⁶⁴ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 33.

⁶⁵ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* (Chicago, IL: Chicago, 1995), 56.

⁶⁶ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 33–37

In another example, Lengyel writes that in the camps, stealing was often referred to as “organization.”⁶⁷ Words such as “theft” and “steal” were typically avoided, as they had, up until this point, always been used to describe a selfish act and thus went against prisoners’ ideas of morality. Stealing in the camps was different, as it was an act that was committed only to stay alive. According to Lengyel,

The washroom would have made a fine field for a moralist’s observations. Sometimes an internee was able to clean up. If she did, her clothing would have been stolen. In the camp, thievery became a science and an art. Women who had been mothers of honest families, who formerly would not have taken a hairpin, became utterly hardened thieves and never suffered the slightest feeling of remorse.⁶⁸

Clothes were rare commodities with many prisoners wearing worn mismatched shoes that were for the same foot. Many inmates would steal clothes to keep themselves alive, especially in the winter months. There was also a black market operating in the camps in which the inmates could sell clothes that were “organized” for vital necessities like bread or margarine.⁶⁹

Lengyel herself, while exhibiting several episodes of morality such as refusing to perform sexual favors for food, occasionally committed acts of “organization” to ensure her own livelihood. One of these humiliated memories took place during a barter in a camp. A woman promised Lengyel a rare food item known as a “plazki” in exchange for aspirin tablets for an earache.⁷⁰ Being a worker in the infirmary, Lengyel often carried aspirin with her. However, supplies for patients in the infirmary

⁶⁷ Lengyel, 109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁰ Plazki is a type of potato pancake common in Poland.

were very scarce and by giving this woman aspirin, a patient who needed it more would not be able to receive any. In her testimony, Lengyel wrestles with this memory that haunted her: “I had abused my standing in the camp for personal welfare. In normal circumstances I would not have stooped so low. But I was at Auschwitz, and I was starved.”⁷¹

Lengyel, and others in her position, cannot be blamed for their selfish acts. Levi states that “the ordinary moral world ceases to exist; the meanings and applications of words like ‘good,’ ‘evil,’ ‘just,’ and ‘unjust’ begin to fuse and the differences between these polar opposites become unclear.”⁷² When faced with the choice between life-saving calories or to help ease the pain of another prisoner, the line between right and wrong becomes indiscernible and this moral conflict becomes a major part of humiliated memory.

Prisoners also had to constantly be on guard against “organization” and “inheritance.” Weissman-Klein miraculously survived the death march that four thousand women were forced to go on when the Allies were closing in on Germany all because of the ski boots that her father had insisted she wear months prior. However, it was due to great personal sacrifice that Weissman-Klein survived. Women who previously never stole anything apathetically stole shoes off their fellow prisoners while they slept and often Weissman-Klein had to go without sleep or give up pieces of her rations to keep her boots. Weinberg was not lucky enough to have ski boots. Instead, he “inherited” socks and boots when his old ones wore out by taking them off decaying corpses he found on the death march.⁷³ In addition to valuable, life-saving articles of clothing, prisoners had to steal food as well if they wanted to stay alive. Food rations varied based on the prisoner’s job but the vast majority of prisoners were not given near enough

⁷¹ Lengyel, 112.

⁷² Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 86.

⁷³ Weinberg, 102–103.

food to stay alive. Hunger and malnourishment killed slower than exposure to the elements did but they were far more brutal.

When hunger reaches the point of starvation, humans regress as their learned traditions, morals, and values give way to their pure, raw, natural survival instincts. One survivor recalls being so hungry during his imprisonment in the camps that he ate from trash cans; another survivor ate human flesh from a hand blown off in a bombing.⁷⁴ Lengyel and her bunkmates smeared toothpaste on their bread rations. Weinberg survived solely off of the sugar and chicory mixture left at the bottom of the barrels of “coffee” that they served: “the taste was revolting but it was full of calories, I doubt I would have survived without it.”⁷⁵ Prisoners became informants to the Germans or worked extremely traumatizing jobs, such as serving in the Sonderkommando, for extra portions of food, or they would secretly hope for a fellow prisoner to die or become sick so that they could eat that person’s ration of bread.⁷⁶

However, the violation of the self during the Holocaust involved so much more than just the things prisoners had to resort to in order to acquire sufficient food and clothing. Prisoners were often kept in close quarters with dozens or hundreds of others without any source of light and with nowhere to relieve themselves. An example of this is seen in the testimony of Malka D., a munitions worker in Radom, Poland. Langer quotes, “Because of some irregularity, the SS took thirty Jews and locked them in a dark cellar without windows. Malka D. was most troubled by the lack of toilet facilities. She tells the interviewer that the men tied strings around themselves so that urine wouldn’t come out.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Langer, 117.

