



THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS CONTEXTS



The Afterdeath of the Holocaust

Lawrence L. Langer

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The Holocaust and its Contexts

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Lawrence L. Langer
Wellesley Hills, MA, USA

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ISBN 978-3-030-66138-0

ISBN 978-3-030-66139-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66139-7>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

What does it mean to have been taken prisoner and interned in a camp? We exist beyond time, beyond life, beyond space. As long as he lives in society, every person in his own way is a small cog in the large machinery of society.

He receives motion and passes motion on, and however modest his role, something moves because of him! But we? We are nothing any more. We have been lifted out of the universe, we receive nothing, and we give nothing. No influence reaches us from outside, no influence flows out from us. Not a single force acts upon us, no counter force emanates from us. All that exists is the desire—we sense it—to destroy us.

Abel J. Herzberg, *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen- Belsen*

*For Sandy
My Better World
And for my great-grandchildren
Danny and Maya
With the hope that they may be lucky enough
To grow up in one*

PREFACE

When a human being is starving to death the strength of the spirit as a source of consolation dwindles into insignificance. Although such a statement might seem self-evident, devotees of what I will call the “hopescape” of the Holocaust seem reluctant to surrender the belief that there is a permanent bond joining body to spirit. Whatever atrocity the body must endure, some balancing form of inner dignity appears to coexist with it. Since disciples of this principle have never been starving to death, or witnessed anyone who was, it is not difficult for them to substitute what is desirable for what was real. The notion that spiritual dignity can survive even the most appalling physical assaults on the body restores a vestige of meaning and agency to the horror we call the Holocaust. It builds a protective wall against the opposite option: that German cruelties destroyed both body and spirit of their victims, leaving behind a bleak intellectual terrain devoid of any meaning at all.

The idea that the human spirit can survive even the worst of physical ordeals is not merely a sentimental form of escapism or denial. It is rooted deep in American religious culture, even though its original impact may have faded and grown weak. Consider the following passage from a seventeenth century English Puritan preacher named John Flavel, one of the favorite authors of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mother: “The soul manifests its dear love and affection to the body, by its sympathy, and compassionate feeling of all its burdens: whatever touches the body, by way of injury, affects the soul also by way of sympathy. The soul and body are as strings of two musical instruments set exactly at one height; if one be touched, the other trembles. They laugh and cry, are sick and well together. This is

a wonderful mystery” But when the experience of German camps and ghettos constantly untuned the strings of those instruments, leaving behind a turmoil of unparalleled discord, the following conclusion of the Puritan divine would come to sound naïve and irrelevant: “The body is the soul’s ancient acquaintance and intimate friend, with whom it has assiduously and familiarly conversed from its beginning. They have been partners in each others comforts and sorrow.”¹ What preacher Flavel could not have known is that the Holocaust would change the very meaning of his pastoral vocabulary, when “comforts” would come to mean an extra piece of bread, and “sorrow” would be redefined as torture, disease, starvation or selection for the gas chamber. This requires a shift from comforting language to dispiriting imagery that makes it understandable why so many students of the Holocaust are reluctant to undertake the journey.

Evidence from witness testimony for this shift is so abundant that one can choose at random from many available sources. And it took time even for the victims of German persecution to realize that as the noose of extinction tightened, hope became a desperate illusion rather than a realistic promise of survival. Consider the situation of the Jews in the Lodz ghetto in September 1942 when the Germans ordered their Elder Chaim Rumkowski to assemble twenty thousand (later reduced to ten) residents from among the elderly, the ill, and children under twelve for “resettlement” in order to reduce the crowded conditions in the ghetto. Joseph Zerkowicz, a professional journalist and archivist for the ghetto kept a detailed account of the proceedings as those chosen for deportation and members of their families faced the deathscape that lay before them. At first a temporary indifference seizes their imagination:

This odd kind of indifference can be found only in that kind of miserable pseudo-existence, as lived in the ghetto, where death is more of a given than life. No one can explain or even understand the force that keeps a person alive, though everyone sees quite plainly how it is that one dies. Death in the ghetto is such a common, everyday experience that it no longer surprises or terrifies anyone, and even if someone continues to live, he does so with the constant thought that he is leading a parody of life, a temporary affair until finally, if not today, then tomorrow, life will surely come to an end.²

