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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

**Between Evidence and Symbol:
The Auschwitz Album in Yad Vashem, the Imperial War Museum
(London) and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.**

by

Jaime Ashworth

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2011

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Doctor of Philosophy

BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND SYMBOL: THE AUSCHWITZ ALBUM IN YAD VASHEM, THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM (LONDON) AND THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MUSEUM.

by Jaime Ashworth

This project explores the representation of the Holocaust in three museums: Yad Vashem in Jerusalem; the Imperial War Museum in London; and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim, Poland. It uses the so-called Auschwitz Album, a collection of photographs taken in Birkenau in May 1944, as a case-study. Employing the concept of mythology in the Barthesian sense of a 'language *in which* we speak', it examines the ways in which the Holocaust is more and more a prism through which other things are viewed; a language *in which* other things are spoken of.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the groundwork for the results of fieldwork described in chapters 3-5. Chapter 1 is concerned with the photographs themselves. Describing the structure and content of the collection, it demonstrates the degree to which the interpretation of photographs is complicated by what the viewer brings to them. While photographs might appear to transmit information, this chapter suggests that they are better understood as reflective objects. Chapter 2 interrogates the assumptions of five "classic" accounts of the Holocaust by Raul Hilberg, Helmut Krausnick, Lucy Dawidowicz, Martin Gilbert and Saul Friedländer, in light of a proposed 'Holocaust metanarrative'.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 engage with the particular museums on their own terms, posing questions about how they interact with the societies they are found in. Each museum, these chapters argue, raises a set of questions about the host nation's relationship with the past.

Chapter 6 looks at the specific display strategies employed by the museums to display the Auschwitz Album, considers how this relates to the broader institutional and national agendas as explored in Chapters 3-5. An epilogue takes the basic conclusion of this section – that all memory is local, and that debate about meaning is likely to be the continuing legacy – and asks if there is an alternative language *in which* to speak of the Holocaust.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, **Jaime Robert Alan Ashworth**,

declare that the thesis entitled

**Between Evidence and Symbol: the Auschwitz Album in Yad
Vashem, the Imperial War Museum (London) and the Auschwitz-
Birkenau State Museum**

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- An early and incomplete version of Chapter 5 has been published as: Jaime Ashworth, 'After Auschwitz', *Emergence: Faculty of Humanities Postgraduate Journal*, Volume Two 'The Defining Moment', Autumn 2010, pp. 34-39.

Signed:

Date:.....

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‘Dust Breeding’ (Marcel Duchamp/Man Ray 1921) on p. 44.

‘Unemployed Man 1928’ (August Sander) on p. 75.

Fragment from ‘Dream’ by Abramek Koplwicz on p. 149.

‘All Behind You, Winston’ (David Low, 1940) on p. 157.

‘London Blitz’, (George Rodger, 1940) on p. 167.

‘Elephant and Castle Shelter’ (Bill Brandt, 1940) on p. 169.

The fragment from the poem ‘Campo dei Fiori’ by Czesław Miłosz on p. 205.

Introduction

In her text on ethnographic methods, Karen O'Reilly identifies five points which the author of an ethnographic text must bear in mind. Since they are fundamental to the way this study is organised, they are worth quoting in full:

- Chapters do not appear by themselves. We decide on them.
- Subheadings are not natural phenomena. They are imposed on the data.
- Many things could be written; many interpretations, in many forms, with many different focuses. [sic]
- We select what we write and how.
- We have a reader in mind.¹

While O'Reilly's comments are directed at the ethnographer, they are useful for engaging with any discipline or institution which claims for itself some measure of authority to describe the world and interpret its meaning. Since this study is concerned with the representation of a historical event in museums, with particular reference to the use of images, these criteria have obvious relevance, since both the discipline of history and the institution of the museum have as their goal 'definitive – not provisional or variable – interpretation and explanation'² whether or not their practitioners view this as possible or not.

A book or article may take a view that is 'fallibilistic and limited'³ but to the reader it is a unit which sets out a particular view and can never be completely explicit about the means by which its evidence and arguments were selected. We may argue with what is on the page but we are powerless to change it unless, like Humpty Dumpty, we insist that words mean whatever we choose them to.

Similarly, a museum may present alternative perspectives or provide space for visitors to add their own reflections, but what the visitor is responding to is – for the duration of the exhibition as experienced by the visitor – definitive. No matter how museums strive for 'polyvocality with representations being focused

¹ Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 218.

² Alison Arieff, 'A Different Sort of (P)Reservation: Some Thoughts on the National Museum of the American Indian', *Museum Anthropology*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1995), p. 78.

³ Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, p. 218.

on all',⁴ (if being focused does not preclude being for all) the fact remains that an exhibit must make choices about what is included or excluded, as Gerald Corsane tacitly admits when he poses the following questions:

- Whose voices should be heard?
- How can the outputs allow for different voices to come through?⁵

While it is true that visitors may shift between different identities – and thus relationships to the 'voices' used – it is equally true that what they are shifting in relation to must stay more or less fixed, something Corsane concedes when he narrows down the broad appeal of his first question with the limitation of 'the outputs' in the second. The creation of an exhibit is, to borrow the title of a book by Lisa Roberts, a transition 'from knowledge to narrative'⁶ and the decisions taken in the course of that transition cannot avoid the impact of the change itself. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has summarised this neatly by observing that exhibitions 'bring together specimens and artefacts never found in the same place at the same time and show relationships that cannot be seen.'⁷

This relationship between artefact, knowledge and narrative is crystallised in the recent British Museum collaboration with BBC Radio 4: *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. The director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, argues in the preface that 'telling history through things is what museums are for'⁸ but acknowledges later that such a history, although it may give a voice to those who do not have texts, 'can never itself be fully balanced because it depends entirely on what happens to survive.'⁹ For that reason, it is a history of the world rather than *the* history of the world: even if, as we engage with it on the

⁴ Gerald Corsane, 'Issues in heritage, museums and galleries: a brief introduction' in Gerald Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory reader*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 9.

⁶ Lisa C. Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London 1997.

⁷ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1998, p. 3.

⁸ Neil MacGregor, *A history of the World in 100 objects*, Allen Lane/BBC/The British Museum, London 2011, p. xiii. The series was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 between January and October, 2010.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. xix.

page or on radio, it is (momentarily) the only history of the world that we have, with little indication of why this particular set of objects was chosen above another. These questions underly all exhibition strategy: *all* exhibitions 'are constructed in the nexus between the necessity and impossibility to bear witness'¹⁰ even if not all exhibitions have a nexus so ideologically and emotionally freighted.¹¹

The sumptuous illustration of MacGregor's book makes space for an analogy with the transformation of reality accomplished by the photograph, which has a similarly paradoxical relationship with what is termed *indexicality* – that is, the degree to which a photograph is a record of what was in front of the lens when the shutter opened and the film or sensor received an impression – and is also much more than that, since we must interpret that trace.¹² As with a museum exhibit or historical text, what is there and fixed is not the same as what it means, and it is this gap that this study investigates, asking what the Holocaust is assumed to mean in a particular context by looking at what is selected to represent it. Museums, historical accounts, photography: all are 'mode[s] of description equipped with a transcriptional bias that allows for guile.'¹³

Finding a language to describe the gap between what is there and what it is meant to mean has been the major obstacle to the study's completion. One

¹⁰ K. Hannah Holtschneider, 'Victims, Perpetrators, Bystanders? Witnessing, Remembering and the Ethics of Representation in Museums of the Holocaust', *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2007), p. 98.

¹¹ Though see Cressida Fforde (ed.), *The Dead and their Possessions: Reparation in principle, policy and practice*, Routledge, London and New York 2002, for an exploration of how the issues of 'collection, repatriation and identity' are of increasing concern to museologists. Also see Fforde's contribution with Jane Hubert to the collection edited by Gerard Corsane; 'The reburial issue in the twenty-first century' (pp. 116-132). One should also note that these issues are not addressed at any length by MacGregor above: though his history of the world is one which is intimately connected with colonial expansion and in fact begins with the mummified remains of an ancient Egyptian priest.

¹² See for example Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, especially Chapter 8, 'Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography', pp. 169-183. Judith Keilbach, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust: On the (Im)Possibility of Depicting Historical Truth', *History and Theory, Theme Issue 47* (2009), pp. 54-76 also refers to the 'indexical relation to the object' (p. 55).

¹³ Max Kozloff, 'Foreword' in Ian Jeffrey, *How to Read a Photograph: Understanding, Interpreting and Enjoying the Great Photographers*, Thames & Hudson, London 2008, p. 7.

option was to take a postmodern approach, understanding postmodernism as ‘a way of thinking and making that sought to strip privilege from any one ethos and to deny the consensus of taste’,¹⁴ as a recent article puts it. Ultimately, though, postmodernity seemed too content with ‘the idea of holding two irreconcilable ideas in our heads: that no system of meaning can have a monopoly on the truth, but that we still have to render the truth through our chosen system of meaning’¹⁵ without addressing the process by which we accommodate ourselves to particular systems of meaning. At the same time, I was acutely aware that the static medium of the written word was unlikely to ever describe this process without doing it considerable damage in the description. Words, like photographs, employ signs to the reader/viewer that they should understand movement, which is not the same as motion, however convincing the illusion sometimes is.¹⁶

A term was needed, therefore, which could be employed to look at both interpretation and what was being interpreted. Roland Barthes’s conception of mythology as ‘a language *in which* one speaks of something’¹⁷ (else?) seemed to offer a means by which the two could be connected, particularly as my research indicated that in each of the institutions covered in this study, the Holocaust was best understood as a means of engaging with other issues about the past, the present and their interrelationships.

Mythology is not a term that sits easily with historical research. Peter Heehs’s 1994 observation that the prevalent understanding of “myth” among historians is ‘an interpretation that is considered blatantly false’¹⁸ is still apposite, perhaps particularly in the field of Holocaust Studies, where the use of the word often indicates an attempt to deny that the Holocaust happened at all.¹⁹

¹⁴ Edward Docx, ‘Postmodernism is dead’, *Prospect*, August 2011, p. 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 40.

¹⁶ For a prolonged consideration of these issues, see E.H. Gombrich, ‘Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1980), pp. 237-273 which explores different artistic strategies in response to the problem.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes (trans. Annette Lavers), *Mythologies*, Vintage, London 2000 [1972] p. 115.

¹⁸ Peter Heehs, ‘Myth, History and Theory’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1994), p. 2.

¹⁹ See for example, Mark Weber, ‘Auschwitz: Myths and Facts’, retrieved from <http://www.ihr.org/leaflets/auschwitz.shtml> on 3 March, 2011. The text is a classic example of denial rhetoric: twisting some facts, totally ignoring others, and concluding by dismissing the ‘Auschwitz extermination story’ as ‘wartime propaganda’.

At the same time, Heehs demonstrates that in debates about the past, there is always an element of thinking that proceeds from assumptions other than the *logos* of historical method. His account of the establishment of a mosque in India on the alleged site of a Hindu temple marking the birthplace of Rama, and its subsequent destruction in 1992, makes clear that the belief in a myth is separate from the facts which can be established on the basis of historians 'basing their work on known documents'.²⁰ Heehs points out that even if it were possible to establish that there had indeed once been a Hindu temple on the site, this would not address the issue that is the cause of tension.

There is no more documentary proof of Rama's existence than Odysseus's. Yet many Hindus consider it beyond question that the mosque was built after the destruction of a temple that marked the precise location of Rama's birth.²¹

When dealing with the Holocaust we are obviously in a different situation: the evidence for its historicity cannot be called into question without mendacity. As Mr Justice Gray put it in his judgement in *David John Cawdell Irving vs. Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books*, 'the falsification of the historical record was deliberate and [...] motivated by a desire to present events in a manner consistent with [...] ideological beliefs even if that involved distortion and manipulation of historical evidence.'²²

Robert Jan van Pelt, in his book based on his expert report for the trial, pointed out that some element of *mythos* was present – indeed had to be present – in his own analysis of the evidence. Van Pelt, in his report for the trial, was careful to make the distinction that he was presenting 'some of the most important pieces of evidence for our knowledge of the genocidal function of Auschwitz'.²³ He saw that the key to exposing Irving's falsehoods was to demonstrate two things.

²⁰ Peter Heehs, 'Myth, History and Theory', p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 13.

²² *The Irving Judgment*, Penguin Books, London 2000, §13.163, p. 347. I refer to the trial in its long form as I believe that the common term 'The Irving Trial' misleadingly suggests that Irving was the defendant rather than the plaintiff.

²³ Robert Jan van Pelt, 'The Van Pelt Report', retrieved from <http://www.holocaustdenialontrial.com/ieindex.html> on 26 January 2007.

Firstly, that the evidence for Auschwitz was not dependent on any single piece of testimony or forensic evidence but rather on the 'convergence of many different strands of often contradictory evidence that, in the end, all pointed to a history that could be understood as a story.'²⁴ In other words, he established that the historical method could be applied to this question and would produce an account at considerable variance with that presented by Irving.

More importantly, though, van Pelt realised that in addition to the weight of evidence there was a second factor which would assist the defence: the social consensus that the Holocaust had, in fact, happened – the history that not only could be but already was 'understood as a story'.²⁵ Van Pelt realised that he 'was engaging Auschwitz as a historical fact after [he] had come across it as an already accepted item of knowledge' and that 'the upcoming battle about what was to be considered evidence and how to interpret evidence was only possible because we shared a consensus about its history.'²⁶

This consensus crosses the border from the historically provable to a much more numinous sense of how the past was and what it meant (or means). As van Pelt summarised it, his establishment of the evidence for our knowledge about Auschwitz would be 'a somewhat ritual exercise, because neither judge nor jury would be able to separate themselves from our own culture and judge the inherited account of Auschwitz on the basis of documentary evidence.' Instead 'they, like everyone else, would interpret the evidence within the context of the belief for which it would seem to provide evidence.'²⁷ As Judith Keilbach remarks of photographs, although their 'immediate power of evidence' is powerful, we need to be aware that in order to 'make out the incidents captured or the situation in which they were taken [...] the viewer needs to construct a context'²⁸ or, extending the idea, fit the evidence into a context that already exists.

²⁴ Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2002, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 103.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 104.

²⁸ Judith Keilbach, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust', p. 56.

On a deeper level still, one has to consider the problems of what van Pelt was defending. Deborah Lipstadt was a problematic historian to defend since she had some difficulty making the distinction between historicity, historical debate, and the sense of identity drawn from them. For example, in her affidavit for the trial, Lipstadt described her antecedents, upbringing and personal development and then moved to a discussion of 'Holocaust Deniers: Their Modus operandi, Arguments, and Objectives' which recapitulated the polemic of her book *Denying the Holocaust*.²⁹ At the end of this section, Lipstadt stated categorically: 'For the deniers to be right all of the following categories of witnesses must be wrong'.

- (a) survivors;
- (b) bystanders (this includes, among others, the Polish villagers who lived adjacent to the death camps);
- (c) facilitators, such as the train engineers who drove the trains into the death camps, and German lawyers who created racial definitions for legislation promulgated by the Third Reich;
- (d) liberators, particularly those who liberated the death camps;
- (e) perpetrators, who left behind reams of documents and testimony attesting to exactly what was done.³⁰

The problem with Lipstadt's statement is that, theoretically, if any of these groups were either not able to observe something or could be shown to have been inaccurate, the possibility exists that the deniers could be 'right' about some aspects of the Holocaust. Since we know (not least through the exacting forensic analysis carried out by van Pelt) that these categories of witnesses do contradict each other – but in a convergent way – Lipstadt is clearly employing something other than the historical method in her implicit claim for the 'rightness' of all these groups.

Indeed, Lipstadt seems to be unaware that her neat categories are (to some extent) exogenous to their evidence. Taking her first group as an example, there is considerable variance in the self-perception of individuals as to whether the label 'survivor' is appropriate. Brian Klug has pointed out that the 'classic

²⁹ Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Revisionist Assault on Truth and Memory*, Free Press, New York 1993. The book was republished by Penguin the following year, allowing Irving to claim that the British courts had jurisdiction.

³⁰ Deborah E. Lipstadt, 'Witness Statement of Deborah E. Lipstadt' retrieved from www.holocaustdenialontrial.com/evidence/wSDL.html on 6 December 2006.

definition' – 'anyone who was herded into a ghetto or incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp or the equivalent'³¹ – excludes other groups, such as those who escaped to the Soviet Union or the children of the *Kindertransport*. There is, Klug continues, 'neither a clear-cut constituency of survivors nor a definition that is applied consistently',³² which makes Lipstadt's assertion of 'survivor' as a neat category much less convincing.

On a different level entirely, even those who survived the Holocaust are unsure that survival is the right term. Inga Clendinnen points out that 'most people who came out of the camps would agree that the word is altogether too smug in its assumption of the "natural" continuity of the individual persona'.³³ Paul Steinberg, in the 'digressions' that punctuate his remarkable memoir *Speak You Also*, makes clear that his life after Auschwitz was a 'second life' lived in comparison to what went before, struggling to 'justify those unbelievable strokes of luck that made me into this fireproof and unsinkable being'.³⁴

Continuing through Lipstadt's list, the neatly listed categories present different problems. I wonder what criteria are at work to differentiate 'bystanders' from 'facilitators', or either of those from 'perpetrators'. In the terms of Lipstadt's examples, Adolf Eichmann could (almost) be placed in any of the three categories: a bystander at mass executions; a facilitator of the schedule; a perpetrator of the result.

Even 'liberator' is problematic when viewed from other perspectives. To describe the Red Army units that entered Auschwitz in January 1945 as 'liberators' is challenging in the light of the subsequent imposition of communist rule in postwar Poland. In addition, one has to reconcile their mistakes: the Auschwitz Museum employed an estimate of the victims based on the calculated burning capacity of the crematoria assuming uninterrupted operation and consistent arrivals of victims. This was the result of the Red Army's initial

³¹ Brian Klug, 'Rough justice or exploitation?' retrieved from <http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/B/battle/page5.html> on 25 February, 2011.

³² Ibid.

³³ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 35.

³⁴ Paul Steinberg (trans. Linda Coverdale and Bill Ford), *Speak You Also: A Survivor's Reckoning*, Penguin, London 2002, pp. 162-163.

calculations immediately after liberation.³⁵ As Franciszek Piper showed in 1991 (when the communist authorities had gone), the figure derivable from documents is approximately 1.1 million.³⁶ And even this is an estimate: we will never know (for example) of the births and deaths *en route* to Auschwitz or the number of pregnant women sent to the gas chamber after registration. As any historical account should, the history of the Holocaust contains elements that are 'known, unknown, disputed and re-examined', to quote the title of an important edited collection.³⁷ Lipstadt, by contrast, relies on 'givens' which she 'did not feel it necessary to research or prove.'³⁸ Uncomfortable though this may be to acknowledge, it has to be faced that research and proof are precisely what separates historical method from religious belief. In the terms of Peter Heehs, research and proof are the difference between '*mythos* (the word as decisive, final pronouncement) and *logos* (the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated).'³⁹

What this means is open to question. It is possible that Lipstadt is simply a clumsy historian who had the misfortune to arouse the ire of a mendacious and self-righteous Holocaust denier in a very public fashion. The reflections of van Pelt, though, led me to think that what is also at work here is the degree to which History (meaning the discipline and practice of writing about the past) struggles to separate itself from wider beliefs about that past.

Recent scholarship has developed this in relation to the Holocaust. Donald Bloxham, in a book co-written with Tony Kushner, pointed out the existence of a 'Holocaust metanarrative', a 'bundle of ideas and preconceptions handed down

³⁵ Robert Jan van Pelt devotes a section to varying estimates of Auschwitz dead under the title 'A Short History of Scholarship Concerning the Number of Victims of Auschwitz' in *The Case for Auschwitz*, pp. 106-119. He discusses the precise methodology of the Soviet estimate on pp. 106-107.

³⁶ Franciszek Piper, 'Estimating the Number of Deportees to and Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp', *Yad Vashem Studies*, Volume 21 (1991), pp. 40-103.

³⁷ Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (eds.), *The Holocaust and History: The Known, The Unknown, The Disputed and the Re-Examined*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998.

³⁸ Deborah Lipstadt, 'Witness Statement'. The full list of 'givens' can be found in Section 113.

³⁹ Peter Heehs, 'Myth, History and Theory', p. 3.

under the label “Holocaust” that shapes the contours and parameters of our understanding of the subject.’⁴⁰

Bloxham’s view is that this metanarrative is an obstacle to historical understanding ‘because of its tendency to view those events from the perspective of the accomplished fact.’⁴¹ In other words, the certainty of the individual that he or she knows what the Holocaust was creates the illusion that things can (relatively) easily be termed either “of the Holocaust” or, more problematically, “*not* of the Holocaust”. This is why Lipstadt can abandon research and proof in relation to some aspects of the historical record: in her view, some things do not need saying, or at least do not need proving.

Bloxham, though, leaves unexamined the degree to which History actually requires a metanarrative in order to be studied and then written. All research, however impeccable its methodology, has a beginning and an end and those points are fundamentally arbitrary. Sometimes we know this to be the case: when, for example, a history of the twentieth century starts in 1914 and ends in 1991.⁴² At others, the arbitrariness of the decisions to start and stop can be harder to unpack because of our inability to change what is on the page (or in the exhibition, or in the frame) and our difficulty in distinguishing between the ‘historical fact’ and ‘the already accepted item of knowledge’, to return to van Pelt.

Taken to extremes, this could mean that we can follow Hayden White in classifying historical writing as divisible from fiction only ‘on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents’.⁴³ In other words, we divide “history” from “fiction” by assuming that a history of the Holocaust (such as those discussed in Chapter 2) refers to real events and that (for example) *Fugitive Pieces*⁴⁴ is composed of events that are not “real”. The controversy

⁴⁰ Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2005, p. 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 66.

⁴² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph, London 1994.

⁴³ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1990 [1987] p. x.

⁴⁴ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, Bloomsbury, London 1998 [1997].

surrounding Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*⁴⁵ demonstrates the fragility of some of those assumptions, and suggests that exogenous designation as either "history" or "not history" plays more of a role in our reception of such artefacts than we are sometimes comfortable in acknowledging. Moreover, this leaves unasked the broader questions Robert Eaglestone asks of the category "Holocaust Fiction": 'what does "about the Holocaust" mean and where does "being about the Holocaust" start or stop?'⁴⁶

One attraction of the term mythology for this study is that it allowed an approach which demonstrated the broad scope of responses to these questions, since the question becomes more about what can be spoken about (and is spoken of) in this metalanguage of the Holocaust. It underlines that we are in charge of what "being about the Holocaust" means and where this starts or stops.

Mythology is a useful way of talking about another aspect of the Holocaust: namely, its wider, more emotional, significance. Robert Eaglestone begins his examination of the Holocaust's impact on modern philosophy with the observation that the Holocaust is more than historical facts but instead 'something wider, more significant, and, precisely because it is so all-pervasive, very much harder to pin down: a sense of "who we are" and "how the world is for us"' .⁴⁷

This is a profoundly important part of the Holocaust's legacy. Primo Levi, describing the arrival of the Red Army in Auschwitz, noted that for both liberator and liberated the world changed.

They did not greet us, nor smile; they seemed oppressed, not only by pity but also by a confused restraint which sealed their mouths, and kept their eyes fastened on

⁴⁵ Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memoirs of a Childhood, 1939-1948*, Picador, London 1997 [1996]. For a more detailed account of the Wilkomirski controversy, see Jeremy D. Popkin, 'The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth', *Biography*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2002). The implications of Wilkomirski are considered in Andrea Reiter (trans. Patrick Camiller), *Narrating the Holocaust*, Continuum, London and New York 2000, and Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, Routledge, Oxford 2000. Elena Lappin, 'The Man with Two Heads', *Granta*, Volume 66 (1999), pp. 7-68 is a critical and compassionate account of the man at the centre of it.

⁴⁶ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, pp.1-2.

the funereal scene. It was the same shame which we knew so well, which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to undergo or witness an outrage: the shame the Germans never knew, the shame which the just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse by its existence, because of its having been introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defence.⁴⁸

Mythology is an appropriate choice to describe the representation of the Holocaust because of the profound change in 'the world of existing things' that it provoked.

Saul Friedländer noted that separate from the horror being described, myths are volatile, 'ready to surface again, to spread, like a trail of flame, or like torrents that unexpectedly fill dry ravines and sweep down across the plains, carrying off everything in their wake.'⁴⁹ Myths have an unpredictable and numinous quality that has to be respected in that it tells us about a place in our minds where we do not understand, or perhaps where understanding is impossible.

Paul Steinberg knew that in returning to his experience in Auschwitz he risked dredging up what he had chosen to forget: he saw this as discarding a 'mental prophylaxis'⁵⁰ that had been kind, the loss of which would unbalance him. As he wrote, he found that differentiating between 'the description of the event as it happened (or at least as I remember it) and the vision or interpretation of it I tend to favour after later experience has erased the initial impression'⁵¹ was harder than anticipated. It is this difficulty in separating event and meaning that I signify with the term mythology.

If this all seems slightly unsatisfactory, there is a good reason: in the world of *logos*, a place of *mythos* is frightening because, far from being either arguable or demonstrable, some truths are simply experienced. As Joseph Campbell put it, 'Myth opens the world to the dimension of mystery, to the realisation of the

⁴⁸ Primo Levi (trans. Raymond Rosenthal), *The Drowned and the Saved*, Abacus, London 1989, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, The Noonday Press, New York 1991 [1978], p.143.

⁵⁰ Paul Steinberg, *Speak You Also*, p. 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 62.

mystery that underlies all forms.⁵² In the article discussed earlier, Heehs notes that the settlement of the dispute over the mosque could only end in one way because the actions of laws and courts are the domain of *logos*. This left the losers 'two alternatives: compromise and violence'⁵³ because to concede their *mythos* on the basis of another's *logos* left them vulnerable. Jonathan Boyarin has identified a similar instability in the competing claims of Israelis and Palestinians and suggests that only by 'constituting themselves through the creation of shared memories'⁵⁴ (in Heehs' terms, bound by *mythos*) can the respective communities move past the competition required by the argument and demonstration of *logos*.

What I am describing might seem like a slightly looser version of what Pierre Nora termed memory in his seminal 1989 article in *Representations*.⁵⁵ There is certainly something of the adaptive quality Nora assigns to memory, the 'bond tying us to the eternal present'⁵⁶ which (in Nora's view) allows societies to maintain a sense of historical continuity. But memory is tameable: it can be verified or denied on the grounds of accuracy; names and dates and order, the very stuff of history, albeit in a slightly more flexible form.

Mythology, though, takes a different turn from the same attempt to reconcile what happened with what it meant. Barthes wrote that 'mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history',⁵⁷ but then things become more complex, as the signifying power of objects in the present becomes part of the process of understanding the events of the past, and the limits of representation become more flexible as time takes its toll or works its magic, depending on your point of view.

⁵² Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers (edited by Betty Sue Flowers), *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, New York 1988, p. 31.

⁵³ Peter Heehs, 'Myth, History and Theory', p. 14.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis 1992, p. 128.

⁵⁵ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989), p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 110.

Another attraction of the term mythology in relation to the Holocaust is the lingering sense of the sacred that hangs around it. The study of the Holocaust should challenge and unsettle us. Robert Eaglestone breaks into the eloquent analysis which characterises his work and asks us to remember that ‘writing and reading about the Holocaust is, and ought to be, distressing’.⁵⁸ He develops a comparison to bring home to the reader what we are talking about.

*So, compare: think about getting blood on your clothes from a nosebleed: think how much, much more blood – the blood of the victims – would ‘saturate with blood’ a thick military uniform. On one day. And the killings, of all sorts, lasted years.*⁵⁹

Eaglestone immediately notes that this comparison is ‘not even really a comparison’ and allows parentheses to contain the frustration that sometimes ‘the nature of the subject is eclipsed for a moment by the heat of writing and debate.’⁶⁰ Mythology appeals to me because it hints at the ‘hidden dimension [...] which lies beneath its earthly, temporal manifestation.’⁶¹ Historians may find this problematic, but I take the view that a degree of ‘re-enchantment’⁶² (to borrow a term criticised by Kerwin Lee Klein) is a necessary step in making sense of how we have made sense (or not) of the Holocaust.

We *should* be challenged by what we describe to wonder whether sense can be made of it, whether there is an adequate or meaningful response. Otherwise we run the risk identified by James Young: that we ‘threaten to make the mere form of study [our] content as well.’⁶³ Robert Jan van Pelt chooses to acknowledge his ‘loyalty with the victims of Auschwitz and against their murderers,’ arguing that:

⁵⁸ Robert Eaglestone, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial* (Postmodern Encounters), Icon Books UK, Duxford 2001, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 29. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Karen Armstrong, ‘The Idea of a Sacred Text’, in John Reeve (ed.), *Sacred: Books of the Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, British Library, London 2007, p. 19.

⁶² Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, *Representations*, No. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000), p. 136.

⁶³ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1988, p. 3.

[N]o historian can responsibly touch the world of Auschwitz without, in some way or another, becoming a “heterological historian.” I believe, too, that the first question one should ask about any historian's attempt to deal with the history of an extermination camp – or for that matter any other atrocity – is the way he or she either accepts or rejects the ethical responsibility that comes with all history, but especially with the history of Auschwitz. No historian should ever play games with the past – especially not a past such as that marked by the word ‘Auschwitz,’ a past marked by the massive betrayal of human solidarity.⁶⁴

This ethical responsibility is why mythology seems to me to be the best term to describe our responses to the Holocaust. It acknowledges that there is a part of this that escapes our grasp and threatens to overwhelm us. An early collection of Holocaust texts had the title *Out of the Whirlwind*, and argued that ‘a whirlwind cannot be taught; it must be experienced.’⁶⁵

Some documents stick in the mind more than others. For as long as I can remember, the following excerpt from an account by Hermann Graebe of a mass execution in Ukraine in July 1942 has made me wonder how we face the apocalypse, and whether there is a meaning to be found.

The father held the ten-year-old boy by the hand speaking softly to him. The boy was struggling to hold back his tears. The father pointed a finger at the sky and seemed to be explaining something to him.⁶⁶

The danger of any academic study is that we lose our sense of the actuality of the event. Sitting in the green expanse of Birkenau on a summer's day, watching the tourists make their way along the ramp to the site of the crematoria, I know this sense of unreality all too well (Can it have happened – and here?) And questioning the nature of representation itself is not always helpful. Mythology is powerful and, as I listened to the “simple” explanations offered by the visitors to the site (or by the guides to them) I felt an unease – that perhaps they are right to see a simple story of death and destruction and that, in seeking to see how they believe what they believe, I have missed the truth: that

⁶⁴ Robert Jan van Pelt, ‘The Van Pelt Report’

⁶⁵ Albert H. Friedlander, ‘General Introduction’ in Albert H. Friedlander (ed.), *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York 1968, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Testimony to the Nuremberg Tribunal by Hermann Graebe: Document 823 in J. Noakes and G. Pridham (eds.) *Nazism 1919-1945. Vol.3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1997, p. 1101.

what happened was awful, and unimaginable. To search for the source of that unease is what this project started with.

None of this should be interpreted as a claim that the Holocaust is the only event which has this paradigm-shifting resonance: the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the revolutions of 1989; the attacks of 11 September 2001; all these changed the structure of the past. Whenever an event seems to divide the past into sections, creating a before and after, it has become a mythology: if the past is a foreign country, mythologies are the frontiers through which we have to pass to try and get there. Whenever, to paraphrase Zhou Enlai's reported comment on the significance of the French Revolution, it seems "too early to say" what an event means a mythology is at work.

Posner, the Jewish character in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, notes that 'to put something in context is a step towards saying that it can be understood and that it can be explained. And if it can be explained that it can be explained away.'⁶⁷ Mythology is more cautious, reserving more clearly the possibility that our understanding and our explanations are provisional attempts to explain that which will not be explained away, because the explanation must change with the consequences as we perceive them. Returning to the criteria proposed by O'Reilly, an awareness of mythology allows us to examine the means *by which* (to paraphrase Barthes again) 'we select what we write and how'⁶⁸ and a way of looking at what we produce.

At the same time, the broad scope of the idea of mythology meant that my decisions to look at some aspects of the mythology of the Holocaust rather than others were exposed as perhaps a little arbitrary. Why after all, should I look at museums and photographs rather than films or novels, particularly as reflections on these (and other) media make their way into my analysis?

The question has two answers. The second of these, my sense that museums offer a unique space in which to explore the presentation and representation of realities past and present, is explored below. Primarily, though,

⁶⁷ Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*, Faber and Faber, London 2004, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, p. 218.

I am equally willing to confess to the fact that these media more than others attracted me. O'Reilly's observation that 'we select what we write and how' can be extended to include what we write *about* as well, and there is an important sense in which the question can only be answered with reference to personal feelings. Autobiography is different from research but it would be foolish to pretend that the initial curiosity is always identifiable in academic terms. I enjoy visiting museums and both looking at and taking photographs, and if I investigate these pursuits from an academic standpoint, I am also happy to concede that this investigation has arisen from interests and experiences that are not purely "scientific".

There is, however, a need for an intellectual justification of my decision to examine not just these kinds of representations, but the particular examples I have selected. In regard to photographs, the perception that their relationship to indexicality explored briefly above (and at greater length in Chapter 1) offered ground to consider how we respond to other indices of authority and reality was decisive.

The decision to use the Auschwitz Album in particular arose from a fascination with the obvious gap (again, explored at length in Chapter 1) between what was depicted, what was meant to be understood, and how these images were deployed in a range of contexts. Beyond that, the sense of *punctum* (that part of an image which pierces or wounds)⁶⁹ meant that for me understanding *this* collection was the priority. Other collections – for example, the Stroop Report or the Genewein photos from the Litzmannstadt/Łódź Ghetto – could have been used. All these collections show the history of the Holocaust as its perpetrators hoped it might be written later. The Auschwitz Album, however, is the one that caught my attention, for reasons not entirely explicable in linear terms – though I do think that images from the Auschwitz Album are used more widely, suggesting to me that they are more useful in understanding how what they are used to depict (or not) is understood (or misunderstood). The way in which the same

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes (trans. Richard Howard), *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Vintage, London 2000 [1980], pp. 25-27 defines *punctum* as 'that accident which pricks me' in opposition to *studium* as 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...] but without special acuity.'

publication can use images from the collection to illustrate the general – ‘A transport of Jews on their way to the gas chambers at Auschwitz’⁷⁰ – and the particular – ‘Jewish Hungarian women at Auschwitz, 1944’⁷¹ – suggests there is something about these images that lends them to mythologisation.

In regard to museums, the perception that they are places in which an understanding of the past is presented alongside the terms on which that past is being understood was very attractive. John Dorst argues that by seeing a Site (as he capitalises) as ‘an image, an idea, an ideological discourse, an assemblage of texts’⁷² the researcher can investigate what happens ‘if the notion of stable subjectivity is perceived as a problem rather than assumed as a premise’.⁷³ Museums are sites in which particular interpretations are raised to prominence in a form which is both (in the moment) inarguable and (in the long run, beyond the exhibition’s closing date or confines) provisional.

The resulting tensions – for both photographs and museums – are like those Benedict Anderson identifies in the daily newspaper: while the reader makes sense of a particular edition (or image, or exhibition) in ‘the lair of the skull’, the visible commonality of consumption means that he or she ‘is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.’⁷⁴ I look at museums as one might look at newspaper reports to speculate about how that world seems to be understood by the receiving public. It is significant, given the historiographical elements of this study, that Anderson sees the newspaper as an ‘extreme form’ of the book: ‘sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity.’⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Anon., *The Holocaust*, Yad Vashem Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem 1975, p. 50.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 61.

⁷² John D. Dorst, *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1989, p. 3.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 6.

⁷⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition*, Verso, London and New York 2006, pp. 35-36.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 34.

This, however, raises two more problems. Firstly, why these museums in particular and secondly, having selected them, how to go about engaging with them?

The choice of institutions was the subject of much discussion between myself and my supervisors in the early stages of this project. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was an obvious choice dictated by the collection of photographs: how the images were used in the place where they were taken was obviously an essential component. The central place of the Auschwitz Album in the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition attracted me to it as a comparison, and one which was in comparatively easy reach.

Both my supervisors and I felt, however, that a third case was needed. Three possibilities presented themselves: the Information Centre at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC; and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

After discussion with my supervisors, it was decided that separating the new museum in Berlin from the rest of the memorial landscape would be difficult and the resulting chapter might unbalance the study. Similar concerns attached to the USHMM: I felt that a single chapter on it would be likely to result in either an account of the extensive existing literature or a recapitulation of arguments by those who have studied it previously. I was also concerned that, given the amount of secondary literature, the time required to research such a chapter would compromise the amount of time for researching the Imperial War Museum, which has so far received (comparatively) little scholarly attention. This left Yad Vashem.

There is, obviously, a considerable literature concerning Israeli understanding, remembering, and imagining of the Holocaust. Not much, however, has been written on the exhibition itself and little beyond journalistic accounts of the new exhibition and memorial complex opened in 2005. My interest was further aroused as I began to see the usefulness of Yad Vashem in illustrating the concept I had begun to see at the heart of my research – that of mythology. The pairing of a biblical name with the very modern idea of a

remembrance authority was a striking juxtaposition and indicative of the tensions in the term mythology explored above.

Having made this decision, though, meant that I was studying three kinds of institution. The site of a former concentration and death camp, a museum of twentieth-century conflict and a memorial campus: these are all very different from each other, as anyone who has visited all three will agree.

At the same time, there were two obvious connecting threads. The first of these is the activity of exhibiting, common to all three sites: all three could be placed in the broad category of “museums”. Looking at the collections edited by Gerald Corsane⁷⁶ and Sharon Macdonald,⁷⁷ the eclecticism of the examples used seemed to indicate that Yad Vashem, the Imperial War Museum and the Auschwitz Museum could be contained within one study. Jeffrey Abt, in the Macdonald collection, draws out three critical aspects of what constitutes a museum: firstly, ‘settings where something could be seen by the many as opposed to settings where visibility was confined to a relative few’;⁷⁸ secondly, ‘a setting for learned discourse in the presence of its objects’;⁷⁹ finally, ‘a steadily evolving institutional form, one that continues to be shaped by the demands of preserving objects to address societal needs.’⁸⁰

All three institutions in this study are encompassed by these criteria, particularly in the light of what Elaine Heumann Gurian has termed ‘a blurring of the boundaries’ among institutions as diverse as ‘libraries, memorials, social services centres, schools, shopping malls, zoos, performance halls, archives, theatres, public parks, cafes and museums’.⁸¹ This blurring is reflected (albeit less dramatically) in the structuring of the volume by Corsane, which groups

⁷⁶ Gerald Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory reader*, op. cit.