⁷⁵ Weinberg, 76.

⁷⁶ Sonderkommando refers to Jews in charge of getting new prisoners into gas chambers, then burning their corpses in crematoriums.

⁷⁷ Langer, 113.

Jewish people had lived in Europe for hundreds of years and had established their own culture, traditions, businesses, and lifestyles. They were artists, teachers, scientists, and philosophers. Malka D. says in her testimony that they were civilized and thus horrified at being reduced to relieving themselves in front of others. Survivor Pierre T.'s testimony says the same thing: "they have made us lose our civilized ways. Gradually you become a different person. And you do things that you would *never* think you'd do."⁷⁸ Piccirillo rephrases a passage declaring that "in order to survive one must forego the notion that it is a basic human right that a person should not have to endure humiliating uncleanliness."⁷⁹

Weissman-Klein explains how she and several hundred others had contracted an intestinal disease or parasite during a march. They were given a wooden barrel and told that overfilling it would result in rampant beatings: "We had to run all night, stand in line, and plead for our turn. When the SS women came in the morning, they beat us, calling us every filthy word in their vocabulary."⁸⁰ Delbo mentions that they were unable to bathe or change their clothes for months on end. They would be shaved to ward off diseases like typhus but being allowed to bathe would have been much more effective at reducing infection rates of typhus and other diseases.⁸¹ By shaving their prisoners instead of allowing them to bathe, the Germans robbed their prisoners of their dignity.

Auschwitz survivor Jean Amery (1912–1978) describes in detail the violation and theft of dignity in the camps. During one incident, a Kapo tried to hit him and he ducked. He held onto that one piece of rebellion against his captors, stating, "I didn't stand firm like a cliff, but ducked. And still, I tried to initiate proceedings to restore my dignity, and beyond physical survival

⁷⁸ Langer, 86.

⁷⁹ Piccirillo.

⁸⁰ Weissman-Klein, 195.

⁸¹ Delbo, *None of Us Will Return*, 149–151.

that provided me with just the slightest chance to survive the nightmare morally also...the deprivation of dignity was nothing other than the potential deprivation of life.”⁸² Amery eventually committed suicide. His ability to live his life was taken from him, as well as his personal dignity which he held sacred. The right to grieve for his loss was also taken from him the same as it was taken from many Holocaust survivors, such as Edith P., who, according to Langer, “was exiled first from normal living or normal dying, and now from normal grieving.”⁸³ Edith P. also tells her interviewer of the devastation that humiliated memory wrecks on survivors: “Physical pain you can stand, but how can you bear emotional pain? My body healed, but my soul never healed. I had been humiliated. I want to share it with someone who knows me *really*. There isn’t even a grave to go and cry to. It’s not easy to live this way.”⁸⁴

It is critical that interviewers and writers not tread lightly when it comes to the concept of humiliated memory and the less-than-human aspects of Holocaust survival. Every experience must be investigated in its natural state, not censored for audiences. Langer explains that “we lack terms of discourse for such human situations, preferring to call them inhuman and thus banish them from civilized consciousness,” instead of talking about them.⁸⁵ But when it comes to trying to understand the Holocaust on a deeper level, every topic must be approached, without caution or censoring.

The human spirit needs and strives for happy endings, even when they do not exist. Many of the testimonies reviewed express the desire of the interviewer (representative of the modern population) to skip over the rough parts and instead speak chronologically about survivors’ experiences, ending with

⁸² Langer, 90. Kapo is a prisoner put in charge of other prisoners, usually in exchange for special treatment.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

liberation. Langer states that history often gets written without these kinds of episodes of human struggle:

They remain exiled from concepts like human destiny, clinging to the stories that constitute their Holocaust reality until some way is found to regard such stories as an expression rather than a violation of contemporary history.⁸⁶

Interviewers, intellectuals, and historians have to be careful not to disregard certain uncomfortable parts of human history that do not fit in with current societal standards if they want to maintain as much accuracy as possible when documenting historical events such as the Holocaust.