When the feeling that death became more of a given than life penetrated the imagination of those haunted by the contradictory terms of ghetto existence, the Holocaust hopescape that survived the event to offer

us comfort today intervened even there, though Zelkowicz captures with a searing honesty the fragile solace it provided:

as long as the sun continues to shine, as long as it remains light, as long as daylight remains, people retain their hope. They feel a bit more certain: people meet one another, hear a lively word, and can—amid the sobs and groans—imagine a word of consolation, empathy, and confidence. It's genuine and heartfelt: a hollow and empty word, but because the will to believe is so powerful, as is the desire for hope, even an empty word has enough force to enter their brains and run in their blood, and following its own cold and sober logic runs through their mind and quickens their pulse, flooding their hearts with waves of “maybe it's not going to happen” and streams of “Still, what if ...” But as soon as nightfall arrives everyone quivers at the sight of their own long, drawn-out shadows.”³

And as Zelkowicz turns some of those shadows into individual human beings, we long to get a glimpse of members of a Jewish family who were not candidates for immediate deportation but who are still bound by the cultural and emotional intimacy that breeds mutual concern. Instead his pitiless portraiture reduces what appears to be a husband and wife to a “he” and a “she” who have been so decimated by the hunger and disease that assailed body and spirit in the Holocaust deathscape that they are barely recognizable as human beings:

When your curiosity has been stilled your gaze is fixed on the “she,” whose eyes look straight at you: an old woman. But her face is that of a child, and a tiny one: a wrinkled face with the forehead of a freak who is neither man nor woman and a sunken breast and neck strewn with so many bumps that you swear she was covered with clumpy grey moss, the kind you'd find in an old forgotten cave. And take a look at her hands! Yellowed like parchment, a skin that looks as if it were encrusted with mold. Her hardened hands look like dried sticks—little more than bones.⁴

Zelkowicz assumes that this shrunken aged creature is lying in the arms of her husband, but when he asks him how old his wife is, he receives as a reply, “What wife? Whose wife? My wife's been dead four months already!” We grimace with pain and astonishment as we realize that Zelkowicz has been unwittingly describing the man's sixteen-year-old daughter, who is starving, ill with dysentery, and barely alive. His nineteen-year-old daughter, contagious with tuberculosis, is lying in another bed. The deathscape

of the Holocaust creates strange bedfellows, and this sketch of a dying Jewish family leaves us wondering how to embrace its naked reality without losing faith in the sense of order and agency that allows normal existence to flourish.

Because we are reluctant to abandon this belief we instinctively tend to search for evidence to support it, even though—as Zelkowitz’s description confirms—when the fate of the Jews in ghettos and camps during the era of the Third Reich is the subject under discussion, “normal existence” simply ceased to flourish. Since this is such a harsh truth to accept, one way of coping with it is the rise of a desperate need to find tokens of hope in the midst of such despair, both from those who were exposed to Holocaust atrocity and those who were not. Unfortunately, this kind of response threatens to change the narrative of the event for future generations, and the effort to do so continues to this very day with an exasperating persistence.

The most recent (and alarming) example is an installation opened outside the gate to Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 1, 2019 that is expected to run for more than a year. What will happen to it afterward is not clear. It was designed by famed architect Daniel Libeskind, curated by sociologist Henri Lustiger-Thaler, and photographed by Caryl Englander. It is called *Through the Lens of Faith*. Before they enter the site of the German deathcamp, visitors will walk by twenty-one ten foot tall steel monoliths, each containing a current photo of a survivor (11 women, 10 men, 18 Jews, 10 Polish Catholics and one Sinti or Romani) and a brief excerpt from a recent interview. As Lustiger-Thaler explained, “It’s really an inter-faith exhibit, trying to understand the role of faith and religion for survivors able to get through Auschwitz.”

Since nearly one million Jews perished in Auschwitz leaving behind no evidence of the role faith played during the ordeal that led to their demise, one is left to wonder why anyone should be impressed by testimony from a miniscule and unrepresentative number of 18 inmates who managed to endure that ordeal. Are we supposed to find something dramatic and meaningful in the fact that 18 is the numerical value of the Hebrew word for “living,” “*chai*”? Auschwitz was a Jewish cemetery, not a Jewish temple, and only if we view the doom of its victims through the lens of death will we begin to realize how devoid of moral and spiritual meaning was the German plan to eliminate all of European Jewry.