⁷⁷ Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2011 [2006].

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Abt, ‘The Origins of the Public Museum’, in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, p. 117.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 122.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 132.

⁸¹ Elaine Heumann Gurian, ‘A blurring of the boundaries’, in Gerald Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory reader*, op. cit., p. 71.

'heritage, museums and galleries' in such a way as to acknowledge that the three forms are hard to separate.

While only two of the three institutions in this study use the word museum to describe themselves, all of them can be seen to be participating in the display of objects in order to communicate ideas – or, in Heumann Gurian's phrase 'the storing and passing on of evident markers of culture and cultural transmission'⁸² – which seems to be the basic criterion for museum status according to the literature. This is reflected in the definition of the International Council of Museums, which defines a museum as 'a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.'⁸³

All three institutions, moreover, are concerned with knowledge and narrative about the same event: the Holocaust. Though only one of the institutions (paradoxically, the one which does not use "museum" to identify itself) could really be termed a "Holocaust Museum", all three were and are engaged in "acquiring, researching, communicating and exhibiting" material related to the Holocaust. To return to the earlier part of this introduction, all three related to the 'bundle of ideas and preconceptions handed down under the label "Holocaust" that shapes the contours and parameters of our understanding of the subject.'⁸⁴ In the Barthesian concept of mythology, all three institutions spoke and speak in terms (at least partially) of the Holocaust.

All three, in addition, are sites which signal the place of the Holocaust in terms of a national memory. This is obvious in the case of Yad Vashem, which as Roni Stauber has shown, was developed quite explicitly as an authoritative

⁸² Ibid. p. 72.

⁸³ International Council of Museums Statutes, approved in Vienna (Austria) August 24, 2007, retrieved from http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Statuts/Statutes_eng.pdf on September 7, 2011.

⁸⁴ Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*, p. 66.

memorial institution for the emerging Israeli state.⁸⁵ The continuing use at Yad Vashem of the words 'Remembrance Authority' is (as developed later in this study) a claim to primacy on at least national (if not international) scale.

This is not true of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition, which is a segment of a branch of the institution. Nonetheless, it is a permanent part of the 'flagship' branch of the museum in Lambeth and the decision to open it within 'Britain's national museum of modern conflict'⁸⁶ (as developed later) is an important statement about what deserves to be part of "British History".

The Auschwitz Museum is different again. Concerned above all with the history of the site it occupies, it has never tried to represent all of the events to which it might be related. The metonymy of the site for the Holocaust, however, means that what happens there will affect perceptions of the whole: Holocaust Memorial Day in Europe is the anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation, and the ceremonies held there (for example in 2005) attended by dignitaries from all over the world, mean that the content of the museum often represents Poland's Holocaust memory. That the memory of the Holocaust in Poland cannot be reduced to the understanding of Auschwitz is a problem engaged with in Chapter 5.

The contradictions and tensions in the above discussion were reflected in doubts about the disciplinary home of the thesis. Was this an exercise in Museum Studies? Or Holocaust Studies? Since the point at issue was the representation of the Holocaust, was this a historical study? Given that all three of the institutions are tourist destinations, was this a study in tourism?

It seemed to me that there was, once again, a 'blurring of the boundaries', this one meaning that the study could not be contained within one label. An easy response would have been to argue that such a study of the representational practices of three "Holocaust museums" (broadly defined) was by its nature interdisciplinary. Gerald Corsane has noted, however, that much of what is

⁸⁵ Roni Stauber (trans. Elizabeth Yuval), *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory*, Vallentine Mitchell, London and Portland 2007.

⁸⁶ Robert Crawford, 'Foreword' in G. Steve Paulsson, *The Holocaust: The Holocaust Exhibition at Imperial War Museum London*, Imperial War Museum, London 2000, p. 3. Crawford was the Director-General of the IWM between 1995 and 2008.

produced in relation to this kind of subject is better described as *postdisciplinary*.⁸⁷

This term is not clearly defined by Corsane, but I take it to mean that while I use the research and theory of existing fields, that use is made in reference to what interests me about them rather than the demands of a "canon". The comment (somewhere between observation and disclaimer) of Donald Horne in *The Great Museum* that 'to handle the themes [...] has demanded enough boldness to pass over areas of expertise'⁸⁸ has loomed large.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the methodology employed to engage with the sites. Methodologically, I began to realise that my research was progressively less "historical" and more ethnographic, engaging with museums in a way that went beyond the descriptive, quite early on. Gillian Rose's brief account of ethnographic methods⁸⁹ fit well with what I wanted to do, and research suggested that what I was doing was a type of participant observation. Peter Jackson identifies three methods at the heart of this: 'participant observation (to describe incidents); informant interviewing (to learn institutionalised norms and statuses); and enumeration or sampling (to document frequency data).'⁹⁰

These three processes seemed to summarise my research method, though Karen O'Reilly's comments on the tensions inherent in the 'concept and oxymoron' of participant observation⁹¹ were also pertinent, as were the reflections of John van Maanen. The latter's pithy reminder that participant observation is 'less a definition for a method than it is an amorphous representation of the researcher's status during a study'⁹² gave me confidence that my actions were in tune with what seemed at times more like an attitude to

⁸⁷ Gerald Corsane, 'Preface' in Gerald Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory reader*, op. cit. p. xiii.

⁸⁸ Donald Horne, *The great museum: The re-presentation of History*, Pluto Press, London and Sydney 1984, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, SAGE Publications, London 2001, pp. 197-199.

⁹⁰ Peter Jackson, 'Principles and Problems of Participant Observation', *Geografisker Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (1983), p. 40.

⁹¹ Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, pp. 84-111.

⁹² John van Maanen, *Tales from the Field: On Writing Ethnography*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1988, p. 3.

the object of research than a methodology *per se*. While aware of the problems of perspective and distance that such an approach raises, the fundamental fact had to be faced: if I was to write about museums, I would have to visit them and thus become part of the processes I was describing.

In concrete terms, what I did was visit the three institutions as repeatedly as time and budget would allow and reflect on those visits before, during and after, while all the time collecting material, talking with museum staff and reading accounts of other responses to these places. What I intended to produce was a close reading of the exhibitions and institutions informed by those influences.

For the record, this was not an equal process. I spent three weeks in Israel in 2007 and spent most of that time exploring and engaging with Yad Vashem, making some limited contacts with the staff. I made one formal 'research trip' to Poland in 2009, but with other less focused visits beforehand, though my research background on the Auschwitz site meant that I was familiar with its topography and many of the issues and people involved. By contrast, I was able to visit the Imperial War Museum (London) on repeated occasions between 2008 and 2010, though I never became as much of an 'insider' at the IWM as in Oświęcim. A close reading of the acknowledgements to this study gives a sense of the different relationships involved.

At the centre of this was a fundamental view of museums as sites of collective interest that are experienced individually. No two people, even visiting a museum together, will make exactly the same choices and discoveries in relation to the exhibition. If they could, the conversations frequently overhead in museums – beginning "Did you see....?" or "Did you think...?" – would be redundant. The impressions of visitors are no more or less 'experientially contingent'⁹³ than those of the researcher. We are all, to use a term developed by Bruce Baugh in relation to museums and galleries, 'percipients' who are

⁹³ Ibid. p. 4.

'responsible for choosing the ends in relation to which circumstances have their meaning.'⁹⁴

Furthermore, the act of research is at times cruelly contingent in museums, which change in ways that are at times hard to keep abreast of. All research has a shelf-life which is often passed in the process of writing: in institutions which change their content in small ways (by substituting exhibits or removing them for conservation) or large ways (by opening or closing exhibitions) this shelf-life can be particularly short. None of the museums I describe here are in exactly the form I describe as I write, and any attempt to make this so would result in a never-ending process of revision. When, in addition, the way *in which* the exhibition is viewed can change with the nightly news (for example, when the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign was stolen from the Auschwitz Museum in late 2009) the effort to present anything other than an informed snapshot is beyond the capabilities of a researcher writing a document with any kind of deadline. Amongst my collection and illustrating this is a guidebook to the Imperial War Museum from the early 1990s, proudly titled *The new Imperial War Museum*, though it is now very out-of date, reflecting the museum at the time and with an "old" Director-General (at the time of writing, now the Director-General before last).

This contingency raised a problem which is ever-present in ethnographic research: the position of the author in the text. As van Maanen and O'Reilly are at pains to point out, ethnography (as suggested by its name) in some senses *only* exists in the writing: 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others.'⁹⁵ Following Michel de Certeau's insight in 'Walking in the City' that the world is constructed individually, I concluded that fundamentally what I am doing in this study is (metaphorically) walking through these exhibitions, reflecting on the possible interpretive consequences of what I see, hear and feel (or rather saw, heard and felt). As de Certeau puts it, 'The paths that correspond in this

⁹⁴ Bruce Baugh, 'Authenticity Revisited', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1988), p. 478.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. ix.

intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility.⁹⁶ The realisation that the audio guide at Yad Vashem is considerably longer than any single day's visiting hours made me realise that the task of reconciling what could have been communicated with what could have been understood was not feasible: there is no good way of telling what people have listened to, been moved by, skipped forward over, been exasperated with and so on.⁹⁷ What I could do, though, was give an account of how I had responded to – and at least tried to make sense of – what was in front of me.

This accounts for the eclectic range of source material, which alongside conventional academic texts includes the catalogues and ephemera of the institutions, as well as primary material such as exhibition scenarios. It also includes a good deal of creative writing and many films and television series, all of which require some explanation.

The first reason for engaging with the creative writing is that it is on sale alongside more conventional historical texts and exhibition-related material at each of the three museums. Engaging with the message that might be literally taken home by the visitor required looking at some sampling of that which the institutions deemed to be “about the Holocaust” or (especially in the case of the IWM) “about” its broader remit.

This connected to the second reason: because the fiction that academic research is conducted in a bubble from the course of everyday life, from which novels and films and television series are excluded, seemed perverse. For example, *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008), a filmic adaptation of the novel by Bernhard Schlink,⁹⁸ was released to critical and popular acclaim in 2008, winning

⁹⁶ Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' in Michel de Certeau (trans. Steven Rendall), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, London 1988, p. 93.

⁹⁷ Eilean Hooper-Greenhil, 'Studying Visitors' in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, pp. 362-376 makes clear the problems of visitor research if visitors are to be treated as 'active interpreters and performers of meaning-making practices within complex cultural sites.' (p. 362) The contribution to the same volume by Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi, 'Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space', pp. 282-301, identifies that visitors often split up and look at different things, but does not offer a concrete suggestion as to how the resulting 'churning' can be made sense of in other ways.

⁹⁸ Bernhard Schlink (trans. Carol Brown Janeway), *The Reader*, Phoenix House, London 1997.

its lead actress, Kate Winslet, an Oscar. At the same time, the novel was heavily promoted in British bookshops. Whether one finds the novel a satisfying interpretation of the aftermath of the Holocaust (and I found it deeply problematic, both on screen and on the page) it was, for a short time, a talking point. In Barthesian terms, it became for a while, the language *in which* the Holocaust was spoken of. One might term this the *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) syndrome, in which a particular representation is accorded almost cultic significance, even if the impact of *The Reader* was (in my opinion, rightly) less than that of the Spielberg film.

In addition, the impact of these cultural artefacts can go well beyond this. Schindler's factory in Kraków opened as a museum in 2010 (though it was partially open when I visited in 2009). Ever since the 1990s, however, there have been tours of "Schindler's Cracow" which have mixed the locations of the film with the sites of the history in ways that have left some uneasy. Whether or not one approves of the film's representation of the Holocaust,⁹⁹ few would argue that a researcher interested in how visitors interpret the sites that feature in it can afford to ignore it. As Tim Cole notes of tourists to Kraków in his chapter on Oskar Schindler, 'for some, Schindler's List has almost the status of a primary source' and they visit the city 'because that is where Spielberg filmed his movie.'¹⁰⁰

Thirdly, though, I am sceptical about the power of *logos* to interrogate *mythos* (to return to Peter Heehs). In trying to understand the Holocaust as 'something wider, more significant, and, precisely because it is so all-pervasive, very much harder to pin down: a sense of "who we are" and "how the world is for us"'¹⁰¹ it seemed to me that I was looking at the experience of *being* "post-Holocaust". While the work of academics is vital and important, it does not always give due respect to the irrational and emotional factors that colour our intellectual responses. Creative writing explores precisely these questions and

⁹⁹ See Yosefa Loshitsky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: critical perspectives on 'Schindler's List'*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1997 for a range of critical responses to the film.

¹⁰⁰ Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust. From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged and Sold*, Routledge, New York 1999, p. 75.

¹⁰¹ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, pp.1-2.

can do so in a way that accesses a truth of a different kind, one that is more about the terms on which we interpret the world, what goes unsaid (or oft was thought but ne'er so well-expressed) but is felt. Any process of writing does some violence to the ebb and flow of thought and feeling in that it chooses to fix them in particular phrases, but the propensity of creative writing to focus on fixing a certain kind of experience made it vital to this project, in that it provided a language *in which* those things were spoken. Christoph Classen and Wulf Kansteiner have noted that some works of fiction (such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*) are 'powerful mediators of historical understanding'.¹⁰² My use of fiction works from Ann Rigney's idea of 'historiographical metafiction', where fiction combines 'narrative about the past with reflection on the nature of historical representation.'¹⁰³

This was especially true in the case of Israel and Yad Vashem, where I had to make sense of what I had experienced and collected at a considerable distance in space and time after the fact. In this task, the work of Amos Oz, David Grossman, Yoram Kaniuk, and Amir Gutfreund was crucial, particularly when (as in the cases of Oz and Grossman) they also wrote non-fiction which allowed for some insight into how they had gone about the process of putting their poetic sense (to anticipate the discussion of Adorno later) of the Holocaust's significance – its *mythos* – into a form more governed by *logos*.

Returning to the issues surrounding my presence in the text, another form of "visibility" is in the use of photographs, which also constitute another form of documentation of my journey through the sites. Museums are textually dense sites, and my notes contain lots of words copied down from the exhibitions. Practically speaking, a camera allowed me to collect texts quickly, meaning I collected more, if sometimes at the cost of reflection in the moment.

More than this, though, the text is rarely separable from the exhibit; particularly at Yad Vashem where so much of the memorial campus is covered

¹⁰² Christoph Classen and Wulf Kansteiner, 'Truth and Authenticity in Contemporary Historical Culture: An Introduction to Historical Representation and Historical Truth', *History and Theory, Theme Issue 47* (2009), p. 2.

¹⁰³ Ann Rigney, 'All This Happened, More or Less: What a Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden', *History and Theory, Theme Issue 47* (2009), p. 16.

with remarkable sculptural attempts to address meaning in three dimensions. The effects of these go well beyond the text. Standing in the Memorial to the Deportees at Yad Vashem, for example, looking up at the massive text incised into the retaining wall of the cliff-face, a simple recapitulation would miss out so much that makes the memorial work as a memorial.

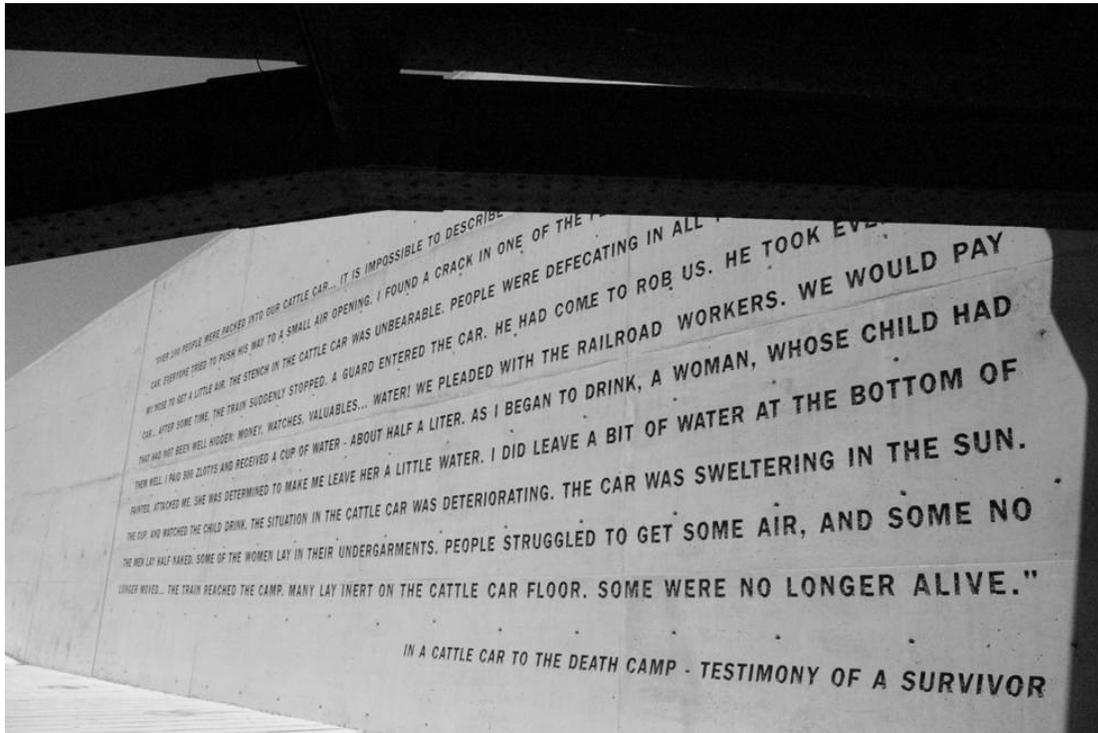


Figure 1: Memorial to the Deportees, Yad Vashem (Moshe Safdie, 1995). Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2007.

In a study of this nature, I was obviously acutely aware of the duality of photographs as both sources of information – a kind of visual notebook – and rhetorical devices. Susan Sontag warned that ‘most subjects photographed, just by virtue of being photographed, are touched with pathos’¹⁰⁴ and this is even more true when what is being photographed already has pathos: and to attribute the pathos purely to a retrospective knowledge about what the photograph depicts is probably impossible – we have to accept that we come to these images knowing what they are. There is no such thing as a neutral photograph, and to pretend otherwise would be foolish. But as already explored in the

¹⁰⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London 1979 [1977], p. 15.

discussion of mythology above, this project accepts – is perhaps most directly concerned with – that which eludes description. Sontag also quotes Lewis Hine: ‘If I could describe it in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera.’¹⁰⁵

More prosaically, if I was participating in a museum’s everyday existence by visiting and viewing, looking at it in terms of what could be photographed and what was interesting to photograph is part of what happens. O’Reilly quotes Malinowski’s injunction to ‘put aside camera, notebook and pencil, and join in’¹⁰⁶ but in a context where visual novelty is part of the experience, putting aside the camera is almost a suspicious choice. Some of the photographs I took were of people taking photographs (see Chapter 5): it is important to remember John Urry’s argument in *The Tourist Gaze*: that tourism is in many ways a pursuit of visual novelty that is connected in a variety of ways to photography. As he writes, ‘there has to be something distinctive to gaze upon, otherwise a particular experience will not function as a tourist experience.’¹⁰⁷ From the opposite point of view, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins have shown how the images in *National Geographic* have contributed to a view of a world that is lived out in tourist experiences, or how the images in fact substitute for that experience.¹⁰⁸

Putting aside the sounds, smells and feelings that contribute to travel (hence the more somatic word, *tourism*), we have to acknowledge that, for many, ‘sightseeing’ is the dominant experience we take away from journeys. David Crouch and Nina Lübbren draw on Urry’s work in their collection on *Visual Culture and Tourism*, which explores how ‘visual practices and representations have been implicated in the rituals and experiences of tourism.’¹⁰⁹ It would be an incomplete ethnography of museums or any tourist site which did not contain

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 185.

¹⁰⁶ Malinowski (1922) quoted in Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁷ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, Second Edition, Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi 2002, p. 117.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993.

¹⁰⁹ David Crouch and Nina Lübbren, ‘Introduction’ in David Crouch and Nina Lübbren (eds.), *Visual Culture and Tourism*, Berg, Oxford 2003, p. 1. This collection contains several interesting perspectives on this question: notably for this study, Stephen F. Mills, ‘Open-Air Museums and the Tourist Gaze’, pp. 75-90 and Griselda Pollock’s important article, ‘Holocaust Tourism: Being There, Looking back and the Ethics of Spatial Memory’, pp. 175-189.

some visual records. As Margaret Mead observed, 'if [the ethnographer] learns a language, he is expected to bring back texts; if the people make pots, he is expected to learn the technique'.¹¹⁰ In the modern tourist environment, what could be more natural than bringing back images?

Furthermore, the significance of images is clearly underlined by the restrictions on making them at each of the three institutions. Cameras are forbidden to be used in the Historical Exhibition at Yad Vashem and in the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum; permission must be obtained from the Museum authorities before taking photographs in the exhibitions in Auschwitz. In each case, as well, there are catalogues and guidebooks which are replete with images of the exhibitions, suggesting that some measure of control over the visual impressions retained (if not received) by the visitor is a priority in the communicative exercises on these sites. Most artefacts within the museums I analyse are roped off or otherwise separated from the visitor. Thus, whether this should be the case or not, it is their visual aspect which is given to most visitors. The museum may be a collection of objects (though of course it is more than that), but the visitor receives a series of impressions which are largely visual.

In addition, one might argue that since, unlike photographs, objects can be 'questioned' somatically – by picking them up, for example – restricting interaction with them to their appearance constitutes a more fundamental violation of their existence than the display of photographs. At least when viewing photographs we are doing as their manufacturers expected. Perhaps, in fact, by looking at these objects as images and thus making them strange, it is easier to see their overall strangeness as relics of something that cannot be restored.

This is the view of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who notes the tensions created by collections of objects which 'being themselves mute [have a] significance [which is] open to interpretation'¹¹¹ and the museum's 'predominantly

¹¹⁰ Margaret Mead, 'Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words', in Paul Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology, Third Edition*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 2003, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, p. 3.

scopic'¹¹² nature. To resolve this, she proposes a model of the museum as analogous to another class of object which offer an apparently factual and “total” presentation of the world: the map. As she notes:

The unfamiliar territory was both made familiar and claimed through the giving of names that place the land within a known schemata. The capacity to suggest both discovery, order and ownership underlies the power of the map and the key role played by cartographers working for governments and monarchies during periods of colonial expansion. Things on the map become “real” within the interpretive framework of the map.¹¹³

This analogy leads to a conception of the museum narrative as a ‘homogenous mapping’¹¹⁴ of culture which makes the ‘deep-seated relations of advantage and disadvantage’ into a master narrative which is ‘visible, normal and morally correct.’¹¹⁵ In short, a mythology in the Barthesian sense, which gives ‘historical intention a natural justification, and [makes] contingency appear eternal.’¹¹⁶

Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘Imagined Communities’ has, as Jeffrey Auerbach has noted, ‘become something of a cliché.’¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, his identification of an ideologically creative triad of ‘Census, Map, Museum’ as three crucial apparatus in the creation and maintenance of national identity is an important one for this study. Anderson argues that the quantifications of census and map were brought together in the museum as both a source of ‘alternative legitimacies’¹¹⁸ and a means to bring census and map into ‘an inerasable embrace’ based on ‘emptiness, contextlessness, visual memorableness, and infinite reproducibility’.¹¹⁹

As we see in Chapter 1, the photographic collection creates a similar impression of visible normality. Whether bounded in space by covers or folios, or

¹¹² Ibid. p. xi.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 17.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 24.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 43.

¹¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 142.

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999, p. 4. Anderson himself has noted this in the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, wryly commenting in an Afterword both that ‘the vampires of banality’ have afflicted the phrase itself (p. 207) and that ‘IC is not my book any more.’ (p. 229)

¹¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 181.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 185.

by more abstract criteria such as genre or authorship, the photographic collection suggests an inarguable view of the reality it depicts. The museum, however it strives for polyvocality, represents some things and not others, and does so in terms that are to some extent fixed. By exhibiting 'relationships that cannot otherwise be seen',¹²⁰ museums also cannot help being some kind of lesson about the past or the present, insofar as these are separable in the exhibition space.

This is, again, dangerous territory. It is possible to construct arguments which say that the Holocaust precludes lessons. This is the real meaning of Elie Wiesel's often-quoted (and often-repeated, not least by him) comment that 'A novel about Treblinka is either not about Treblinka or not a novel.'¹²¹ Or, of course, there is Adorno's famous (though less famously reversed) dictum that 'It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.'¹²²

These comments have exercised a considerable hold over the critical imagination and, as explored later in this study, presented challenges to writing about the Holocaust. How does one represent the supposedly unrepresentable?

The answer lies in the acceptance that one can. If one sees the irony inherent in Adorno's comment – that its use of the word 'Auschwitz' to stand for far more than the camp itself is in fact poetic – then the way is clearer. In giving the events and processes a name, one has represented, however imperfectly, what is claimed to be beyond that process.

The paradox of photography explored in Chapter 1 is subject to a similar resolution – one offered by Barthes himself in *Image Music Text*:

¹²⁰ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, p. 3.

¹²¹ Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration' in Elliot Lefkowitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1990 [1977], p. 7.

¹²² As noted by Klaus Hofmann in 'Poetry After Auschwitz – Adorno's Dictum', *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp. 182-194, the common rendering of Adorno's comment is a (mis)translation of Adorno's actual comment, which was less a prescriptive 'dictum' than a speculation about *whether* it was any longer possible to write poetry after Auschwitz. The consequences of an accurate reading of Adorno are dealt with by Hofmann in some detail, but they do not detract from the point here: that, whether Adorno said it or not, the idea that he did has become entrenched as a staple of critiques of 'Holocaust representation'.

It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without code that the *real unreality* of the photograph can be fully understood: its unreality is that of the *here-now*, for the photograph is never experienced as illusion, is in no way a *presence* (claims as to the magical character of the photograph must be deflated); its reality that of the *having-been-there*, for in every photograph there is always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered.¹²³

It is thus possible for photographs to both possess 'totality-of-image' *and* be signs to read, as long as we accept that what we read can only go so far, since they are not a presence but a real unreality through which we have to approach what we want to look at. As Primo Levi noted, survivors may be the exception to the rule but this is 'something that [they], to exorcise the past, tend to forget.'¹²⁴

The parallel with museums, in which we make our way through a constructed reality (with a totality of more than image) in pursuit of a past that will not return, is striking. How, though, can one put this into practice in the course of research?

The answer I have adopted is to treat museums as embodiments, paraphrasing Barthes, of the languages *in which* they choose to speak. In short, I approach museums as mythologies given solid form: assuming them, like photograph albums, to reveal and conceal in equal measure.

Whether museums can be approached on the same terms as photographs is a difficult question to answer, and a fundamental one. The two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional museum environment which employs aural and kinaesthetic stimuli seem, on first sight, to be far removed from each other. To simply look at photographs within museums would seem to be safer ground.

Yet this would miss something else. Simply looking at the photographs on the walls (or in the display cabinets) of a museum risks conceding the totality of image of the institution unless it is accompanied by a critical evaluation of their

¹²³ Roland Barthes (trans. Stephen Heath), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London 1977, p. 44.

¹²⁴ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 82.

setting. To achieve what Anna Reading terms ‘critical cultural historiography’,¹²⁵ the overarching concerns of those behind it need to be considered in a way that at once leaves them intact and open to debate. By treating the museum as more than the intentions of those who designed it, as an experience with ideological consequences, I feel that a middle path can be found between Barthes’s despairing consignment of what we see before us to ‘the drawer or the wastebasket.’¹²⁶

These problems explain the structure of this study. Broadly, the first two chapters look at the limitations and problems of photographs as evidence, and the similar limitations and problems of historical writing, since the museum is conceived here as a kind of hybrid entity of these two forms.

Chapter 1 looks at the Auschwitz Album as a collection, exploring the ambiguities and distortions in the selection and placement of images within it. Steve Sem-Sandberg has written of the Genewein collection of photographs from Litzmannstadt/Łódź that they show ‘the history of the ghetto as he and the other Nazi officials saw it – or persuaded themselves it would look when it was eventually written.’¹²⁷ It is my contention that the Auschwitz Album gives us a similar insight into the way the Auschwitz SS viewed their actions.

Underneath this, though is an awareness also highlighted by Sem-Sandberg: that we can distinguish between ‘what posterity (*now*) knows for a fact and the chroniclers (*then*) could only suspect.’ As he continues, we may not know more than those who were present, but we know differently: ‘with a historical transparency and clarity of detail that those incarcerated there did not possess.’¹²⁸ Chapter 2, therefore, examines five established accounts of the Holocaust and examines the different emphases and methods by which the authors tried to translate their sense of what posterity knew “now” into an explanation of what their subjects knew “then”.

¹²⁵ Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: gender, culture and memory*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2002, p. 14.

¹²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 93.

¹²⁷ Steve Sem-Sandberg (trans. Sarah Death), *The Emperor of Lies*, Faber and Faber, London 2011, [Swedish 2009], p. 650. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 647.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are very different from each other. Partially this is simply because, as discussed above, the three institutions they describe are different. What they try and do, however, is look at the institutions and raise the problems that I see in them for their national cultures and this study. This arose from a concern that influential studies such as James Young's *The Texture of Memory*¹²⁹ tended to obscure the actuality of the site by exploring a particular theme too closely. This is particularly acute in Young's treatment of Auschwitz, which seemed to me to be overly concerned with the (historically fascinating) vignette of the unveiling of the monument in Birkenau in 1967 with little apparent thought about the broader contexts in which this took place.¹³⁰

The discussion chapter attempts to bring together the kinds of understandings of the Holocaust on each site by looking at the specific ways in which the three museums display the Auschwitz Album, and relate that display to the agendas each seems to be concerned with. The most obvious conclusions to be drawn (as I explain) are firstly, to reiterate the simple formulation of James Young: that all memory (or mythology) is to some extent local, and secondly that in practical terms the continuing debate about how the Holocaust is best remembered is likely to be the most enduring form of memorial or memory-work.

An epilogue to this study attempts to take that irresolution further and asks, if we are so sure that memory and meaning are fungible, can a meaning and memory of the Holocaust be found that is creative. I do not seek to prescribe forms of remembrance. I am acutely aware that the Holocaust and Nazism are still parts of history with intensely personal significance and that every journey toward understanding (or non-understanding) is conducted on its own terms.

But memory, like photography, possesses a totality of image. Just as we cannot know for certain what a photographer chose not to show, we cannot know for certain what we have not remembered. At some point we have to accept that we cannot see outside the frame and that, while we try to do so, other frames are

¹²⁹ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993.

¹³⁰ Jaime Ashworth, 'Expert Witnesses? Accounts of visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau', *ProMemoria* 20, January 2004, pp. 62-65.

passing us by. Susan Sontag observed that the preservation of photographs of genocide is 'to ensure that the crimes they depict will continue to figure in people's consciousness.'¹³¹ By focusing on one moment, though, we run the risk of becoming so absorbed in that moment that, in Primo Levi's words, we forget 'that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting.'¹³²

Sontag also underlined, however, that 'To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.'¹³³ The point of the epilogue, therefore, is not to extol memory but rather forgetting and its frequent (and much more controversial) counterpart, forgiving.

In their totality of image, photographs contribute to that forgetting. Seeing the dead, like Michael Chabon's image of a paper rose consumed by fire but made to bloom, once again whole and in front of us (which begins Chapter 1), is seductive and melancholy in equal measure. Yet we have to acknowledge the deceit: the dead are gone and, despite these lingering traces, have vanished and become 'so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place.'¹³⁴ To deal with the present, we must let the paradoxes and illusions stand unresolved while moving on with the lessons we choose to take from them. We all know that memory is both faulty and limited: our conclusions, if possibly necessarily faulty, need not be limited.

¹³¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin, London 2003, p. 77.

¹³² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 51.

¹³³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 103.

¹³⁴ Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Fourth Estate, London 2001 [2000], p. 339.

Chapter 1

An Illusion of Wholeness: The Auschwitz Album

“The fictions we make about photographs are as unreliable as they are inevitable.”¹

In his novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon writes that the appeal of magic lies in its promise of a restored wholeness: ‘that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash.’² He continues, though, that ‘everyone knew that it was only an illusion. The true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place.’

Chapter 2 examines mythology from the perspective of the – within limits – rational ways in which historians have conceptualised the Holocaust. This chapter, however, turns to the emotive aspect of the term, as revealed in the efforts of photography to reverse the terrible magic trick in which, as Chabon puts it, the Jews of Europe ‘had been slipped unseen into some fold in the pin-bristling map of Europe.’³

Underneath this analysis, however, this chapter is aware that albums and collections are just examples of what Sophie Howarth has described as ‘the unexpected and often incongruous places in which photographs appear ‘by dint of their reproducibility, [becoming] unhinged from their original context.’⁴ As explored later, museums are another.

Unhinged is an intriguing word, carrying as it does the suggestion of madness. And in many ways, I suspect, the memory of the Holocaust is a form of madness: an attempt to retrieve something that has been lost, to heal a wound in the collective psyche that is, in the words of Robert Eaglestone cited in the introduction, ‘something wider, more significant, and, precisely

¹ Liz Jobey, ‘Diane Arbus: A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing, N.Y.C. 1966’ in Sophie Howarth (ed.) *Singular Images: Essays on Remarkable Photographs*, Aperture Foundation, New York 2005, p. 67.

² Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, p. 339.

³ *Ibid.* p. 440.

⁴ Sophie Howarth, ‘Introduction’ in Sophie Howarth (ed.) *Singular Images*, p. 9.

because it is so all-pervasive, very much harder to pin down: a sense of 'who we are' and 'how the world is for us'.⁵

The Holocaust is – or has become – a part of who we are, whether as Israelis, Britons or Poles as in this study, or more generally as Europeans or world citizens. The Holocaust, as Eaglestone tellingly demonstrates, opened up wounds in the comforting notions of progress and civility that we had employed to insulate ourselves from the actuality of the savagery with which civilisation was made to work. Auschwitz shocked us because we saw Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* perfected in the heart of Europe, against the people who had, letter by letter and line by line, started the construction of those ideals. In doing so, the possibility that we were the savages became all too apparent.

And so, to avoid the message that the smouldering wreckage winked out in greasy semaphore, we built. At times frantically, we told stories that would pretend we could reverse the vanishing trick by taking on the identity of those who had suffered and carrying it through to whichever version of redemption we decided might justify that loss.

But to build those stories, we had first to destroy and distort. A character in Amir Gutfreund's novel *Our Holocaust* is possessed by a question: 'Only saints were gassed?' The novel ends with the narrator trapped in a final confrontation with this broken Jeremiah, forced to acknowledge that what 'had always appeared to be a frightening madness' concealed 'a profound erudition.' As the book concludes:

Everything, the Shoah, had been an ordinary occurrence. Ordinary people made it happen and ordinary people were its victims.⁶

This chapter will look at the first stage of the loss of that truth: the transformation of ordinary victims into extraordinary icons. Part of this will consist in captioning, whenever possible, their pictures by name. The work of Gideon Greif (a researcher at Yad Vashem) in restoring this central aspect of the humanity of the victims, though incomplete and ultimately (as I explore below) provisional, deserves recognition in this way, as do their stories.

⁵ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford 2004, p.1-2.

⁶ Amir Gutfreund (trans. Jessica Cohen), *Our Holocaust*, The Toby Press, New Milford and London 2006 [Hebrew 2001], p. 404.

Though we must accept, at the same time that without them here to tell them, those stories must be largely conjecture.⁷

What we do know about this transport can be easily summarised. On May 24, 1944, a transport numbering approximately 3,500 people left the Berehovo Ghetto in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, a territory of Czechoslovakia annexed by Hungary in the late 1930s.⁸ Two days later, on May 26, the transport arrived on the railway siding built inside Auschwitz II-Birkenau for the Hungarian *Aktion* that had been planned since the collapse of Hungarian attempts to preserve a measure of independence in German-dominated Europe in late 1943.

It was a hot day: the photographs show the sun glinting off the faces and hair of the deportees as they waited to find out what they had arrived to [Fig. 3]. The transport was arranged into two columns, one of men, the other of women and children, five people per row [Fig. 4] An SS doctor proceeded to select the Jews either for immediate death in the gas chambers or a more prolonged death through starvation and hard labour. The exact numbers of Jews selected for hard labour rather than death in the gas chambers is unknown; the photographs taken on that day by two SS-men suggest that perhaps 300 were so treated; according to Danuta Czech's *Auschwitz Chronicle*,⁹ four admitted to the camp in May were two pairs of twins selected to be victims of medical experiments.¹⁰

After the selection, those chosen for hard labour made their way to the facilities set up in Birkenau for registration. Those who had been selected for death in the gas chambers also made their way through the camp, for the most part apparently to Crematoria IV and V in the woods beyond the camp,

⁷ For this reason, my captions in this chapter are a hybrid: using the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum numbering but using Greif's identifications, though the reader should (for reasons that are explained later) mentally insert a question mark next to the names.

⁸ For the account of the background to the deportations, I have relied on Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (2 volumes), Columbia University Press, New York 1981, the standard account of the Holocaust in Hungary, though the collection edited by David Cesarani (ed.), *Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary 1944*, Berg, Oxford and New York 1997 is also useful.

⁹ Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*, Owl Books, London 1997, p. 634.

¹⁰ This statement may seem contradictory, but the standard procedure in Auschwitz was for new arrivals selected to work in the camp to spend time in "quarantine" as "depot prisoners" where they were "taught" how to behave in the camp, or transferred elsewhere without being fully registered into the camp.

though a few images suggest that others were sent to Crematoria II and III, located at the end of the railway siding.

Those who went to Crematoria IV and V had, in many cases to wait in the woods which hid the gas chambers from view: the limited capacity of these institutions meant that a bottleneck developed as the bodies had to be disposed of. The photographers who had been recording this process did not stop as they did so. The scenes might be from a picnic or summer outing: only the few images showing distress [for example, Fig. 15] indicate (possibly) that the smoke rising from the chimneys, and the sound of the screams, had reached them.¹¹

It is impossible to accurately estimate the number of those who survived not only that day in Birkenau but also the months that followed. Those who survived were dispersed from Auschwitz and there is no way of knowing which of them died during that dispersal, or which of them saw liberation only to die shortly after.