Part Four: Tainted Memory and the Impromptu Self

Langer describes tainted memory as “a narrative stained by the disapproval of the survivor’s own present moral sensibility...it is a form of self-justification, a painful validation of necessary if not always admirable conduct.”⁸⁷ This kind of memory is very similar to humiliated memory in that current societal morals, values, or standards tend to condemn, even if only subconsciously, victims’ actions that were necessary to survive in the camps. However, humiliated memory dealt more with actions that violated the victims’ sense of self, such as having been forced to relieve themselves in front of others or eat trash or rotting food to survive. In contrast, tainted memory deals more with the ethical and moral choices victims made against others to either survive the camps or avoid them entirely. These choices, though necessary at the time of their occurrence, would be looked down upon now. Therefore, some survivors have trouble talking about them in interviews.

⁸⁶ Langer, 120.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

To make these kinds of choices necessary for survival, two things had to happen. The first is that the victims had to become self-ish, in other words, victims had to focus on nothing but themselves if they wanted to survive. Langer explains the difference between “self-ish” and “selfish”:

The selfish act ignores the needs of others through choice when the agent is in a position to help without injuring one’s self. It is motivated by greed, malice, and indifference. The former victim who describes self-ish acts is aware of the needs of others but because of the nature of the situation is unable to choose freely the generous impulse that a compassionate nature yearns to express.⁸⁸

This is where tainted memory and humiliated memory sometimes overlap. When discussing tainted memory, Langer includes plenty of examples where survivors felt ashamed for doing nothing when witnessing atrocities committed against another person. However, their inaction would not be considered a “selfish” one since it is not motivated by greed or malice. It instead is motivated by the person’s instinctual desire to live. Doing something in some situations might have meant death for the intervener. In the context of tainted memory, refusal to act would be deemed a “self-ish” act instead.

One example of a “self-ish” act is seen in the testimony of Myra L. who describes a male neighbor whose sister-in-law came to visit him one night in the Lodz ghetto. The woman begged the man for a slice of bread for his older brother who was dying of starvation. The neighbor cried, but ultimately refused his sister-in-law stating, “I have no food myself, how can I give him my last slice of bread?”⁸⁹ This act is a self-ish one. The neighbor did not deny his brother the life-saving bread out of greed or malice, but

⁸⁸ Langer, 124.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 124.

out of the need for his own survival. Myra L. expresses later that “the survival will was so big that nobody was sacrificing himself for anybody else.”⁹⁰ This tainted memory, without a doubt, permanently scarred the younger brother, who survived, and whose older brother did not.

Another psychological insight of the diminished self apparent in Frankl’s written testimony is how the camps brought out the apathy in its inhabitants. Frankl believes this apathy was partially a defense mechanism, a self-ish act by the mind that convinced the prisoner that apathy was necessary for his own survival. In a concentration camp, the prisoner could not afford to worry about anyone else. His primary, and often only focus, was keeping his own body healthy enough to avoid the next inevitable selection. Another part of it though is

hunger, lack of sleep, and the general irritability which was another characteristic of the prisoner’s mental state. The fact that we had neither nicotine nor caffeine [commodities that prior to internment, prisoners had had for the majority of their lives] also contributed to the state of apathy and irritability.⁹¹

There are several examples of tainted memory in *Night*, a testimony written by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) that describes his experiences with his father in the Auschwitz-Buchenwald camp. As a healthy fifteen-year-old at the time of his deportation to Auschwitz, the camp life was not as hard on him as it was for his fifty-year-old father. He lived in the same camp as his father and often did most of the same jobs. When his father was repeatedly beaten by Kapos for not working fast enough or marching correctly during many different job assignments, Wiesel was forced to watch in silence. However, he was not forced to

⁹⁰ Langer, 126.

⁹¹ Frankl, 62.

remain silent by the Germans, but rather by his preservation of self.

In Wiesel's first few days at Auschwitz, his father was struck so hard he fell to the ground. Wiesel recalls, "I stood petrified. My father had been struck and I had not even blinked. I watched and kept silent. Only yesterday, I would have dug my nails into this criminal's flesh. Had I changed that much? So fast?"⁹² Later, in 1944, Wiesel and his father were sent to Buna, a subcamp of Auschwitz. His father's health had already begun to decline and Wiesel was forced, yet again, to watch his father be beaten. This time, however, instead of just remaining silent, Wiesel thought about trying to leave to avoid the blows himself. The terror and heartbreak of watching his father be beaten no longer mattered to him: "I had watched it all happening without moving. I kept silent. I thought of stealing away in order not to suffer the blows myself. That was what life in a concentration camp had made of me."⁹³ Recalling when his ailing father was taken to the crematorium, Wiesel remembers: "It pained me that I could not weep, but I was out of tears. And deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscious, I might have found something like: Free at Last!"⁹⁴ Wiesel of course loved his father, but when faced with the choice between helping his father and his own personal survival, he often chose the latter. What consumes Wiesel throughout his experience in Auschwitz is what Langer calls the "impromptu self."⁹⁵