Most of the essays in this collection are concerned with writing that invites us to reflect on the realities of a time when death became more of

a given than life. They ask us to confront a landscape of the imagination we never inhabited where solace perished along with the victims whose remnants lie scattered beneath its surface. But other of these essays examine efforts—misguided as they may be—to find ways of coping with such desolation by striving to wrest some minimal meaning from the atrocity of mass murder. The recurrence of this theme, most recently exemplified by the exhibit at the gates of Auschwitz which reminds those who are about to enter that they should view what they are soon to see “through the lens of faith” as well as the blinders of death, threatens to alter the Holocaust narrative from the obscene attempt of the Germans to exterminate all of European Jewry into a caricature of hope. If only for the sake of educating future generations, we should be aware of the hazards of such an enterprise.

Wellesley Hills, MA

Lawrence L. Langer

NOTES

1. Quoted in Marilynne Robinson, “Which Way to the City on a Hill?” *The New York Review of Books* (July 18, 2019), Vol. LXVI, Number 12, p. 46.
2. *In Those Nightmarish Days: The Ghetto Reportage of Peretz Opoczynski and Joseph Zelkowitz*, ed. Samuel D. Kassow, trans and co-edited David Suchoff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 195.
3. *Ibid.*, 221–222.
4. *Ibid.*, 113.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Four of the essays in this volume—“Redemptive and Unredemptive Holocaust Memory,” “Representing and Misrepresenting the Holocaust,” “The Legacy of Holocaust Deathscapes,” and “Memory and Invention in Olga Lengyel’s Five Chimneys”—have never appeared in print before. “The Afterdeath of the Holocaust” appeared in *Witnessing Unbound: Holocaust Representation and the Origins of Memory*, ed. Henri Lustiger Thaler and Habbo Knoch (Wayne State University Press, 2017). “My Life with Holocaust Death” appeared in *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (October 2020). “Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*” appeared as the Preface to the Second Edition of *Auschwitz and After* (Yale University Press, 2014). “Holocaust Fact and Holocaust Fiction: The Dual Vision of H. G. Adler” is a slightly expanded version of an essay by the same title that appeared in *H. G. Adler, Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. Julia Creet, Sara R. Horowitz, and Amira Bojadzija-Dan (Northwestern University Press, 2016). “Beyond Testimony: The Literary Design of Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* [*Survival in Auschwitz*]” appeared in *New Reflections on Primo Levi: Before and After Auschwitz*, ed. Risa Sodi and Millicent Marcus (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). “Ner Ot: The Memorial Candle as Symbol in the Art of Samuel Bak” first appeared in *Ner Ot: Candles in the Art of Samuel Bak* (Pucker Art Publications, 2019). I am grateful to Bernard Pucker of the Pucker Art Gallery in Boston for permission to include the illustrations in this essay.

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The Afterdeath of the Holocaust

When the exiled and the dead outnumber the living, it is the dead who start talking instead of the living. There are simply not enough of the living left to be able to maintain a whole reality.

Steve Sem-Sandberg, *The Emperor of Lies*

In the summer of 1964, I found myself in a Munich courtroom at the trial of SS General Karl Wolff, adjutant to Heinrich Himmler and liaison to Hitler. Nearly 20 years after the war, he was charged with responsibility for the deportation of more than 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka, where most of them were murdered upon arrival. Neatly dressed in a modest pin-stripe suit with white shirt and tie, thinning gray hair and a pleasant expression on his face, he showed nothing in his appearance that connected our memory to such a monstrous crime. Nor did his testimony help. When the presiding judge asked him if he had ever been in the Warsaw ghetto, he replied, “My God, no!” When a young prosecuting attorney who looked half the 64-year-old Wolff’s age offered unassailable evidence that Wolff was lying, the judge asked the accused, “Herr Witness, what do you say to that?” Wolff calmly replied, “Herr Chairman, I’m an old man. I can’t be expected to remember everything.” To this the Judge, leaning forward, responded, “If I had been in the Warsaw Ghetto, I would *never* have forgotten it!”