This, though, is the first narrative invented about the Holocaust. In the wake of the discovery of the camps, those who remained became the survivors, while those who had not become victims. This has proved a durable distinction, despite the work done by Lawrence Langer and many others in exposing the fragility of the concept of survival. As one of Langer's interviewees told him:

I often say to people who pretend or seem to be marvelling at the fact that I seem to be so normal, so unperturbed and so capable of functioning – they seem to think the Holocaust passed over and it's done with: It's my *skin*. This is not a coat. You can't take it off. And it's there, and it will be there until I die...¹²

The notion of survival implies a return to wholeness which Langer's research suggests is not supportable, despite the successful lives led by many survivors. As Jean Améry, who lived through Auschwitz and many other horrors, put it: 'Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably

¹¹ Teresa Świebocka (ed.) (trans. William Brand), *The Architecture of Crime: The "Central Camp Sauna" in Auschwitz II-Birkenau*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2001 contains numerous accounts of prisoners working in the *Kanadakommando* next to Crematoria IV and V: many describe how the noise from the gas chambers was audible and it seems reasonable (if chilling) to assume that those waiting in the wood were similarly aware.

¹² Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1991, p. 205. Ellipsis in original: I have retained it here to resist the sense that such utterances are simple texts for reproduction.

burned into him [*sic*], even when no clinically objective traces can be detected.¹³

But such a conclusion would offer little hope. So ways had to be found to create not just 'survivors' – describing what had happened – but (capitalised) 'Survivors' whose testimonies could be made to carry an ontological weight. Tony Kushner has noted the tendency of some commentators to bestow a sacred quality on testimony, an approach which means that 'the testimony itself, if not always in the form of soundbites, is rarely allowed to have space to reveal its own internal dynamics, especially in relation to the rest of the person's life story.'¹⁴

None of the above should be taken to mean that those who survived are not survivors, or that what they survived was not terrible. It is simply observing that even a statement of fact is in itself a construction with consequences for subsequent communication of it.

Photographs, being composed in most respects entirely of reflective surface, are even more prone to such distortion. While a photograph may appear to simply radiate light outward, in fact it reflects it, and the image which reaches us is composed more of what we attribute to it than of what it is made of. The temptation when 'reading' a photograph is to do exactly what that verb demands, and assume a pattern of agreed signs with a meaning independent of interpretation: treating photographs, in short, as documents. But the idea of a document (in the historical sense) is problematic when applied to photographs.

Susan Sontag's description of photographs as 'a trace, something stencilled off the real' is a reflexive reaction to photographs, and one on which her often-quoted response to seeing photographs of the liberated concentration camps is predicated:

When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.¹⁵

¹³ Jean Améry (trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld) , *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and its Realities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1980, p. 34.

¹⁴ Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin 1979, p. 20.

The emotions felt by Lilli Jacob, one of the deportees depicted, on finding the Album in Buchenwald shortly after her liberation, are unknowable. What can be said, though, is that she recognised these images as traces not of an abstract 'real', but of friends and family. Questions of subject-position and intention were almost certainly not her concern when she gave images from the Album to friends and family in Prague.¹⁶ She was, nonetheless, actualising a way of looking at images predicated on their ability to transcribe.

Roland Barthes argued in *Camera Lucida* that the transcriptive capacity of the photograph to 'fill the sight by force' so that 'nothing in it can be refused or transformed'¹⁷ was part of its violence, claiming it possessed a 'Totality-of-image'¹⁸ that could only be refused by a deliberate turning away. As he put it, 'the only way I can transform the photograph is into refuse: either the drawer or the wastebasket.'¹⁹

Yet in this regard, as in others, Barthes appears at least to contradict himself. For, if the photograph cannot be transformed, his earlier distinction between *studium* and *punctum* would fall.

Studium, argues Barthes, is the viewer's appreciation of an image's general content insofar as they understand it culturally, their participation 'in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.'²⁰ By contrast, *punctum* is 'this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me [...] that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).'²¹ In both cases, a totality of image would seem to be belied by the forces brought to bear in the interpretation of that totality.

If one seeks to explain the viewing of images, however, one needs to resolve that contradiction. But how?

The answer lies in the maintenance of a paradox: that while the photograph is a closed field which depicts what it depicts and nothing else, our reading of that depiction (or transcription from reality) is anything but a

¹⁶ Serge Klarsfeld (ed.), *The Auschwitz Album: Lili Jacob's Album*, The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, Paris 1980. There are no page numbers in this volume.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 89.

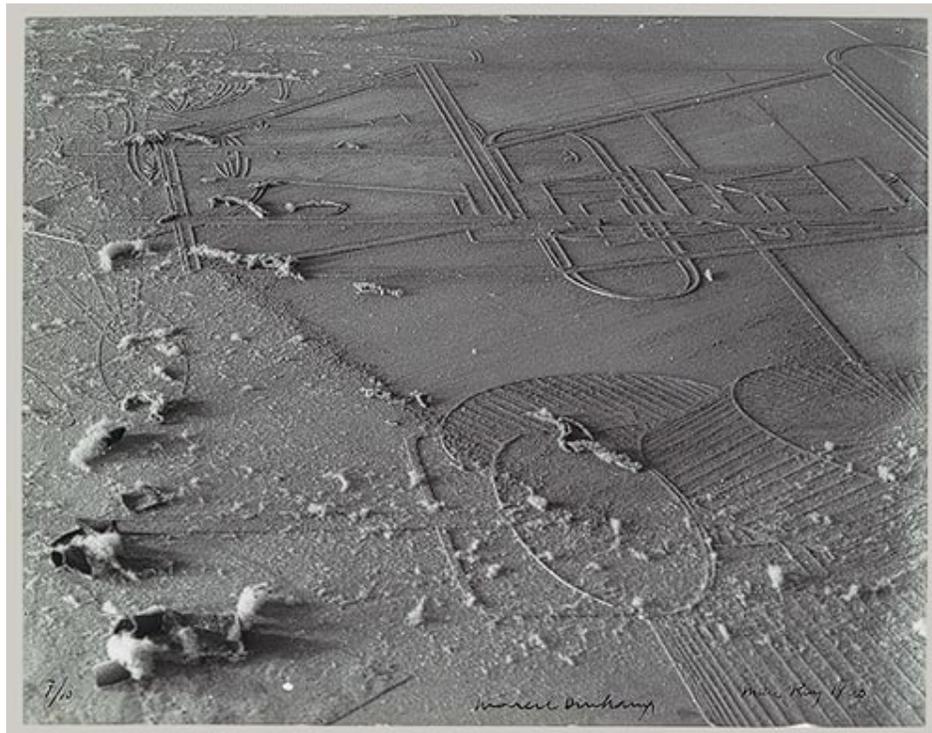
¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 26-27.

closed field. In fact, it is open to a multiplicity of readings, defined at the edges only by the content. In short, we find an image and make of what is there what we want to.

A striking example of this is the following image, which at first sight seemed to me to be an aerial picture, perhaps of the Nazca Lines in Chile or an airport at night. The sun seems to be setting from the west, and the clouds float across a desert, featureless except for the mysterious lines and curves on the ground far below.



Except this is nothing of the kind. The image, entitled *Dust Breeding*, was a collaboration between Marcel Duchamp and the photographer Man Ray, showing a plate of glass on which Duchamp was cultivating dust for a later sculpture. Originally captioned 'View from an aeroplane By Man Ray 1921' it provokes questions about how we decide what an image depicts. As David Campany summarises, 'It indicates a false vantage point and leaves it to us what the subject matter might be.'²²

²² David Campany, 'Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp: Dust Breeding 1920' in Sophie Howarth (ed.) *Singular Images*, p. 48.

Intended as a piece of deception (or provocation), *Dust Breeding* might seem to have little to do with the concrete realities depicted in the Auschwitz Album. After all, there can be no doubt as to what it depicts, can there?

Except that there is. So far we have addressed the viewer's experience and shown it to be flexible. Now we need to examine the other side of the photograph (so to speak) and consider what is depicted from the perspective of another set of choices by the image-maker, which mean that even the content is defined by something other than "what is there".

The most obvious level on which this is true is that of the viewfinder. A photograph encloses some detail and excludes others by defining what can be seen. In the case of the Auschwitz Album, this can be seen in a number of ways, which this chapter explores.

Firstly, there is the level on which the photographers chose to depict this transport rather than any other. As Martin Gilbert has written, 'they are only the photographic record of a single day out of the camp's more than eight hundred days on which deportees arrived.'²³ The content of these images, then, is partial in that sense, even if individual images are complete.

In regard to individual images, however, we also have to see that viewing them out of their place(s) within the collection distorts them. Images within collections are viewed within what Darsie Alexander has termed a 'sequential framework [which] thwarts the desire to separate images, since each one gains meaning through cumulative effect.'²⁴

This is a problem for this chapter and this study, since none of the museums described displays all the images together, instead placing them within different 'sequential frameworks' (the museum and/or exhibition), lending them a new meaning. The question of how far photographic meaning is mutable is an underlying question of this study.

The purpose of this chapter, however, is to look at the images themselves. By interrogating the omissions and structures within the collection, and asking what it was intended for, it will leave the reader with questions, which I pose now to problematise what follows: how far can these

²³ Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1997, p. 161.

²⁴ Darsie Alexander, 'Nan Goldin: The Hug, New York City 1980' in Sophie Howarth (ed.) *Singular Images*, p. 90.

images ever escape their origins as a product of those responsible for what they depict? By employing these images, how far do we have to tacitly accept the mentality which produced them?

Methodologically, I will analyse each of the sections of the album in turn, through a close reading of one or two images which seem to me to be particularly significant. I make no apology for this essentially subjective choice, indeed one central point I would like to make with it is that, however explained or justified, all choices of this kind are fundamentally subjective: even (perhaps especially) the choice to conduct an apparently quantitative analysis of images – such as Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins's examination of *National Geographic*²⁵ – is dependent on a fundamentally subjective estimation of what is to be quantified.

Moreover, the other goal which an avowedly subjective choice achieves is the presentation of what is important to me about the images. The reader can dispute what I find significant, but he or she cannot say that I have not been explicit about my preferences and underlying assumptions.

Title page

The album begins with two images and a title: 'Resettlement of Jews from Hungary.' It is easy to forget that these pictures are not only bound by association but physically bound within the pages of a book. Gideon Greif has described it as follows:

The album that Lilli Jacob found was 33cm long and 25cm wide. It had a beige-brown linen hard cover and consisted of fifty-six pages. The four edges of the album were fortified with black-coloured metal. The measurements of the photos are 8.2x11.1cm. The photographs show the arrivals of the transports from the beginning until the bitter end. In addition there is a smaller section attached to the back of the album, which includes 63 photos on 10 sheets of paper. These photographs do not relate to the transports from Hungarian territories but describe the visit of Heinrich Himmler to Auschwitz, several construction sites of buildings in Auschwitz and its satellite camps.²⁶

²⁵ Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993.

²⁶ Gideon Greif, 'The "Auschwitz Album" – The Story of Lilli Jacob', in Israel Gutman and Bella Gutterman (eds.), *The Auschwitz Album: the Story of a Transport*, Yad Vashem/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Jerusalem/Oswiecim 2002, pp. 76-77. I have followed Greif's spelling of Lilli Jacob's name, except in titles of publications where it appears differently.

The authorship of the collection is unclear, as is its journey from Auschwitz to Buchenwald. It has been assumed that they were the work of Bernhard Walter, the head of the Auschwitz *Erkennungsdienst* or Identification Service, responsible for the registration of prisoners and the recording of events within the camp such as suicides by 'going to the wires' or the results of medical experiments, and his deputy Ernst Hofmann. As the only people in Auschwitz authorised to take photographs, they are the obvious suspects, confirmed by testimonies from the Polish survivors from the *Erkennungsdienst*, who remember developing and mounting the images. Gideon Greif speculates that Richard Baer, commandant of Auschwitz in May 1944 and of Buchenwald at the time of its liberation, may have been the owner.

Serge Klarsfeld, in his facsimile edition of the album, is cautious about the authorship of the album. He notes that the first of the images on the title page of the album appears to have been taken in the workshop/studio of the *Erkennungsdienst*, in Block 27 of Auschwitz I. As he points out, 'Walter and Hofmann were the only ones to have access to that studio.'²⁷

At the same time, Klarsfeld acknowledges the possibility that Walter was not involved, quoting extracts from his statements under interrogation in Germany between 1959 and 1962. In one such extract, from October 1960, Walter claimed that he had only taken photographs in an official capacity within Auschwitz I, while Hofmann was 'the photographer for the outside.'

The surviving members of the *Erkennungsdienst* prisoner staff were more emphatic in identifying the pictures as having been taken by Walter and Hofmann together, with some suggestions that Rudolf Hoess, the first commandant of Auschwitz seconded to the camp to oversee the Hungarian *Aktion*, also took some of the images. For this version of the album's origins, however, we are dependent on the word of individuals.²⁸

Its purpose, however, is unknown. This is a fundamental assumption in my approach as, unlike some other collections depicting Nazi atrocity, such as

²⁷ Serge Klarsfeld (ed.), *The Auschwitz Album*.

²⁸ Janina Struk conducted interviews with the surviving prisoners from the *Erkennungsdienst* for her book, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, I.B. Tauris, London 2004, pp. 102-119. Although she compiles an interesting picture of the lives of these prisoners, she concedes that the identity of the photographer of the Auschwitz Album 'has never been firmly established.' (p. 119)

the Stroop Report on the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto,²⁹ the Auschwitz Album has no explicit agenda and as such leaves space for interpretation. The explanation of the Album developed in these pages – as a *memento mori* intended to explain its owner’s actions during the war to his postwar life – is offered in this knowledge, as a possible reading of the intentions of those who created it, rather than an exclusive insistence on a particular meaning. Indeed, my suspicion is that it is partly this very openness to interpretation that has made the Auschwitz Album such a popular source of imagery: lacking firm knowledge of their original purpose, the images can be placed in almost any context.

The images from the title page [Fig. 1], however, support my interpretation. One is a portrait presumably taken in the *Erkennungsdienst* studio in Auschwitz I. The two men in it stare into the distance to a point outside the left-hand frame of the image. In the other, three men on the ramp³⁰ in Birkenau look out of the right-hand side. In neither case do the subjects return the gaze of the camera. These images are peaceful, thoughtful: the subjects preoccupied with thoughts the viewer is not asked to guess at, or even asked not to guess at, just as the title of the collection asks the reader not to guess at what “resettlement” actually means.

²⁹ Sybil Milton and Andrzej Wirth (eds.), *The Stroop Report: The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw Is No More!*, Pantheon Books, New York 1979 is the standard published version of the collection, though it should be read alongside Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo*, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, Oxford and London 2004, which considers the history and use of the single most famous image from it of a young boy with his arms raised.

³⁰ Other photographs in the collection [USHMM 77327 and 77328] show the same men from a different angle, where they can be seen to be on the ramp.



Figure 1: USHMM 77222 (l) (identities unknown) and USHMM 77223 (r) (the man on the left is Rabbi Naftali Zvi Weiss of Bilke).

This tension threatens the documentary status of the images. The deployment of the images can be seen, in the words of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, as ‘build[ing] pathos or sympathy into the image, [investing] the subject with either an emblematic or archetypal importance.’³¹ And this emotional message is meant ‘to obscure the political sphere whose determinations, actions and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual.’³²

But this in turn throws into question once again the very notion of ‘documenting’ through photographs which, as already discussed, are partial views of a particular reality. This is acknowledged by Derrick Price in his discussion of the wider notion of ‘documentary photography’, which has come to be associated with both formal qualities of composition and an underlying sense that the aim of the documentary photographer is connected ‘with some notion of improving or ameliorating the lot of their subjects’³³ – in other words, a set of codes and conventions external to the images rather than some intrinsic quality in the act of photographing.

This is challenging in the case of Holocaust photographs, since to question these images on these terms throws the term itself – ‘Holocaust photographs’ – into doubt as at least potentially as much a construct as any other genre. And underneath that threat is another, greater one: that ‘The

³¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, p. 169.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Derrick Price, ‘Surveyors and surveyed: photography out and about’ in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition, Routledge, London 2000, p. 80.

Holocaust' itself is as much a set of codes and conventions about the past as an act of mass murder.

The way to defuse this ontological threat is to see that these views are not mutually exclusive. Just as the category of 'Survivors' has been constructed around the fact of those who survived, we need to acknowledge that "The Holocaust" has been constructed around the fact of mass murder that it describes. The next chapter's analysis of the diverse ways in which even academics – who might be expected to adhere to a common 'scientific' definition – demonstrates that "The Holocaust" has been defined in different ways at different times and places. This could only be the case if it were constructed rather than ontological: or rather, constructed as well as ontological.

In the light of such a conclusion, suggesting that 'Holocaust photographs' is a constructed category seems less provocative than inevitable. And this means that we can pose a fundamental question: what constitutes a 'Holocaust photograph' and, by extension, 'Holocaust photography'?

In her seminal article on the visual record of the Holocaust, Sybil Milton set out the parameters of the 'voluminous visual record about the persecution and murder of Jews and others in Europe between 1939 and 1945.'³⁴ But this matter-of-fact definition opens up problems in itself: both in terms of the validity of the definition itself and what it means for our simple phrase "Holocaust photographs".

Firstly, one has to question Milton's choice of period. As the previous chapter demonstrated, there is no commonly-agreed inclusive period which academics regard as encompassing 'The Holocaust', and the different choices create very different understandings of the event they all seek to explain. Subsequent chapters will show that museums are similarly eclectic in their views of what constitutes the object of study and display. This variety is important to our discussion: if the boundaries of 'The Holocaust' are moveable, then so also is the archive of images which can be designated as

³⁴ Sybil Milton, 'Images of the Holocaust – Part I', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1, 1986, p. 27. Also see 'Images of the Holocaust – Part II', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 193-216.

depicting it. And the concomitant of this is that the set of images placed outside the archive is also the subject of negotiation.

It might be argued that, in fact, then, the matter is simple: all we have to do is agree our terms and select from the images which conform to them. But this hides a deeper problem: that of scale. Even the most restrictive definition of the Holocaust, equating it with the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' agreed at Wannsee in 1942, means that 'The Holocaust' lasted three years and encompassed events across virtually all of Europe. As such, 'Holocaust photographs' becomes a category so broad as to be unmanageable: all photographs from countries in which the murders were carried out, or from which deportees were taken, potentially become part of the neatly-labelled archive.

This is compounded by the ways in which these images have been received by the historians of photography, who have tended to exclude images of the Holocaust despite their impact on its theory and the role of many 'masters of photography' in documenting it. Mary Warner Marien's compendious *Photography: A Cultural History*,³⁵ for example, includes some images from the liberation of the camps by Henri Cartier-Bresson and others as part of a recurring analysis of photographs of war, though she does not consider the impact of these images on photographic theory through (for example) the comment by Susan Sontag quoted in the previous chapter. Nor does she acknowledge that, through their presence in museums, websites, films, and books, they are some of the most ubiquitous photographs in modern society.

The reason for this is not clear, though I suspect that the way in which the Holocaust does appear gives a clue. An image by Cartier-Bresson appeals to the idea of photography as an art in a constant process of development. The content of the image – the unmasking of a former camp guard by former inmates – furthers the notion of progress by implicitly equating justice with visibility. The camera and photographer, even in the camps, are the instruments of positive values. The majority of Holocaust photographs, however, would undermine this progressive teleology, reducing

³⁵ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 2nd Edition, Laurence King Publishing, London 2006.

the act of photographing to (potentially) an indiscriminating search for the picturesque in front of us.

Worse than this, moreover, the camera might be exposed as functioning to distance the perpetrator from the act: assisting in developing what Bernd Huppaufl has described as a 'cold gaze'.³⁶ Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris have explored this in the context of the photographs taken of Iraqi prisoners in the American prison at Abu Ghraib, noting that Sabrina Harman, the source of most of the images, had, by the end of her time at the facility 'repositioned herself as an outsider at Abu Ghraib, an observer and recorder, shaking her head, and in this way she preserved a sense of her own innocence.'³⁷ A niggling doubt about whether the photographs from the Auschwitz Album turn viewers into similarly complicit witnesses provided the initial impetus for this project. If the camera can insulate the perpetrator from the actions he or she is involved in, we must consider very carefully the insulating effect it has on us, the apparently disconnected viewers. As Agi Rubin (herself visible in the Album) notes, 'Photos are the outsider's way of remembering Auschwitz'.³⁸

But, an imaginary interlocutor might point out, even if 'Holocaust photographs' is problematic as a category, then surely we must at least accept that these images are 'photographs of the Holocaust'?

Well, of course, we might reply, but then the problem of scale is raised again, albeit from a different direction. 'Photographs of the Holocaust' implies that these images encapsulate the whole within their frames – as though a single coincidence of photographer and subject were sufficient to summarise a process as vast as the Holocaust: as though the deaths of millions could be encompassed in a picture of one of them: as though an album of pictures, however voluminously filled, could contain the full reality of a situation.

But the illusion of completeness is what the album is meant to suggest. Just as the recently-discovered album of photographs showing the Auschwitz

³⁶ Bernd Huppaufl, 'Emptying the Gaze: Framing Violence through the Viewfinder', *New German Critique* No. 72 (Autumn 1997), pp. 3-44.

³⁷ Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, 'Exposure: The woman behind the camera at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2008, pp. 44-57.

³⁸ Agi Rubin and Henry Greenspan, *Reflections: Auschwitz, Memory, and a Life Recreated*, Paragon House, St. Paul MN 2006, p. 4. The image from the Album in which she is depicted (USHMM 77364) is reproduced on p. 6.

SS garrison relaxing at their nearby resort shows them 'going about their business, socialising, enjoying the beautiful weather and mourning fallen comrades'³⁹ [Fig. 5] this album shows a mournful, reflective population being 'resettled'. One might imagine the two albums, side by side on a shelf, both testifying to the partial realities of life and death they conceal, showing the world fixed in a contingent form that is not natural, however much they pretend otherwise. Instead, the albums give the events at Auschwitz 'a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.'⁴⁰

Arrival of a Transport Train

The title of this section continues the evasions begun on the title page. The train – not the Jews – has arrived, apparently (if the title page is to be believed) from Hungary. The first image reinforces this evasion, showing SS officers wandering in the space between the trains. Whether this is before or after the rest of the process of unloading is unclear, though a large pile of what appear to be suitcases further up the railway siding, and the belongings scattered under the train on the left, suggest that it may have been after the deportees had been unloaded and despatched to whatever fate awaited them.

³⁹ 'Auschwitz through the lens of the SS', retrieved from <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/on-line/ssalbum/?content=3> on 14 February, 2008.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 142.

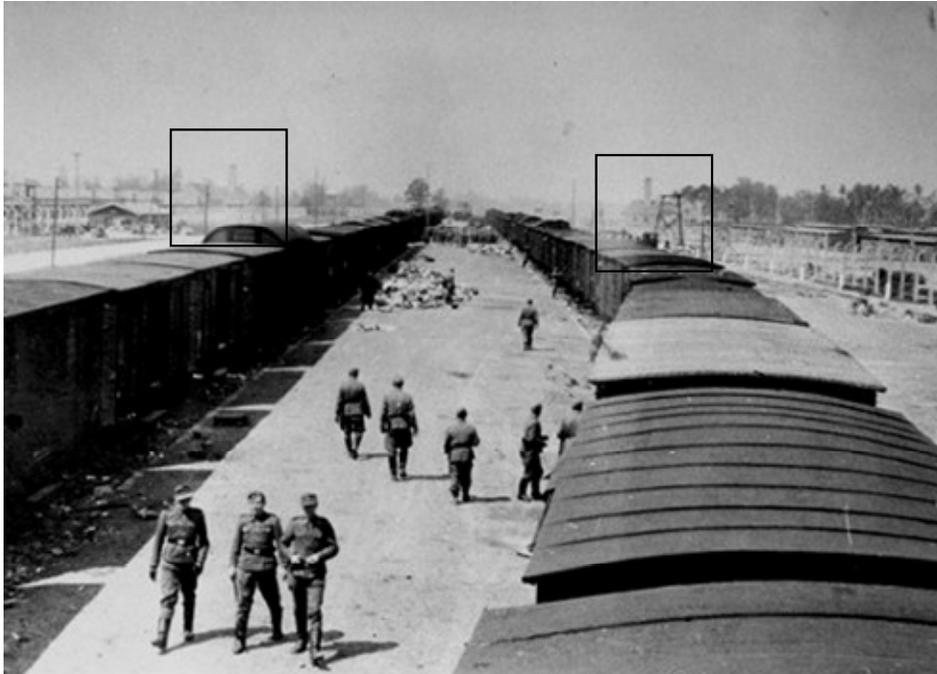


Figure 2: USHMM 77220. The rectangles show Crematoria II (on the left) and III (on the right).

Other images in this section, however, make abundantly clear that the train was not simply a train but a vehicle carrying people, who are shown clambering down from the boxcars, finding their belongings and families, in some cases being warned of how to behave at their destination.

How can all this be told from the photographs, like the image in Fig. 3? The short answer is that it cannot, at least not without bringing to bear the accounts we have of arrival at Birkenau, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which describes how he and his father were told to increase and decrease their ages in order to pass through the selection.⁴¹ Or the description by Jeno Schwarz of how 'the stronger ones among us jumped out of the wagons, while the old and the weak pulled themselves slowly and painfully to their feet and prepared to climb out as well.'⁴² Or Helen Farkas's account:

We arrived at Auschwitz on May 24, 1944. We did not know where we were. The cattle car was opened and we saw young men in striped clothing and caps, with absolutely no hair. All of a sudden everyone was shouting. The German soldiers with their rifles and bayonets yelled, 'Aus! Aus! Mach's schnell! Mach's schnell!' Everyone tried to grab their belongings as we jumped out in a hurry. I ran as quickly as I could to get my mother's medicine; Ethel

⁴¹ Elie Wiesel (trans. Marion Wiesel), *Night*, Penguin Books, London 2006, p. 30.

⁴² Jeno Schwarz (trans. Sidney Lightman), *A Promise Redeemed*, Butler and Tanker, Frome 1964, p. 94.

was running frantically to secure some of her baby's belongings. The young men in the striped clothing kept saying to the young mothers, in Yiddish, 'Give your child to an older person.' Ethel said, 'They are crazy! What do they mean give my child to an older person?' We kept trying to grab belongings, but the soldiers began beating us back. Scared by the noise and commotion, Gyurika began to cry.⁴³

It is tempting to continue piling testimony upon testimony in an attempt to try and shock the reader with a detail that will engrave itself on the mind as particularly evocative: to find a *punctum* in these texts. But my purpose is not to describe arrival in Auschwitz so much as to emphasise that whatever truth we find in accounts or photographs is the result of a convergence of evidence and beliefs about what they depict/describe.



Figure 3: USHMM 77229. Rectangles again show Crematoria II and III.

This is why we have to look askance at the title for this section. Its studied neutrality appears to answer questions but in fact poses them: where have the trains arrived from? Who is on board? Where have they arrived? We know from the title page they are 'from Hungary' but no indication is given as to where they are being resettled. Once again, though, these questions do not

⁴³ Helen Farkas, *Remember the Holocaust: A Memoir of Survival*, Fithian Press, Santa Barbara 1995, p. 31.

compromise the physical and apparent ontological integrity of the album and what it depicts. It is, to appropriate Barthes's phrase, possessed of a 'totality of image' that can either be accepted at face value or questioned. The presence of these people on the ramp in Birkenau was not denied, but the meaning of that presence was disguised.

Sorting

The next section begins with two very similar images. Gazing down and back to the main gate of Birkenau (from the top of the train seen on the right-hand side of the frame in Fig. 2), we see two columns of people, five people wide, stretching back to vanishing point. In the foreground, some SS officers are looking back at another group – another two columns, perhaps – which can be seen in the bottom right-hand corner of one of the images. The section is titled – along, implicitly, with the images – 'Sorting'.



Figure 4: USHMM 77319.

Once again, the language of the title is curious. The calm detachment of *Sortierung* – sorting – is far from the harsh syllables of what the SS called this process: *Selektion*. What is the effect of this substitution?

The essence of the change is to effect what Robert Jay Lifton identified in *The Nazi Doctors* as the mechanism by which those who carried out the

selections justified it to themselves. He termed it 'doubling', a 'Faustian bargain' in which the SS sought to separate their sense of who they were from what they were doing, because 'the individual Nazi doctor needed his Auschwitz self to function psychologically in an environment so antithetical to his previous ethical standards'.⁴⁴ As Leo Kuper noted in a review of Lifton's work, 'detoxification of the language used would have assisted this psychic numbing by rendering murder nonmurderous',⁴⁵ though he wondered whether Lifton's 'humanism' was 'somewhat misleading in the present context.'

Kuper concludes, though, by asking about the real challenges Lifton's work poses. In short: 'does one feel uncomfortable with the humanising element in his characterisation of the doctors because of one's own desire to see them portrayed as demonic and totally removed from the human condition?' The question can be reiterated visually, through the image below.



Figure 5: USHMM 34582. Karl Hoecker relaxes with women at the SS retreat in Solahutte.

This question is a key one when looking at artefacts such as the Auschwitz Album and the evasions they employ. It is tempting to simply sneer at the evasion of *Sortierung*, but we need to ask ourselves what these evasions really tell us. As Rebecca Erbelding, the curator at the USHMM

⁴⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, Basic Books, New York 1986, pp. 418-419.

⁴⁵ Leo Kuper, 'Review: *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* by Robert Jay Lifton', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 1, (1987), pp. 175-176.

responsible for the newly-discovered album of SS photos mentioned earlier, noted in an interview:

It makes you think about how people could come to this. They don't look like monsters. They look like me. They look like my next-door neighbour. Is he capable of that? Am I?⁴⁶

Erbelding's questions go to the heart of our relationship with the Auschwitz Album. We have to acknowledge that what we find moving is what the image-maker found arresting and chose to preserve in the second selection this transport was subjected to in the process of assembling the album. Even Klarsfeld concedes that 'Contrary to other writers, we don't see, in the style of these photos, an intention of mockery of human beings, the majority of whom have only a few moments left to live.'⁴⁷

John Berger's observation that 'We accept [an image] in so far as it corresponds to our own observation of people, gestures, faces, institutions...because we still live in a society of comparable social relations and moral values'⁴⁸ is a deeply disturbing one in this context, but equally necessary. If we are to fully appreciate the gaze that the deportees – such as the woman in the photograph below [Fig. 6] – returned to the camera, we have to acknowledge it as one appreciated by those it is tempting to dehumanise as monsters. It is, in so many ways, more chilling to realise that they saw the humanity of these people and still murdered them in their millions.

⁴⁶ 'Auschwitz through the lens of the SS', retrieved from <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/on-line/ssalbum/?content=3> on 14 February, 2008.

⁴⁷ Serge Klarsfeld (ed.), *The Auschwitz Album*.

⁴⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC/Penguin Books, 1972, p.14.



Figure 6: USHMM 77236. Geza Lajtbs of Budapest.

Men on Arrival/Women on Arrival

These sections have been joined to illustrate the artificiality of the separation imposed by the Nazis both on the ramp and subsequently in the pages of the album. Here again, the album tries to present an artificial situation as reality.

The first level of the deception then, is the separation itself, which obscures the moment of separation – or rather, to transform the words to their proper form, the *process* of *separating*. As Michael Weiss recalled in a 1995 interview:

Okay, now this is another...to be, to be honest with you, when the doors opened and all those tummel, what happened there, I really don't know. I don't remember details. I remember getting off that car and my mother had a piece of bread in her hand and she asked me if I want some. And I said, "no." And all of a sudden, I don't...and that was the last time I seen my mother in Auschwitz. That was the last time I seen my mother in Auschwitz. And I'm thinking today, those freight cars, that is a big... how these people got off. I was young. I could jump off and in that tummel, in that tummel, [*sic*] I...details, what happened, I really don't remember. And am trying to remember. I cannot see it.⁴⁹

The album does not show this separating, the trauma of which can be read in the stumbling speech of the witness. Just as 'Sorting' began with the

⁴⁹ Michael Weiss – August 9, 1995, retrieved from the Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive (<http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/weissm/section001.html>) on October 31, 2007. The apparent errors in the text have been retained in an effort to convey the brokenness of these memories, rather than glossing over them.

two columns, formed of countless such moments, neatly standing in line, so 'Men on Arrival' consists of men waiting, generally staring ahead or at the camera. No women are visible.



Figure 7: USHMM 77242. Zoltan Kolos, Dr. Henri Hegedush, Dr. Lazar.

'Women on Arrival' presents a similarly ordered vision of women and children. The first photograph [Fig. 8] centres around the smiling face of a young girl, whose curious gaze seems appropriate to a school outing rather than an extermination facility. These orderly worlds continue the freezing of a process of separating into a moment of separation begun in 'Sorting'.



Figure 8: USHMM 77253. the woman at the far left is Lilli Jacob's aunt with her four children, the little girl in the centre is the daughter of Breine Slomovics, standing behind her.

There are, however, moments where the separation does not make sense. The final page of 'Men on Arrival' begins with Figure 9, in some accounts the first one Lilli Jacob saw on opening the album in 1945.



Figure 9: USHMM 77218. Sril Jacob and Zelig Jacob: Lilli's brothers.

The photograph summarises how this image – and all Holocaust photography – has to be understood as what Marianne Hirsch has termed

'family frames'.⁵⁰ For now, we return to the implications of including these two boys – seven and nine years old – in the category of 'men'.

A cynical explanation might be that their uniforms were intended to evoke the idea of a Jewish threat. Far more disturbing, however, is the possibility that, as we explored earlier, whoever selected these images for preservation within the album found it as moving as we do: allowing themselves to build a pathos into the images which, building upon Abigail Solomon-Godeau's observation quoted earlier, disrupts the pathos and exposes the contradictions of this closed world. For these two boys are neither men nor women – the only possibilities admitted by the section titles – but children.

After the Sorting: Men fit for work/Women fit for work

The titles of these sections introduce another element into the system of signification, that of 'work'. The way in which it does so – through the idea of 'fitness for work' – also naturalises the next category: those 'unfit' for work. It fails, however, to either explain what that 'work' consisted of, or why this distinction – which has been made 'between frames' – is important.

The idea of 'work' suggests productive activity, even perhaps a consensual exchange of labour for the support of life. In Auschwitz, however, work was intended as another, slower, means of killing while extracting value from the deportees. And, as the minutes of the Wannsee Conference make clear, the role of labour was secondary to the extermination:

In pursuance of the final solution, the Jews will be conscripted for labour in the East under appropriate supervision. Large labour gangs will be formed from those fit for work, with the sexes separated, which will then be sent to these areas for road construction and undoubtedly a large number of them will drop out through natural selection. The remainder who survive – and they will certainly be those who have the greatest powers of endurance – will have to be dealt with accordingly. For, if released, they would, as a natural selection of the fittest, form a germ cell from which the Jewish race could regenerate itself.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1997.

⁵¹ Document 849, 'The minutes of the Wannsee Conference', in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Nazism 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, (3 volumes) University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1983 onwards. *Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*, Exeter 1997, pp. 1127-1134: p. 1131. The document is problematic to interpret, as explored in Mark Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution*, Penguin Books, 2003

This typically guarded description of what became known as 'extermination through labour', however, does no justice to what conditions were like. Once again, it is tempting to cast about for part of a testimony to convey the backbreaking dirt and futility of the work, but this is another area where the ability of those who survived to speak about it exceeds their ability to actually communicate what it was like. Instead, I will confine myself to citing Hermann Langbein's laconic judgement on 'work' in Auschwitz: that the amelioration of conditions there in 1943 (through the provision of more, though still inadequate, medical treatment and the discontinuation of selection among 'hospital' patients) reduced the overall death toll among all concentration camp inmates (as opposed to the victims of the gas chambers) by a quarter.⁵²

The images give no hint of the work for which these people were "fit". The men seem to vary between their late teens and late forties and either ignore the camera or glance sideways at it:

[2002]: Roseman notes in his introductory chapter that it is not clear why the meeting at Wannsee was held in January 1942, how the participants were selected by Heydrich, and how faithful a record of the conversation the protocol is. As Roseman puts it, 'there is no camera-eye view.' (p. 4) At the same time, Roseman concludes that 'shifting pressures for or against retaining Jewish manpower [...] were not decisions about whether to kill or not, simply about when and in what order to kill' (p. 106), a view in line with my use of the document above.

⁵² Chapter 2, 'The Conditions' in Hermann Langbein, *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps 1938-1945*, Constable, London 1994, pp. 9-24. It should be noted that Langbein's role as assistant to the Auschwitz medical officer is implicitly made more heroic by this claim, though he produces statistics to support it.



Figure 10: USHMM 77259. The older man second from left is Jacob Fettman, from the Nyirjespuszta ghetto: on his left is his son, Menachem.

The temptation to read these expressions is great, but probably has to be resisted, however unambiguous they seem, as in Fig. 10. Having survived two days of travelling in crowded, unsanitary boxcars with the dead and dying, it may be supposed that they were tired and far from happy, but to read much more than that requires the insertion of more information than the image gives. As Randolph L. Braham has pointed out, the Jewish inhabitants of Subcarpathian Ruthenia had been subjected to a string of antisemitic measures since the region's annexation by Hungary in 1938. Unlike deportees from Poland, who were generally transported from the relatively developed societies of the Polish ghettos, they had survived 'concentration' in holding areas improvised from brickyards and other open-air locations. As Braham notes, by the time the deportations started on May 15, after weeks of such deprivation, many deportees 'entered the freight cars convinced that they were bound to be better off at their unknown destination than in the ghettos and entrainment centres they were forced to leave.'⁵³ Elie Wiesel notes at the beginning of his account of arrival in Auschwitz that it was only when a woman noticed the flames of the crematoria that they began to doubt the word of two men given permission to fetch water while they waited for the train to actually enter Birkenau: that 'conditions were good. Families would not

⁵³ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, p. 596.

be separated.’ As he notes, ‘Suddenly we felt free of the previous night’s terror.’⁵⁴

Wiesel’s feelings may or may not have been shared by these deportees, but that is the point: we cannot know what they saw and can only guess at what they felt. It is only by inserting the fact that they are pictured in Auschwitz, and our “knowledge” of what that means, that allows us to assume that we do. Even if we discount the images’ suggestion of an orderly, even cheerful atmosphere as the author of the album distorting what must (surely?) have been a tense situation, the testimony of those who watched the transports arrive concurs: there was often no panic, and almost no attempt to resist. As Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish inmate who assisted in earlier arrivals, noted, the deception of those about to die was ‘the camp law’ and ‘the only permissible form of charity.’⁵⁵ Or one can read Primo Levi’s account of his early moments in the camp.