The "impromptu self," the second part of tainted memory, is the version of the self that develops spontaneously when the larger self is exposed to significant amounts of trauma. This impromptu self takes over in times where the victim has to make choices in what Langer calls "crucial moments—situations requiring a split-second response that often made the difference

⁹² Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1969), 65.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁵ Langer, 140.

between life and death.”⁹⁶ The impromptu self makes choices that a victim otherwise would probably not make. For example, one survivor named Mira B. describes her attempt to save her brother by convincing him to put on one of her dresses after being rounded up for “labor.” The brother did not believe he was going to be put to death. Instead, he believed he was merely going to be working.⁹⁷ The brother’s impromptu self never emerged because he did not believe that he was in any danger. Langer believes that “the illusion that he was still in control of part of his destiny inactivated the impromptu-self—and sealed his doom.”⁹⁸

There are plenty of other examples that show how the impromptu self sometimes saved the victim. For instance, in a testimony by Leon S., Leon printed up fake papers for himself and his Jewish wife once the Nazis arrived in Poland. The Poles discovered he was a Jew after confirming that he was circumcised and threatened to hand him over to the Germans. Leon’s impromptu self then came up with a speech delivered so well it convinced the Pole not to hand him over.⁹⁹ In another example, Irving F. hid with his wife and child, amongst other family members in a hidden cellar. When their hideout is discovered, Irving hid in a grain oven in which he is never found, while the rest of his family was taken away. He sacrificed his family to save himself: “What saved him was not a plan, but a desperate movement that preserved only him in a roomful of relatives.”¹⁰⁰

In a discussion of her job as a worker at the camp’s infirmary and the things she had to do that went against her moral compass, Lengyel recalls, “We five whose responsibility it was to bring infants into the world [while in camp] felt the burden of this monstrous conclusion which defied all human and moral law.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Langer, 151.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154–155.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰¹ Lengyel, 113.

The Nazis did not want the prisoner's newborn infants to survive. Lengyel states that pregnant women who arrived at the camp were always sent to the left which meant certain death. Women that were very early in their pregnancy and thus sent to the right would give birth in camp. When the baby was born, both the newborn and mother were sent to the crematory, where the still-alive newborn was tossed into the crematory first as "kindling," with the mother soon to follow. However, women whose babies were stillborn or miscarried were permitted to stay in camp.¹⁰² Lengyel and the five other inmates with healthcare experience who worked in the infirmary were forced to kill newborn infants and present them as stillborn to the Germans. This way, they bargained, at least they saved the mother's life. What is viewed today as a disgusting and immoral action was necessary at Auschwitz. Lengyel painfully writes,

The Germans succeeded in making murderers of us. Our own children had perished in the gas chambers and we dispatched the lives of others before their first voices had left their tiny lungs. I try in vain to make my conscience acquit me. I marvel to what depths these Germans made us descend!¹⁰³

The impromptu self seems to work as a way to rid the victim of guilt, much like Lifton's idea of doubling. Langer explains, "once the impulse to stay alive [the impromptu-self] begins to operate, the luxury of moral constraint temporarily disappears."¹⁰⁴ The mind suppresses everything other than the urge to stay alive when exposed to significant amounts of trauma. The victims may lose all moral control and they are free from guilt while fighting to stay alive, but once the moment has passed and they are safe, the guilt returns. Perhaps this is why the liberation

¹⁰² Lengyel, 113–116.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Langer, 150.

stories that interviewers so desperately crave never seem to satisfy. The victim, after the ordeal is over, has to live with the choices they made against people they loved to save themselves because “personal survival lives in the permanent shadow of family loss.”¹⁰⁵ Alex H., for example, expresses his desire for there to be meetings where survivors can “speak out and be reassured that [they aren’t] some kind of beast or animal.”¹⁰⁶ Another survivor, Leo G., states,

I envy people that can get out of themselves for one minute sometimes. They can laugh, enjoy themselves. Anybody in my situation cannot. How can you? How can you *enjoy* yourself? It’s almost a crime against the people you lost that you can live your life and enjoy yourself.¹⁰⁷