It should come as no surprise that people like Wolff were afflicted with convenient amnesia in regard to their crimes. A few days later, I attended the so-called Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt of 21 camp personnel, and heard notorious brutes like Oswald Kaduk and Josef Klehr deny that they had anything to do with murdering Jews. Accused of “*Abspritzen*” or fatally injecting phenol into the heart muscle of hundreds of prisoners, Klehr insisted that he must have been home on leave when such crimes were taking place. This was not a case of “I can’t remember” but of “I don’t *want* to remember” and this formula extends beyond the claims of those guilty of war crimes to those who feel uncomfortable tracing the journey of “deep memory” into an abyss of horror into which they would prefer not to plunge.¹

Any monument to the Holocaust worthy of its name must include many roads, one of which would invite memory to pursue its winding path toward a destination called “atrociousness.” Kaduk and Klehr together with several of the other accused listened to the testimony of survivors and built around it a wall of what we might call “evasive memory,” and the proprietors of this stance, whether guilty or not—an important distinction, to be sure—continue to use it to insulate themselves from the crimes of Auschwitz and its fellow killing sites. But if the Holocaust is to enter human consciousness, as it must, as an integral part of the narrative of modernity, that consciousness must voluntarily explore the contents of “deep memory” wherever it leads, however dark and cruel its revelations, whatever inroads it makes on the so-called moral and spiritual value of the quest for truth and the meaning of being human.

The expression “deep memory” (“*memoire profonde*”) was introduced into Holocaust discourse by Charlotte Delbo,² a French survivor of Auschwitz who in the three volumes evoking her camp experience, *Auschwitz and After*, and in the slim work she finished shortly before her death, *Days and Memory*, struggled to find a link between her Auschwitz self and the self who enjoyed what she thought of as the luxury of survival. Neither logic nor intuition can explain what one of her fellow survivors meant when she announced to Delbo, “I died in Auschwitz, but no one [sees] it.”³ But Primo Levi understood well the paradox of a life consumed by the aura of death even as it continued to exist, to breathe, to think and, perhaps surprisingly, to hope. Forced to witness the hanging of a prisoner but unable to raise a word or gesture of protest, Levi cannot escape the burden of that moment of remembered shame. Deep memory is at work as he writes, “it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t quick, but you Germans have

succeeded Because we, too, are broken, defeated: even if we have been able to adapt, even if we have at last learned how to find our food and to withstand the exhaustion and the cold, even if we return home.”⁴ Unlike Levi, Delbo speaks of shedding her Auschwitz ordeal as a snake sheds its old skin, but in so doing she ironically reminds us of what cannot so easily be left behind: “the leaden stare out of sunken eyes, the tottering gait, the frightened gestures.” After all, she finally admits, “Rid of its old skin, it’s still the same snake. I’m the same too, apparently.” Inside Auschwitz, she is unable to find consolation in thinking about more amiable prewar or postwar conditions: “In the camp, one could never pretend, never take refuge in the imagination It’s impossible. One can’t imagine either being somebody else or being somewhere else.” It is easy to extract fragments from her narrative and flaunt them as victorious moments—for instance, “To think, to remember was a great victory over the horror”—and to use them as examples of the triumph of the human spirit, but this is to ignore her immediately following insistence that thinking “never lessened” the horror: “Reality was right there, killing. There was no possible getting away from it.”⁵

Monuments, museums and memoirs that do not focus on the killing reality of the Holocaust are risking failure in their mission, if their mission is to capture for present and future generations the depth and the scope of the atrocity. The paradox that Delbo and so many survivors in their testimonies convey is that life stopped at Auschwitz and other camps and ghettos and life went on afterwards, giving birth to two selves whose contradictory natures must somehow be transmitted to us, the observers. The Auschwitz self Delbo captures with vivid candor: “hardly able to stand on my feet, my throat tight, my heart beating wildly, frozen to the marrow, filthy, skin and bones; the suffering I feel is so unbearable, so identical to the pain endured there, that I feel it physically, I feel it throughout my whole body which becomes a mass of suffering; and I feel death fasten on me, I feel that I am dying.” The other self, as she says, is “the person you know, who can talk to you about Auschwitz without exhibiting or registering any anxiety or emotion.”⁶ “*Memoire profonde*,” deep memory, gives us access to the first; what she calls “*memoire ordinaire*,” common or ordinary memory, reflects the second.