And it is this refrain that we hear repeated by everyone. You are not at home, this is not a sanatorium, the only exit is by way of the Chimney. (What did it mean? Soon we were all to learn what it meant.)⁵⁶

Soon, but not then: what ‘Auschwitz’ meant was not a given, not yet. And to do justice to the expressions we have to remember this: that we read these pictures on some level as images of ‘Holocaust victims’ (or perhaps, in some cases, of ‘Holocaust survivors’) but that ‘The Holocaust’ is a creation of the time after, part of the attempt to make sense of what did happen. These people did not know they were victims of anything but the situation in which they found themselves: and that was tragic enough. The question of how far we can do without the extra narrativisation of ‘The Holocaust’ is one which I shall return to later, but for now pose explicitly as a problem to consider.

The women are perhaps more consistently younger, but again there is little to be gathered from these photographs. Except that, once again, an image which challenges the easy division of the headings into ‘men’ and ‘women’ [Fig. 11] is to be found on the opening page.

⁵⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Tadeusz Borowski, ‘This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen’ in Tadeusz Borowski (trans. Barbara Vedder), *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Penguin Books USA, New York 1976, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Primo Levi (trans. Stuart Woolf), *If This Is A Man/The Truce*, Abacus, London 1987, p. 35.



Figure 11: USHMM 77256. Identities unknown.

Why is this image here? Does it represent, like Figure 9, a desire to disrupt the smooth narrative by inserting children into a world of ‘men and women’? Or is it, along with Figure 9, a deliberate attempt to sabotage a smooth reading and thus further obscure the actual processes recorded? It is the fact that we cannot know for certain that must drive our analysis of these images.

Men no longer fit for work/Women and children no longer fit for work

The images of men and women “no longer fit for work” are different from those that have come before. Up to now, the images have tended to depict groups, as in Figure 11, with a sense that focus on individuals has come accidentally.

The images now under discussion, however, focus more deliberately on individuals. This focus raises two sets of questions, answers to which hopefully emerge in the rest of the thesis. For now, once again, I will use a discussion of some images to pose them.

The overarching issue is that of identification. This can be seen in two ways. Firstly, how far can the people appearing in these images be identified in the sense of given a name? Secondly, however, how far and under what circumstances are we meant to identify *with* them: that is, adopt their sufferings as our own?

The first page of the section entitled 'Men no longer fit for work' is dominated by two pictures, reproduced below [Fig. 12].



Figure 12: USHMM 77280 (l) and 77281 (r). Identities unknown.

The commentary in the Yad Vashem volume dedicated to the Auschwitz Album says of the image on the left that 'This Jew was specially chosen to be photographed as proof of the "ugliness and abnormality" of the Jewish "race"'.⁵⁷ The image on the right is claimed to be 'an example of the "distinct features of the Jewish face and body"'.⁵⁸

It should be borne in mind from the outset that there is no textual proof for these assertions, though the images do conform to Nazi stereotypes of 'The Jew' and, especially in the case of the image on the right, the star on his coat identifying him as a Jew is a prominent part of the composition. He is also pictured gazing out of the frame, turning him into a specimen rather than an equal partner in the photographic transaction, like the men who appear on the title page (see Fig. 1). Both his pose and his features recall the images from the title page which, for the Album, visually define the Jews to be 'resettled'. Yad Vashem's caption, then, while perhaps overly certain in tone, is backed up by the image.

⁵⁷ Israel Gutman and Bella Gutterman (eds.), *The Auschwitz Album: the Story of a Transport*, Yad Vashem/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Jerusalem/Oswiecim 2002, p. 179.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 181.

In the case of the image on the left, however, the composition is more ambiguous. While he is clearly encumbered physically, his gaze is direct and he has been allowed to arrange himself in a way that makes the nature of his disabilities unclear. He is certainly more than an example of 'ugliness and abnormality'.

What both of these images have in common, however, is a tacit justification of the heading. One of these men is clearly too old for work (at least of any physically demanding nature), and the other is physically challenged. What the 'work' they are not fit for consists of, however, is again excluded from consideration, though their membership in the group which is 'unfit' suggests that it will not be administrative or indoors. The final image on this page (USHMM 77318) continues this, showing a group of elderly men and women (one is shown with a cane) sitting beside a boxcar. The images that begin the next section [Fig. 13] reaffirm this.



Figure 13: USHMM 77338 (Babo, described by Yad Vashem as the "village idiot" of Tacovo), 77339 (Perla Schwarz or Fayge Cig), and 77340 (Identity unknown).

On the face of it, this section is the most transparent. The images indeed show women and children, and for some it is hard to imagine what kind of work they could be fit for, regardless of what we know about the nature of work in Auschwitz.

Further into the section, however, we find images of men, women and children waiting in (what we know to be) the wood next to Crematoria IV and V. The men are curious, since some of them at least would seem to belong more in the category 'fit for work'.



Figure 14: USHMM 77348. Identities unknown.

So what is concealed? Again, the nature of selection (or 'sorting' as the album has it): some of these men must be those who chose, like many did, to go with their families and (unbeknownst to them) face death. Those, in short, to whom Borowski's 'camp law' was applied without mercy, though the guilt of those who did not know what lay in store for the families they allowed themselves to part from was in itself a paralysing thing to try and come to terms with afterward.

These images take us to the very edge of what the Album can tell us about the Holocaust, at least in terms of the procedures that substituted for normality in Auschwitz. One photograph (Fig. 15) carefully placed well before the end of the album (thus avoiding any suggestion that it might be the end of the journey) shows the walls of the gas chamber in the background.



Figure 15: USHMM 77317. Identities unknown.

The chimneys of Crematoria II and III have been visible before, in some of the images in the sections ‘Arrival of the Transport Trains’ and ‘Sorting’ (see Figs. 2 and 3). Their presence is not connected, however to the presence of the trains on the siding – except, of course, in our knowledge of the connection. Once again, we read the images with our knowledge and not purely with the image’s content: a viewer innocent of the purpose of the chimneys in the background might not even notice them. Just as the walls in the background only explain the apparent distress of the woman in the centre when we connect it to written accounts of the screams echoing from the building, and the smoke that blew in the wind.

It is this problem which thwarts our efforts to identify with these people. We cannot follow them into the gas chamber: we remain outside, both historically and philosophically. As Primo Levi noted in *The Drowned and the Saved*, even those who were there, in Auschwitz, and returned to talk about it, cannot describe the act of death itself.

Those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims”, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose depositions would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.⁵⁹

There can be no survivors of murder. We have to recognise that we are at so many removes from these events that the effort to do anything more

⁵⁹ Primo Levi (trans. Raymond Rosenthal), *The Drowned and the Saved*, Abacus, London 1989, p. 64.

than guess at their nature is almost certainly doomed to well-meaning frustration. Even our efforts to listen to the survivors, Levi tells us, will be frustrated by the impossibility for them of finding language adequate to the task.

A good example of this effort is that made to identify those depicted within the album, an effort this chapter has so far relied upon. The reasons behind it – why giving names to these images is so important – is something I shall return to in later discussion of Yad Vashem, but for now I want to highlight the uncertainties.

We have already seen, in Figure 13, that some of these people have been identified. This was done by, among others, Gideon Greif of Yad Vashem through his contact with a number of survivors in Europe, Israel and the USA, as well as ‘people who came to Yad Vashem on their own after the first edition was published and identified themselves or their relatives.’⁶⁰ The solidity of his research explains the certain tone of his captions, reflected in mine.

Greif also noted, however, that following a chance meeting with a survivor pictured in the album, several of the identifications (he did not say which) will be changed in subsequent editions. This poses a problem, which I want to discuss through the following photograph [Fig. 16], identified by Yad Vashem as being of Rabbi Leib Weiss of the Tacovo Ghetto.

⁶⁰ Personal communication from Gideon Greif, 25.11.2007.



Figure 16: USHMM 77290. Rabbi Leib Weiss and, behind him to the right, his son Shlomo. Or is this Mr Jakubovics of Berehovo?

In the memoir (posthumously) co-authored with his daughter, the late Hugo Gryn, a survivor of Auschwitz originally from Berehovo, identified this man differently: as his *cheder* teacher, Mr Jakubovics.⁶¹ Can we presume to adjudicate these competing claims of memory in caption-form?

One answer might be that, yes, on the basis of historical research, we can say that Hugo Gryn was mistaken. And the caption in *Chasing Shadows* is careful to note that ‘Hugo *thought* [my emphasis] he recognised this man as his *cheder* teacher, Mr Jakubovics.’ It seems, on the face of it, reasonable to accept the verdict of the team of historians behind the identifications at Yad Vashem, who have tried to match other sources to the testimonies. We seem to have found a point where the demands of memory are trumped by the method of historical enquiry.

But there is no way of knowing for sure. We have to remember that, in Anna Reading’s words, the dividing line between memory and history is ‘the degree to which they are *vested* [my emphasis] with authenticity and

⁶¹ Hugo Gryn (with Naomi Gryn), *Chasing Shadows*, Penguin Books, London 2001, illustration between pp. 174-175.

authority.⁶² In other words, the trust we place in Yad Vashem's researchers to tell the truth as far as they have been able to ascertain it is, like all trust, a matter of choice. So the question becomes: can we trust at all? As I argue in the chapters that follow, trust is possible as long as we see that it comes from our choice to trust in a particular authority and/or their version of events, rather than any accuracy that the account has in and of itself.

This is dangerous territory, raising the possibility that outright denial of the Holocaust is a choice like any other. Even that sentence is open to manipulation by the unscrupulous, and I have to move carefully, reminding the reader that there is, as discussed above, no contradiction between accepting the consensual and constructed nature of narratives and retaining the knowledge that what happened indeed took place. The point to keep in front of oneself is that 'it' did happen, but that our efforts to talk about it are inevitably subject to distortion, since we cannot have been there: especially since those who were there acknowledge that their testimony is only ever partial.

Another element of these more personalised images is their function as portraits. While it may seem hard to reconcile the idea of a portrait with this photography of victims, it should be borne in mind that the initial reaction of Lilli Jacob to possessing the album was to distribute images of those killed to their families. Once again, the totality of image of the photograph trumps the codes behind it since, regardless of why they were created, the image of the deceased was more important. Though equally one cannot know the extent to which the images were also valued because they placed the dead where they died, restoring a measure of history to their otherwise unrecorded deaths.

There is no unitary definition of the term 'portrait', though the common features of all definitions are easily summarised.⁶³ Firstly, a portrait must depict a person, in the sense of being an image that corresponds to a particular person. This correspondence, however, does not have to mean a 'realistic' likeness, as Ludmilla Jordanova makes clear in her discussion of

⁶² Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust*, p. 33.

⁶³ See Joanna Woodall (ed.) *Portraiture: Facing the subject*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1997, Graham Clarke (ed.) *The portrait in photography*, Reaktion Books, London 1992, and Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, for some of the debates in this subject.

Maggi Hambling's portrait of Dorothy Hodgkin,⁶⁴ and as even a short tour through the National Portrait Gallery will attest.

Secondly, though, there is an undercurrent in the use of the term 'portrait' that assumes a name as the defining characteristic. Given the above discussion of the essentially provisional nature of the naming of the deportees in the Album, this might seem to be a critical obstacle to terming the images portraits. If the man in Figure 16 can only (in all honesty) be provisionally named as anything other than 'a deportee' does the image fail as a portrait?

However tempting it may be to answer yes, the work of many photographers in producing images of 'types' forestalls any certain response. The work of August Sander, for example, is frequently described as portraiture, though none of his 'faces of the twentieth century' are named. As Graham Clarke has explored, that 'each portrait photograph was offered in relation to a larger, and definitive classification'⁶⁵ does not ultimately stop them from fulfilling the first of the criteria I have identified: that they show a recognisable individual, though one interpreted (or interpreting themselves) within a broader scheme of meaning.

The question raised here, of the degree to which a portrait must be the result of a contract (whether explicit or not) between the subject and the image-maker, is possibly the most thorny. Certainly, in relation to photographs taken by the perpetrators of genocide of their victims, it is the most loaded. As John Tagg (among others) has explored,⁶⁶ photographs express a set of power relations among individuals: and the portrait is commonly regarded as a process in which, in the words of Peter Burke, 'artist and sitter generally colluded.'⁶⁷ Can this collusion, though, be reliably indicated visually?

In his exploration of Sander's *Unemployed Man, 1928* [Fig. 17], Graham Clarke implicitly suggests that it can. He argues that the subject's

⁶⁴ Ludmilla Jordanova, *Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660-2000*, National Portrait Gallery/Reaktion Books, London 2000, pp. 153-158.

⁶⁵ Graham Clarke, 'Public Faces, Private Lives: August Sander and the Social Typology of the Portrait Photograph' in Graham Clarke (ed.) *The portrait in photography*, p. 71. For Sander's work, see for example, *August Sander, Photographs of an Epoch 1904-1959*, Aperture Monographs, New York 1980.

⁶⁶ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993.

⁶⁷ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Reaktion Books, London 2001, p. 26.

placement at the side of the frame and disconnected gaze across the view of the camera 'advertise a lack' which suggests that 'to be unemployed here is to be without status and, more problematically, identity.'⁶⁸



Figure 17: August Sander, *Unemployed Man* 1928.

The contrast between Figures 16 and 17 is striking. Whether the man in Figure 16 is Leib Weiss or Mr Jakubovics, his engagement with the photographer and the act of photographing is palpable, unlike Sander's (presumably) more conventionally 'colluding' subject. That Weiss's (or Jakubovics's) is (in my reading) an angry engagement is beside the point: collusion is not the same as willing agreement.

An obvious counterpoint to these arguments might seem to be the work of Roman Vishniac, who photographed Eastern European Jewry (including the village of Berehovo) in the years immediately preceding World War Two. His desire to become a 'spokesman to record their plight', born of a sense that 'the world was about to be cast into the mad shadow of Nazism' might seem to defy comparison. But Vishniac noted that much of his photography was the work of 'a hidden camera to record the way of life of a people who had no desire to be captured on film'.⁶⁹ While Vishniac's motives are different from those on the ramp, who have to be held responsible for the deaths of those

⁶⁸ Graham Clarke, 'Public faces, Private Lives' in Joanna Woodall (ed.) *Portraiture: Facing the subject*, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Roman Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, Allen Lane, London 1983.

they depicted, his admission at least exposes the potential violation of the person that any photography, however well-intentioned, can constitute.

Nor are Vishniac's images any more free of external narrativisation. As Vishniac continues:

If I am to breathe life into the pictures that follow, it is by providing you, the reader, with my thoughts about them. The pictures depict people and places that no longer exist, yet in my memory they do exist. I hope that you will look at each picture with its story, and perhaps you, too, will see the world that I saw.⁷⁰

The world, though, is the one that *he* saw. His subjects have no more control over the reproduction of their images – to tell their stories about the world they more than saw – than the deportees on the ramp. That they conform to a vision we wish to have about the reality of life for Eastern European Jewry before the Holocaust, is a happy accident. Or is it? The extent to which a hard existence in volatile communities has been idealised in the interest of emphasising the tragedy of its loss is an issue that the exhibition at Yad Vashem raises particularly acutely, but Vishniac's images – and still more his text – hint at it. And Vishniac's statement should make us wary of trying to see the 'world that was' (as Yad Vashem calls its first gallery/installation) in 'the world that I saw.'

Leib Weiss (or Mr Jakubovics) has far more pressing reasons to resent the photographer's intrusion, but our questions about his role in the frame spring from the same source as Barthes's dissatisfaction with his own image as reproduced in portraits.⁷¹ We wonder whether the image corresponds to the self, wondering whether, in the words of Simon Schama (writing about the work of Richard Avedon), the image has 'caught the shorthand signature of an entire life,' whether the pose is 'a print of individual spirit.'⁷² At the same time, though, we must ask the same questions of Sander's image, or of Vishniac's, however alluring their images can be.

In that wondering, though, lies the power of the images. The space offered by the gaps in our knowledge to interpose our assumptions is what creates our interest. In a discussion of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* –

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 10-15.

⁷² Simon Schama, 'Players and Contenders', *Guardian Weekend*, Saturday 27 September, 2008, pp. 33-47.

another image produced without the consent of the subject in pursuit of an idealised picture of a population – Liz Wells notes the effect of finally naming the woman pictured. ‘One of the twentieth century’s most familiar and telling images was recuperated [*sic*] as an ordinary, aged woman who was poor in a humdrum way and no longer able to function as an icon of nobility and sadness in the face of destitution.’⁷³ That no such resolution is open to many of the deportees from Berehovo is the reason for their continuing impact. As Sandy Nairne, director of the National Portrait Gallery, has written of a far more innocuous set of images: ‘Anonymous to the viewer now, and disconnected from all that linked them to a place, to a family or to a friend, their faces look confidently out, knowing full well who they are.’⁷⁴

After the Delousing

These images desert the division between men and women that has so far structured most of the album, though the segregation of men and women within the camp is adhered to. They show the deportees after the processes of registration had been carried out.

There are many accounts of this process, all of which emphasise the humiliation and brutality of being ordered to strip naked, be shaved all over the body, and herded through showers to be given a number in tattooed ink on the forearm. I wonder whether I am justified in selecting (that word again) individual accounts to stand for the others, or whether I must simply accept that I cannot do any measure of justice to all of them except through one.

The effect of this process, as many survivors point out, was to turn the deportees from people into inmates, signified only by their number. Fania Fenelon identifies this moment as when she realised she was ‘no longer

⁷³ Liz Wells, ‘Thinking about photography: debates, historically and now’, in Liz Wells (ed.) *Photography: a critical introduction*, p. 39. Wells quotes Lange’s comment on the question of the woman’s name: ‘I did not ask her name or her history.’ Also see James Agee’s questions about the ‘curiosity’ of ‘parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings’ whatever the altruistic motives for such a course: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2001 [1939], p. 5.

⁷⁴ Sandy Nairne, ‘Foreword’ to National Portrait Gallery, *We Are The People: Postcards from the Collection of Tom Phillips*, National Portrait Gallery, London 2004, p. 9.

anything, not even a slave,' but an individual for whom 'there was no longer either code or law: I was alone, abandoned, consigned to the executioner.'⁷⁵

But the nature of that loneliness is exposed particularly clearly in the images, which show rows and rows of faces. This was loneliness in Auschwitz: in a sea of humanity, unable to decide (without the crucial markers of hair colour and style) whether or not the person next to you was a complete stranger or a close acquaintance.



Figure 18: USHMM 77359. 1: Salomon Lazar; 2: Shismshon Falkovics; 3: Istvan Balasza; 4: Moshe Vogel; 5: Shmuel Yitzhak Smilovics.

These images are not widely used, though a detail from Figure 18 appears as the cover to my edition of Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*. The reasons for this are difficult to guess, though I suspect that the way the clothing hugs the still substantial bodies of the men runs counter to the popular view of those selected for hard labour: these are not emaciated "living skeletons" but still healthy men struggling to come to terms with a future they could not yet know. This, it should be pointed out, is in some ways a truer picture of the Holocaust, showing what was destroyed rather than the wreckage.

⁷⁵ Fania Fenelon with Marcelle Routier (trans. Judith Landry), *Playing for Time*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1997 [French 1976], p. 20. Fenelon's memoir has been criticized by fellow-survivors as inaccurate, a reaction intensified by the play by Arthur Miller based on the book (Arthur Miller, *Playing for Time*, Nick Hern Books, London 1990 [1985]). See Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth 1939-1945: The Documented Experiences of a Survivor of Auschwitz and Belsen*, Giles de la Mare Publishers, London 1996 for an alternative account of the women's orchestra in Birkenau which Fenelon describes. Lasker-Wallfisch, though, also says that the process of registration 'reduced [her] to a complete *nobody*.' (p. 72).

Introduction into the Labour Camp

This is the final section of the album showing the deportees. They are moving from wherever their registration and delousing was carried out to their accommodation for that night, probably one of the 'Quarantine areas' within Birkenau, in which new arrivals learnt how to survive, or not.



Figure 19: USHMM 77374.

The motion of these individuals is the final lie in the album, as it suggests the validity of the title page. They have been resettled: clutching belongings (albeit not as many as when they left the trains) they seem to be moving purposefully forward. The numbers suggested by the column's disappearance out of the frame of Fig. 19 are endless. Their clothing is not obviously that of prisoners.⁷⁶ Even the chimneys of the barracks behind them help to explain away the chimneys of Crematoria II and III visible in Figures 2 and 3.

The only question, though, also lies in the motion. Where were they headed? What were they to do in their place of resettlement? In this regard, the motion – or rather, to quote Mary Warner Marien, our 'willingness to

⁷⁶ Due to shortages of the striped uniforms that some men appear wearing in the previous section, new arrivals to Auschwitz in this period were given clothing rejected by 'Canada' (see below) for shipment to Germany.

accept signs of motion as the real thing⁷⁷ – deceives, since it offers no answer as to destination. This deception – as in the photograph by Charles Nègre discussed by Warner Marien – ‘suspends the images between document and symbol.’⁷⁸ It is the willingness to undertake that suspension that drives this study.

Effects

The final section shows none of the deportees. Or at least, it shows none of their faces. Instead, it shows their belongings, at first left by the empty boxcars, and then in ‘Canada’, the section of the camp (next to Crematoria IV and V) in which they, like their owners, were sorted through. Borrowing Conrad’s description of tribal plunder in *Heart of Darkness*: ‘an inextricable mess of things decent in themselves but that human folly made look like the spoils of thievery.’⁷⁹



Figure 20: USHMM 77381. The man holding open what appears to be a sheet is Chaim Raphael, from Salonika in Greece.

The people in these images can be divided into two groups: inmates of the camp and the SS. Both groups have appeared before (see Figures 2, 3, 4,

⁷⁷ Mary Warner Marien, ‘Charles Nègre: Chimney Sweeps Walking 1852’, in Sophie Howarth (ed.) *Singular Images*, p. 27.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 30.

⁷⁹ Joseph Conrad (ed. Robert Kimbrough), *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Editions, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1988, p. 32.

6 and 15) but here they are the only people. As such it seems the correct place to reflect on their presences and absences within the album.

Regarding the inmates, it is hardly surprising that their presence has rarely been registered in the album. From the point of view of those behind the camera, they are not individuals: they have long since become simply a mass of arms and legs, buying survival by being trapped in different kinds of collaboration with the regime. Both Borowski and Levi came to the conclusion – and it was almost certainly this insight that made their ‘survival’ unbearable – that it was not possible to survive in Auschwitz without participating in its crimes. Even being selected for labour almost certainly meant that another had gone to die. However heartbreaking the work in ‘Canada’, being confronted with the relics of the murdered, including their own families, some survivors of the *Kanadakommando* are candid that the benefits of the job (as well as the chance to impede the plunder) made these assignments highly attractive.⁸⁰

With regard to the SS, the first point to consider is that they have never been absent: even if we allow the (highly unlikely) possibility that the photographers were not members of the SS, these people are sent by them along the dusty paths of Auschwitz. Their presence here is a result of policies they have organised and carried out. Whether they appear in the frame or not, they are present in that sense.

If, however, we assume that the photographers were members of the SS, then that presence becomes even more insidious, and the peculiar truth of Barthes’s insight that the photograph possesses a totality of image emerges. For, whatever, their role in producing these images, the SS is, by and large, not present in them. By themselves, the photographs can tell us little but what they tell us, just as a written document, on a certain level, contains only words that have to be understood – and that understanding comes through corroboration and comparison of what appears to be the intended message with other sources and evidence. As Robert Jan van Pelt reminds us in *The Case for Auschwitz*, it is the convergence of evidence that points to the truth.

⁸⁰ See for example, Kitty Hart-Moxon, *Return to Auschwitz*, House of Stratus, Thirsk 2000.

The images of the SS that do appear in the Album generally give little evidence for the brutality and venality which most accounts agree were frequently displayed by many SS men, on the ramp and elsewhere. In Figure 2, they appear much like any group of uniformed men – and it should be noted that SS-women are the real absence from this collection – not monsters. In Figure 4, they appear to be as nonplussed by the crowd that waits on the ramp as the crowd itself. Only in Figure 6 do we see an active role, as an SS-man holds the lapel of an older deportee. But our gaze is fixed by the woman in the centre – the act of selection depicted by the photograph is, remarkably, its *studium* rather than its *punctum*.

The SS have become the epitome – or at least, one epitome – of evil in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Figures as extreme as the villain Karl Ruprecht Kroenen in the film *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2005) are one side of this (as are the Imperial Forces in *Star Wars*), while Ralph Fiennes's portrayal of Amon Goeth, the commandant of the Płaszów Labour Camp, in *Schindler's List* is another. The 'good Nazi' of *The Pianist* is another, perhaps rather rarer, facet of the image of the SS, though one which depends for its effect on a deeper presupposition that monsters were the norm. The interesting work by David Cesarani tracing the shifts in perception of Adolf Eichmann, perhaps the most notorious of the *genocidaires*, argues that we have moved beyond this simplistic view.⁸¹ Perhaps we have as academics: as societies, we have perhaps moved less than we think. Perhaps, like the SS on the ramp, we 'double' our minds.

But we do not need the SS to be monsters. In fact, as long as they are, we avoid the questions the Holocaust poses about us as human beings. It is, as discussed earlier, much more frightening if they were human beings who experienced moral doubts about what they were doing – and did it anyway. The question raised by Rebecca Erbelding – could we do this? – is much more pressing if they were, indeed, 'ordinary'.⁸² As Max Aué, the protagonist of Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*, reminds the reader:

⁸¹ David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*, Vintage Books, London 2005 [2004], though also see the same author's introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of Israeli History*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 1-17.

⁸² But, to revive a debate that never seems to quite leave us, ordinary men or ordinary Germans? Mark Levene, 'Illumination and Opacity in Recent Holocaust Scholarship', *Journal*

If you were born in a country or at a time not only when nobody comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace. But always keep this thought in mind: you might be luckier than I, but you're not a better person. Because if you have the arrogance to think you are, that's just where the danger begins.⁸³

of Contemporary History, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2002), pp. 275-292 opens by asking if 'all roads in post-1996 Holocaust debate inevitably lead back to Goldhagen?' (p. 275)

⁸³ Jonathan Littell (trans. Charlotte Mandell), *The Kindly Ones: A Novel*, Chatto & Windus, London 2009, p. 20. Originally published in French (and winning the Prix Goncourt) as *Les Bienvillantes*, Littell's novel poses more questions than it answers, ultimately relying on making Aué as monstrous as any comic-book villain.

Chapter 2

A Mythology of Annihilation: Holocaust Metanarrative, 1961 to the present.

*'The desire to write is as strong as the repugnance of words.'*¹

Elizabeth Kolbert, reviewing the history of the Armenian genocide in *The New Yorker* in 2006, exposed a core problem in writing about genocide:

Any writer who takes on genocide as his topic accepts obligations that, if not exactly contradictory, are clearly in tension. The first is to describe the event in a way that is adequate to its exceptionality. (The original UN resolution on the subject, approved in 1946, describes genocide as an act that "shocks the conscience of mankind.") The second is to make sense of it, which is to say, to produce an account of the unspeakable that anyone can understand.²

In other words, the event must be constrained in order to be expressed, but that expression must retain sufficient force to at least remind the reader of what is actually being described. Metanarrative bridges the gap, creates a link between the unspeakable and its expression. The question – which has been a (perhaps *the*) constant source of tension in Holocaust historiography – is whether there are ways of expressing particular metanarratives that are preferable to others.

At the same time, James Young has pointed out that there is a symbiotic relationship between metanarrative and representation: 'What is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered, and how events are remembered depends in turn on the texts giving them form.'³ This tension, as perceived in the finished text, can be termed the mode of emplotment, as developed by Hayden White in *The Content of the Form*. Christopher Browning has translated White's term into the practical problems facing the working historian:

Second, although I would not disagree that it is the plot that determines the narrative, I would add that the questions being posed shape the plot and the narrative together. It is the concerns and unanswered questions of historians that from the beginning will cause them to screen out some testimony as

¹ Gustawa Jarecka, introductory essay to the *Oneg Shabbat* Archive. Quoted in Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Penguin, London 2009, p. 6.

² Elizabeth Kolbert, 'Dead Reckoning: The Armenian genocide and the politics of silence', *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2006, p. 121.

³ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 1.

irrelevant, ponder and weigh other testimony for its importance, and immediately seize upon yet other testimony as obviously crucial. These questions will set the parameters within which any plot and narrative can be constructed, but the full dimensions of the plot or “moral” of the story are not known before the research begins. Furthermore, even if the moral stance and concerns of the historian undertaking the research are already shaped, they too can change under the impact of the research itself. There is a constant dialectical interaction between what the historian brings to the research and how the research affects the historian.⁴

It is this dialectic that I shall investigate in what follows; showing changes in what historians have termed ‘the Holocaust’ and how that has, in turn, changed the terms of reference for those who followed. If, following Dan Stone, we accept that ‘the Holocaust, *qua* “The Holocaust” names a set of events that were heterogeneous in the extreme, and often entirely unconnected other than through the interpretive framework that is brought to bear on them’⁵ then we need to examine those frameworks and how they have been brought to bear.

But, once again, how does this relate to the concept that I began this search with – that of *mythology*? Dan Stone’s *Constructing the Holocaust* is eloquent in its search for a resolution to the problems of writing about a break in history without employing the tools that produced the break: ‘the paradox is that, although it has become *de rigueur* for historians to begin their studies by observing that the Holocaust denies notions of progress and civilisation, they often write using a philosophy of history that implies the opposite.’⁶ His book ends, though, with a slightly despairing call to ‘work within the very rift itself, making it productive, maintaining the question *as a question*.’ To develop, ‘in other words, a notion of tradition as rift.’⁷ I believe that approaching the historiography of the Holocaust as the development of a series of contemporary myths about ‘who we are’ and ‘how the world is for us’ allows us to at once acknowledge the break in our conception of the world – and of the word’s ability to render any broken thing whole once again, if at the cost of

⁴ Christopher R. Browning, ‘German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony’ in Saul Friedländer (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, p. 31.

⁵ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust: a study in historiography*, Vallentine Mitchell, London and Portland 2003, p. 141.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.16.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.266.

acknowledging its brokenness fully – and to do justice to how that break occurred historically.

Barthes described myth as a metalanguage ‘*in which one speaks*’ about the language-object being described.⁸ By seeing different historical attempts to describe the Holocaust historically as necessarily flawed attempts to explain the myth that governs the individual historian’s perception of the event, we can see both the strengths and weaknesses of their version – because myths are never complete or definitive – and the core of the conception that drove them to write – for the myth never originates but inside the mythmaker. And by seeing these accounts as myths, we might perhaps better understand Robert Jan van Pelt’s care in defining the ‘evidence for our knowledge about Auschwitz’⁹ as just that, rather than mistaking the map for the territory. Hayden White argued that it might be possible to ‘explain why and how every event in a sequence occurred and still not have understood the meaning of the sequence considered as a whole’¹⁰: we need to look at histories as sequences whose meaning lies in their construction by individuals and societies rather than necessarily in the events themselves.

This might seem to fly in the face of Friedländer and Stone’s injunctions to resist the tendency to ‘domesticate’ events through neat causality and interpretive frameworks which facilitate understanding at the cost of meaning (or perhaps vice versa). But in fact seeing the work of historians as mythmaking moves the historian down from being an oracle of trusted authority, gifted with the ability to know ‘how it was’ to the more equal position of a storyteller prepared to share with us how he or she has made this story. As James Young has provocatively asked, ‘Are historical tracts of the Holocaust less mediated by imagination, less troped and figured, or ultimately less interpretive than the fictions of the Holocaust?’¹¹ Myth allows us to both keep sight of the actuality of what historians describe while simultaneously acknowledging their presence in what they write.

What follows, therefore, is a consideration of historical works as expressions of what their authors, by virtue of their histories, have chosen to

⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.115

⁹ Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, p. 104.

¹⁰ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 50.

¹¹ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 6.

make of the events they have discovered or identified as important. Rather than eliminating the 'transferential relations' which Saul Friedländer acknowledges as being at work in every historian's encounter with the past¹² – but especially in those historians whose work involves the period which shaped their view of 'who they are' and 'how the world is for them' – the idea of myth brings those transferential relations to the centre of the enquiry, allowing us to ask how we as a society have taken on their stories as our own. As James Young puts it, in reference to the retelling of events in Auschwitz:

The aim in comparing several different variant versions of the same event is not to find the truest, or the one that corresponds most closely to the reality, or to undermine the credibility of these witnesses. It is rather to trace the manner in which this act has been grasped by several different survivors, how they have assimilated it to other pre-existing legends and to their own understanding of the camp, how it has reinforced particular truths already held, how it was molded to conform to their beliefs, and how it was sustained imaginatively as a kind of inspiration to other victims.¹³

I am wary of the possible consequences of using these questions as my starting-point, potentially casting all of us who came after as survivors, using the idea of 'survivor' in a way that broadens it *ad absurdum*.

Few reading this, after all, will be able to say that they survived the Holocaust, even if how we view the world has been fundamentally shaped by it. On the other hand, Young's willingness to view historical events through the prism of 'legend' demonstrates the utility of letting go of the conceit (in every sense) that history can necessarily get closer than other forms of narration to the truth of an event. The concept of myth places the acts of remembering and imagining together, while facilitating recognition of the strangeness of 'the decorative display of *what goes-without-saying*'¹⁴ that much historical writing constitutes. By doing so, we can begin to answer Young's questions, seeing the degree to which (following Eaglestone and Bloxham) the Holocaust occupies a central place in the concerns of those who did not experience it. We may not have survived the Holocaust ourselves, but it is not ridiculous to see our conception of the world as fundamentally shaped by it. It is also

¹² Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1997, p. 1.

¹³ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 49.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 11.

important to remember that one of the authors discussed here, Saul Friedländer, *is* a survivor, and that all the others have personal connections to the subject which, though not as direct, exercised a profound influence on them.

It should also be noted, however, that Young's questions are not easy to apply consistently to each work without producing a chapter-length consideration of each. I have, therefore, focused on what reflections on these questions in relation to the texts generated and done my best to indicate where it has been necessary to vary this.

Choosing the texts

To pass straight to consideration of the texts without some acknowledgement of how and why they were chosen would be a mistake. Historiography can inadvertently fall even more surely into the trap that Stone cautions against in the narratives themselves, that they 'propose a master narrative which is unidirectional and teleological; it does not admit that details have been left out, [is] univocal, and implies a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict.'¹⁵

In a field as vast as the historiography of the Holocaust, moreover, where 'research itself has continued to rush on like the torrent of a river in full flood rather than the gentle eddies of a slow-moving stream',¹⁶ the plucking of particular versions of the story from the current is not neutral. If you as reader are to trust me to work 'within the rift' it is only fair that I allow you some glimpse of the safety harness I have chosen to construct, particularly since the process of coming to my conclusions has in large part proved the point of the task. Dan Stone's decision not to discuss more openly either what he understands by the Holocaust – instead claiming slightly disingenuously that 'it would be curious if my own interpretation of the Holocaust were indiscernible'¹⁷ – or make clearer how he selected the works he considers are

¹⁵ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 146.

¹⁶ Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, Fourth Edition, Hodder Arnold, London 2000, p. vii.

¹⁷ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. xvi.

curious omissions in a postmodern study of historiography. How, after all, can Stone 'work within the rift' if he retains the mystery of how he arrived within it?

Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* [1961] seemed an essential text. Although critical of the conclusions and assumptions reached by Hilberg, Dan Stone concedes that Hilberg 'uncovered and presented a mass of factual information which might otherwise have lain undiscovered or uninvestigated.'¹⁸ Historiographical surveys by Dan Michman, Michael Marrus,¹⁹ and others echoed this view, as did the work's frequent appearance in lists of 'further reading'.

But which edition? Hilberg worked on the text constantly after 1961 to finally produce a three-volume 'revised and definitive' edition in 1985, 'splicing the additions seamlessly into the text so that a new reader might see no vestige of the old limits.'²⁰ There was a case for using this edition as the fullest representation of Hilberg's thought, but this would undermine the effort in this chapter to examine the development of the Holocaust as a concept. For this purpose, the first 1961 edition that Hilberg had hated for its layout, which he felt had 'obliterated' the clarity of his ideas,²¹ was the best statement of what Hilberg believed about the events as he wrote.

After Hilberg, Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews* [1975] seemed the next obvious choice. Although I was aware of the problems of the book, its popularity on reading lists and in the historiographical surveys I was using presented it as part of the canon: there was also the consideration that, as Dan Michman notes, Dawidowicz's book 'quickly became a best-seller',²² enjoying six printings in its first year of publication. Examining my Tenth Anniversary Edition, my attention was held by Dawidowicz's assertion that she had chosen not to make any alterations to what she had written because none of the documentary discoveries since the publication of the first edition could 'be described as significant finds in terms of changing our views of the

¹⁸ Ibid. p.149.

¹⁹ Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in history*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1987 and Dan Michman, *Holocaust historiography: a Jewish perspective: conceptualizations, terminology, approaches and fundamental issues*, Vallentine Mitchell, London 2002.

²⁰ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago 1996, p.174.

²¹ Ibid. p. 118.

²² Michman, p. 24.

National Socialist past.²³ The challenge of this statement in the context of how the Holocaust has been conceptualised was irresistible: how could Dawidowicz's understanding be so durable?

One of the problems with Dawidowicz's work is the extent to which it is in many ways a synthesis of secondary literature. Apart from the works of Philip Friedman,²⁴ the most prominent work was *Anatomy of the SS-State* [1963, English translation 1968] by Helmut Krausnick and others from the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* in Munich. Krausnick's contribution, 'The Persecution of the Jews' was the first continuous account by a German historian of what Germany and the Germans had done to the Jews of Europe. It was written for the trial in 1964 of twenty-one former Auschwitz SS-officers. Given the importance of Auschwitz to this study, it seemed impossible to ignore. Christopher Bigsby's *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust*²⁵ also highlighted the importance of this trial for many of the authors he discussed: for Jean Améry, Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss and Arthur Miller, it seems to have provided the impetus to engage with the Holocaust as a subject, while for W. G. Sebald (the central figure in Bigsby's text) the trial started him asking why and how a parallel silence about what happened in Germany as the war ended had developed.

Questions of comparability were raised, however. Krausnick's account is part of a multi-authored volume and does not employ the term "Holocaust" in relation to its subject. This is a different undertaking to the other works.

Fundamentally, though, the problem is that identified in the earlier quote from Ian Kershaw: that the historiography of the Holocaust does not

²³ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945*, Tenth Anniversary Edition, Bantam Books, New York 1986, p.xix.