Delbo feels differently about this. In one of her poems called “Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive,” she writes about trivial things that most people are worried about, such as money, and begs people to do something meaningful with their lives so that the ones who died did not die for nothing: “I beg you, do something, learn a dance step, something to justify your existence because it would be too senseless after all for so many to have died while you live doing nothing with your life.”¹⁰⁸ Levi explains his thoughts about guilt or shame after liberation:

In the majority of cases, the hour of liberation was neither joyful nor lighthearted. For most it occurred against a tragic background of destruction, slaughter, and suffering. Just as they felt they were again becoming men, that is, responsible, the

¹⁰⁵ Langer, 57.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰⁸ Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 230.

sorrows of men returned: the sorrow of the dispersed or lost family; the universal suffering all around; their own exhaustion...the problems of a life to begin all over again amid the rubble, and often alone.¹⁰⁹

The dormant emotional trauma that had no place in the camps often returned at the point of liberation. To many survivors, enjoying what was left of their lives after liberation felt like a crime against the people they loved and lost.

Despite all the good qualities that oral testimonies provide, the ones dealing with tainted memory are a struggle. Langer contends that,

Oddly enough, [survivors] say little of their Nazi oppressors, they wrestle instead with the dilemma of their own identity and the impossibility of functioning as a normal self. They struggle with the incompatibility between the impromptu-self that endured atrocity and the self that sought reintegration into society after liberation.¹¹⁰

Weinberg discusses this same dilemma after his liberation by American GIs at Buchenwald. He explains, "While day-to-day survival had been my main concern, I had not done much thinking, so liberation called for a reappraisal of my life."¹¹¹ On Liberation Day, as Weissman-Klein viewed a white flag waving over a Czech church steeple, she realized she should be happy. She even hides another one of their friends' death from a mutual friend because Liberation Day is supposed to be happy. But after the trauma she had endured over the past four years, she felt anything but happy:

¹⁰⁹ Levi, "Shame," 57.

¹¹⁰ Langer, 148.

¹¹¹ Weinberg, 115.

As I look back now, trying to recall my feelings during those first hours, I actually think that there were none. My mind was so dull, my nerves so worn from waiting, that only an emotionless vacuum remained. Like many of the other girls I just sat and waited for whatever would happen next.¹¹²

Many survivors had no family, no home, and no money once liberated; they had nothing left to return to. They just had to live day-by-day, similar to what they were doing before liberation.

Part Five: Unheroic Memory and the Diminished Self

Finally, this last hidden memory explores the diminished self as it deals with Langer's term "unheroic memory."¹¹³ Langer critiques several Holocaust scholars whose works include several accounts of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, or heroism. Langer believes that most commentators, Holocaust historians, and authors

cling to a grammar of heroism and martyrdom to protect the idea that the Nazi assault on the body and spirit of its victims did no fundamental damage to our cherished belief that, even in the most adverse circumstances, character is instinctively allied to the good.¹¹⁴

Langer compares these commentators to Dante and Virgil walking through the inferno with flowers sprung about. While the setting is nice, they are still in the inferno.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Weissman-Klein, 213.

¹¹³ Langer, 169.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

One testimony tells of a young Jewish teen named Matilda who chose not to run away from the Nazis with her friends but instead chose to go home and be with her family. Most commentators see her actions as heroic. But Matilda did not have any idea what would happen to her if she chose to stay with her family, so she did not make this kind of a decision while knowing the consequences. Therefore, “[h]er decision is, of course, admirable, though made at a time when the *certainty* of dying had not yet been absolutely established.”¹¹⁶ Langer then argues that commentators and interviewers are, by elevating Matilda to heroism, essentially condemning her friends who chose to flee. Matilda, having had all the information, might have chosen another path. She may have lived through years of torture only to be “liberated” and discover that her entire life she knew, including all her family members, was gone. *That* is unheroic memory.

More examples can be found in Weissman-Klein’s memoir. Her brother Arthur, mentioned earlier, registered himself for German labor despite his family protesting against it after hearing what happens to those who willingly go. His actions can be seen by his family, friends, and neighbors as heroic during the time, but he did not believe the stories of what would happen to him for having gone, or he might have chosen otherwise. His impromptu self never activated since he was not fearful for his life. After having been told by her father not to leave her mother, young Weissman-Klein jumped out of a truck that was meant to carry her to a different camp than her mother:

Just then Merin [a high-ranking Jewish leader from Sosnowitz who cooperates with the Germans in rounding up the Jews; Weissman-Klein calls him the King of the Jews] passed. He looked at me, and with strength unexpected in that little man, he picked me up and threw me back onto the truck. ‘You are too young to die.’ Strange that the man

¹¹⁶ Langer, 166.

who sent my mother to death had pushed me into the arms of life.¹¹⁷

Weissman-Klein's actions could be seen as heroic, but at this point, she had not yet seen a concentration camp so she was not fearful of what would have happened to her if she had not been pushed back onto the truck. She just wanted to go with her mother.