We sympathize cheerfully with the objects of ordinary memory because they do not threaten our well-being, our consciousness, or the integrity of our personalities or world-views. When dealing with the Holocaust, the difficult challenge before us is to identify with the target of deep memory,

that intellectual and emotional terrain where the clear borders between living and dying merge and we are faced with the condition of being I call the Afterdeath of the Holocaust, a territory we instinctively flee because it is uninhabitable by reasonable creatures like ourselves. Talking about Auschwitz, Delbo argues, comes from “intellectual memory, the memory connected with thinking processes.” And this has its value, but also its limitations: it does not evoke the “killing reality” of the place. That is reserved for deep memory, which “preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses.” Delbo uses the example of thirst, which nearly proved fatal for her in Auschwitz, to clarify her idea. Ordinary memory sees thirst as a condition that is abated by taking a drink; deep memory instantly evokes her camp self, “haggard, halfway crazed, near to collapse; I physically feel that real thirst and it is an atrocious nightmare.”⁷

And try as we might to find a context of meaning for the murder of European Jewry, it remains an “atrocious nightmare,” a black hole in the cosmos of consciousness, so that efforts to locate traces of a bright galaxy in its orbit only risk allowing the temptations of evasive memory to infiltrate our response. Evasive memory elevates the horrors of the Holocaust to a manageable level by shifting the emphasis from the cruelty of the ordeal to a frame of mind that translates mass murder into a narrative of suffering and redemption. Viktor Frankl is a good example, and his testimony about Auschwitz—where he spent no more than three days—in *Man’s Search for Meaning* continues to mislead readers about the nature of the Holocaust experience. Frankl seems constitutionally incapable of acknowledging the physical and moral devastation wrought by that event, though the impact of his work remains undiminished, especially in America, where his book has sold more than nine million copies and the Library of Congress, after a national survey, declared it *one of the ten most influential works ever published in the United States*. If deep memory were allowed to play its proper role in Holocaust discourse, excavating and displaying the monumental cruelty of the catastrophe, sentimentalized versions of its impact like Frankl’s could never prevail. Nor could the literal examples of false witnessing like Binyamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments (Bruchstücke)* or Misha Defonseca’s *Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years*, have gained the following they did, especially the latter, which became a best-seller in France and Italy, and was made into a successful film. In February of 2008 the author finally admitted that the memoir was fake and that she was not even Jewish. Only widely disseminated testimonies based on authentic

witnessing, including large doses of deep memory, can discredit such counterfeit narratives before they are distributed.

But the most dangerous examples of evasive memory come from the murderers themselves, authentic witnesses who exploit false witnessing to deflect attention from the horror of their crimes. One illustration from among many will have to suffice. Earlier I mentioned the SS man Josef Klehr, a defendant in the Auschwitz trial who was accused of murdering no fewer than 465 inmates by injecting phenol into the heart muscle, a tactic which proved instantly fatal. Klehr received a life sentence plus fifteen years in 1965, was released in 1988 at the age of 84, and died a few months later. In 1978 a German television journalist was allowed to interview him in prison. Klehr spoke with a crude bluntness, since he no longer had anything to lose, but his “testimony” demonstrates that if evasive memory can elevate the Holocaust to a spiritual level it has not earned, it can also deflate the ordeal to a plane of moral insensitivity that gives us a rare but valuable glimpse into the mental terrain of the killer. In spite of biographies of figures like Heinrich Himmler and Ernst Kaltenbrunner and Robert Jay Lifton’s detailed portraits of Nazi doctors, such mental terrain remains a speculative realm that eludes total comprehension.

The interviewer asks Klehr to describe the process of “Abspritzen” or injection, to which he vaguely replies: “Yes, I reported the incident to my superior, that prisoners were being injected without the approval of the camp doctor.” No, the journalist protests, that is not what he meant, since he had asked Klehr to describe the course of events during “injections” after *he himself* has been ordered to carry them out. “Yes,” Klehr responds at length, and we note how he excludes himself as an agent and adopts the role of witness during the deadly drama he describes:

I made my own observations at that time. I was amazed that the prisoners didn’t even weep or defend themselves. They sat down on a stool and waited, until it was all over [*“bis es soweit war”*]. I had my own thoughts about that then, and I still have them today: no prisoner resisted and no prisoner cried. Because they knew, it was an open secret: they had been “selected,” they knew where they were headed. That was clear, it was an open secret. And nevertheless when the time for “injection” arrived no prisoner resisted. And should a prisoner have resisted, I would have ...⁸

And Klehr’s thought, such as it is, trails off into silence. It reminded me of the moment at the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt when one of Klehr’s

prisoner assistants during the *Abspritzen* was in the witness stand, testifying that one morning Klehr asked him why he had been weeping the afternoon before and had replied, “the man you injected then was my father,” to which Klehr had responded, “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have let him go!” As we all know, myths are born of false witnessing like Klehr’s, myths that shift the blame from the murderer to the victims, reproaching them for not doing enough to protect themselves or to fight back. Like so many others, Klehr mistakes for passivity or cowardice the paralysis that seizes a doomed individual in the final moments of existence, although we can never be certain how many of his candidates for death were conscious of what was about to occur.