²⁴ Philip Friedman (1901-1960) was a key figure in the development of Holocaust history. Born in Lwów, he studied in Vienna in the 1920s and returned there in the 1930s. Following the murder of his wife and daughter, Friedman spent two years on the 'Aryan side' of the city until its liberation by the Red Army in 1944. After the war, he played a key role in the development of several institutions in Poland, including the nascent Jewish Historical Institute. After two years as head of the Education Department for the Displaced Persons' camps in Germany (where he worked with Lucy Dawidowicz) he emigrated to New York in 1948, where he lived and worked until his death twelve years later. For this account of Friedman's life, I have relied upon Roni Stauber, *Laying the Foundations for Holocaust Research: The Impact of Philip Friedman*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2009. For a selection of Friedman's work, see Philip Friedman and Ada June Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, Conference on Jewish Social Studies/Jewish Publication Society of America, New York 1980.

²⁵ Christopher Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

stand still, nor even move at a pace which can be easily kept up with. In the end, I felt that there were four reasons for including Krausnick.

Firstly, as mentioned above, that it was the first continuous account by a German historian. That alone would have made it interesting. Secondly, though, Krausnick's presence stood in for some of the other historians – like Christopher Browning or Ian Kershaw – whose work has been conducted in the history of the Third Reich and Germany more generally but which has had a lasting impact on the much narrower field of Holocaust History. As Ian Kershaw put it in an online forum paper in 2004, 'only through the structural analysis of the Nazi system, leading into evaluation of the mentality and behaviour of varied social groups in Germany (which Broszat pioneered), was the later detailed understanding of how the Holocaust emerged from within that system of rule at all possible.'²⁶

Christopher Browning emphasises something different in a recent publication collecting his George L. Mosse Lectures at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He contrasts the broad research of Mosse – 'spann[ing] centuries as well as such enormous topics as nationalism, racism and sexuality' – with his own 'narrowly focused, densely researched, thoroughly empirical study of one relatively obscure but interesting institution in the Third Reich' and recalls Mosse's wry explanation of why he had supported Browning's very different research. 'Those of us who survey the broad landscape,' Mosse said, 'still love the twigs and bushes.'²⁷ If the bulk of the chapter was concerned with depictions of the landscape, it seemed appropriate to utilise one account which was smaller in scope.

Finally, though, there was a conscious desire to follow the structure of Dan Stone's *Constructing the Holocaust*, which had identified Krausnick's text as of comparable importance to Hilberg and Dawidowicz, alongside those of Martin Gilbert and Saul Friedländer. Taken alongside the importance of the

²⁶ Ian Kershaw, 'Forum: Ian Kershaw: Beware the Moral High Ground' (2004), retrieved from <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/index.asp?type=diskussionen&id=418&view=pdf&pn=forum> on 21 September, 2011. Kershaw also notes his friendship with Hans Mommsen and the role of Martin Broszat as his 'early inspirational mentor'.

²⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and London 2003, pp. ix-x.

trial for which it provided expert evidence, these reasons seemed to explain its inclusion.

As a British historian it seemed impossible to exclude Martin Gilbert's *The Holocaust*.²⁸ Gilbert is an enormously influential figure, having published a total of seventy-seven books on themes ranging from Winston Churchill (he is Churchill's official biographer) to the fate of Soviet Jewry over a period of forty years. He has also been involved in Holocaust remembrance for thirty years and was part of the advisory board for the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition: his book *Never Again*²⁹ was published to coincide with the opening of the exhibition and in many ways functions as an accompanying textbook.

Gilbert's very status and prolific output posed unique problems, however. His website (www.martingilbert.com) is interesting and informative, with texts reflecting on both his works and his method but there is not a methodological paper trail similar to that of Hilberg, Dawidowicz or Friedländer (below).³⁰ And his books are, as Dan Stone comments, powerful narratives whose organising principles are not immediately obvious. The opportunity to interview him, however, gave me an insight into both how he specifically works around and conceives of the Holocaust as well as a view of the logistics – the actual process – of writing a narrative history that was invaluable.

As I explore in the section on Gilbert, I was acutely aware of the problems of reflexivity raised by this encounter. Could I have asked different questions, and with a different, possibly more critical, emphasis? Yes, but the criticisms of Gilbert are obvious: what I wanted to do was understand how he had gone about the task. For this reason, my desire was for him to explain rather than respond to any kind of interrogation. Working from my notes of the meeting and the literature cited in the text, I have tried to be fair to someone who would probably regard the label "chronicler" as a compliment.

²⁸ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, Fontana Press, London 1987 [1986].

²⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Never Again: A History of the Holocaust*, Harper Collins Illustrated, London 2000.

³⁰ Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust Writing and Research Since 1945. Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Lecture, 26 September 2000*, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington DC, 2001, is an interesting summary of what Gilbert concedes at the beginning is a vast field, but offers little in terms of analysis: once again, Gilbert is compiling lists.

Finally, the work of Saul Friedländer had to be included. As probably the most theoretically complex historian of the period, the first volume of his *Nazi Germany and the Jews* was greeted with great anticipation, though Dan Stone's feeling that while Friedländer had written a great work of synthesis (or at least half of one), 'it did not fulfil the need in the literature which Friedländer had himself identified'³¹ was a sense I shared. The impending publication of the second volume at the beginning of this project also made Friedländer's inclusion imperative, particularly as it became apparent that many reviewers of the second volume felt he had succeeded in writing something that was, in Wulf Kansteiner's words, an 'instant classic'.³²

Raul Hilberg: The Destruction of the European Jews.

The problem of finding a language in which to speak about the Holocaust was more acute for Raul Hilberg than for those who came after. The problems identified in his work by many commentators – though Dan Stone is the most lucid and will serve as their spokesman in much of what follows – are best understood as responses to this task. The shortcomings of Hilberg's text, though, also serve to illustrate the value of the concept of mythology defined as the language 'in which one speaks' about what is being described.

Before turning to Hilberg himself, though, we need to consider how the passage by Young quoted above might be turned into critical action. As the same criteria will be used for each author, this section is also a demonstration of a process which will be repeated less explicitly; it may, therefore, seem slightly brief in its treatment of the text itself. The degree to which Hilberg's text, for all its flaws, has become an "Ur-text" of Holocaust history means, however, that aspects of the book are better considered in relation to those who went after.

Young's first task is to 'trace the manner in which this act (the Holocaust) has been grasped'³³. Does this, though, mean how it is presented

³¹ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 162.

³² Wulf Kansteiner, 'Success, Truth, and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer Thirty-Five Years after the publication of *Metahistory*', *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 47 (May 2009), p. 27.

³³ Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 49.

or the organising principle behind it, which may be different things? Applied to Hilberg, these questions produce different answers.

If one interprets Young as meaning how the event is presented, the dominant means of grasping the Holocaust for Hilberg is that of *process*. The events unfold in his text as the result of two things: the ‘destruction process’ and ‘the machinery of destruction’ which, when combined, allow us to see events ‘not merely as a monolithic, non-transparent, and impenetrable event but as a series of operations which fall into a definite pattern.’³⁴

This insistence on pattern and system has led Dan Stone to accuse Hilberg of ‘semiotic totalitarianism’ on the grounds that *The Destruction of the European Jews* ‘propose[s] a master narrative which is unidirectional and teleological; it does not admit that details have been left out, it is univocal, and implies a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict.’³⁵ Secondly, Stone draws attention to what he sees as the consequence of this: that the victims are reduced to merely being victims and the perspective of the perpetrator becomes the perspective of the historian and, by extension, that of the reader.

Both of Stone’s assertions are correct. Hilberg’s narrative constantly wrestles with two contradictory views about the predictability of events, and his treatment of Jewish reactions to persecution are simplistic and unforgiving. If, however, one sees ‘how the act has been grasped’ as referring to an organising principle which draws in Young’s next question – ‘how they have assimilated it to other pre-existing legends’ the reasons for Hilberg’s choice become clearer.

Hilberg did not have the structures that contemporary historians do, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Lawrence Baron’s study of the many currents of research and writing about the Holocaust before 1960 challenges the contemporary assumption about the rise of Holocaust memory that during the 1940s and 1950s ‘the memory of the Jewish catastrophe was either forgotten or repressed’³⁶. Although Baron’s study demonstrates this to

³⁴ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago 1961, p. 31.

³⁵ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 146.

³⁶ Lawrence Baron, ‘The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945-1960’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2003), p. 62.

be false, his mission is so much to demonstrate the amount of literature available that he fails to consider its lack of coherence. 'By the 1960s,' he concludes, 'the foundations had been laid for a keener understanding and a bleaker portrayal of what the genocide entailed and portended for Jews and gentiles alike.' The foundations, however, were not unified: to grasp the subject, Hilberg needed 'an outline, rigid and comprehensive enough to hold any document I would find, so that even if there were thousands of notes, I would be able to file all of them precisely in the order in which I would use them in my narrative.'³⁷ Only by subjecting his sources to 'semiotic totalitarianism' could Hilberg hope to condense the vast range of primary material that he consulted into a manageable narrative. The utility of this will be seen when we turn to Lucy Dawidowicz, whose account of Jewish reaction to the Holocaust in Poland assumes we "know" that the Polish case was exemplary (whether, of course, it was or not).

Young's next tasks – to see how an account 'reinforc[es] particular truths already held' and is 'molded to conform to their beliefs' – need to be taken together, as the likelihood of telling the two categories apart seems small. In one sense, the above discussion might be considered to have answered the questions as well: Hilberg's need for an outline might, for example, be classed as a 'belief' or 'truth' already held. In another sense, though, these questions raise issues which are at the heart of criticism of any kind and which may spell disaster for the whole enterprise. For what the task demands of us practically is separating the text from the author and studying both in tandem.

Initially, the existence of Hilberg's memoir, *The Politics of Memory*, might give us hope that we can understand the assumptions that Hilberg brought to bear in writing his original text. But, as Jeremy Popkin has pointed out, historians' memoirs constitute a genre that raises more questions than it answers. Not only do autobiographies resemble historical accounts as 'reconstructions of past events, usually in the form of a chronological narrative'³⁸ but they also suffer even more acutely from the problem of

³⁷ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory*, p. 64.

³⁸ Jeremy D. Popkin, 'Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 3, (June 1999), p. 726.

'transferral relations' with the subject than the historian's professional writing: how, after all, can we expect anyone not to describe their own life from their own perspective?

The neat narrative of Hilberg's memoir, describing his family's flight from Nazi Germany in 1940, their straitened existence in New York, his return to Germany with the US Army in 1945 and his subsequent studies and career, is therefore unlikely to provide us with real insights into why he wrote. After all, we know that Hilberg likes to impose structure on events if at all possible: his account of how he shaped his text to be the literary equivalent of Beethoven's music³⁹ does not need to be read literally, though, to confirm this sense. Whether true or not, however, his desire for us to believe that this was what happened tells us several interesting things: again, a love of structure; a sense of the scale of the mission he had assigned himself; as well, perhaps of the sense of isolation that runs through the book. He is constantly alone and unheard, a romantic outcast from the academic establishment. All of these things perhaps allow us to locate on an experiential level what kinds of "truths and beliefs" drove the text itself.

It also helps us to approach Young's final task, of seeing how the text is 'sustained imaginatively as a kind of inspiration'.⁴⁰ The sense of isolation from the outside world (writing in his parents' living-room),⁴¹ from others (his wife is invisible and unnamed in his memoir), and from the academic community (the memoir begins and ends with disappointing reviews)⁴² finds a mirror in the conclusion to *The Destruction of the European Jews*, where he reflected that

As time passes on, the destruction of the European Jews will recede into the background. Its most immediate consequences are almost over, and whatever developments may henceforth be traced to the catastrophe will be consequences of consequences, more and more remote. Already the Nazi outburst has become historical.⁴³

The sense that the time for the study of the Holocaust had passed is an important part of what sustains the book. It justifies the desperation with which

³⁹ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory*, pp. 84-86.

⁴⁰ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 49.

⁴¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory*, p. 82.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 15-18 and pp. 189-194.

⁴³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, p. 760.

he read as many documents as he could in order to provide as complete a picture as possible of an event that he felt was about to become just another 'outburst'. And desperation to cover as much ground as possible also explains the need for a structure allowing him to repeat the same process for all parts of Europe even if the events themselves had varied in many ways: something which the compendious nature of Hilberg's text makes clear.

The other element that sustained the text imaginatively was what inflamed contemporary responses and has driven subsequent reviews: Hilberg's treatment of the Jews themselves. Lucy Dawidowicz's furious footnote to *The War Against the Jews* – that Hilberg's 'knowledge of Jewish history is not equal to his rashness in generalizing about it'⁴⁴ – illustrates the intensity of feeling generated by this aspect of Hilberg's text, while Dan Stone's analysis is more measured, describing the Jews in Hilberg's text as 'oppressed, reactive subjects.'⁴⁵

I believe it is more useful to see Hilberg as responding in an unusual way to what Philip Friedman described in 1959 as 'a new myth that has already struck deep roots in our historical consciousness'⁴⁶ – the belief that the Jews *should* have resisted. The legitimate claim that Hilberg dismisses Jewish attempts to resist is entirely accurate but misses something broader about myth and its importance: that by treating the Jews as 'unable to resist, unable to speak, unable to flee' until 'reduced to utter compliance with orders and directives' in the ghettos and camps, Hilberg endorsed the importance of resistance as a concept as surely as Dawidowicz did in her account. This is confirmed by the final chapters of Hilberg's work, which dwell on the importance of Israel as 'Jewry's great consolation' where 'The Jews seek to perfect their position in society by perfecting the society in which they live'⁴⁷. Hilberg's comment that Israel was a place where 'there was no longer any need to rationalize impotence with forgiveness'⁴⁸ infuses with a grim irony the laconic note by the name of Adolf Eichmann – 'Apprehended by Israel agents

⁴⁴ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 435.

⁴⁵ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 148.

⁴⁶ Philip Friedman, 'Problems of Research on the European Jewish Catastrophe', *Yad Washem Studies III* (1959), p. 40.

⁴⁷ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, p. 763.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 676

in Argentina for trial, May, 1960.⁴⁹ Hilberg remained a political scientist and what sustained his account more than anything else was the knowledge that if the Jews of Europe had allowed themselves to be destroyed, it would at least not happen again through blindness to the possibility.

Helmut Krausnick: The Persecution of the Jews

‘For some,’ wrote Helmut Krausnick in the foreword to *Anatomy of the SS-State* ‘the whole Third Reich business can be summed up in the word Auschwitz; they are incapable of seeing further than the stark fact that this hell on earth actually happened.’⁵⁰ The volume he was introducing collected the reports by Krausnick and his colleagues for the ‘Auschwitz Trial’ of 1964.

Krausnick’s own contribution to the volume, entitled ‘The Persecution of the Jews’, was the first attempt by a German historian to go beyond ‘Auschwitz’ and try to understand the deeper reasons for the ‘Third Reich business’. The weaknesses of his account, however, can be explained by locating it in context as a piece of evidence in a judicial investigation rather than as a piece of independent historical research.

‘The Persecution of the Jews’ was written to form part of the indictment against nineteen former SS officers and one prisoner functionary tried in 1963 in Frankfurt for their crimes in Auschwitz. It is therefore not surprising that Krausnick’s “grasp” of the events should mirror the court’s eventual understanding, though it is equally difficult to separate cause and effect: we have no real way of knowing to what degree the prosecutors wanted a version of the Holocaust (though they did not call it such at this time) which reflected the legal problems which beset them, or to what degree Krausnick’s account may have pushed the lawyers down particular legal avenues. What we can do is identify the legal problems which faced the prosecutors and consider the problems of making law with history and writing history for the law.

The problem which faced the Frankfurt court which convened in December 1963 was how to convict the accused without relying on the simple facts that they had been at Auschwitz and had done what they did. Devin

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 705.

⁵⁰ Helmut Krausnick et al., *Anatomy of the SS-State*, Collins, London 1968 [Walter-Verlag, 1965], p.xiii.

Pendas has identified the two major legal problems facing the prosecution. Firstly, the prosecutors had to deal with the definition of a murderer as 'anyone who kills a human being out of blood lust, in order to satisfy their sexual desires, out of greed or other base motives, maliciously or treacherously or by means dangerous to the public at large or in order to enable or conceal another crime.'⁵¹ Given the failure which Pendas demonstrates in the period 1945-1963 to secure convictions for Nazi crimes under the last two criteria, the prosecutors had to rely on the 'base motives' part of the law to avoid an indictment for the alternate (and secondary) offence of *Totschlag* which Pendas describes as 'a broader category than manslaughter is in American law, and encompass[ing] crimes that would be considered second-degree murder in the United States.'⁵² To convict the defendants of murder, in other words, the prosecution had to demonstrate less that the perpetrator had caused the deaths of their victims than that they had done so with 'base motives'. Indeed, since the expiry of the statute of limitations on *Totschlag* in 1960,⁵³ the prosecution had to prove 'base motives' to convict the accused of anything at all.

A secondary problem, however, was the issue of perpetration. Proving that the accused were guilty in the words of the law on being an accomplice to murder, had 'through action or inaction, knowingly aid[ed] a perpetrator in the commission of any action punishable as a crime or misdemeanor'⁵⁴ was not challenging, but would have hardly done justice to what the accused had done. Instead, therefore, the prosecution was committed to proving that they were guilty of 'single-handedly killing another person.'⁵⁵ Once again, the emphasis of German law on personal agency meant that the prosecution had to focus on their internal motivations. This led to what Rebecca Wittman has identified as a central paradox of the trial: that the prosecutors 'had to use

⁵¹ Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965: Genocide, History and the Limits of the Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 56.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 67.

(and validate) Nazi orders and regulations to show that the defendants had acted above and beyond the orders of the SS in Berlin.⁵⁶

In this context, Dan Stone's comments on Krausnick's text start to fall apart slightly as he argues that it 'pivots' around 'the contradiction between the rational and the irrational'.⁵⁷ This is accurate on one level; Krausnick's text describes a series of events in which things happen without obvious agency – the 'veritable torrent of discriminatory orders [that] began to flow over the heads of the Jews'⁵⁸ after the Nuremberg Laws for example – but at the same time, in Stone's words, 'cataloguing the moments at which the Nazi regime broke with the rule of law'.⁵⁹ Stone's claim, however, that Krausnick's text is therefore 'either indicted in replicating a way of thinking that fuelled the Nazi dynamic, or fails to comprehend that which it seeks to encompass' misses the point by ignoring the degree to which reading the text is 'overhearing' the advice of an expert witness rather than being addressed ourselves.

Just as the prosecution accepted Nazi laws (indeed the whole Nazi legal system) as legitimate in order to definitively criminalise the actions of the defendants which went beyond those orders, so Krausnick downplays the racial hatred of the regime in order to present the racial outlook of the defendants as 'base'. Both approaches are based on the realisation of Helge Grabitz about the praxis of National Socialist trials: 'in spite of the terrible fate suffered by the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis, we must not lose sight of the fact that although innumerable Germans were involved, in the actual trial the individual accused must be proved personally guilty.'⁶⁰ The priority of the expert witnesses had to be to ensure this result.

This raises questions about the involvement of historians in legal cases described briefly by Grabitz – who limits the historian to simply establishing "what happened" – and at greater length by Richard Evans (himself an expert witness in the Irving Trial) who draws a compelling maxim from his own

⁵⁶ Rebecca Elizabeth Wittmann, 'Indicting Auschwitz? The Paradox of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial', *German History* Vol. 21, No. 4 (2003), p. 506.

⁵⁷ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 159.

⁵⁸ Helmut Krausnick, 'The Persecution of the Jews' in Krausnick et al., *Anatomy of the SS-State*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Helge Grabitz, 'Problems of Nazi Trials in the Federal Republic of Germany', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1988), p. 220.

experience: 'if there is information which may run counter to the case argued by the side commissioning the report the expert is not at liberty to suppress it.'⁶¹ The question that Evans does not address – possibly because, as he notes, his own report was concerned with the 'empirical question' of whether (or rather, how) Irving had manipulated and falsified sources – is to what degree any conception of broader issues than those dealt with by Evans can be approached without suppressing at least some possibilities. And lawyers are unlikely to commission an author who contradicts their position. But there is a difference – which Evans slightly disingenuously omits, thus making it implicitly – between the suppression of information and its employment. Krausnick demonstrates this neatly: none of his report is false, but neither is it the whole truth.

Erich Haberer has raised the further point that using historians as expert witnesses can not only mean 'using historically derived conclusions as incontrovertible evidence in a court of law.'⁶² This, I think, misunderstands the task of both lawyer and historian to some extent – though it taps into Evans's concern with being forced to 'prove a case beyond reasonable doubt rather than dealing in the broader frame of probabilities, as historians habitually do'⁶³ – but Haberer's second point that further research can refute the evidence as presented at one moment has no easy answer, whatever our historical certainty (or present conviction, if we can tell the difference) that a given verdict is correct.

In this sense, I have to take issue with Dan Stone's claim that Krausnick's text can be said to 'deconstruct itself' and has left unfulfilled 'the role of the historical text as ossifier of memory.'⁶⁴ Krausnick's text removes agency from the perpetrators and was written for a purpose which is not explicit in the text. Indeed, the degree to which Elizabeth Wiskemann, in her introduction to *Anatomy of the SS-State* (as the collected volume of the

⁶¹ Richard J. Evans, 'History, Memory, and the Law: the Historian as Expert Witness', *History and Theory*, Vol.14, No. 3 (2002), p. 330. This article is probably best read in conjunction with Richard Evans, *Telling lies about Hitler: the Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial*, Verso, London 2002 and Robert Eaglestone, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial* (op. cit.), which considers Evans's view of history and historical practice more generally.

⁶² Erich Haberer, 'History and Justice: Paradigms of the Prosecution of Nazi Crimes', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (2005) p. 509.

⁶³ Evans, 'History, Memory and the Law', p. 330.

⁶⁴ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 161.

reports was called in English) uses Hitler and 'Hitlerism' (rather than Nazism) as her basic terms of reference, points to the degree to which Krausnick's text, taken by itself rather than as one of a series of trial documents isolated for ease of reading, ossified *on the page* a particular view of the Holocaust as an almost inexplicable action by Hitler who, Krausnick's claim to the contrary, does appear essentially as 'a mere accident of German history'⁶⁵. In the courtroom, however, Krausnick's text helped ossify the memory of Auschwitz as the product of a system whose legal foundations were exceeded by the 'base motives' of the defendants.

The contradictions of Krausnick's work, however, turned into questions about why and how Nazi ideology had been translated into action with such efficiency. As Detlev Peukert put it in 1982, concern with the 'everyday life' of German society during (rather than 'under') Nazism allowed greater understanding of 'how "Auschwitz" – that is, Nazi racialism and terror – was possible, why it was tolerated and, indeed, in part endorsed.'⁶⁶ As Hans Buchheim put it:

The only sound basis on which he [the historian] can attempt to unravel the problem of the exceptional situation in which those receiving an order to kill found themselves, is to examine the whole mental, moral and political environment in which such an order was given and received. [...] My object will be to show the basis upon which compliance with such orders was demanded, the extent to which those receiving them were generally inclined to obey them and the possibilities available to the recipients of evading their fulfilment.⁶⁷

The problems of such an approach have frequently been the subject of intense discussion, most notably between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer in the 1980s⁶⁸. The concern that finding areas 'where nonconformist behaviour could and did evolve' might lead to an apologia for German society has always been a tension, as has the potential for 'the

⁶⁵ Krausnick, 'The Persecution of the Jews', p. 3.

⁶⁶ Detlev J.K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, London 1993 [Bund-Verlag GmbH, Cologne, 1982], p. 22.

⁶⁷ Hans Buchheim, 'Command and Compliance' in Krausnick et al., *Anatomy of the SS-State*, p. 305.

⁶⁸ Martin Broszat, 'A Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism'; Saul Friedländer, 'Some Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism'; Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, 'A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism.': in Peter Baldwin, *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the historians' debate*, Beacon, Boston 1990.

history of everyday life' to be 'lost in pointillism and miniaturism'⁶⁹. Krausnick himself made both of these mistakes. In the end though, writing the history of the Nazi era to deal with the individuals who had manned the gas chambers – those who had received and carried out the orders that Hilberg and Krausnick described in such detail – meant that the focus became what ordinary Germans had been doing for the twelve years of the Nazi period. It thus gradually became possible to speak of genocide – the work of a whole society – rather than “simple” mass murder – possibly (perhaps even necessarily) the work of only a subset of that society. In this limited sense, perhaps, Krausnick's work did not ossify memory, in that for the first time, the 'ordinary men'⁷⁰ (and women) of the regime were a matter of concern.

Lucy Dawidowicz: The War Against the Jews

Alert readers will have noted that in the previous section I abandoned Young's questions as an explicit model. The reasons for this are hard to explain precisely but centre on the degree to which Krausnick's text does not have an obvious point of entry for deconstruction – itself an argument in support of Stone's claim that it ossifies memory. Turning to Dawidowicz's classic account, however, the questions posed by Young are once again centre stage and raise issues in the text that a more conventional historiography would miss.

Young's first question concerns 'how the act has been grasped'. This problematizes the most striking feature of Dawidowicz's text: her division of the period into two parallel histories of 'The Final Solution', which describes the Nazi plans and measures 'against the Jews' and 'The Holocaust', which describes the Jewish experience of and reaction to those measures. This division is not only fundamental to Dawidowicz's understanding of the Holocaust but also the imaginative motor of her narrative as it allows her to

⁶⁹ Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, p. 15.

⁷⁰ As observed at the end of Chapter 1, the use of the word 'ordinary' either recalls Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Perennial, New York 1993 or Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1996. I do not wish to review the entire debate, though I regard Browning's work as superior, agreeing with the comment in Mark Levene, 'Illumination and Opacity' (p. 278) that the problems of 'quantify[ing] collective psychosis, let alone submit[ting] such a notion to empirical investigation' are probably insuperable in responding to Goldhagen.

develop her central theme: that Jewish resistance was ultimately constrained by what she presents as a monolithic Nazi policy of annihilation against which it was futile to struggle. From this point of view, she expands the definition of resistance to include 'the protection of community against [Nazi] man's solitariness and brutishness' through the creation of 'voluntary Jewish organisations [which] fulfilled more fundamental, if less tangible, Jewish needs, creating community, enhancing group solidarity and social cohesion, reinforcing belongingness and social cohesion.'⁷¹ She dubbed this network 'The Alternative Community'. The obvious question is: alternative to what?

The earlier analysis of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* did not explore a question raised by Dan Stone's comment (quoted in the section dealing with the choice of texts) that Hilberg 'uncovered and presented a mass of factual information which might otherwise have lain undiscovered or uninvestigated.' This does not, after all, explain why the book had the impact it did: the reasons for that impact, however, are central to understanding Dawidowicz's text.

Dawidowicz's furious attack on Hilberg's portrayal of Jews and Jewish history reflects the general reaction to Hilberg's work in 1960. Oscar Handlin's review of Hilberg in *Commentary* claimed that, while *The Destruction of the European Jews* was 'an excellent work in other respects,' issue had to be taken with the idea that 'these incredible events happened, in part at least, because of some deficiency in the people who suffered from them.'⁷² Handlin's comments, however, came in the context of reaction to Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which had argued (based substantially on reading Hilberg) that 'In Amsterdam as in Warsaw, in Berlin as in Budapest, Jewish officials could be trusted to compile the lists of persons and their property, to secure money from the deportees to defray the expenses of their deportation and extermination, to keep track of vacated apartments, to supply police forces to help seize Jews and get them on trains, until, as a last

⁷¹ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 242-243.

⁷² Oscar Handlin, 'Jewish Resistance to the Nazis', *Commentary* (November 1962), pp. 398-405. As demonstrated by Michael Cohen, 'Culture and Remembrance: Jewish Ambivalence and Antipathy to the History of Resistance', in Ruby Rohrlich (ed.), *Resisting the Holocaust*, Berg, Oxford 2000 [1998], pp. 19-37, the issue of resistance continues to trouble some, though I think that, in his eagerness to argue that resistance is under-reported, he relies on a reductive definition of resistance as armed struggle.

gesture, they handed over the assets of the Jewish community in good order for final confiscation.’⁷³

Anson Rabinbach has argued that the debate over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was ‘the first time that both Jews and non-Jews were witness to a controversy over Jewish memory.’⁷⁴ David Cesarani is more cautious in his analysis, though he notes that the controversy about the book ‘introduced millions to the issues surrounding the Nazi genocide against the European Jews’ and gave an ‘urgent filip’ to research and writing.⁷⁵ Dawidowicz’s furious denunciations of Arendt and Hilberg not only in *The War Against the Jews* but also in subsequent works suggest that her feelings about their treatment of Jewish behaviour are the ‘key’ to her own text.

This is reinforced when one considers the way in which Dawidowicz structures her text in such a way that Hilberg/Arendt’s conception of Jewish behaviour is undermined in two ways. Firstly, Dawidowicz argues that in the face of the Nazi campaign – without any ‘ideological deviation or wavering determination’⁷⁶ – the only course open to Jewish leaders was to ‘save what could be saved, bargaining with the devil’ as ‘plain sense dictates that in a disaster one rescues as many as can be rescued.’⁷⁷ The earlier narrative of the formation of Nazi policy creates what Perry Anderson has termed (in relation to the work of Andreas Hillgruber) an ‘extenuating comparison’.⁷⁸ The Jews in Dawidowicz’s account do not resist – in the sense of fighting back – more than in Hilberg’s text, but their struggle to survive physically and as Jews is given more weight. The other way in which Dawidowicz undermines Hilberg and Arendt is to question the Jewishness of both some figures in the ghettos and of Hilberg and Arendt.

⁷³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, London 1994 [1963], p. 117-118.

⁷⁴ Anson Rabinbach, ‘Eichmann in New York: the New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy’, *OCTOBER* 108, (2004), p. 97.

⁷⁵ David Cesarani, ‘Introduction’, *The Journal of Israeli History*, Volume 23, Number 1, (2004), p. 6.

⁷⁶ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 163.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 352.

⁷⁸ Perry Anderson, ‘On Emplotment: Two Kinds of Ruin’, in Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, p. 55. I am aware that even implicitly comparing Dawidowicz to Hillgruber is dangerous territory, but the choice of two parallel narratives is such an unusual choice of structure that Anderson’s comments seemed relevant.

A central criticism of Hilberg is the way in which his definition of ‘the Jews’ is fundamentally a Nazi conception: ‘the Jews’ for Hilberg are those targeted for destruction. The issue of ‘definition’ to which he devotes a chapter does not consider how they defined themselves but only how the Nazis turned their ideological demons into a bureaucratic reality. That this is a consequence of Hilberg’s reliance on German documents is a point that has been made by various authors. Its meaning for his text in terms of how resistance is portrayed has not, however, been examined; Dawidowicz’s characterisation of ‘the Jews’ of the Holocaust is a perfect foil.

Dawidowicz depicted the ghettos as having three elements: the ‘official community’ (the *Judenräte* and institutions); the ‘alternative community’ (voluntary community organisations); and ‘the countercommunity’ (the political underground). Dawidowicz argued that, while the latter two communities enjoyed the support and approval of most ghetto inhabitants, the *Judenräte* were regarded with the same mixture of ‘grudging consent and sardonic consent’⁷⁹ as the traditional *kehillot*. This decoupling of the actions of the *Judenräte* from the behaviour of the general population was accomplished by challenging the pre-war status of those who led the ghettos. As Dawidowicz put it:

The reluctance on the part of communal leaders to participate in the Judenrat was universal. In some instances, when no candidates could be prevailed upon to accept, the Germans themselves made random appointments. In the absence of legitimate communal leaders, a few unscrupulous individuals who had never served the community volunteered their services to the Germans.⁸⁰

Status within the community, however, did not provide sufficient grounds to remove the ghetto leaders from the continuities of Jewish history. Dawidowicz therefore introduced another element, arguing that the ghetto leaders had been ‘apostates’ and therefore their actions could not be connected with Jewish history as surely as Hilberg seemed to think. She reserves especial venom for the Ghetto Police, which she argued ‘exemplified the dynamics of degeneration that the Germans set in motion’. She pointed out after identifying Józef Szeryński, the first police chief in the Warsaw

⁷⁹ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 239.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 226.

Ghetto as 'a Catholic convert' that 'Ringelblum noted that a hundred apostates served in the [Warsaw] police in visible positions.'⁸¹ 'Apostasy' is central to Dawidowicz's portrayal of the *Judenräte* as she sought to emphasise that those who had betrayed the Jews – the 'strutting dictators in their wretched ghetto realms'⁸² – had not been true Jews themselves. The chapters on the other communities continued this theme – once again employing 'extenuating comparison' – by emphasising the spiritual values of the 'alternative community': for example, the clandestine *yeshivot* in Warsaw, 'performing the most urgent and efficacious function of any [organisation] in the ghettos to ensure the salvation of the Jews.'⁸³

In my earlier analysis of Hilberg, I referred to Philip Friedman's identification of resistance as 'a new myth that has already struck deep roots in our historical consciousness.' Later in the same text, he set out his view of what a history of the 'European Jewish Catastrophe' would consist of: 'a history of the Jewish people during the period of the Nazi rule in which the central role is to be played by *the Jewish people*, not only as the victim of a tragedy, but also as the bearer of a communal existence with all the manifold and numerous aspects involved.'⁸⁴ Friedman argued for an approach which was 'Judeo-centric' as opposed to 'Nazi-centric'. Hilberg's book (which Friedman had supervised as a doctoral dissertation) clearly did not meet this need, though Friedman had lobbied for its publication by Yad Vashem⁸⁵ – suggesting perhaps a recognition that Hilberg had created a 'Nazi-centric' synthesis on the basis of which a 'Judeo-centric' history could be written. Given Friedman's impact on Dawidowicz – she worked for him in the Joint Distribution Committee in Germany in 1945 when, according to her memoir, 'Driven by memories not rightfully mine, I now inherited a shadow world of

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 234.

⁸² Ibid. p. 226.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 252.

⁸⁴ Philip Friedman, 'Problems of Research on the European Jewish Catastrophe', p. 33.

⁸⁵ Roni Stauber, 'Confronting the Jewish Response during the Holocaust: Yad Vashem – a Commemorative and a Research Institute in the 1950s', *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2000), pp. 277-298 describes the failure of Yad Vashem to accept Hilberg's text and Friedman's efforts to secure publication. For the broader context of Yad Vashem's refusal, see Roni Stauber (trans. Elizabeth Yuval), *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory*, Vallentine Mitchell, London and Portland 2007.

murdered European Jews⁸⁶ – it is tempting to see *The War Against the Jews* as her attempt to write what Friedman had wanted.

If so, it is either a faulty response or a demonstration that Friedman's suggested history was unwritable. The 'extenuating comparison' makes Nazi actions as central to the narrative as Jewish responses: and the dynamic of action-response makes the Jews in Dawidowicz's text as reactive as in Hilberg's, albeit much more individuated and with more complex reactions to what they were experiencing. A question which is implicit in this analysis as a whole becomes more acute: is the history of the Holocaust the history of victims or perpetrators?

What is clear is that Dawidowicz's history was intended, if not as a history of the victims alone, then at least as one which gave their experiences life. Underlying the book, though, is a contradiction. For all that Dawidowicz seeks to marginalise the ghetto leaders and emphasise those who resisted (however resistance was defined), she could not escape the fact that the 'strutting dictators in their wretched ghetto realms'⁸⁷ had offered up parts of the ghetto population to annihilation; had sought to derive personal gain from their power; and, most problematically, had in some cases been admired by their fellow Jews for doing so. *The War Against the Jews* ends with a quotation from Zelig Kalmanovich, Dawidowicz's mentor in Vilna in 1938-39: 'All are guilty, or perhaps more truly, all are innocent and holy.'⁸⁸ In Dawidowicz's *Holocaust Reader*, the full diary entry is reproduced, and the passage reads:

All are guilty, or perhaps more truly, all are innocent and holy, and, above all, those who actually carry it through. They must master themselves, brace themselves, and conquer the soul's sufferings. They exempt others and shield them from sorrow.⁸⁹

Earlier in the entry, Kalmanovich claimed that those who survived the selection he described had 'purchased our life and our future with the deaths

⁸⁶ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938-1947*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 1989, p. 278.

⁸⁷ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 226.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 353.

⁸⁹ 'Pondering Jewish Fate: from Zelig Kalmanovich's Diary' in Lucy S. Dawidowicz (ed.), *A Holocaust Reader*, Behrman House, New York 1976, p. 225-233.

of tens of thousands.’ He even offered up prayers for Jacob Gens, the ‘commandant’ of the Vilna Ghetto: ‘Praised be the God of Israel who has sent unto us this man.’ Such statements must have introduced doubts into Dawidowicz’s mind about whether Hilberg’s claims were so ridiculous. Her admission in the introduction to *The War Against the Jews* that ‘the experience of Jewish history and of past Jewish persecution was utterly inadequate as a guide for the Jews who now confronted a new phenomenon in their history – a powerful nation that had committed its energies and resources to their total annihilation’⁹⁰ places her view closer to that of Hilberg than she might have been comfortable admitting.

Above all, though, Dawidowicz found herself caught in contradictions which she herself had identified in the work of Yad Vashem in 1969, in a critical account of a conference held at Yad Vashem on ‘Manifestations of Resistance During the Holocaust’. She distinguished between Holocaust commemoration and Holocaust history:

The institute is required to discharge two functions: commemoration, which requires eulogy, respect and love for the dead – a softness of heart – and historical investigation, which requires rigor, distance and a passion for truth – a hardness of head. Commemoration, of necessity, demands a single-minded focus on Jewish behaviour, while Holocaust history demands a wide-angled view which encompasses all the actors in the events under study.⁹¹

She went on to question the value of much research on resistance, arguing that the ‘elevation of resistance to a preciousness equal to or above other ultimate virtues’ was ‘alien to Jewish tradition and history.’ In *The War Against the Jews*, Dawidowicz tried to write a history of the era which did justice both to the facts and to the friends she had – she felt – abandoned in Vilna.

Martin Gilbert: The Jewish Tragedy

Ethical questions dog this section. I am lucky enough to have notes from an interview granted to me by Martin Gilbert, and the pleasant memory of the meeting – including lunch and a tour of his library/archive – colours my

⁹⁰ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. xxii.

⁹¹ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, ‘Towards a History of the Holocaust’, *Commentary* (April 1969), pp. 51-56.

opinion. Can I maintain sufficient critical distance while honouring the obligation to describe what I see and draw the conclusions that seem apposite? I hope so, though the reader will have to guess where I (perhaps) soft-pedal or give Gilbert the benefit of the doubt on this basis: I cannot treat 'Gilbert' as simply a voice on the page (or a mind organising the words) but have to consider him as a human being with all the complexities that entails.