Lengyel lived in Hungary in 1944 with her parents, her husband, and her two sons. In her testimony, she gives two major accounts of unheroic memory, choices she made that unknowingly led to her family's demise. The first happened while they were still in Hungary. Her husband was arrested and was to be deported to "Germany" right away to work as a doctor. She insisted that the Germans allow his family to go with him, but she unknowingly led them to Auschwitz with her husband.¹¹⁸ The second occurred while deboarding the train that carried them there. Her youngest son was sent to the left, or to "the children's and old persons camp" as the Germans called it. Her oldest son was younger than twelve but large for his age. The German asked her if he was able to work, stating that he looked at least twelve.¹¹⁹ Had Lengyel said he was old enough, he would have been sent to work and had a chance to survive. However, she states that: "I wanted to spare him from labors that might prove too arduous for him...How could I have known? I had spared them from hard work, but I had condemned my son and my mother to death in the gas chambers."¹²⁰ By trying to save her family, she had condemned them to death, albeit unintentionally.

From the immediate post-war period and well into the twenty-first century, the Jewish Councils that ran the ghettos under Nazi supervision were hit with heavy criticism. They were accused of "complying" or "coordinating" with the Germans by allowing

¹¹⁷ Weissman-Klein, 91.

¹¹⁸ Lengyel, 14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

them to transport the more vulnerable citizens of the ghettos for “resettlement.” The Councils knew, though, that “it was impossible to save the entire ghetto community...since not all Jews could be saved, it was better to deliver to the Nazi Moloch those ghetto dwellers with little or no chance of survival in order to save others.”¹²¹ The Councils were put into an impossible situation, one where morals could not reside. Logic had to overrule morality if they were to have any hope at all of saving any Jews from deportation. Because they made this decision based on logic and not morality, they cannot be held accountable for a decision that led to death. The decision to give up some to save others can be looked at heroically, while in contrast, the decision not to stage resistance may be looked at by some as unheroic. The reality is that the situation (and most situations during the Holocaust) does not allow for judgment of either kind.

Langer states that “unheroic memory is disheartened by the subversive realities that it recovers.”¹²² As understanding as it is to hope for episodes of heroism and defiance in Holocaust testimonies, it is an unrealistic and nearly impossible expectation. The experiences victims suffered took away their humanity and diminished their spirit and sense of self to the point where all actions taken were those necessary for survival. Once physiological survival became near-certain, usually, at the point of liberation, unheroic memory came back to haunt the survivors of the camps in the form of both actions and inactions. Their minds began to bargain with themselves, asking things such as “why didn’t I resist?”

Levi recalls a man who had resisted and was then hung just days before the Soviet soldiers liberated the camp. His last words sought to assure his fellow prisoners, “Don’t worry, I’m the last one.”¹²³ Levi then reflects upon this, stating that he did not think much of the man’s last words until after liberation: “This is a

¹²¹ Trunk, 169.

¹²² Langer, 169.

¹²³ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 149.

thought that then just barely grazed us, but that returned ‘afterward’: you could have, you certainly should have.”¹²⁴ Future regret over inaction is a common example of unheroic memory.

Chaim E., a survivor who was part of a small detail of workers at Sobibor, was one of ten men who tried to escape while on a work assignment by killing their Ukrainian guards and running into the forest. While some may see this action as heroic or defiant, Chaim E. did not: “We were not human beings, we were just robots who happened to eat and happened to do things...so all the logic doesn’t apply there.”¹²⁵ He believed that heroism could not exist in the kind of circumstances the victims were in. He recalls, “urgent immediate needs crippled such ideas.”¹²⁶ Heroism cannot exist in a situation where the hero has no choice, as Chaim E. claimed. Later in his testimony he also explained that “idealistic things didn’t have any place there; only survival for your skin, that’s what counted.”¹²⁷ Surviving mattered; little else did.