In his comments in prison Klehr consistently deflects attention from the “killing reality” for which he was responsible. Evasive memory suffers from a delinquent or reluctant imagination and may be viewed as a variation on the mental approach to the Holocaust that steers us away from the revelations of deep memory. With a cool detachment that insulates him from the nightmare of atrocity as it must have been experienced by his victims, Klehr explains that the phenol injection was preferable to gassing because it was instantly fatal, whereas asphyxiation from gas could take as long as ten minutes. He admits that gassing was “*grausamer*,” more terrible than a phenol injection, but this is merely a comparative comment rather than an absolute condemnation. Such testimony is valuable for what it does not express even more than for what it does, since it exposes us to the possibility of a Holocaust discourse that treats deep memory as a response to be avoided.

Testimonies that pay tribute to survival, rescue or resistance are examples of this discourse, and the temptation to follow this route is strong among all witnesses. We may call it celebratory memory, and it is designed to compensate for the irreducible pain that deep memory explores. Among the documents in the Oyneg Shabes archives of Emanuel Ringelblum is one by a journalist named Leyb Goldin, who was assigned to provide a written account of what a soup kitchen in the Warsaw Ghetto would have looked like to a hungry “customer” in October 1941. In order to objectify his piece and give it a literary flair, Goldin creates a character named “Arke,” and presents him as a creature trying to assess the value of the mutual aid groups in the ghetto which supply a daily bowl of soup to those too poor to feed themselves. Knowing that future generations will rely on such reports in determining how to remember existence in the ghetto, Goldin divides his persona into two voices, much as Charlotte Delbo had

done when she split herself into the Auschwitz inmate who responds to deep memory and the Auschwitz survivor who tries (unsuccessfully) to live afterward through “*memoire ordinaire*.” In Goldin’s piece we witness the birth of both selves, as his character seeks to preserve his dignity despite the starvation that dampens his spirit and threatens his very integrity.

Goldin calls his account “Chronicle of a Single Day,” and in it he records the dual responses that Delbo identified as deep and ordinary memory. “At one time,” we learn, “he had been an intellectual who had greatly appreciated modern Jewish and European literature: Peretz, Mann, and Goethe. In the good old days he could think of time as a literary trope, just as Thomas Mann had done in Magic Mountain, where Hans Castorp went to the mountain to pay a short visit and stayed for seven years.” So much for ordinary memory. “But now,” we are informed, “he is in the ghetto; it is 5:00 a.m. and time has assumed a totally different meaning. His mind can only focus on the eight hours that separate himself from his daily bowl of soup at the public kitchen.”⁹ What we are really witnessing is testimony from the dead, since most of these candidates for a daily bowl of soup perished from starvation or were deported to a death-camp. Such testimony gives us an incisive clue to how we should imagine the “killing reality” of the Holocaust. In one of his essays Elie Wiesel defined man in Auschwitz as a starved stomach, and in conjuring up his soup-kitchen client, Leyb Goldin makes a similar discovery: “now his stomach is doing all his thinking.” He also discovers what Jean Améry meant when he wrote “Es führte keine Brücke vom Tod in Auschwitz zum Tod in Venedig” (“No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to [Thomas Mann’s] Death in Venice”).¹⁰ But he is less prone than Améry to let culture concede defeat to hunger (though Améry would have substituted “torture” for hunger). He knows that written testimony is a literary event as well as a documentary account, and with a surprising post-modernist fervor he incorporates this insight into his monologue as dialogue: “That kind of split was all right at one time when one was full. *Then* [with a possible covert allusion to Goethe’s Faust] one could say ‘Two people are battling within me,’ and one could make a dramatic martyred face. Yes, this kind of thing can be found quite often in literature. But today? Don’t talk nonsense—it’s you and your stomach. It’s your stomach and you. It’s 90 percent your stomach and a little bit you, an insignificant remnant of the Arke who once was.”¹¹ Oral Holocaust testimonies are full of the struggle between what we might call civilized memory and the memory of

atrocities, though a trained writer like Goldin can translate it into a self-conscious dispute and articulate the need for a resolution.