In essentials, I agree with Dan Stone as far as the text itself is concerned. He stresses Gilbert's achievement in '[giving] voice to many witness accounts which had been previously ignored' but then also critiques its 'totalising impulse'.⁹² I also agree with Stone's argument that Gilbert writes 'as if the changes in historiographical methodology since the war had simply not occurred'.⁹³ The text certainly makes Stone's central point about the artifice of some historical writing: *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* is in many ways a 'chronicle' and one which does not 'admit that the coherence is of [Gilbert's] own making'.⁹⁴ Whether it is necessarily 'historically inappropriate' in light of a 'post-Holocaust realization of a world without transcendental guarantees' I am not sure.

The interview with him brought out many of these themes. He has a clear sense of periodisation, and has no trouble identifying 'four solutions, the last of which was the Final Solution'; the 'background' of 1933-39; and the 'aftermath' after the war, which he adds, is 'an integral part of the story', like Jewish life before the war.⁹⁵

Asked about his work with maps – a question suggested by a colleague – he makes the intriguing statement that 'Each history of the Holocaust should contain every element of the Holocaust' and starts to explain that his works with maps and photographs – *Holocaust: Maps and Photographs* [1978]; *Final Journey: The Fate of the Jews in Nazi Europe* [1979] – were conscious attempts to develop a narrative he was happy with. The reason for this becomes clear when I ask him what (if any) limitations he sees in the written word. He responds that 'any page, which anybody writes, could be a chapter, and any chapter, a book.' This, I suspect, is the key to

⁹² Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 153.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 156.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 155.

⁹⁵ Notes from interview with Martin Gilbert, 24 January, 2007.

Gilbert – his collected works (his website lists seventy-nine titles) have a repetitious quality to them: there is a clear sense that he returns to different aspects of the same subject at different levels of specificity, which makes his comment ‘I feel very much that there’s no end to the writing’ rather poignant, though he clearly thrives on it. And his humility is in itself humbling; he says that he has found at least one thing he didn’t know in every memoir he has ever read. When asked how he chooses his photographs (his books are almost always illustrated) he replies ‘By going through all the photos I can.’ He sits at his desk and, while I stand behind him, goes through *Final Journey* and identifies the source for almost every one of the photos – 27 years after the book’s publication.

‘All the photos I can’ is further put into context by a visit to the top floor of a private college behind his house which he rents as archive and library. The room is about twenty feet by thirty (somehow metric seems wrong for Gilbert) and one wall is lined with papers – ‘The Churchill papers’ he explains. He takes me round the shelves and starts to show me the different sections on his different researches: into Churchill, and the Second World War, and many other things, including a very battered folder of notes for his initial PhD topic. He has already shown me his Holocaust books, which fill a room on the top floor of his house. He commented that the Eichmann trial transcripts are underused – during breaks in research in Israel, he tells me, he would read them. He takes a volume down from the shelf and shows me the inscription from Moshe Landau, the presiding judge at the trial.

The essence of his approach is collecting. Official documents, books, photographs, letters, oral accounts written on what comes to hand (he describes transcribing one testimony on a paper tablecloth). Everything is collected until he can order it and produce one of his ‘strikingly coherent’ narratives out of what he has. He describes the process of writing *The Holocaust*: he had a wallchart cross-referencing locations with dates and, as he went through, he would cross off the places. He describes his search for ‘something from Dvinsk’ (in Lithuania) which ended when a survivor from Dvinsk walked into his hotel one morning after a talk in ‘what was then Rhodesia’.

His book is more explicable in these terms, and the passion he has for collecting the memories and testimonies of those who were there is moving. My nagging suspicion is that Stone's comments do not do justice to the sincerity with which Gilbert works, or his humility in the face of what is 'a necessary mediation between the past and the present'.⁹⁶ Gilbert's description of *The Jewish Tragedy* as 'an attempt to draw on the nearest of the witnesses, those closest to the destruction, and through their testimony to tell something of the suffering of those who perished, and are forever silent'⁹⁷ has to be taken in the context of the vast number of sources he has collected and is, indeed, still collecting.

An exchange over lunch, however, while not altering my overall impression, gives me an insight into how Gilbert seems to think about history. His wife recounts how, after a lecture in the United States, a student asked 'if he was an intentionalist' and their resulting bewilderment. While the student seems to have been guilty of simple categorisation, the implicit message in their reaction – that the historian simply deals with "what is there" – does suggest that Stone's comment that 'Gilbert does not admit that the coherence is of his own making'⁹⁸ has some justice. I am sure that the wallchart which structured *The Holocaust* was the result of painstaking design but I am unsure that Gilbert would see it in conceptual terms.

The Holocaust illustrates better than any other text the existence of a 'Holocaust metanarrative': the dense layering of voices describing the experiences of 'those closest to the destruction' requires the reader to have a good grasp of the overall narrative, otherwise it is easy to forget that outside these individual voices there were events driving the speakers in different directions. Without 'the bundle of ideas and preconceptions handed down under the label "Holocaust"' the narrative would be overwhelming. True, the evocation of particular experience excludes other experiences. And yet, it might be argued that this was part of the true experience of the Holocaust, which the victims themselves could only rarely perceive as anything other than the individual cruelties they experienced. Dori Laub (himself a survivor)

⁹⁶ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 155.

⁹⁷ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 155.

has explored this, noting that ‘it was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness’ and that ‘the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist.’⁹⁹ Primo Levi described the feeling – or at least attempted to reconstruct it – of realising what it was that he had survived, noting that ‘in the very hour in which every threat seemed to vanish, in which a hope of a return to life ceased to be crazy, I was overcome – as if a dyke had crumbled – by a new and greater pain, previously buried and relegated to the margins of my consciousness by other more immediate pains: the pain of exile, of my distant home, of loneliness, of friends lost, of youth lost and of the heaps of corpses all around.’¹⁰⁰

Although she was not liberated from a camp, Marianne Ellenbogen’s description to Mark Roseman of the feeling of liberation in 1945 draws out the ambiguities:

The “historical moment” passed without fanfares. Everyone felt an enormous sense of release. But that was more of an unconscious feeling. It’s often hard to see the full significance of such an event as it happens. How should we evaluate it and where does it fit in? It wasn’t obvious at the time that this was a turning point. Instead, one simply flowed into a new set of circumstances. Something had ended, but the thing that was beginning wasn’t clear at all.¹⁰¹

In the light of these comments, we have to ask whether Gilbert’s approach has not in fact captured something of the event itself, in which ‘the perpetrators [...] brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness.’¹⁰²

But how then are we to regard Gilbert as the creator of order in the text? As a “semiotic totalitarian” (to adapt Dan Stone’s characterisation of Hilberg’s methodology) making sense where there is none, providing the absent “Why?” which Primo Levi was denied in Auschwitz? This seems more

⁹⁹ Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival’ in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Routledge, New York 1992, p. 81.

¹⁰⁰ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man/The Truce*, p. 190.

¹⁰¹ Letter by Marianne Ellenbogen to friends in the Bund, 30.5.1945, quoted in Mark Roseman, *The Past in Hiding*, Allen Lane, London 2000, p. 394.

¹⁰² Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p. 81.

than a little harsh on Gilbert. How, after all, can the voices of the Holocaust speak without imposing some order on them? Indeed, can any voice speak without imposing order on what it wishes to say?

A genre has emerged in popular Holocaust literature which seeks to tell the story of the Holocaust through oral history. They illustrate the problems of emphasising the voice of the witness and the degree to which a 'Holocaust metanarrative' is a requirement if, as Laurence Rees claims in his foreword to *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*, such books can be 'a significant contribution to our emotional understanding of the Holocaust'.¹⁰³ Rees's comments, as well as the very limited introductions to individual chapters, assume a degree of knowledge of the processes which operate behind the 'voices' we are given to hear. Furthermore, the very positive message which the book wishes to send to its reader: that despite its illustration of 'the essential capriciousness of life' in the Holocaust (or perhaps in life generally – Rees leaves the possibility open), 'the world is a better place for this book being in it' because of the lessons that can be learnt from it. The lessons identified by Rees and Lyn Smith are worthy lessons – 'countless examples of how, even in the most deprived, degrading and cruel circumstances, people held firm to their humanity and steadfastly clung to the values that their parents and communities had bequeathed them'¹⁰⁴ – and recall Gilbert's claim at the end of *The Holocaust* that 'Merely to give witness by one's own testimony was to contribute to a moral victory.'¹⁰⁵

Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust is part of a series of books published by The Imperial War Museum based on the resources of its Sound Archive, and also part of a general expansion of oral history as a means of making sense of the past. Walking into a bookshop, one is struck by the dominance of biography, autobiography, and memoir in history sections. The roots of this probably lie in the dominance of visual media in mass communication and the requirement of those media for 'human interest' to engage the viewer. It also, perhaps, speaks of something deeper: as Jeremy Popkin suggests, a 'cultural moment' with a 'mistrust of overarching "grand narratives"' which means many

¹⁰³ Laurence Rees, 'Foreword' in Lyn Smith, *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*, Ebury Press, London 2005, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Lyn Smith, *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*, p. xiii.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, p. 828.

people 'attribute a power of conviction to first-person accounts that they are reluctant to grant to the work of either historians or authors of fiction.'¹⁰⁶ As a British subject, I suspect that the growth of explicit political manipulation in recent years may have something to do with this. As John Tulloch puts it, there is 'a continuing, disempowered silence' in the face of attempts by governments to 'frighten and silence people'¹⁰⁷ and an awareness that witnesses can be given words to say that are not theirs. The appearance of Tulloch's image on the front pages of some newspapers in 2006, appearing to endorse anti-terror legislation he in fact opposed,¹⁰⁸ is a strong example of how wary we have had to become of media distortion.

The contradiction in this is exposed by Gilbert's text: in order to focus on first-person accounts, we need a narrative structure to put them into. Stone is correct in stating that Gilbert's 'strikingly coherent' narrative has a 'totalising impulse' which does not fully declare itself. How far, though, does Stone's analysis itself – by selecting particular works and placing them in order – contain such an impulse which 'propose[s] a master narrative which is unidirectional and teleological; it does not admit that details have been left out, [is] univocal, and implies a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict.'?¹⁰⁹

Saul Friedländer: Nazi Germany and the Jews

My question of Dan Stone is, of course, equally applicable to my own discussion, and the beginning of this section raises this fact very sharply. I am aware that by following the historiography chronologically I have created a narrative of my own, and will doubtless go on to make a case for some kind of progress which is justified on its own terms rather than through any necessary qualities of its own. Such awareness, however, does not necessarily invalidate my text by exposing its artifice. By positing myth as the organising principle of this study I have, I hope, made clear that this analysis is not

¹⁰⁶ Jeremy D. Popkin, 'First-Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust', *Ideas* Vol. 9 No. 1 (2002), p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ John Tulloch, *One Day in July: Experiencing 7/7*, Little, Brown, London 2006, p. 222.

¹⁰⁸ See Ros Coward, 'They have given me somebody else's voice – Blair's voice', *The Guardian*, Thursday 10 November 2005.

¹⁰⁹ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 146.

intended as any kind of definitive answer to the questions raised by either the Holocaust or its historiography. Instead, it is a record (here and now) of my responses to both, and a narrative of my attempt to deconstruct the narratives of others.

Saul Friedländer is perhaps the most theoretically complex historian of the Holocaust. Alongside historical research into what happened during the Holocaust he has also continually considered the implications of both what happened and how we decide it should be presented.¹¹⁰ The search for a way to 'interpret its internal dynamics, how to render adequately both its utter criminality and its utter ordinariness, or, for that matter, where and how to place it within a wider historical context'¹¹¹ is one that Friedländer acknowledges as continually undertaken and eternally unresolved. This awareness of the complexities of writing history led, as Stone notes, to the first volume of *Nazi Germany and the Jews* being 'eagerly awaited'¹¹²

The problem that Stone has with Friedländer is (I think) one born of disappointment, as it became clear that despite the 'highly theoretical approach to history' which Friedländer's text had 'promised',¹¹³ what was delivered was a 'surprisingly conventional'¹¹⁴ narrative. Stone is full of praise for the quality of the narrative, and its juxtaposition of individual 'microhistory' with the 'necessary information about the Nazi manoeuvres in Jewish policy'.¹¹⁵ He also notes Friedländer's undermining of the intentionalist/functionalist debate by positing 'the annihilation policies of the Third Reich' as 'the fundamental obstacle to historical understanding'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ For example, Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1993, or the collection edited by Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, The article by Friedländer, 'An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges' in Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (eds.), *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, Continuum, London 2010, pp. 21-29 is also very useful, though it repeats much of the material discussed in the introductions to *Years of Persecution* and *Years of Extermination*.

¹¹¹ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, p. 1.

¹¹² Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 162.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 162.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 162.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 162.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 163.

Why, though, did the historian who had offered hope of bringing together the theory of representation with historical analysis produce a work which, no less than the others analysed by Stone and myself, 'propose[s] a master narrative which is unidirectional and teleological; it does not admit that details have been left out, [is] univocal, and implies a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict.'? Friedländer's central concept is 'redemptive antisemitism', the idea that 'redemption would come as liberation from the Jews – as their expulsion, possibly their annihilation.'¹¹⁷ This is no less a construct than Hilberg's 'machinery of destruction' or Dawidowicz's 'war against the Jews'. Admittedly, Friedländer's use of the word 'possibly' introduces a flexibility into the narrative which both Hilberg and Dawidowicz lack, but ultimately Friedländer faces two problems which defeat all historians who attempt to write history: the need to produce finished works and the impossibility of escape from 'transferential relations'¹¹⁸ with the subject matter.

Friedländer focuses on the question of transferential relations in his introduction to *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. He begins by acknowledging the degree to which for historians of his generation 'ploughing through the events of those years entails not only excavating and interpreting a collective past like any other, but also recovering and confronting decisive elements of our own lives.'¹¹⁹ This leads him to a justification of his approach as an 'attempt to convey an account in which Nazi policies are indeed the central element, but in which the surrounding world and the victims' attitudes, reactions, and fate are no less an integral part of this unfolding history.'¹²⁰

Friedländer continued his history in a second volume, *The Years of Extermination*.¹²¹ In the Introduction, he attempted once more to characterise what a history of the Holocaust should constitute:

¹¹⁷ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, p. 87.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹²¹ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945*, Phoenix, London 2008 [2007].

The history of the Holocaust cannot be limited only to a recounting of German policies, decisions, and measures that led to this most systematic and sustained of genocides; it must include the reactions (and at times the initiatives) of the surrounding world and the attitudes of the victims, for the fundamental reason that the events we call the Holocaust represent a totality defined by this very convergence of distinct elements.¹²²

Shortly after this, he used the words 'integrative' and 'integrated', to match his use of 'integral' in the first volume. This awareness of a need for 'integrity' however, means that Friedländer's project is revealed as necessarily an attempt at a narrative of the period. If the 'major challenge' of Holocaust historiography is 'Establishing a historical account of the Holocaust in which the policies of the perpetrators, the attitudes of surrounding society, and the world of the victims could be addressed within an integrated framework' some thought must be given to what it means to produce an integrated framework at all.

To produce an integrated framework means to structure the material we have available into a form which reflects the principle by which the structuring is accomplished: and by doing so we necessarily lose some flexibility of interpretation.

This tension is expressed very cogently in responses to Friedländer by Doris Bergen and Michael Wildt, both of whom point out that the chronological structure of the book bears comparison to Raul Hilberg.¹²³ Both focus on the problem that what Bergen terms the 'simple tool' of 'putting things in order'¹²⁴ allows Friedlander to structure the array of accounts by those experiencing the measures alongside those organising them. Wildt also points out that both Hilberg and Friedlander were confronted by a common problem – one 'usually neglected by most other Holocaust historians' – of 'finding a language, an idiom to write about the Holocaust.'¹²⁵

This returns us to a fundamental truth of historical writing. Namely, that even if we (as good historians) obey Richard Evans's injunction quoted earlier

¹²² Ibid. p. xv.

¹²³ Doris L. Bergen, 'No End in Sight? The Ongoing Challenge of Producing an Integrated History of the Holocaust', pp. 289-309, and Michael Wildt, 'Raul Hilberg and Saul Friedländer – Two Perspectives on the Holocaust', pp. 101-113, in Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (eds.), *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*.

¹²⁴ Doris L. Bergen, 'No End in Sight?', p. 290.

¹²⁵ Michael Wildt, 'Raul Hilberg and Saul Friedländer', p. 107.

that 'if there is information which may run counter to the case argued by the side commissioning the report the expert is not at liberty to suppress it'¹²⁶ then we equally have to bear in mind what Evans chooses to downplay (in a striking illustration of the process): that conceptual concerns and beliefs present the information to us in a form that is already not neutral. As I argued earlier, even if we could obtain all the evidence, we would have to adopt a sequence in order to process it. Once we have done that, we have to accept the consequences: that there will be episodes that are not discussed, people who are not mentioned, decisions that are not analyzed. Friedländer himself has acknowledged that the result of his choices was 'a return to a chronicle-like narration', even if this choice 'remains the only recourse after major interpretive concepts have been tried and found lacking.'¹²⁷ To put the matter bluntly, once we have decided that we are writing history, the label itself restricts us to a limited number of forms. The results of alternative strategies – such as the 'collective autobiography' of Karen Gershon's *We Came As Children*¹²⁸ - may be powerful, but they are something other than history, seeking to explain how the past felt – or even feels – without detailing the structure of that past in a way that is explicit.

Although Friedländer does acknowledge the structure of his account, he still has to decide on inclusion and exclusion of material, and these choices are why his account, though it may be a remarkable achievement, did not meet all of the (admittedly intense) expectation that it aroused. To cite one example that is particularly striking for this study, Friedländer does not mention the taking of the photographs that are the basis of this project. Given his recurring interest in the volume in the way the perpetrators recorded in letters and diaries as well as photographs, the crimes they committed, it seems curious that a collection that has been as influential as the Auschwitz Album should not at least merit a footnote: particularly when, as will be discussed in the next chapter, so much can be brought out of this collection about how the SS viewed their victims and their task. This is particularly

¹²⁶ Richard Evans, 'History, Memory and the Law', p. 330.

¹²⁷ Saul Friedländer, 'An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges', p. 25.

¹²⁸ Karen Gershon (ed.), *We Came As Children: A Collective Autobiography*, Papermac, London 1989 [1966].

curious when, as David Cesarani noted in a review, the opening pages of the second volume 'demonstrate Friedländer's acute ability to read visual documents and to appreciate their importance.'¹²⁹ The refusal to allow his readers to make up their own minds about the images he discusses is to retain control of the interpretation in a very traditional way.

Nor is Friedländer immune to the desire of the author to keep the reader interested, to draw out certain episodes for attention while necessarily putting others in the background. As I read *Years of Extermination*, I started to recognise the characteristic way in which the end of a chapter was marked by particularly 'telling' episodes and quotations. At the end of Chapter Seven, Friedländer recounts how Richard Lichtheim, the delegate of the Jewish Agency in Geneva, was asked to write a 1500-word report on 'the position of Jews in Europe'. Lichtheim, Friedländer tells us, wrote 4000 words, which 'conveyed his anguish in sentences that, decades later, can sear the reader's mind':

I am bursting with facts [...] but I cannot tell them in an article of a few thousand words. I would have to write for years and years... That means I really cannot tell you what has happened and is happening to five million persecuted Jews in Hitler's Europe. Nobody will ever tell the story – a story of five million personal tragedies every one of which would fill a volume.¹³⁰

As well as being a poignant end to a chapter describing the events of a remarkably harsh period even by the standards of the Holocaust (July 1942-March 1943), Lichtheim's comments raise a final problem: that to do justice to the subject, we would also require sufficient space to do so.

Historians, unfortunately, do not have unlimited space: we produce books, articles, monographs, research reports, lectures and so on, all of them bounded in time and space. We are, therefore, left having to make choices as to what is included or excluded, what is emphasised or minimised in importance, and how all of these things are ordered. As Friedländer points out, 'the historian's necessary measure of detachment is not precluded',¹³¹ though my argument in many ways is that even that 'necessary measure' is

¹²⁹ David Cesarani, "'Integrative and Integrated History": A Sweeping History of the Shoah Rooted in Everyday Life – and Death', *Yad Vashem Studies*, Volume 36, Number 1 (2008), p. 277.

¹³⁰ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, p. 467.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

very largely illusory. To consider this idea properly, however, means that I need to move beyond consideration of specific works and draw some broader conclusions.

The History of the Present¹³²

The ultimate focus of this project, regardless of its origins in my training as a historian, is the present and future. While the record of historians in predicting the future is notoriously bad, the assumption of my work is that the study of history is fundamentally an exercise in explaining the present. This will be dealt with in the chapters and conclusions which follow, but here I would like to consider one aspect of the future: the chances that historians will ever truly 'work within the rift.'¹³³

The major obstacle is time, which, while it may not 'propose a master narrative' of itself, is certainly 'unidirectional'. We are getting further away from the concrete realities we describe, and as they recede further the difficulties of separating not only fact from fiction but also the fictions of the past from those of the present will become more profound. Furthermore, as time moves forward different elements of the story will seem important as the consequences of the events change the events themselves in our understanding, imposing apparent teleologies by chance.

In addition, the accumulation of consequences will bring to the fore our need to control the past, to make it manageable and 'usable'. This might be likened to the psychological process of 'narrative control', by which we order 'what is otherwise a horrendously vulnerable experience, living on in flashbacks after the bomb.'¹³⁴

Using John Tulloch's words in the previous paragraph brings me back to the concerns I voiced at using Young's questions to analyse the texts: that they unconsciously cast us all in the role of 'survivors' and victims. I also worry at using Tulloch's words: I fear I may be devaluing the very personal insight of a remarkably wise and compassionate human being to make an intellectual point. And yet I feel few of those scruples in using words from

¹³² There is an obvious debt here to Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s*, Allen Lane, London 1999.

¹³³ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 266.

¹³⁴ John Tulloch, *One Day in July*, p. 12.

Primo Levi or Tadeusz Borowski. But these scruples are special pleading: we must have a language *in which* we speak about what we describe, and the resonance of particular words or passages must be treated respectfully but equally honoured in use. I suspect John Tulloch would be more disappointed if I held back from what I perceive to be a useful comparison simply to spare his feelings. And my use of Tulloch's text reflects the state of enquiry: we use "what is there" to build the representation of the past that seems right now (in whichever way the reader chooses to interpret the last three words).

One avenue down which such a thought might progress, as mentioned earlier in this text, is to claim that all historical study is worthless because it is necessarily incomplete, or that all representations are equally valid because all are equally based on assumption. Once again, however, this is not the case, and historical enquiry, if it can be contained within the limits of humility, is a valuable tool in establishing the invalidity of both assertions.

Robert Jan van Pelt is at pains in *The Case for Auschwitz* to emphasise the complexity of the Auschwitz site and the history of the events which took place there (even if, in using the word 'there' for 'Auschwitz', I unify a complex reality into one word pregnant with meaning). He points to the ten functions of Auschwitz identified in his report and states:

In a sense, it would be possible to write ten histories of Auschwitz: Auschwitz as a concentration camp for Poles, Auschwitz as a production site for gravel and sand, and so on. Each of these histories has their own political, institutional and financial context, each its own unique spatial impact on the site and temporal regularities, variabilities, and times of crisis and change. At times these histories run at cross-purposes, at times parallel without interfering with one another, at times they communicate, converge, and unite. As a result, a historian who desires to make a judgement about any aspect of the history of Auschwitz must take into account an often labyrinthine context, which is made even more difficult to negotiate because of intentional camouflage of certain aspects of the camp's history during the war and the wilful destruction of archival and other material evidence at the end of the war.¹³⁵

As I have argued elsewhere, the complexity of the Auschwitz site as a historical reality means it must be 'incumbent on us to cultivate as precise a sense as possible of how the Auschwitz of today matches to the Auschwitz of

¹³⁵ Robert Jan van Pelt, 'The Van Pelt Report', retrieved from <http://www.hdot.org/evidence/vani.asp>, 17 May 2007.

the past.¹³⁶ In this the tools and skills of the historian are of enormous use in the accumulation of detail and in trying to maintain a historical record that is as far as possible complete. It should also be noted, though, that the ten functions identified by van Pelt do not include the murder of approximately 21,000 Sinti and Roma: his claim that 'it would be possible to write ten histories of Auschwitz' excludes the eleventh and subsequent histories. This is developed further in Chapter 5.

Maintaining the sources of history, however, is only a part of the historian's task. As Richard Evans notes, historians do not explore documents to establish beyond reasonable doubt, but in a 'broader frame of probabilities.'¹³⁷ And in assessing those broader frames, we have to see that our conception of what is possible – what belongs 'in the world of existing things' – drives our work as historians. It is the language of possibility, on the basis of which we define our realities in the past no less than in the present, which must offer the most potent challenge to our perception of what happened.

Myth, however, by forcing us to see the language *in which* we describe, may allow us to have some flexibility in assessing our own estimation of the 'world of existing things.' Even if, ultimately, it cannot penetrate the rift entirely, at least it problematises that failure.

And this failure is a common trait of all disciplines and institutions that, as developed in the introduction, claim authority to describe the world and interpret its meaning. By themselves, histories are like collections of photographs which select certain elements of what can be ascertained about the past (or captured in the viewfinder) and freeze those possibilities into presentations which pretend to a definitive quality that is much more fragile than it seems. To borrow a phrase from Charles Maier, there are debates and silences.¹³⁸ The problem for the photographer, the historian and the museum curator is that the debates can be presented while the silences cannot. You have to create an image, a text or a display which says *something*.

¹³⁶ Jaime Ashworth, 'Auschwitz Past and Present', lecture at the Galicia Jewish Museum, Krakow, 27 July 2007.

¹³⁷ Richard Evans, 'History, Memory and the Law', p. 330.

¹³⁸ Charles S. Maier, 'Targeting the city: Debates and silences about the aerial bombing of World War II', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, No. 859 (2005), pp. 429-444.

The introduction began with Karen O'Reilly's guidance for the author of an ethnographic text, the fourth of which is 'We select what we write and how.' Chapter 1 made the argument that what we make of apparently authoritative evidence is less certain than it seems. This chapter has shown how the 'transferential relations' between author and subject are always there in some form. As described in the introduction, the purpose of the next three chapters is to look at museums as a three-dimensional hybrid between image and text that raise problems and questions for national cultures. Just as this chapter acknowledged that different works raised different problems, these chapters attempt to do this in relation to the museums.

Chapter 3 On the Mount of Memory.

*'It is a creative struggle to address it, and it is a creative struggle not to address it.'*¹

The purpose of this chapter is to consider what story Yad Vashem tells about the Holocaust and how this relates to the state in which it is located.

The first aspect of this can, in one sense, be quickly summarised by simply looking at the structure of the Historical Exhibition. Entering over a bridge into the vast subterranean exhibition space, one is confronted with an installation entitled, 'The World that Was'; one proceeds through a narrative of destruction, detailing how six million European Jews were murdered; until one arrives at a balcony overlooking a valley, clearly meant to symbolise the state in which Yad Vashem exists.



Figure 1: the concluding balcony of the Historical Exhibition, Yad Vashem, 2007. Photo: Jaime Ashworth.

¹ Ian McEwan, 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech', retrieved from www.ianmcewan.com/bib/articles/jerusalemprize.html on 21 February, 2011.

This has been a narrative structure at Yad Vashem for a long time.² Now tucked away in a shady tunnel, though it used to be placed prominently, the 1970 sculpture by Naftali Bezem, 'From Holocaust to Rebirth', tells the same story.



Figure 2: 'From Holocaust to Rebirth', Naftali Bezem, 1970. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2007.

The work is in four parts: 'The Destruction'; 'Resistance'; 'Immigration to Israel'; 'Rebirth'. The explanatory texts instruct visitors how to read the symbolism: inverted Sabbath candles and a winged fish indicating profanation and despairing cries; flames of battle juxtaposed with a ladder embodying 'resurgence, ascent and promise'; tools for rebuilding on a ship; the Sabbath candles righted, the *sabra* fruit bursting forth – though the lion still weeps for 'the memories of the Holocaust'.³ A 1975 publication by Yad Vashem ends with three paragraphs which tell a similar story:

² See Jeffrey D. Feldman, 'An Etymology of Opinion: Yad Vashem, Authority, and the Shifting Aesthetic of Holocaust Museums' in Yasmin Doosry (ed.), *Representations of Auschwitz: 50 Years of Photographs, Paintings and Graphics*, Department of European Studies, Jagiellonian University/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim 1995, pp. 121-128 for a consideration of how this dynamic has affected the structure of other museums.

³ Photographic record of the texts, 2007, from the author's collection.

SIX MILLION JEWS OF ALL AGES, STRATA AND AFFILIATIONS WERE MURDERED IN THE HOLOCAUST. THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS WHO ESCAPED, WHETHER BY HIDING OR BY JOINING THE UNDERGROUND OR PARTISAN UNITS AND THE FEW WHO SURVIVED THE CAMPS REFUSED TO RETURN TO THEIR FORMER HOMES. THOSE LANDS HAD BECOME GRAVEYARDS TO THEM, AND THEY COULD NOT FACE THE PROSPECT OF RESUMING LIFE IN THOSE COUNTRIES. THE VERY FEW WHO HAD SURVIVED THE PERIOD OF DARKNESS, SUFFERING AND DEATH AND WHO HAD RETURNED TO THEIR NATIVE CITIES AND VILLAGES IN EASTERN EUROPE, WERE RECEIVED WITH ANGER AND HOSTILITY.

THE SURVIVORS, UNWANTED IN THEIR FORMER HOMES AND WEARY OF A LIFE OF TRIBULATION AND ADVERSITY, WAGED A STUBBORN STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHT TO IMMIGRATE TO THE LAND OF ISRAEL. THEY FORMED THE VANGUARD OF THE "ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION" AND CONSTITUTED A POWERFUL FORCE IN THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN WAGED FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT STATE OF ISRAEL.

IN FACT, THE MAJORITY OF THE SURVIVORS REACHED THIS COUNTRY. HERE THEY HAVE MADE NEW LIVES FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN.⁴

The novelist Amos Oz noted in a 1987 article for the newspaper *Davar* that, while the Zionist project had grown from a decision 'to reenter history', the legacy of the past was now preventing that aspiration. 'The major obstacle to our reentry into history,' he continued, 'is, ironically, our enslavement to the horrors of history.'⁵ The challenge of writing about Yad Vashem is in deciding, moment by moment, which tendency is uppermost, and in identifying why.

Why this should be so is hard to say for certain. I believe, though, that the root of this is in the understanding of historical catastrophe proposed by Alan Mintz: an event differentiated from a "common" destructive event in that it 'convulses or vitiates shared assumptions about the destiny of [the Jewish] people in the world'⁶ and which therefore requires explanation: 'first to represent

⁴ Anon., *The Holocaust*, Yad Vashem Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem 1975, pp. 75-79. I have retained the capitalisation of the original to try and convey the almost lapidary quality of these words on the page.

⁵ *Davar*, 13 April, 1987. Reprinted as 'Amalek Week' in Amos Oz (trans. Maurie Golberg-Bartura), *The Slopes of Lebanon*, Vintage, London 1991 [Hebrew 1987], p. 121. This is a recurring theme in Oz's non-fiction: see the essays collected as Amos Oz (trans. Nicholas de Lange), *Under this Blazing Light: Essays*, Canto/Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, and especially 'The meaning of homeland', pp. 77-101.

⁶ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY, 1996 [1984], p. 2.

the catastrophe and then to reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning, and thereby make creative survival possible.’⁷

Catastrophes, therefore, are mythological in the sense of this study in that they change the language *in which* everything is spoken. Whether one refers to the crude typing of Nasser as a new Hitler in the 1960s or the interviews with Holocaust survivors during the 1990 Gulf War, the spectre of the six million is ever-present. And in the peace process, the frequent stalling and false promises are justified with the comparison. ‘A retreat to the borders of 1967,’ said Binyamin Netanyahu, ‘is a retreat to the borders of Auschwitz.’⁸ All the way back in 1967, Abba Eban opened his speech to the United Nations by evoking ‘the greatest catastrophe ever endured by a family of the human race.’⁹ A few pages later, he asserted that ‘the “final solution” was at hand.’¹⁰

Anne Karpf has explored the web of associations, uneasy and uncertain, that have built up on this theme. She notes that her first direct exposure to a discourse which characterised Arabs as Nazis was during a speech by Yitzhak Shamir at Yad Vashem.

One moment Shamir was speaking of the atrocities of the Holocaust, the next he was talking about the danger posed by the Palestinians, and so smooth was the slippage between the two that most people hardly noticed, although a number that did were angered by its political exploitation of the victims of Nazism, their relatives.¹¹

It is this ‘slippage’ that is intriguing, particularly when one notes that Karpf is by no means the first to identify it. Amos Oz, in an open letter to Menachem Begin in June 1982, pointed out that ‘Hitler’s Dead, Mr. Prime Minister’.¹² In his

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Michael Berenbaum, ‘Israel and the Holocaust: Some Reflections on Israel’s 60th Anniversary’, *Midstream*, July/August 2008, pp. 8-11.

⁹ ‘Abba Eban: “The Six Days War” Speech to the U.N. General Assembly, June 19, 1967’ in Walter Laqueur (ed.), *The Israeli-Arab Reader: A documentary history of the Middle East conflict*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1969, p. 207.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 213.

¹¹ Anne Karpf, ‘The ‘Arab Nazi’ and the ‘Nazi Jew’’, in Anne Karpf, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose and Barbara Rosenbaum (eds.), *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Memory*, Verso, London 2008, p. 108.

¹² *Yediot Aharonot*, 21 June, 1982. Reprinted as ‘Hitler’s Dead, Mr. Prime Minister’ in Amos Oz (trans. Maurie Goldberg-Bartura), *The Slopes of Lebanon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-31.

travelogue based on journeys through Israel later that year,¹³ though, it is striking how many of his interlocutors return to the Holocaust for an understanding of their contemporary surroundings.

The tension here is the same as in the preceding chapters: between what happened and what it meant. Mintz observes that the Holocaust (like any other event), rather than having a 'discoverable essence' of meaning, in fact exists for meaning to be made of it: depending on the 'interpretive traditions of the community or culture seeking that meaning.'¹⁴ In other words, as explored earlier, the meaning of the Holocaust is, however difficult it may be to frame, a matter of choice.

But this raises other problems. One risk of mythology as a concept is that everything can have a symbolism that threatens to complicate analysis. While sitting outside a coffee shop on Jaffa Road, watching daily life flow past me, I often questioned whether I was reading too much in to what I saw. My guidebook wrote amusingly of the 'Jerusalem Syndrome' in which visitors 'become overwhelmed by the historical significance [...] and come to the conclusion that they are biblical characters or that the apocalypse is near.'¹⁵ Being in the presence of so much diverse and complex history is certainly exhilarating, and the symbolic history is impossible to ignore: in this city, the *Via Dolorosa* is part of directions as well as a symbol (even if it is doubtful whether the present street actually has anything to do with the crucifixion). And the documented history can present one with a set of juxtapositions that provoke thought. Looking out from Oscar Schindler's grave on Mount Zion, I realised that the valley in front of me was Hinnom, where children were sacrificed to Moloch in vast fires: *holokauston*. Another name for Hinnom is Gehenna, which lent its name to hell in Hebrew and Arabic.¹⁶ With such resonances, the power of symbols can never be ignored.

¹³ Amos Oz (trans. Maurie Goldberg-Bartura), *In the Land of Israel*, Fontana Paperbacks, London 1983.

¹⁴ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Michael Kohn et.al., *Israel and the Palestinian Territories*, Fifth Edition, Lonely Planet, London 2007, p. 89.

¹⁶ See Amos Elon, *Jerusalem: City of Mirrors*, Fontana, London 1996 [1991], p. 28; Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, HarperCollins, London 1996 and Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 2011, make similar

Beyond the valley, moreover, one can see the wall which separates Israel from the Palestinian Authority, snaking across the hill: graffiti on it compares the plight of those on the other side to 'Warsaw 1943',¹⁷ testimony to the way in which the Holocaust is also the language *in which* the Palestinians sometimes speak.¹⁸ As a journalist on the newspaper *Al-Fair Al-Arabi* (The Arab Dawn) told Amos Oz in 1982:

You are our destiny. We are your destiny. Our respective disasters, yours and ours, for decades in this land – these very disasters have welded us together.¹⁹

All consideration of the city demands at least an acknowledgement of what Simon Goldhill terms 'an archaeology that uncovers not so much rock and dust as the sedimented layers of human fantasy, politics and longing.'²⁰ Goldhill's object of study is the Temple of Jerusalem, which he terms a 'monument to the imagination.'²¹ One has to ask, though, whether there is really any other kind.

At the same time, however, it has to be recognised that the Holocaust has been, is and will be (for the foreseeable future) central to Israeli society. As such, it will be remembered, and in concrete forms which choose a way to talk about the past. It may seem at times that there is no form which is unproblematic: or, to borrow a phrase from one supportive and engaged reader of many versions of this chapter, there is no form which I appear to deem adequate.

This problem is, I think, largely irresolvable, for [two] main reasons: firstly, because (as explored in Chapters 1 and 2) there is no neutral description. Whether textual or literal, my analysis will be framed, choosing to describe some things and not others. My text, no less than the memorial work described, has to choose a particular set of words and images with which to 'freeze' the action.

points, as does Simon Goldhill, *Jerusalem: City of Longing*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2008.

¹⁷ Visible for example on the cover of Tanya Reinhart, *Road Map to Nowhere: Israel/Palestine Since 2003*, Verso, London 2006.

¹⁸ See Gilbert Achcar (trans. G. M. Goshgarian), *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, Saqi Books, London 2011 [2010] for a book-length consideration of the interlocking between Palestinian and Israeli narratives of *Holocaust* and *Nakba*.

¹⁹ Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, p. 177.

²⁰ Simon Goldhill, *The Temple of Jerusalem* (Wonders of the World), Profile Books, London 2006, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 18.

James Young places a quote from Nathan Rapoport at the beginning of his chapter on the latter's Warsaw Ghetto monument: 'Could I have made a stone with a hole in it and said, Voila! The heroism of the Jews?'²²

One answer might be that, yes, he could have done so. But it is unlikely that the choice would not have been scrutinised and debated as thoroughly as Young examines the monument that Rapoport chose to produce. In looking at anything for a sustained period it becomes strange and the problems more apparent: there is always a road not taken which can be as important as the road taken.