Langer argues that the integrity of Holocaust testimonies will only be protected by the interviewers’ ability to accept that their ideas of heroism and defiance are different than the way that survivors see them. Everything the survivors did came down to the human instinct for survival. Ideals such as heroism had no place in such a traumatic event. It seems Weinberg agrees with Langer on this point when he proclaims, “I am thankful, but never proud, to have survived the camps. In my view we, the survivors, are all somewhat compromised. We did not sacrifice our lives so that others might perhaps stand a slightly better chance at living.”¹²⁸ He then explains what it is that makes a survivor:

As it is, survival feels less like a heroic act than like
having won a lottery against truly astronomical

¹²⁴ Levi, “Shame,” 64.

¹²⁵ Langer, 178.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹²⁸ Weinberg, 108.

odds. It is easy to fantasize that there must have been some underlying reason for one's survival, but in the end it was probably just a combination of chance and an aptitude for self-preservation.¹²⁹

He is not alone in this theory. Levi believes some qualities were apparent in people who happened to survive, usually qualities that are seen as negative outside of the context of the Holocaust. He says several times that thieves, swindlers, and the like tended to survive while all the morally just prisoners died.¹³⁰ However, he also believes that in the end, survival came down to luck, and he admits that luck, or chance, was probably the biggest factor.

Ideals such as heroism were also illogical. Hypothetically, even if the will to survive was taken out of the equation and acts committed by survivors were purely heroic in nature and not out of instinct for survival, many survivors still would not have acted out of heroism because one defiant action usually led to reprisals. During the death march that Weissman Klein was in, fourteen women were lined up in front of the others and shot by the SS for their attempt to escape.¹³¹ In the days leading up to this, she had been planning her own escape with four of her friends. Her close friend, Ilse, finally told Weissman-Klein that she was afraid:

Until then I had not been afraid; excitement had buried my fear. Only when Ilse showed her fear did my doubts come to the surface. What if our plan did not go well? The decision [to escape] was not mine alone: Ilse's life was as dear to me as my own. At that moment I vowed that I would never try to escape, never take our lives into my own hands.¹³²

¹²⁹ Weinberg, 106.

¹³⁰ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 97.

¹³¹ Weissman-Klein, 189.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 191.

Weissman-Klein could hear the artillery fire of the Russian army so close behind them. If they escaped, they would have just had to hide and wait for nightfall to be liberated and, had the decision affected her alone, she may have done so. But she could not stand the reprisals for her actions affecting her friends or other innocent women who had chosen to stay with the formation.¹³³

Another example of repressed heroism can be read in Chaim E.'s testimony. After his work detail tried to escape, they witnessed reprisals. Survivor Luna K. reminds us that anyone ““who felt that he wanted to perform an act of resistance was an individual who had to make a conscious choice right then and there, that he will not only commit the rebellious act, but he along with himself will take with him scores of people.””¹³⁴ A defiant act might not only get the perpetrator shot, but it might get innocent victims shot along with him. The Nazis also might have chosen to leave the perpetrator alive so that he can see the deaths that his “heroic” action brought upon his fellow innocents. Many of the survivors Langer writes about describe acts of defiance or heroism as “foolish,” knowing that any action done by them could kill dozens of innocent people. Acts such as these were likened to murder by survivors.

The Jewish Councils (mentioned previously) were also repressed from heroic acts because of, amongst many things, the fear of reprisals. In the Vilna ghetto on July 22, 1943, members of the Jewish United Partisan Organization escaped. When they were caught, the Gestapo chief ordered the escapees’ families to be delivered to him, as well as the families of the leaders of their labor units. If the escapee had no family, then his neighbors, and in some cases his entire building, would be rounded up and shot. One witness wrote down the following:

The responsibility for these deaths falls onto those
who betrayed our ghetto community and all its

¹³³ Weissman-Klein, 210.

¹³⁴ Langer, 181.

serious tasks in the full knowledge that they were endangering the existence of our entire ghetto and the lives of their loved ones in the first place. They are responsible for the spilt blood.¹³⁵

Langer analyzes a study done by Charles Taylor, named *Sources of the Self: The Making of a Modern Identity*, in which Taylor speaks about what he calls “the good life,” or, in other words, the life that existed for the survivors before the Holocaust. When imprisoned in the camps, “the ‘good life’ and the ‘right thing to do’ lost their relevance because particular situations did not allow the luxury of their expression.”¹³⁶ The “goods that command our awe” is what Taylor uses to describe things like family unity, parental devotion, and sibling loyalty, all of which are things that are lost in the Holocaust. Langer concludes that,