Walking back from his bowl of soup, “the Arke who once was” passes the small ghetto hospital where surgeons are operating to save a child’s life, and he is filled with a sudden surge of dignity: “Each day the profiles of our children, or our wives, acquire the mournful look of foxes, dingoes, kangaroos. Our howls are like the cry of jackals ... But we are not animals. We operate on our infants. It may be pointless or even criminal. But animals do not operate on their young!” But he knows this is a voice of desperation, not of triumph, as he concludes: “The world’s turning upside down. A planet melts in tears. And I—I am hungry, hungry. I am hungry.”¹² Leyb Goldin, I should add, died of starvation in 1942. Deep memory of the Holocaust assaults our idea of normalcy with an irrepressible sense of how in the midst of life we are in death in a way not intended by the makers of the original phrase. Finally Ringelblum himself had to admit that remembering the Holocaust would become an excursion into the archeology of death, though subsequent investigators of the terrain would substitute for “death” the more accurate designation of “mass murder.”

When we speak of commemorating the Holocaust, we have to ask ourselves what kind of memory work do we want the student, the spectator, the visitor to museums and monuments to undertake. It is easy enough to transform an archeology of death into an excavation of rebirth and to focus on the future, as Steven Spielberg does at the end of *Schindler’s List* when he reminds us how many descendants resulted from Schindler’s saved remnant. But he neglects to speculate about how many offspring might have been born of the millions of Jews who were *not* rescued and did *not* survive. Ringelblum established his archives with the hope of documenting for future generations a multi-disciplinary record of the conduct of the Jewish community in Warsaw under duress, with no inkling of the coming catastrophe when he began. His shift from hope to despair parallels our passage from ordinary to deep memory, a journey that ends with an appreciation of the heartlessness that lies at the heart of the Holocaust experience. We do not need to imagine how the initially sanguine Ringelblum faced this discovery, since he tells us himself: Reflecting in May 1942 on the self-help organization in the ghetto that he was instrumental in founding, he is forced to admit that it “does not solve the problem [of hunger], it only saves people for a short time, and then they will die anyway. The [soup kitchens] prolong the suffering but cannot bring salvation It is an absolute fact that the clients of the soup kitchens will

all die if all they have to eat is the soup they get there and the bread they get on their ration cards.” Ringelblum could not know that in less than two months the Germans would find a swifter end for the ghetto’s starving population at a place called Treblinka. The value of Ringelblum’s surviving archive cannot be overestimated; it is not, however, the story of the life of a community but of its “deathlife,” of its valiant but vain struggle, as its recent historian Samuel Kassow concludes, “to hold onto some morality, some humanity, in the middle of hell.”¹³

But at an unhindered level of inquiry into the Holocaust such an ambition proves fruitless, and this is the chaotic realm where deep memory presides. As the recent work of Father Patrick Desbois confirms, it is a territory where a certain kind of dying ceases to be a trope and becomes a truth. The testimony he extracts from witnesses, a burden for decades, reveals a landscape where “deep” has a physical as well as a metaphorical—to say nothing of metaphysical—meaning. Father Desbois tells us that his investigation of mass graves in Ukraine was inspired by the experience of his grandfather, who during the war was an inmate of a labor camp in the area established by the Germans for French prisoners of war who had attempted multiple escapes from their POW barracks in Germany. Through an odd coincidence, the labor camp in Rawa-Ruska was the same one where French author Pierre Gascar was held and which he used as the basis for his neglected Holocaust masterpiece, the semi-autobiographical novella called *The Season of the Dead* (*Les Temps des Morts*), which won the Prix Goncourt in 1953. Both works offer testimony to what I have called the archaeology of death, and reading Gascar’s *The Season of the Dead* in tandem with Father Desbois’ *The Holocaust by Bullets* gives us sharp comparative glimpses into how deep memory operates in literature as well as in life.

The resemblance between certain portions of the two works is nothing less than uncanny. Gascar’s narrator is in charge of caring for the small cemetery that the Germans have established for the French prisoners of war who die in captivity, from disease or malnutrition. As their number grows, the narrator extends the cemetery’s border closer and closer to the nearby forest, until one day his shovel uncovers a strange twisted corpse and in an instant he begins to comprehend the difference between a burial ground and a mass grave, a distinction that is already clear to Father Desbois in his grim investigations. The narrator has unwittingly unearthed the site of the murder of members of the local Jewish community, whose tangled decaying remains leave him stunned with revulsion. We hear the