As explored in the introduction, though, I am aware that the most important truth of what I describe is that something terrible happened, and that its meaning has to be found – or at least approached – somehow. Though it may not always appear that way, I do not presume to dictate the terms of personal grief. I have always tried to remember that the Holocaust is not the subject of 'academic or sterile remembrance [but rather] free, existential remembrance, that penetrates to the innermost part of the human being.'²³

Secondly, one needs to acknowledge the importance of asking questions about what is in front of us. Steven Katz has pointed out 'that silence, too, can be problematic':

[I]f employed incorrectly, or too casually, or too universally, as a – or the – theological response to the Shoah, it removes the Holocaust from history and all post-Holocaust human experience. And by doing so, it may produce the unintended consequence of making the Holocaust irrelevant. If the generations that come after Auschwitz cannot speak of it, and thus cannot raise probing questions as a consequence of it, then it becomes literally meaningless to them.²⁴

A reentry into history is also a reentry into *logos*: the word as what can be proved or argued – or questioned. Moreover, I think Jacqueline Rose's argument

²² James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 155.

²³ Shalom Rosenberg, 'The Holocaust: Lessons, Explanation, Meaning', in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 333.

²⁴ Steven T. Katz, 'Introduction: European and American Responses During and Following the War' in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God*, p. 367.

that it is love rather than hatred which inspires questions needs to be borne in mind:²⁵ if I did not care, I would not care enough to ask the questions.

Reconciling these pressures was not easy, and some readers may feel that I have still not succeeded. Nonetheless, I had to find some way to say something.

For this reason, the criteria developed by Mintz in his analysis of Hebrew literature to assess these responses to catastrophe are the guiding parameters of this chapter. For the record, they appear originally as follows:

(1) the distance in time between the catastrophic event and the response to it; (2) the relationship of the writer to the event: survivor, bystander-witness or descendent; (3) the reflexive focus of the writer on his own ordeal in writing about the catastrophe, and thus the balance of attention between his drama and the event itself; (4) the role of figurative language in representing this subject, especially metaphor, analogy and parable; (5) attitudes to the enemy: the presence or absence of the enemy in the text as a function of the catastrophe's being understood as an internal Jewish drama or an antagonism with the gentile world; (6) the resort to forms of personhood, such as personification and individual vignette, as a means of representing the collective nature of national catastrophe; (7) the image of the world lost in the catastrophe and how its valence changes before and after the event; and (8) the burden or opportunity presented by the texts of the past in the accumulating traditions of catastrophe.²⁶

Though Mintz's critique requires some adaptation to fit the three dimensions of a museum, they provided a starting-point for thinking about how Yad Vashem presents the past. There is a danger that such an approach reduces everything to 'text' for analysis. For this reason, I have tried, wherever possible, to look at aspects of the site which are not written in words.

The distance in time between the catastrophic event and the response to it.

The issue of the distance in time between the catastrophe and the response is a matter of debate. Both Mintz and James Young take the founding of Yad Vashem in 1953 as the decisive moment, arguing that the length of time it

²⁵ Jacqueline Rose, 'On the Myth of Self-Hatred', in Anne Karpf, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose and Barbara Rosenbaum (eds.), *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Memory*, Verso, London 2008, pp. 84-95.

²⁶ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 2.

took to establish a memorial is evidence, in Mintz's words, of 'considerable ambivalence about establishing a national shrine and memorial.'²⁷ He therefore views the period as consisting of a gap in memory. Both he and Young interpret this gap as consisting of shame, leading to the eventual focus on resistance and heroism rather than the victims perceived as having gone passively to their deaths. Young also points to the comparative alacrity in establishing 'The Chamber of the Holocaust' on Mount Zion in 1950 by Rabbi S.Z. Kahana.

What both analyses fail to adequately acknowledge is both the intensity of the debate and its length. The first proposal for an institutionalised form of remembrance in what was to become the state of Israel was made by Mordechai Shenhavi in 1942. As Roni Stauber has shown in his study of those debates, they were in fact a protracted negotiation between various parties inside and outside of the Knesset.²⁸ Mintz's suggestion that the Holocaust was a 'shadowy presence' in the life of the state is not borne out. His comment that the Holocaust was hardly taught in Israeli schools in this period fails to take into account the number of recent arrivals from Europe who would hardly have needed reminding of the events of 1939-1945. Tom Segev notes that 'to these immigrants, the cities and towns conquered by the Germans were not distant planets':

They received reports of friends and relatives who had been deported, lost or killed – fathers and sisters, husbands, wives and children. The Holocaust was their personal tragedy; they lived in fear, in mourning.²⁹

In addition, there is more than one way of looking at the date of 1953. Mintz and Young both imply that it was distant from the event because it was eight years after the end of the Second World War. But one could see it instead as only five years after the establishment of the state and the chaos which attended it. Instead of a halting response to something which no one was prepared to talk about, it becomes an urgent issue the discussion of which could

²⁷ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 163.

²⁸ Roni Stauber (trans. Elizabeth Yuval), *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory*, Vallentine Mitchell, Edgware 2007, especially Chapter 4, 'The 1953 Debate on the "Law of Remembrance of Holocaust and Heroism: Yad Vashem"', pp. 66-77.

²⁹ Tom Segev (trans. Haim Watzmann), *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, Owl Books, New York 2000 [1991], p. 77.

not be postponed. Tom Segev has noted that the discussion about how to memorialise the Holocaust started while it was still in progress in 1942, a conversation he characterises as ‘grotesque’ or even ‘macabre’.³⁰

There is, though, another less literal way of looking at the question of distance in time. Using the metaphor of literary responses, one can ask in what ‘tense’ the Holocaust is addressed at Yad Vashem.

On the surface, it seems clear that the past tense is dominant. One enters the Holocaust Historical Exhibition and it seems clear that the word ‘Historical’ is addressing the past as though it were past. One has to consider, however, both the broader setting and the content before making this judgment.

The broader setting is *Har Hazikaron*, the Mount of Remembrance. Once again, the temptation is to see this as putting the events back into the past. Remembrance, after all, refers to past events.

But this is deceptive: remembrance, when all is said and done, refers to the present and future of an event’s significance. To designate the hill on which Yad Vashem is located – through which the Historical Exhibition burrows – the Mount of Remembrance is to inscribe on the very landscape the imperative to bring the past into the present by asking what is being remembered.

This is further complicated by the location of *Har Hazikaron* next to Mount Herzl, where the leaders of Israel are buried alongside the dead of its wars. A path links the two, making the connection between Israel’s present (or at least, more recent past) and the events remembered at Yad Vashem. The most significant day, moreover, for the memorials of Mount Herzl, is *Yom Hazikaron* – Remembrance Day – connecting the sites again through the word *hazikaron*.

Finally, one has to remember that the use of Hebrew for place names is a loaded one. As Meron Benvenisti has described, the process of naming the land in Hebrew was also a process of erasing the names in Arabic, and one which deliberately blurred the distinction between past, present and future.

Over the years, the distinction between names based upon the actual identity of an ancient site, like Yoqneam, and names of biblical characters like Aviel or biblical

³⁰ Ibid. p. 104.

expressions like Te'ashur – that had been chosen quite randomly – became blurred, and all of these together came to be perceived as “biblical or ancient names.”³¹

This is also true of Yad Vashem's name. One of Shenhavi's original proposals, it comes from Isaiah:

I will give them, in My House,
And within My walls,
A monument and a name, [*yad vashem*]
Better than sons and daughters.
I will give them an everlasting name
Which shall not perish. (Isaiah 56:5)³²

The choice of a biblical verse is at once natural and loaded. Natural, since it fits easily into the tendency identified by Uriel Simon for early Zionism to engage in a ‘two-way association’ with the Bible, in which ‘Biblical history gave the Zionist endeavour roots in time; geography, with its memory-laden sites, confirmed its ties to place; and archaeology provided the newcomers with material proof of their “nativity” in this old-new land.’³³ (Simon, p. 1990) Loaded, since it asserts that this museum is as much a canonical text as the bible from which its name comes.

But Yad Vashem is not an ancient site, though its name claims an ancient heritage. It was founded in 1953 to remember events that occurred far away, though its name says otherwise. Standing in the museum, we are at once here and now and there and then. The Holocaust is both there and then – in the Diaspora – and here and now, in Israel. The recorded tour of the museum tells the visitor that ‘the museum documents the events of the holocaust [sic], an historical narrative, but the present will penetrate before your eyes in the presence of daylight.’³⁴

³¹ Meron Benvenisti (trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta), *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 34.

³² Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York 2004. Unless otherwise stated (for example, where a passage is translated differently by Yad Vashem) all biblical references come from this volume.

³³ Uriel Simon, ‘The Bible in Israeli Life’ in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.) *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1990.

³⁴ Audio Guide, Track 100: Welcome to Yad Vashem. Quotations are taken from the text of the recordings given to the author by Naama Gallil, Director of the Guiding Department at Yad

The relationship of the writer to the event

Mintz's next two criteria concern the way in which the 'writer' – in this case, the museum authorities – relates to the event. Firstly, he asks whether the 'writer' takes the position of survivor, bystander-witness or descendent.

This is a complex question at Yad Vashem. The trajectory of the museum – from pre-Holocaust Europe to a magnificent view of Jerusalem – re-enacts the journey made by Holocaust survivors. The sculpture by Naftali Bezem, *From Shoah to Rebirth*, may have been moved from the entrance to the exhibition to a side alley, but the narrative it records is still central.³⁵

This re-enactment comes at a price, though. By making all visitors into survivors, the museum at the same time keeps the Holocaust alive, re-inscribing the trauma into the fabric of the society it serves, carrying the anxiety into the future.

This is linked to Mintz's next criterion, which is 'the reflexive focus of the writer on his own ordeal in writing about the catastrophe, and thus the balance of attention between his drama and the event itself.'³⁶ In other words, to what extent does the writer acknowledge the events as affecting their own view of the world and thus the way in which they choose to tell the story.

On one level, the museum's designers seem to acknowledge the impact the Holocaust had on Jewish and Israeli consciousness, and the questions it raises for the present day. Avner Shalev, the Director of Yad Vashem, has written that on being offered the post, he at first was reluctant to succeed Yitzhak Arad, 'a Holocaust survivor and respected historian' but then realised that 'my generation must assume responsibility for shaping the memory of the Holocaust.' Shalev goes on to explain his view:

Vashem, and one of the team who created the exhibition. I also rely on my notes taken at the time to record additional sound effects and so on.

³⁵ James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, pp. 251-252.

³⁶ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 2.

For Jews, the Holocaust is an experience that has been seared into our identity and forces us to ask difficult historical, creedal, moral, and educational questions. Foremost among them are why and how an ideology of total murder took form, how the murder of a people and the destruction of Jewish existence in Europe, amid the indifference of the Jews' neighbours and the world's silence, became possible. The ongoing discourse will determine whether the Holocaust becomes just another event to be studied in history books, or whether its examination and memorialisation lead to a heightened consciousness of the event's significance that can shape the face of civilisation. Will humankind develop a broad commitment to creedal, religious and human values that bind the individual human being, created in God's image, who lives by the commandment "Do not murder" and is devoted to the preservation of human freedom, dignity, and rights?³⁷

This statement suggests a high level of 'reflexive focus' on the task of telling the story of the Holocaust. But it does not tell the whole story. As long as the museum is part of an Israeli state that at times appears to be living in opposition to the values that Shalev extols, it cannot be uncorrupted. The view of Jerusalem that concludes the Holocaust exhibition overlooks the site of Deir Yassin, a Palestinian village that was all but eradicated during the 1948 war.

The role of figurative language in representing this subject

In addition to the descriptions of artefacts on an informational level, Yad Vashem contains examples of written material that is designed to frame the exhibition in broader terms. This section will describe them and consider the messages they transmit.

First of all, we must return to the name of the institution itself. As discussed above, 'Yad Vashem' comes from the Book of Isaiah. But this is only half the story: the full name of the museum is 'Yad Vashem: The Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.' This should give us pause.

Firstly, the division of memory into the categories of 'Heroes' and 'Martyrs' is an attempt to draw a clear dividing line between those who fought and those

³⁷ Avner Shalev, 'Building a Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem' in Joan Ockman *et al.*, *Yad Vashem, Moshe Safdie – The Architecture of Memory*, Lars Muller Publishers, Baden 2006, pp. 51-52.

who died without a struggle. As James Young puts it, dividing memory 'between the survivors' memory of victims and the fighters' memory of resistance.'³⁸

This is given concrete expression in 'Ghetto Fighters' Square', where a reproduction of Nathan Rapoport's memorial to the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto stands. The figures of the fighters, proud and defiant, burst forth from the wall, while to the right the victims march, heads bowed, almost disappearing into the granite, recessed into the brick wall which stands for the Ghetto.

Alongside the issue of Martyrs and Heroes, though, one has to put the question of what 'authority' means in this context. Young notes the role conceived for Yad Vashem as the institution intended to 'share and buttress the state's ideals and self-definition.'³⁹ This can be seen today in the way the audio guide frequently refers to Yad Vashem's right to speak for the government of Israel – for example in awarding the state honour of 'Righteous Among the Nations' – and for the Jewish people as a whole. But more than this, the use of the word 'authority' also marginalises other narratives – something described by Roni Stauber, who recounts the process by which Yad Vashem eclipsed alternative sites of Holocaust remembrance such as the Chamber of the Holocaust, or *kibbutzim* run by Holocaust survivors representing political groups such as *Hashomer Hatzair* which had a stake in the memory of the Holocaust.

The contrast between the Chamber of the Holocaust and Yad Vashem is striking. Instead of the glossy and highly-finished exhibition on Har Hazikaron, the visitor to Mount Zion finds a much rawer, darker interpretation of the destruction. The rusted sign indicates the degree to which this is a more marginal interpretation, though it may be 'Israel's original memorial to the six million'.

³⁸ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 211. Also see Jonathan Webber, 'Jewish Identities in the Holocaust: Martyrdom as a Representative Category' in Antony Polonsky (ed.) *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. Volume Thirteen: Focusing on the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London 2000, pp. 128-146, for a consideration of the wider theological issues around the use of the term 'martyrs'. A shorter version of this paper, 'Jewish Martyrdom in the Holocaust: A Representative Category' can be found in Yasmin Doosry (ed.), *Representations of Auschwitz*, op. cit., pp. 71-86. Benzion Dinur, 'Problems confronting "Yad Washem" in its Work of Research', *Yad [V]ashem Studies* 1 (1957), pp. 7-30 also differentiates sharply between 'the European catastrophe' and 'Jewish resistance' (p. 9): Dinur (the first director of Yad Vashem) draws a distinction between 'those who lost their lives in the course of the European catastrophe' and 'those who fell in the struggle against the Nazis.' (p. 8)

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 243.



Figure 3: sign by the Chamber of the Holocaust, Mount Zion, 2007. Photo: Jaime Ashworth.

Inside, the low ceilings and impression of soot combine with hand-lettered signs and clumsily-laminated texts to reinforce this sense that the Chamber is outside of the mainstream. The language, too, is rawer, less concerned with those who are outside its understanding of the world. Hebrew texts here are left to stand alone, untranslated; and the words (when translated) are direct and sharp. The inscription on the Candle Memorial has a righteous anger that texts at Yad Vashem rarely, if ever, possess.

O God, full of mercy, Who dwells in the Heavens, deliver proper rest on the wings of the Divine Presence, in the ascents of the holy, the pure, and the courageous... Almighty God, remember the six million people, women, the old and children who were murdered, with all sorts of torture and cruel death by the Nazis may their names be blotted out⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Translation of Hebrew text by Dr. Dan Levene on the basis of a photograph by the author, 2007.

Next to this memorial is a cabinet containing a jacket made from Torah scrolls worn, the simple label tells us, 'by a Nazi officer in order to antagonise the Jews.' It goes on to add that the tailor ordered to make it took 'revenge' by sewing it from 'all the curses which befall the evil doers.' Once again, there is an edge to this language that is very different to Yad Vashem. One can hear the cry of the brothers' blood which the sign at the entrance of the Chamber invokes.



Figure 4: Jacket sewn from Torah scrolls, Chamber of the Holocaust, 2007. Photo: Jaime Ashworth.

But the Chamber of the Holocaust can make statements that cause wounds as it does not have the authority vested in Yad Vashem. As Stauber relates, the tone of the Chamber played a key role in its marginalisation, with a member of the Yad Vashem team sent to investigate the possibility of

cooperation reporting that he saw 'things which, in my opinion, were not done in the spirit of Judaism and which bordered on idolatry.'⁴¹

How, though, does the authority won by Yad Vashem frame itself? Perhaps the best place to start looking at this question is the inscription on the gate to the museum, taken from Ezekiel: 'And I shall put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I shall put you down upon your own soil.'

The political implications of this are clear. The suffering of the Holocaust is contextualised as being a trial which resulted in the establishment of Israel. The display of the quotation on the inner side of the gate – visible from the inside, or when the gate is an exit rather than an entrance – also narrativises the cemeteries of Mount Herzl. They are made to signify a continuing struggle that carries almost as high a price as the Holocaust. It is significant that the first memorial one comes to, having taken the path between Yad Vashem and Mount Herzl, is that dedicated to the victims of terrorism: more Jews slain at random for being Jews.

But the picture in the plaza the gate demarcates is more complex. The Palestinian cleaners in their uniforms raise the question of whose soil it was, is, or might be. Another biblical passage, this time from Joel, tries to neutralise these questions:

Has the like of this happened in your days
Or in the days of your fathers?
Tell your children about it
And let your children tell theirs
And their children the next generation! (Joel 1:2-3)

The problem here, of course, is that it has happened again, in our lifetimes. Even if one leaves the Palestinians out of the equation (and few would argue that what is happening is genocide, though the charge of ethnic cleansing is hard to refute), then Cambodia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia make a mockery of this sentiment.

But this is not the intent of those who put the quotation on the wall. This biblical passage serves to make the Holocaust unique. This is the most banal

⁴¹ Moshe Kol, quoted in Roni Stauber, *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s*, p. 99.

interpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust: that never again will Jews be killed in such numbers. Placed once again so that those exiting the museum will see it on one of the pillars of the reception building, it inoculates the visitor who, after the exhibition, is likely to interpret 'this' as meaning the Holocaust. The ironies of this are explored below in the context of the burden or opportunity presented by past traditions.

Attitudes to the enemy

Mintz argues that the enemy's presence or absence in the text is indicative of the catastrophe 'being understood as internal Jewish drama or an antagonism with the gentile world.'⁴² In other words, is the catastrophe seen as being to do with the Jewish relationship to God or as an event which is simply the result of gentile evil?

This is clearly relevant to Yad Vashem, which in common with many Holocaust museums presents the enemy in great detail. In Galleries 2 and 7, the museum goes to great lengths to locate the Nazis – and even the entire Gentile world – as the source of trouble.

Gallery 2 introduces the world of German Jewry in the interwar period after explaining the origins of Nazi antisemitism in terms of Christian antecedents and the nineteenth-century obsession with race. The Nazis are presented as the inevitable outcome of these processes, in which antisemitism changed form but not essence: 'If they hated Jews before for daring to be different, they hated them even more now, in the modern era, for wanting to become like the majority of the population.'⁴³

The gallery portrays Nazism, moreover, as a phenomenon in which all Germans participated. As the audio guide describes:

Look at the picture of the Nazi party conference in front of you. It witnesses one of the methods the Nazis used to gain the support of the masses – huge public rallies that featured Nazi flags, choreographed marches carrying torches, and inciting

⁴² Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 2.

⁴³ Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (eds.), *To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance at Yad Vashem*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2005, p. 29.

speeches on racist supremacy encouraging hatred towards Jews. These rallies lent a feeling of intoxicating strength to the masses, contributing to their willingness to follow Hitler unquestioningly.⁴⁴

Zwi Bacharach, a survivor, emphasises this in the testimony which runs on a video loop in the gallery and is excerpted in both the museum catalogue and the audio guide.

I remember [after Kristallnacht], Mother stood, pale, and cried. What happened? I recall that she phoned non-Jewish friends. She had more non-Jewish friends than Jewish ones. No answer. Not one.⁴⁵

This is the message of the Gallery: that firstly, no matter how perfectly Jews assimilate, they will always be singled out as Jews; and, secondly, that as long as Jews rely on non-Jews for support they will be disappointed. Because, however successful and established Jews are in non-Jewish societies, Gentiles only need encouragement to desert their Jewish friends.

In Gallery 7, this is broadened to the world. The audio guide introduces the gallery – entitled ‘Resistance and Rescue’ – in the following way:

Go into the next gallery now, and hear about the world’s indifference to the murder of Jews.⁴⁶

The use of tenses is curious. The statement is unbounded, turning the conduct of the world at a specific historical moment into the behaviour of all non-Jews everywhere at all times – there is something of the Chamber of the Holocaust here, which describes itself on a sign (Fig. 3) as displaying ‘examples of Jew hatred today throughout the world’.

Even Yad Vashem’s section on the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ frames the actions of those who saved Jews within the context of the exceptional nature of their actions. The audio guide underlines this.

Despite the risks to themselves and their families, these people chose to act on behalf of the Jews. We must remember that their actions were extraordinary. Most

⁴⁴ Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 201.

⁴⁵ Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (eds.), *To Bear Witness*, p. 52. Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 209.

⁴⁶ Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 700.

persecuted Jews came across a wall of indifference and fear on the part of the local community and in many cases they received hostile treatment, sometimes even physical abuse. But given that the persecution of Jews was the norm, [these] Righteous Among the Nations deserve special commemoration. Their actions are testament to the fact that helping and saving the Jews was possible and the decision to extend a helping hand was the result of a courageous human choice, a decision not to stand on the sidelines, a decision to act to preserve the sanctity of human life.⁴⁷

The section on ‘the Righteous’ concludes with an account of the actions of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Budapest Jews by issuing forged papers, only to disappear under the Soviet occupation. The lesson is clear: even helping Jews runs the risk of retribution, however heroic the individuals who acted were.

So the only way for Jews to act on the comment by Tuvia Bielski quoted in the audio guide and the catalogue – ‘Don’t rush to fight and die...we need to save lives. It is more important to save Jews than to kill Germans’⁴⁸ – is to take arms. The threats from outside, whether they take the form of active persecution or indifference keep Jews – or in this case, Israelis, not that a meaningful distinction is made at this point – together.

This precariousness is spoken differently in the memorial campus outside. The Partisan’s Monument is a vast arrangement of six hexagonal stone blocks, set to form a hole in the shape of a Star of David. No mortar is visible and, standing next to it, I reflected that pressure keeps things together.

The image of the world lost in the catastrophe and how its valence changes before and after the event

This is a theme introduced in the first gallery, entitled ‘The World That Was’. Consisting of a video installation by the Israeli artist Michal Rovner, the visitor is confronted with images of Jewish life in Europe. Men and women appear at windows, a band plays on a street, children beckon us. In contrast to the gallery’s emphasis on the past, it is entitled ‘Living Landscape’.

⁴⁷ Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 711.

⁴⁸ Caption in Gallery 7 and Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 705.

The question this installation raises most urgently is that of beauty. It is a very moving piece of art: more than once, I saw visitors leaving in tears after just a few minutes, unable to face the exhibition it opened. But it is not innocent.

First of all, one has to question the composition. As the museum catalogue makes clear, what appears to be a depiction is a highly constructed artefact: a collage of idylls culled from many different points in time and space. As with the photographs of Roman Vishniac discussed in Chapter 1, this “world that was” is a world seen (or imagined) by its author.



Figure 5: Still from ‘Living Landscape’ www.yadvashem.org

The building in the image above was in Nowogrodek in Lithuania. The scenes inside the building are from an old-age home in the Netherlands. The girls waving in the foreground are from Kolbuszowa in Poland. The audio guide notes that ‘Yad Vashem has chosen to present the Jewish world as it was prior to the war; lively and creative on European land, a world that dealt with its past and future with exceptional vigour and energy.’⁴⁹

This is an intriguing choice. Given that for many Jews in pre-war Europe, life was not idyllic, what purpose does this choice serve?

⁴⁹ Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 102.

The answer is given immediately in the form of pictures of the massacre at Klooga in Estonia, which follows 'Living Landscape'. Murdered just a few days before the Red Army liberated Estonia, the pictures of corpses piled on logs are an abrupt contrast to the nostalgia of the 'Living Landscape'. In this way, 'the world that was' is idealised, heightening the sense of betrayal by the non-Jews who lived alongside it. The picture that is intended is summarised in a comment by Michal Rovner quoted in the descriptive plaque in the museum: 'The challenge was to recreate the atmosphere of Jewish life[.] I took different film clips and blended them into one background, just as the Jews blended into the countries where they lived.'⁵⁰

But idealisation can only be accomplished in two dimensions. Michal Rovner's comment above is revealing because it actually demonstrates how only a blend of images can produce the ideal picture. The realities of life in any individual community were more complex, quite apart from the variety of Jewish identities and experiences condensed into one by Rovner. Would Dutch, Lithuanian and Polish Jewry have been able to coexist in the way the installation suggests? Israelis might argue that, yes, in Israel they can, but the tumultuous nature of Israeli politics would call this into question.

The resort to forms of personhood, such as personification and individual vignette, as a means of representing the collective nature of national catastrophe

From this destroyed world "that was", we are shown many of the individuals who went about their lives. But we are shown them in a particular way, as either Israelis or Israelis in the making.

Firstly, the survivors whose testimonies follow the visitor through the exhibition speak in Hebrew. A senior member of staff (who declined to be named) noted that in some cases this is despite their relative inarticulacy in the language.

⁵⁰ Descriptive plaque (fieldnotes).

The myth of the survivors' contribution to the State of Israel is summarised by Hanna Yablonka in the introduction to an online exhibition produced in May 2008 to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the state:

In the history of immigration, there has been no comparable story to that of the survivors who came to live in Israel. Rarely, if at all, has a group of immigrants made so profound an impact on a society, and so fully participated in charting its course.⁵¹

Another exhibition from 2008's anniversary celebrations makes a similar point even more hyperbolically. Building on a comment by Chaim Herzog – 'From the ashes of the Holocaust the nation arose, ingathered from a hundred countries, and flowed along timeless routes to the ancient homeland' – the text makes a bold claim:

The struggle of the survivors to come to Israel, to rebuild their lives, and become active partners in the most important communal endeavour of the Jewish people in the 20th century, is a wondrous achievement that knows no equal in human history.⁵²

The exhibition, titled with the Zionist slogan 'To Build and To Be Built', consists of biographies of ten Holocaust survivors: a former secondary school principal; the former Chief Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court; an artist; a career soldier; a midwife; a historian and former director of Yad Vashem; a former Chief Rabbi; a professor of Veterinary medicine; two survivors who have worked in Holocaust remembrance. There is little in the way of explanation, but the quotations from the survivors are illuminating:

"I had just turned thirteen. At that moment I decided to come to Israel, because I wanted to belong to someone, but also to belong to my nation."

"The view of Haifa from the ship when we first arrived is something I will always remember."

"I don't have a moment's peace. I have to keep busy, to keep the thoughts from eating into my soul. I do so by sculpting, and by writing poetry and prose."

⁵¹ Hanna Yablonka, Introduction to 'My Homeland: Holocaust Survivors in Israel', retrieved from http://www1.yadvashem.org/new_museum/pavilion.html on 12 May, 2008.

⁵² Introduction to 'To Build and To Be Built: The Contribution of Holocaust Survivors to the State of Israel', retrieved from http://www1.yadvashem.org/remembrance/remembrance_day/remembrance_day_2008/exhibition/index.html on 12 May, 2008.

“I would do my part to build a strong army and a strong country.”

“Being a midwife meant coming back to life.”

“We established a movement with two objectives in mind: 1) to go to Israel 2) to fight for the right to freely relocate to Israel.”

“As long as our – the survivors’ – candle is burning, we must use its light to learn, draw conclusions from, internalise, and apply the lessons we have learned as much as possible.”

“My father’s precept, to be a good person, has been the essence of my life.”

“So that no victim will remain anonymous, but rather, each and every individual will be remembered.”

“These people left no traces...I have adopted them as my family.”

The quotes fit the Zionist narrative suggested by the title of the exhibition. Israel is an alternative family, a destination, and something to fight for. The survivors are shown as contributing to this in various ways. In return, Israel (implicitly) has given them prominence and support.

The romantic view of survivors settling seamlessly into Israeli society is not one which the literature supports. The journalist Tom Segev demonstrates in *The Seventh Million* the complex ways in which the memories of survivors were suppressed in the early years of the state. Segev quotes Yehudit Hendel as saying ‘I was taught in school that the ugliest, basest thing is not the Exile but the Jew who came from there.’⁵³

This may seem at odds with my earlier comments concerning the speed with which Yad Vashem was founded after the establishment of the state but it is not: the narrative which developed was simply not one which favoured the majority of survivors – who had not resisted in Zionist terms: that is, had not engaged in armed struggle. As discussed earlier, the fighters in Rapoport’s monument push the other victims into the background.

Furthermore, historian Idith Zertal has taken issue with the heroic picture of immigration presented in these exhibitions. She argues that far from being a priority of the *Yishuv* leadership – and especially David Ben-Gurion – the migration of survivors from Europe was regarded as secondary in importance to the defence of the existing Jewish community. The survivors were, at least at first, regarded as mainly useful for their propaganda value while the actual encounter between Israelis (or proto-Israelis between 1945 and 1948) was far

⁵³ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million*, p. 179.

more awkward than some versions of the history will allow.⁵⁴ The significance of this is developed in Chapter 6.

The uneasy relationship with the Diaspora is expressed visually in a manner analogous to insisting that survivors speak Hebrew. Victims are also made to speak Hebrew through the dominance of the Hebrew text. A good example is a fragment of Abramek Koplłowicz's poem, 'Dream', which appears in Hebrew and English but not the original Polish.⁵⁵

Dream

When I grow up and reach the age of
20,
I'll set out to see the enchanting world.
I'll take a seat in a bird with a motor;
I'll rise and soar high into space.

I'll fly, sail, hover
Over the lovely faraway world.
I'll soar over rivers and ocean
Skyward shall I ascend and blossom,
A cloud my sister, the wind my brother

Marzenie

Jak ja mieć będę dwadzieścia lat,
Zacznę oglądać nasz piękny świat.
Usiądę w wielkim ptaku motorze
I wzniosę się w wszechświata
przestworze.

Popłynę, pofrunę w świat piękny, daleki,
Popłynę, pofrunę przez morza i rzeki.
Chmura siostrzycą, wiatr będzie mi
bratem.

As I walked through the galleries at Yad Vashem, I wondered what it would be like if the museum allowed the texts to speak in their own languages. Obviously, there is only so much space. But the effect of Polish, Russian, Yiddish, French, Dutch, German, Greek would be to emphasise the diversity of Jewry before the war, and with that the effort involved in exterminating them all. But to do so would also be acknowledging the highly contingent nature of Israel –

⁵⁴ Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel*, California University Press, Berkeley 1998 [Hebrew 1996] and Idith Zertal (trans. Chaya Galai), *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005 [Hebrew 2002]. Also see Idith Zertal, 'From The People's Hall to the Wailing Wall: A Study in Memory, Fear and War', *Representations*, No. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (2000), pp. 96-126 for a more detailed look at the impact of the Eichmann Trial. For a different view of Ben-Gurion's attitudes, see Dina Porat, 'David Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust' in Dina Porat, *Israeli Society, the Holocaust and its Survivors*, Vallentine Mitchell, London 2008, pp. 11-38.

⁵⁵ The Polish text is taken from the website *Wirtualny Sztetl* (Virtual Shtetl): retrieved from <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/article/lodz/16,relacje-wspomnienia/13542,eliezer-lolek-grynfeld-o-swoim-bracie-przyrodnim-abramku-koplłowiczu-urodzonym-w-1930-roku-w-lodzi/> on 5 October, 2011.

these were not proto-Israelis but members of communities that, assuming the Holocaust had not happened, would have developed along their own lines. This is the same truth that is obscured in Gallery 1.

The burden or opportunity presented by the texts of the past in the accumulating traditions of catastrophe

The underlying assumption of all museums is that there is an essential truth about the events they describe waiting to be discovered. They are not open-ended journeys of discovery but narratives which have – to some extent, as considered in the introduction – already been defined and closed off. Idith Zertal has described the consequences of such a closed narrative:

Do the analysis and interpretation [...] when we know the end of the story, cast us into a perspective within which every event constitutes a link in a causal chain that led inevitably to that final result? In other words, does it lead us to conclude that events could not have unfolded in any other way? Or should our knowledge of the outcome of the historical process lead us, on the contrary, to ask about what did not happen, and what was not done or perhaps was missed?⁵⁶

Yad Vashem, like many museums, tries to have it both ways, setting out the actuality of what happened and arguing for its inevitability, while at the same time insisting on the (justifiable) indignation arising from the failures of those who could have acted differently.

The only way to regain equilibrium after trauma is to accept that it happened, that the meanings we impose are fundamentally arbitrary, and yet to see that the meanings, because discoverable, are also inherent. Otherwise, as Cathy Caruth has argued, trauma becomes an impossible burden that cannot be managed. Caruth argues for the view that all strategies of coping are invalid because they all involve seeing the trauma as containing meaning. She heads the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* with a quote from a Vietnam veteran: 'I do not want to take drugs for my nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends.'⁵⁷ Much of her ensuing theory is dedicated to the

⁵⁶ Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Cathy Caruth, 'Preface' to Cathy Caruth (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1995, p. vii.

assumption that the choice that survivors are confronted with a binary choice between remembering and forgetting, when even a cursory examination of the processes involved reveals that to remember is to forget – since we do not remember everything – and that to forget is to remember – since we choose what we forget. What matters is how we manage that process and select the meanings that produce a productive outcome.

As Mintz describes, Jews have developed two basic strategies for dealing with catastrophic events. The first, exemplified by the book of Lamentations and amplified by the prophets, is to see the catastrophe as punishment for sin. The second, in response to the pogroms of the middle ages, was to see catastrophe as a testing of the righteous.⁵⁸

Post-Holocaust thought has rejected both of these options. Seeing the Holocaust as punishment for sin proved too much for Jewish thought, since the deaths of six million men, women and children purely on the basis of their race seemed disproportionate to any offence, particularly since no obvious pattern was discernible in terms of religiosity. Orthodox and Reform, separate and assimilated, religious and secular, all perished. Even those who by many traditional standards were not Jews at all any more were killed for their ancestry. The lack of a survival option as a Jew made interpretation of the Holocaust in those terms hard to support. In fact, as Dan Cohn-Sherbok has explored, Jewish theology 'is in a state of crisis both deep-seated and acute: for the first time in history Jews seem unable to account for God's ways.'⁵⁹

Alternatively, however, the idea of the Holocaust as a test of the righteous was hard to support, since the cruelty of both the numbers involved and the nature of their deaths seemed to test the survivors beyond any reasonable limit.

Given that any theological response seemed doomed to frustration, the answer seemed to be the path of modernity in the form of attributing historical blame, a course which also fit with Zionism as a "reentry into History". By

⁵⁸ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, pp. 3-6.

⁵⁹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust Theology*, Lamp Press, London 1989, p. 119. See also Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought*, New York University Press, New York 1983.

separating the events from any theological explanation, the questions raised by the Holocaust seemed to be attributable purely to human actions.

And yet any explanation that relies purely on human actions, that reduces the Holocaust to the level of any other historical accident, is also one which leaves resolution out of reach. Steven Katz has stated the problem succinctly.

The death camps and Einsatzgruppen do challenge – even while they do not necessarily falsify – traditional Jewish theological claims. However, just what this challenge ultimately means remains undecided.⁶⁰

The extent to which Israelis want the Holocaust to be beyond explanation, since this absolves them of the need to ask questions about any of the historical processes which are related to it, is a question Israelis will have to answer for themselves. My own tentative and cautious answer about how this might be achieved can be found in the epilogue to this study.

⁶⁰ Steven T. Katz, 'Introduction: European and American Responses During and Following the War', in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God*, p. 368. Also see David Patterson, *Open Wounds: The Crisis of Jewish Thought in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 2006, who argues that 'Striving to become as god, we have lost our connection to God.' (p. 31)

Chapter 4

Rose-Tinted Spectacle?

*'To see victory as a curse and defeat as moral purification and salvation is to combine the ancient idea of hubris with the Christian virtue of humility, catharsis with apocalypse.'*¹

'It is striking to see,' writes the Dutch journalist Geert Mak, 'how quickly the normal historical spectacle in London has made way for the myth and the spectacle.' Mak is bemused by the Imperial War Museum's *Blitz Experience* in which, as he describes it, 'one can walk down a wartime street, hear wartime radio reports and sit in a fairy-tale air-raid shelter listening to the howl of the sirens and the thudding of the Heinkel bombers.' He contrasts it with 'city museums on the continent' where 'the key words for this particular epoch are silence and serenity [...] a black and grey scale model of a badly-wounded town, a handful of scorched objects, and that is usually it.'²

Leaving aside (for a moment) some very similar theatrics in the Warsaw Rising Museum, I can see Mak's point. Few European capitals remember the Second World War with such unabashed enthusiasm as London. It is hard to imagine Leningrad or Paris wanting to recreate the war years in this way, let alone Berlin. Even in Warsaw, the theatrics of replicas only touch those parts of the story that can be rendered with reasonable moral clarity. The sewers of the insurgents are recreated, but the ghetto is discussed in a more respectful (and remote) two dimensions.

Moreover, I suspect that the re-creation of wartime (or indeed, wartime as recreation) would not be so unremarkable in other countries. The actors who lead sessions for children during half-terms in the guises of air-raid wardens, land-girls and housewives attract rapt attention here. How, I wonder would such an event be enacted elsewhere? I suspect the tensions of deciding how to represent the vast changes in time and perspective would

¹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*, Granta Books, London 2004, p. 20.

² Geert Mak (trans. Sam Garrett), *In Europe: travels through the twentieth century*, Vintage, London 2007 [Dutch 2004], p. 377. For a detailed examination of the *Blitz Experience*, see Lucy Noakes, 'Making Histories: Experiencing the Blitz in London's Museums in the 1990s' in Martin Evans (ed.), *War and memory in the Twentieth Century*, Berg, Oxford 1997, pp. 89-104.

throw up some insuperable challenges of representation. How would one cast the *politruk*, the Vichy official, the *szmalcownicy*, or the Gestapo?³

Mark Connelly illustrates clearly how the pre-war and wartime eras in Britain are, by contrast, a period which evokes a fairly homogenous nostalgia. Whether as tragedy (*Atonement* or *Charlotte Gray*), farce (*Dad's Army* or *Allo' Allo'*), or simply as genre entertainment (*Foyle's War*), the late thirties and early forties are a period to which British culture returns naturally. And as Connelly movingly describes, "The Day War Broke Out" is easily accessible as the final days of 'a world about to end, a way of life about to disappear [generating] a profound sense of nostalgia.'⁴ Norman Longmate goes further, terming the Second World War 'one of the great dividing lines in our history,' claiming that those who lived through the conflict 'consider themselves superior to those born too late to remember the strange, unique years from 1939 to 1945.'⁵

This sense that 1939 marked a turning point was evoked during the war, along with so many other elements of our understanding. The titles of *Mrs Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) begin by characterising the pre-war era as:

[W]hen the sun shone down on a happy, careless people, who worked and played, reared their children and tended their gardens in that happy, easy-going England that was so soon to be fighting desperately for her way of life and for life itself.