[W]hen the ‘goods that command our awe’ suddenly collapse on the ramp at Auschwitz, then identity groped for alternative moorings—and somewhere in our philosophical investigations, we must find room for the diminished self that resulted, the one whose voice echoes sadly but frankly from the recollections of unheroic memory.¹³⁷

Conclusion

Langer’s work, the information and analysis provided in the additional testimonies, and Viktor Frankl’s psychological insight help put the study of Holocaust testimonies into an entirely new perspective that allows readers to understand the tragedy on an even deeper level. It would be naive to believe that the Holocaust ended at the point of liberation because the ramifications of the

¹³⁵ Trunk, 183.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 199.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 200.

Holocaust are everywhere, not only living in the memories of the survivors but in the absence of the ones who did not survive. To honor their memory, survivors share their stories, and it is the duty of contemporary society to listen. To understand Holocaust testimony, it is imperative to understand these types of memories—deep, anguished, humiliated, tainted, and unheroic—in the context of the situation in which they were experienced. Attempting to understand these testimonies using contemporary standards runs the risk of misinterpreting or not absorbing the information, ultimately changing the historiography of the Holocaust.

With deep memory, survivors can unconsciously omit emotional information and focus only on concrete facts to protect their minds from going “back there.” With anguished memory as well, survivors may sometimes be hesitant to give information: what happened to them during the Holocaust and the life they live now are two completely different worlds. Some may have a hard time believing their own memories because their experience was so unprecedented; it happened in what was supposed to be one of the most advanced, modernized civilizations of the world. In some cases, shame may prevent survivors from revealing events that violated their dignity, as in the case of humiliated memory. Similarly, the guilt of the tainted memory may prevent them from revealing events that forced them to violate their ideas of morality. Finally, many survivors do not see their actions as heroic; they were forced into situations that gave them no opportunity to act heroically. With unheroic memory, survivors often recall that the most heroic thing one could do was usually nothing at all.

Understanding these types of memory by listening to both oral and written testimonies is crucial to understanding the whole picture of the Holocaust, not just the general frame. It is the responsibility of the coming generations of humanity to acknowledge and understand the testimonies provided by the survivors, to fight against the denial of the Holocaust, and to prevent the history of this genocide from repeating itself. But there are many stories that will forever go unheard and many questions

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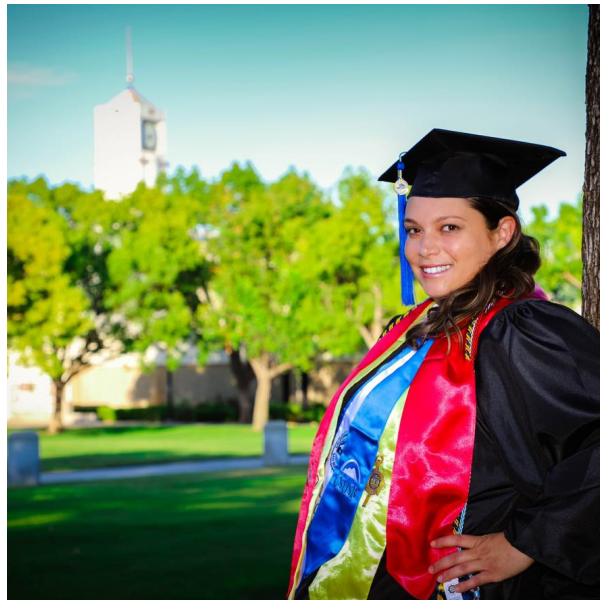
that will forever go unanswered. The answer to those questions can only be found in the ashes, bones, and blood buried beneath the soil of Eastern Europe, or in the mass graves deep beneath the Nazi killing fields. Traces will forever be found in the memories of those who lived through it and were brave enough to share their painful stories in order to honor the loved ones who never came home.

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Author Bio

Jennifer Ann Duke graduated Magna Cum Laude with her Bachelor of Arts in History in 2020 as a member of both Phi Kappa Phi and Phi Alpha Theta national honor societies. Her main areas of focus during her studies were twentieth century European History, World War II, and the Holocaust. After graduation, she continued her work at the county hospital throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but she hopes to soon go back to school to earn her teaching credential. She then hopes to teach World History at a local high school and coach their softball team. She would like to thank Dr. Timothy Pytell for inspiring her for this research project and for developing her interest in European History throughout her time at CSUSB.



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