This sense of 1939 – and specifically Chamberlain's broadcast – as a dividing line is reinforced in the IWM's *Outbreak 1939* exhibition (September 2009-September 2010). Visitors stand in a simulated drawing room listening to the broadcast on a loop. Chamberlain's clipped tones echo throughout the space, a low rumble of impending doom.

³ *Politruk* was the name for political officers in the Red Army; *szmalcownicy* was the name given to those in occupied Poland who blackmailed and/or betrayed hidden Jews.

⁴ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, Pearson Education, Harlow 2004, p. 29.

⁵ Norman Longmate, 'Foreword' in Juliet Gardiner, *The 1940s House*, Channel 4 Books, London 2000, p. 7.



Figure 1: "I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany." Visitors to the IWM listen to Chamberlain's broadcast of 3 September, 1939. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, June 2010.

On another level, however, I wonder whether Mak's implicit distinction between 'myth' and 'spectacle' is as solid as it might be. The two are clearly related. Barthes's definition of myth as a semiotic system which does not deny facts but instead 'makes them innocent', giving them 'a natural and eternal justification', in turn leading to 'a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact'⁶ relates clearly to Guy Debord's formulation of *spectacle*:

[...] by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule.⁷

For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to suggest that the spectacle is the reification of myth into a solid presentation. The spectacle, as 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images',⁸ is a symptom of the presence of myth. The spectacle is a concrete formulation of

⁶ Roland Barthes (trans. Annette Lavers), *Mythologies*, p. 143.

⁷ Guy Debord (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York 1995, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 12.

the myths ‘used to describe the desire of humans to ascertain who and what they are.’⁹

This relationship is not as clear-cut as the preceding paragraph might wish it to be. As Mark Connelly describes, the inter-relationship of myths and their outcomes is hard to unravel, as preceding spectacles become reference points for the future. Furthermore, when dealing with the representation of this period, one has to engage particularly sharply with the degree to which we are also coping with the contemporary distortions of those present.

The Second World War was dramatised and packaged from early on, with government moving beyond simple propaganda to more responsive forms of relationship with the population. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang quote a memorandum by Mary Adams (the founder of Home Intelligence) which clearly sets out how the department sought to remedy the key problem of early wartime communication: that the Ministry of Information ‘was talking to Britain without listening to Britain: a one-sided conversation.’¹⁰ Adams saw the problem and its solution in two dimensions.

1. To provide a basis for publicity. A continuous flow of reliable information is required on what the public is thinking and doing in order that publicity measures may be properly planned and their effectiveness tested.
2. To provide an assessment of home morale. For this purpose it is necessary to study immediate reactions to specific events as well as to create a barometer for the purpose of testing public opinion on questions likely to be continuously important, e.g. pacificism.¹¹

The resulting daily reports between 18 May and 27 September – until the daily reports were replaced by weekly ones in October 1940 – show a back and forth between populace and propagandists. As well as commenting on how particular broadcasts were received (Churchill’s speech, ‘Be Ye Men of Valour’ on 19 May was described as having been popular but not of ‘any extremely grave import’¹²) the reports show how the management of news worked. The first report by Home Intelligence, on 18 May notes the comment

⁹ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang (eds.) *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports from Britain’s Finest Hour, May to September 1940*, The Bodley Head, London 2010, p. xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. xii.

¹² Report for Sunday 19 May and Monday 20 May 1940. *Ibid.* p. 12. The speech, under this title, can be found in David Cannadine (ed.) *The Speeches of Winston Churchill*, Penguin Books, London 1990, pp. 150-154.

by the Nottingham Regional Information Officer (RIO) that ‘it would be a good thing [...] if the Prime Minister were to broadcast in a day or two.’¹³ Without archival research, one cannot prove whether the broadcast of 19 May was a direct response to this, but it certainly fit with the nine Conclusions of the first report, placed at the beginning ‘for the sake of speed’. Their legacy can be clearly seen in the picture we have now built up of the war. In particular, the idea that ‘fear needs to be expressive not repressive’ and managed through the ‘building-up’ of public personalities:¹⁴ of whom, post-factum, Churchill seems the obvious example.

On a broader level, though, the report’s suggestion that ‘people should be made to share their fears: to fraternise: be neighbourly’¹⁵ is a distillation of the conflict as a ‘People’s War’. The 1940 cartoon by David Low, ‘All Behind You, Winston’, summarises both the aims of the authorities and one vision of our recollection, though Chamberlain’s face behind Churchill is a reminder that the appeasers were still in the cabinet.

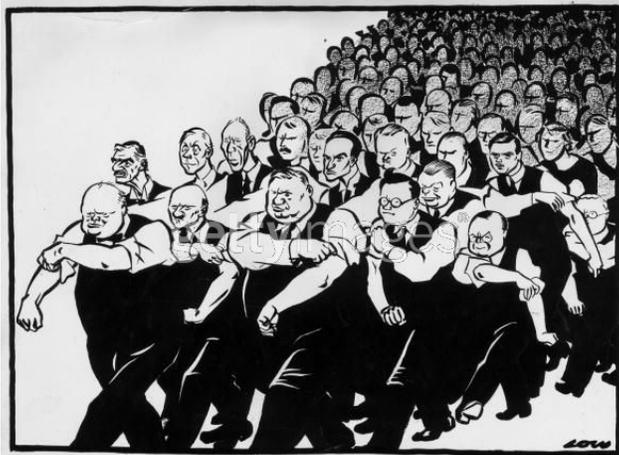


Figure 2: ‘All behind You, Winston’. David Low, 1940.

As Connelly notes, the problem of disentangling what happened, what people believed had happened, and what the government wished them to believe, is by no means easy. ‘The real war – whatever it actually constituted – was being imagined and mythologised as it happened by its participants,

¹³ Ibid. p. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 6.

¹⁵ Report for Saturday 18 May 1940. Ibid. pp. 5-6.

both great and small, which meant it was always being recast, reframed, reinterpreted even as it continued.¹⁶

Connelly identifies three essential components to British understanding of the Second World War: the 'colossal military disaster' of Dunkirk; the Battle of Britain and 'the fewest of the few; and finally the 'London Pride' of the Blitz. This is similar to Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz*, to which Connelly freely acknowledges his debt.¹⁷

As Calder's title illustrates, however, the central story is that of the Blitz. As he and Connelly acknowledge, both left and right have appropriated elements of this story – the left focusing on the coming together of society and the right emphasising leadership, especially that given by Churchill. Also as both Connelly and Calder acknowledge, this very struggle for the story has reaffirmed its centrality. As Debord writes, the most important characteristic of myth/spectacle is that it simply uses debate about its meaning to confirm its importance: 'the spectacle is constantly rediscovering its own basic assumptions – and each time in a more concrete manner.'¹⁸ The seventieth anniversary has been no exception, with Channel 4 showing *Blitz Street*, in which military experts progressively demolished a pair of housing terraces using charges to correspond with particular bombs. As the presenter, Tony Robinson, framed it: 'British willpower went head to head with this deadly technology: and it won.'¹⁹

It comes as no surprise to find, therefore, that the *Blitz Experience* continues to be a massively popular part of the Imperial War Museum. An undergraduate student of mine reported (in 2010) that the queue to get in had been too long for her group to be admitted. During visits to the museum I have been struck by the posters which inform visitors that the 'likely waiting time' from this point is ten or even twenty minutes, as well as the regularity with which people wait to enter. Given that this is a representation of an experience which many at the time found emotionally and physically exhausting, the reasons behind the clamour – and the exhibit which generates

¹⁶ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, Pimlico, London 1992 [1991].

¹⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 22.

¹⁹ *Blitz Street* (Impossible Pictures, 2010) Episode 4: originally broadcast Monday, 10 May, 2010.

it – will be the first focus of this chapter. Before doing so, however, a brief account needs to be given of the institution which houses it.

In the wake of the Battle of the Somme, the first proposals for a National War Museum were put forward. Historians of this event are mostly in agreement that, in Gaynor Kavanagh's summary, 'support for the museum was given not necessarily because such a record would be right and just, although there were those who felt that this was true, but because a museum was a means of promoting the war and strengthening the war mood.'²⁰ Meirion and Susie Harris argue that the plans for the museum were 'elements of Lloyd George's reorganization of propaganda and his effort to combat war-weariness', noting that 'a war museum is an obvious focus for patriotism'.²¹

Kavanagh questions this slightly, noting that more 'pragmatic reasons' for founding the museum were given in May 1917 by Commander Walcott, the Admiralty's representative on the National War Museum Committee. These were that 'Relics and exhibits etc. were being overlooked and in some cases irretrievably lost' in addition to other 'relics' being 'bought, stolen or obtained by local units and private persons and some [having] been sent to USA.'²²

Overall, though, Kavanagh concludes that the waning popularity of recruitment and growing fears of a further year of war meant that 'something had to be done to re-focus the nation on the war effort and convince people that the war was worthwhile.'²³ Kavanagh points to the coincidence of the moves to establish the museum with the creation of both the Department of Information and the National War Aims Committee. Whatever, therefore, the 'pragmatic reasons' provided to the Admiralty (which, Kavanagh notes, was in need of convincing about the project), 'in political circles [...] the war museum

²⁰ Gaynor Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War: A Social History*, Leicester University Press, London 1994, p. 121. Also see Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The origins of the Imperial War Museum', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1988), pp. 77-97. It should also be noted at this juncture that for the purposes of this chapter, references to 'the Imperial War Museum' will generally mean what is now referred to as IWM London: part of a network of museums and sites which include IWM North (in Manchester), IWM Duxford (on the former RAF base), as well as the Cabinet War Rooms in Westminster and HMS Belfast moored near Tower Bridge.

²¹ Meirion and Susie Harris, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century*, Michael Joseph in Association with the Imperial War Museum and the Tate Gallery, London 1983, p. 118.

²² Gaynor Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War*, p. 122.

²³ *Ibid.*

may well have been born not out of any anxiety to record and remember, but of an anxiety to maintain the war mood at any cost.²⁴

Paul Cornish, a curator at the Imperial War Museum, broadly agrees with this analysis, arguing that 'In the wake of the heavy losses sustained during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, it was seen as essential that the public were left in no doubt as to why the war was being fought.'²⁵ He argues, however, that while the political impetus for the establishment of the museum may have been propagandist, the collection policies of the museum – and the attitudes of those who ran it – quickly shifted to a memorial agenda. Cornish quotes a submission to the War Cabinet by Sir Martin Conway, the first Director-General, proposing that:

The very heart and focus of the building should be of a memorial character. This might take the form of a Hall of Honour as rich and beautiful in character as artists can devise, and adjacent to it a Gallery devoted to the separate memorials of the Navy and the Army by ships, regiments and contingents.²⁶

The American military historian Frederick Todd went further in 1948, terming the IWM 'more a museum of peace than of war', speculating that 'the hatred of war curtailed research into the techniques of military science, or into the organization and panoply of military forces'.²⁷ Todd may have exaggerated, but Noble Frankland, the Director-General of the Imperial War Museum between 1960 and 1982, recounted in his memoirs how he had found his predecessor, L.R. Bradley, still struggling with the demolition of the assumptions that the museum had employed to guide itself after 1918. According to Frankland, Bradley (a veteran of the First World War):

[C]ontinued to see the Imperial War Museum through the eye of its original beholders and those who had founded it. They had believed that the Great War must be the war which ended war. They, who had laid their plans in the year of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Paul Cornish, "Sacred Relics": Objects in the Imperial War Museum 1917-39' in Nicholas J. Saunders (ed.), *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, memory and the First World War*, Routledge, Abingdon 2004, pp. 35-50.

²⁶ Ibid, p.41.

²⁷ Frederick P. Todd, 'The Military Museum in Europe', *Military Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1948), p. 40. Suzanne Brandt, 'The Memory Makers: Museums and Exhibitions of the First World War', *History and Memory*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1994), pp. 95-122 makes a similar argument about the IWM to Kavanagh and Cornish, though its focus is on interwar Germany. Brandt quotes a publication from 1936 (on the occasion of the move to Lambeth) which hopes that the museum will 'play its part promoting peace.' (p. 113)

Passchendaele could be excused for believing that there would never be another world war. Their requirement for the museum they created was that it should stand as an enduring memorial to the horrors of war, as a warning and a reminder to subsequent generations who would never experience such horrors themselves. The coming of the Second World War shattered this illusion [...].²⁸

Frankland describes Bradley's attitude to the Second World War as 'a nuisance which deposited masses of material in the Museum, squeezing its already restricted space and disrupting such order as its exhibitions had earlier had.'²⁹ Bradley, moreover, viewed the conflict as such a challenge to the initial ideals of the IWM that 'he gave the impression, as he approached the grave, that the museum, which he had served for so long, would do the same.'³⁰ This shattering of belief is perhaps symbolized by the destruction of Sir Edwin Lutyens' original wood and plaster Cenotaph by an air-raid.³¹

This conflict between the pity of war and its glories is one that can be seen today in the museum. To get to anything in the museum one has to get there, however, which means engaging at least briefly with the building.

The building is the only remaining section of the Bethlem Royal Hospital, perhaps better known as 'Bedlam'. Built originally in 1815, all but the central section was demolished in the early 1930s to make way for the park that now surrounds the museum. This – and the location of the museum – was not uncontroversial: the MP for Lambeth North (Mr. Strauss) commented in Parliament that 'those who are interested in the district are very jealous of every square yard of open space' and asked why the museum could not remain where it was in South Kensington. In reply, the First Commissioner of Works (Mr. Lansbury) said that, in addition to the issue of rents payable on the site in South Kensington, the site was not suitable long-term, unlike the Bethlem Hospital, which would otherwise be entirely demolished, necessitating the construction of a shelter in the park. Since the purpose of the museum was not 'to glorify war [but] to show the people what war really means', and since there would be free access, the siting of the Museum in

²⁸ Noble Frankland, *History at War: The Campaigns of an Historian*, Giles de la Mare Publishers Ltd., London 1998, p. 164.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³¹ Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War*, p. 154.

Southwark met with the approval of the government and the museum was established there in 1936.³²

The present building was then the third and final home of the museum. Before South Kensington, it had been at Crystal Palace, which is recalled in the design of the current atrium, which Anne Karpf has called ‘the biggest boys’ bedroom in London’.³³ For the museum, though, it is the ‘Large Exhibits Gallery’, full of every kind of mechanized weapon. This is a tone set by the two vast naval guns which dominate the entrance to the museum. In the teardrop-shaped space at the front of the museum, they can (in certain light and perhaps to a certain fanciful turn of mind) give the whole building the aspect of a destroyer cruising through London.



Figure 3: The IWM London Large Exhibits Gallery. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2009.

The path through the hardware of mass destruction, though, often leads to exhibitions which take a more cautious, or even anti-war, attitude. The exhibition *Weapons of Mass Communication* (IWM London, October 2007–March 2008) took a very skeptical view of the role played by propagandists in wartime. This was perhaps most clearly illustrated by the

³² For the whole exchange, including an intervention by Sir Martin Conway (MP for the Combined Universities), see Bethlem Hospital (Amendment) Bill [Lords], *Hansard Commons Debates*, 17 July 1931, Vol. 255, cc. 1026-32.

³³ Anne Karpf, ‘Bearing Witness’, *The Guardian*, Friday, 2 June 2000.

choice of David Gentleman to design the exhibition's logo, clearly reminiscent of his work for the Stop the War Coalition. The companion volume by James Aulich also took a critical stance, noting the role of posters in 'alternately bewitching, terrifying and beguiling the public',³⁴ and by broadening 'war posters' to encompass posters by CND and Israeli peace groups. The definition of war at work in this exhibition was clearly broader than the one implied by the Large Exhibits Gallery.

The exhibition which replaced *Weapons of Mass Communication* also grappled with conflicting understandings of war in the United Kingdom, though it did so through the prism of the ninetieth anniversary of the end of the First World War. *In Memoriam: Remembering the Great War* (September 2008-September 2009), though it made clear the initial enthusiasm for the war, ended on a very muted note: visitors exited the final gallery to be confronted with *Gassed* by John Singer Sargent, one of six paintings commissioned in 1918 for the museum's subsequently abandoned Hall of Remembrance.

A notable feature of *In Memoriam* was its clarity that it was 'Remembering the Great War' rather than attempting in any way to recreate it. The pillar outside the gallery in fact concluded its text by noting that the museum itself was founded as 'a lasting memorial of common effort and common sacrifice.'³⁵

What the exhibition did not do – in contrast to the *Trench Experience* which flanks the basement opposite the *Blitz Experience* – was even implicitly claim to take the visitor back to that place and time. Indeed, the underlying theme was of the incommunicability of the event. In the opening section, the visitor was confronted with a quotation from Cecil Withers, of the 17th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers: 'Only those who were there can tell what really happened. Tell of the suffering and misery.'³⁶ Similarly, the shattered helmet in a display case outside the gallery, juxtaposed with a piece of barbed wire and a poppy from a 1920s appeal, emphasised our fragmentary knowledge despite an apparently clear understanding. A similar helmet and poppy on the

³⁴ James Aulich, *War Posters: Weapons of Mass Communication*, Thames and Hudson, London 2007, p. 8.

³⁵ Fieldnotes, 24.02.09.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

cover of the companion volume further emphasised the fragmentary nature of our contemporary understanding of the conflict.³⁷



Figure 4: Display case outside In Memoriam: Remembering the Great War. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, February 2009.

This nuanced understanding that the symbols have a life beyond what they immediately signify – that a spectacle requires a myth as surely as *vice versa* – is less consistently in evidence in the basement, which houses the core exhibits on the First and Second World Wars, alongside a gallery devoted to ‘Conflicts since 1945’. The map in a free information leaflet makes clear the density of exhibits and themes.

³⁷ Robin Cross, *In Memoriam: Remembering the Great War*, Ebury Press, London 2008. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005 [French 2004] traces the development of this knowledge since the beginning of the conflict and draws some striking conclusions about the differences in European understandings and histories of the conflict.

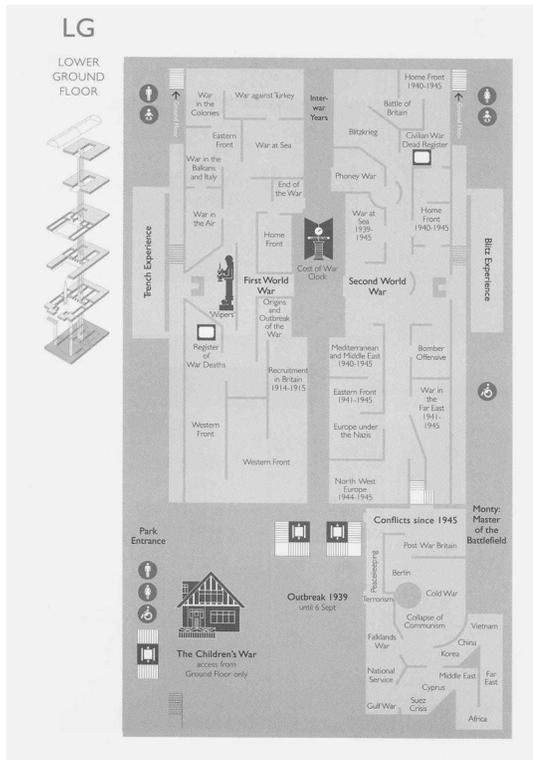


Figure 5: IWM London Lower Ground Map, 2010.

There is obviously too much here for anything approaching a comprehensive treatment of all this material. Given the already established importance of the Blitz in British memory of the Second World War, I want to use the treatment of it as an example of the kind of juxtaposition which the Imperial War Museum can produce, rather contradicting the impression of nuanced thought demonstrated by the temporary exhibitions, as discussed above, or by the Holocaust exhibition itself, as discussed later. My central question is how the museum can support this representation of the Blitz, emphasizing the devastation and (in its opening section in a simulated air-raid shelter) the fear of this moment in time, while just feet away depicting the Strategic Bomber Offensive as a morally uncomplicated episode.

The 'Blitz Experience' begins in a simulated air-raid shelter, which reverberates for approximately five minutes with the sounds of bombing and 'authentic' dialogue. As one listens in the darkness, the seats tremble slightly at the recorded impacts until, at the end, it jerks violently, as though a bomb had landed nearby. The visitors are then asked to follow an 'actor-

interpreter³⁸ dressed as an air-raid warden through a reconstruction of a bombed-out street.



Figure 6: The Blitz Experience, IWM London. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2009.

A plaque just inside the Second World War gallery advises visitors of the Blitz Experience opening times and warns that ‘people of a nervous disposition’ should not enter. The members of staff controlling access reiterate this point at times. While the content of the ‘experience’ stresses the confusion, fear, and chaos of bombing alongside more cheery aspects such as mobile canteens, the severity of bomb damage and the psychological effects on those prey to it are dominant themes.

The two sections which are closest to the *Blitz Experience* are both highly relevant to its subject. In one direction, ‘Home Front 1940-1945’ tells a familiar story of cheeriness under fire and national unity in the face of bombing. As the introductory text describes it:

*Unable to launch an invasion, Germany tried
instead to bomb Britain into submission.
Britain endured not only air raids but also
severe shortages of food and other essentials.*³⁹

³⁸ The museum uses this term to describe the staff: see ‘The Blitz Experience’ <http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/conEvent.380>, retrieved 27 May, 2010.

³⁹ Field notes, 2 June, 2010. This aspect of its activity has been developed by the IWM recently, through features on ‘Make Do and Mend’ on its website, linking the contemporary economic crisis with wartime shortages, and also through a new exhibition on ‘The Ministry of Food’, including prominent British chefs demonstrating wartime dishes. The café at IWM

To the other side, however, 'Bomber Offensive' tells the other side of the story. Its introductory text is equally emphatic:

*The strategic air offensive against Germany played a major role in the defeat of Germany by attacking the enemy's economic strength and will to resist.*⁴⁰

The contradiction here is obvious. Bombing Britain only produced a stiffening of the will to resist, while bombing of Germany produced the opposite effect.

There is historical support for this point of view. Neil Gregor has shown how in Nuremberg, bombing highlighted 'ongoing tensions and conflicts' while simultaneously unleashing 'more fundamental disintegrative tendencies within German society during the second half of the war.'⁴¹ By contrast, the literature on the British reaction has tended to confirm the picture of a population which drew together in the manner captured by George Rodger, with 'an absence of drama which is totally convincing.'⁴²



Figure 7: George Rodger, *London Blitz*, 1940.

London has also been rebranded as 'The Kitchen Front', serving (at twenty-first century prices) dishes from wartime.

⁴⁰ Field notes, 4 March, 2008.

⁴¹ Neil Gregor, 'A *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*? Allied Bombing, Civilian Morale, and Social Dissolution in Nuremberg, 1942-1945', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2000), p. 1052.

⁴² Tom Hopkinson (ed.), *The Blitz: The Photography of George Rodger*, Penguin Books, London 1990, p. 9. Note the date of this collection, presumably intended to mark the fiftieth anniversary.

This is why Calder's work has proved so durable: he understood that the power of myth lies precisely in the way it provides not an untruth but a more acceptable truth. As he wrote, while there may have been elements of propaganda in the myth, by 'acting in accordance with this mythology, many people [...] helped make it "more true"'⁴³

There has always, as well, been a darker and more complicated way of looking at the Blitz. Amy Bell has conceptualised wartime London as a 'landscape of fear', 'imbued with fears of imminent collective and individual destruction.'⁴⁴ This can be seen in the cityscapes of Bill Brandt, who used the unusual conditions of the blackout to produce a series of haunting images in which the properties, deserted for the night, seem deserted and strange. His view of the underground platforms being used as shelters are similarly strange.

⁴³ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 14. For perceptive readings of Calder's work, see Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!* and Philip Ziegler, *London at War, 1939-1945*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London 1995. Ziegler's is an interesting account, acknowledging the value of Calder's 'compelling and judicious study' (p. 163) but arguing that while 'much dirt was, indeed, brushed under the carpet by propagandists' the quantity 'was relatively inconsiderable.' (p. 163) Ultimately, though, Ziegler is reluctant to see the myth as anything other than justified: his concluding lament for 'the comradeship, the self-sacrifice' he can no longer see in modern life puts him squarely in the nostalgic camp.

⁴⁴ Amy Bell, 'Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London, 1939-1945', *Journal of British Studies* 48 (January 2009), p. 157. Bell's argument is based around a close reading of Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, Vintage Books, London 2001 [1943]: a thriller which uses the devastation and strangeness of wartime London to emphasise the isolation and confusion of Greene's protagonist, Arthur Rowe. It might, though, be argued that Rowe is a kind of antihero for the Blitz, demonstrating through his deficiencies the qualities desired: as Calder notes, the myth is hard to escape.



Figure 8: Bill Brandt, *Elephant and Castle Shelter*, 1940.

Brandt's photographs were far less than comforting images: as Paul Delany has written, Brandt's photographs of Londoners taking shelter in underground stations turned them 'into catacombs incubating strange sects'⁴⁵ rather than the cheery attempts at normality captured by Rodger. Delany describes Brandt as concurring with Henry Moore in seeing the shelters 'as places that gave the appearance of death, even as they preserved life.'⁴⁶ Delany notes that although Brandt received work from the Ministry of Information, his photographs did not appeal to the editors of *Life* magazine: the unofficial purveyors of the myth were in this case less willing than the officials to engage with images that did not conform.

This darker side to wartime London is essential in understanding the complex attitudes to Bomber Command. Calder argues that it had to be excluded from the story of the war as 'The Myth could not accommodate acts,

⁴⁵ Paul Delany, *Bill Brandt: A Life*, Jonathan Cape/Pimlico, London 2004 [2001], p. 171. Works by Henry Moore and Feliks Topolski were very similar in tone and composition: see the relevant chapters of Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists*. After the war, the IWM received a large proportion of the works commissioned by the Ministry of Information during the conflict. *Art from the Second World War*, Imperial War Museum, London 2007 reproduces many of these and shows the variety of artistic responses. A companion volume, *Art from the First World War*, Imperial War Museum, London 2008, is a quick way to compare the responses of the Second World War to the previous war.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

even would-be-acts, of killing of civilians and domestic destruction initiated by the British themselves, however they might be justified strategically.⁴⁷

I do not wish to get caught up in the debate surrounding the morality of Allied bombing during the Second World War. Vast energy has been expended on this question and even a brief rehearsal of the arguments would take up too much space. That said, it seems clear that the morality of this strategy is at least questionable. As A.C. Grayling concludes his examination of area bombing:

In all these cases the centre-piece is an attack on a civilian population aimed at causing maximum hurt, shock, disruption and terror. This is what these events have in common, whether in the midst of declared war or not, and so far as this core point is concerned, adjustments of fine moral calibration are at best irrelevant.⁴⁸

What does need to be added, though, is a more nuanced sense of the way in which this happened after the fact. As Connelly describes it in his book on Bomber Command, the reputation of the organisation, and especially that of Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, was a product of revulsion afterwards at the carnage, rather than a scruple felt at the time. Connelly traces popular and official calls for 'reprisals' against German cities, citing Churchill's promise to 'mete out to the Germans the measure and more than the measure they have meted out to us'.⁴⁹ The daily Home Intelligence reports collected by Addison and Crang also suggest that as 1940 progressed, calls for reprisals became ever louder. One of the final daily reports notes 'increasing demands for reprisals and growing hatred against the Germans'.⁵⁰ A pamphlet published in

⁴⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?*, Bloomsbury, London 2006, p. 279.

⁴⁹ Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A New History of Bomber Command in World War II*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York 2001, p. 50. Interestingly, this is not a speech selected by David Cannadine for his edited collection cited above. In fact, Churchill made two speeches that day, according to Charles Eade (ed.), *The War Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill*, Cassel & Company Ltd, London 1951 (3 volumes). The first short speech (Eade, Vol. 2, pp. 20-21) was made to 6,000 members of the Civil Defence Services in Hyde Park. The second (quoted by Connelly, Eade, Vol. 2, pp. 22-27) was made to the London County Council at County Hall. In both speeches, Churchill made clear that (in the words of the first speech) 'We are now bombing [the enemy] at a heavier rate in discharge of tons of bombs than he has in any monthly period bombed us.'

⁵⁰ Report for Thursday, 19 September, 1940. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *Listening to Britain*, p. 434. The increase in reports of demands for reprisals is noticeable in the reports for August and September, 1940. As explained above, daily reports were discontinued in October 1940 in favour of weekly reports.

1941 claimed that German morale had suffered and that 'the attacks delivered by Bomber Command are steadily increasing in weight and severity.'⁵¹ The pamphlet concluded with the sober promise that 'Our attack will go on, fierce because it is relentless, deadly because it is sure.'⁵² The central place of the bomber in bringing the war back to Germany was made very clear.

After the war, though, as Connelly notes in *We Can Take It!*, Bomber Command became a curious omission in the panoply of war movies with which 1950s Britain attempted to reassure itself that it could still revisit its finest hour.⁵³ Although perhaps the most enduring of symbols, *The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson, 1954) is the only film produced after the war to deal with the work of Bomber Command. Connelly argues that it was the exception because, in contrast to many bomber operations, 'every element can be found on the Great British checklist of what constitutes an epic: it was a huge gamble, it was the brainchild of a brilliant and eccentric mind and it was carried out by a tiny band of brothers.'⁵⁴

As Connelly finally notes, the raid on the Ruhr dams was also a precision raid on an industrial target. This is brought out strongly in the film, which contains almost no depictions of the German population, except as workers scurrying to safety in the face of the deluge: the objects shown being engulfed, such as a train, are not personalised. This drew on wartime depictions of the bombing campaign: passages of *The Dam Busters* are very similar in tone to the 'documentary' *Target for Tonight* (Crown Film Unit, 1941).⁵⁵ In both, the diversity of the aircrew is emphasised, as is the

⁵¹ *Bomber Command, 1941: Facsimile Edition*, HMSO, London 2001, p. 124. This is a reprint of *Bomber Command: The Air Ministry Account of Bomber Command's Offensive Against the Axis, September, 1939 – July, 1941*, HMSO, London 1941.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 128.

⁵³ As Connelly notes, Bomber Command was not a feature of these films. The Army (*Ice Cold in Alex*, J. Lee Thompson, 1958) and Navy (*The Cruel Sea*, Charles Frend, 1953) were well-represented. Fighter Command also featured in *Reach for the Sky* (Lewis Gilbert, 1956). *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946) is, slightly curiously, not referenced by Connelly, though it studiously avoids the nature of the mission the bomber pilot played by David Niven is returning from. Connelly does discuss the 1952 film *Appointment in London*, but notes that its much harsher portrayal of the realities of Bomber Command was not popular.

⁵⁴ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 258. The 'Great British checklist' Connelly refers to is taken from Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 196 and reproduced in Connelly, p. 22.

⁵⁵ See K.R.M. Short, 'RAF Bomber Command's 'Target for Tonight' (1941)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1997), pp. 181-218, for an account of the making of the film and for a reproduction of its script.

schoolroom atmosphere of the air bases. The enemy is equally anonymous (with some suspiciously British-accented German dialogue in the latter film), focusing on the destruction of *materiel* from the air.

These trends can be seen clearly in the exhibition. The Dam Busters is given pride of place as a mission which 'rightly became renowned as a spectacular feat of daring and courage' (as can be seen in Figure 9 below) which achieved most (though not all) of its precise objectives.

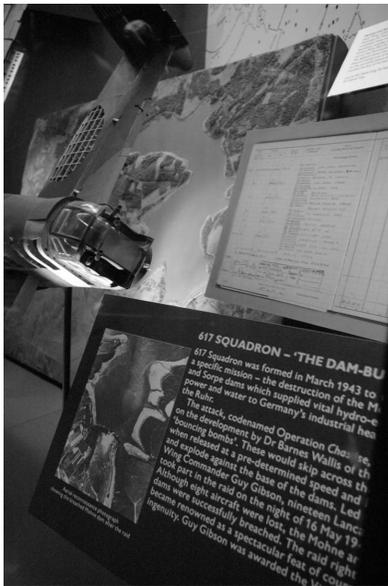


Figure 9: 617 Squadron - The Dam Busters display in 'The Bomber Offensive', IWM London. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, April 2008.

By contrast, the display opposite on the German bombing campaign depicts the enemy as barely human, even inhuman. A gas mask stares blankly out of the case, below a poster showing a skeleton astride a plane: the slogan 'Verdunkeln!' (Darken!)



Figure 10: Detail from 'The Bomber Offensive', IWM London. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, June 2010.

This Manichean opposition sufficed to conduct the war, but could not be sustained in peace. When confronted with the evidence of the effect of bombing, British society recoiled. And it became indicative of other cleavages within society: it is notable in Connelly's account of the furore surrounding the erection of a statue to Harris in 1995 how perspectives on history were intimately tied up with contemporary politics. The *Spectator* and *Daily Telegraph* (bastions of small and large C conservatism) published articles defending the decision (by a Conservative government in turmoil that year) while the centre-left *New Statesman* and *Independent* ran pieces criticising the commemoration.⁵⁶ Just as Jeff Hill has argued that 'The 'finest hour' was seen to have brought forth admirable British characteristics, all the more admired historically for their being absent in the present',⁵⁷ the debate over Bomber Command is really a debate about the negative aspects of the Second World War we have to repress because they are so powerful.

The restriction of Bomber Command's representation to *The Dam Busters* was particularly striking in a climate that tended, as in *The Colditz Story* (Guy Hamilton, 1955) to show the Germans as militaristic and inflexible rather than evil. Popular culture was even able to make the German *fighter* pilot a hero of sorts, as in *The One That Got Away* (Roy Ward Baker, 1957)

⁵⁶ Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp. 137-157.

⁵⁷ Jeff Hill, 'Postscript: A War Imagined' in Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (eds.), *Millions Like Us: British Culture in the Second World War*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1999, p. 324.

which told the story of Franz von Werra, the only German POW to escape back to Germany. With regard to our own actions, though, as W.G. Sebald commented, 'the need to know was at odds with the desire to close down the senses.'⁵⁸ And in this closing down of the senses, the Holocaust became a central part of the argument. However terrible the figures produced for German casualties, the Holocaust, as A.C. Grayling notes, would always put the matter of Allied responsibility into perspective: 'this egregious crime against humanity was a central fact of Nazi aggression and the racist ideology driving it, and in comparison to it other controversies seemed minor.'⁵⁹ Connelly invokes this strand of thought in his rather confused defence of Bomber Command, arguing that the debates about area bombing 'designed to slough off [German] war guilt or imply any sort of equality of guilt'.⁶⁰

I incline towards Grayling's analysis: however hideous, the death of civilians in wartime is something that occurs and is qualitatively different from the systematic destruction of a people on grounds of race. This does not mean, however, that criticism of our own actions automatically involves a lessening of responsibility on the part of the other. An aspect of the debate unaddressed by Connelly is the sense that the level of defensiveness about this issue conceals the true extent of the doubts: Connelly's awkwardness at describing Bomber Command as 'only carrying out orders'⁶¹ is palpable. But an act is moral or immoral on its own terms, not in comparison to others: invoking 'us' and 'them' merely reiterates the central error.

In any case, the reluctance to admit that our forces inflicted civilian losses on the scale they did is an issue that has immense contemporary as well as historical relevance: as Connelly notes, controversies about the accuracy of bombing and 'collateral damage' are still very much with us. They certainly impact on our debate of historical questions: the question of whether

⁵⁸ W.G. Sebald (trans. Anthea Bell), *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Penguin Books, London 2003, p. 4. Christopher Bigsby, *Imagining and Remembering the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, argues that this paradox was at the heart of Sebald's work. Also see Noble Frankland, *History at War*, for an account of the struggles in writing (with Sir Charles Webster) the official history of the bombing campaign in the face of opposition from many, notably Sir Arthur Harris. Connelly questions Frankland's account in *Reaching for the Stars*, though he in essence concedes that the conclusions of the Official History were substantially valid.

⁵⁹ A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 138.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 120.

Auschwitz should have been bombed, for example, is predicated on assumptions about the accuracy and range of Allied bombing.⁶² This is alluded to obliquely in the IWM: a map shows the range of bombers, but does not comment on the fact that Auschwitz lies beyond the outermost circle.



Figure 11: detail from 'The Bomber Offensive' IWM London. The square is the city of Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland): Auschwitz is another 400km east. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, March 2008.

But in many ways, Auschwitz and the Holocaust remained beyond the outermost circles of awareness. Suzanne Bardgett, the project leader for the Holocaust Exhibition and now its senior curator, has described the caution inside and outside the IWM to the inclusion of the Holocaust.

Bardgett has contributed a variety of articles to both scholarly and general publications during her stewardship of the Holocaust Exhibition. Two, however, are of particular relevance. The first, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961'⁶³ describes the antecedents of the exhibition and ends at its opening in 2000 by HM Queen Elizabeth II. The second, 'The Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum: Challenges of

⁶² See the volume edited by Michael J. Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum, *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, University Press of Kansas in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Lawrence 2003 [2000] which contains the papers given at a 1993 symposium at the USHMM. The reader is struck by the contrast between the bravado of the former pilots and the forensic examination of what bombing could actually achieve.

⁶³ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961', *Journal of Israeli History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2004), pp. 146-156.

Representation',⁶⁴ is much more focused on the practical process of assembling the exhibition.

In Bardgett's account, the impetus for the Holocaust Exhibition came from the desire of Field Marshall Lord Bramall, chairman of the IWM in the 1990s, to create 'a major new exhibition devoted to Man's Inhumanity to Man, and incorporating in it a significant section on the Holocaust'⁶⁵ as part of a major extension and overhaul of the Museum's exhibition space.⁶⁶

This was a departure for the museum. Although the museum had been conducting educational workshops on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust since the 1970s,⁶⁷ Bardgett can only identify 'three items illustrative of Nazi persecution' on display in the museum in the 1970s: Dame Laura Knight's depiction of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg; Hitler's Last Will and Testament; and (as she notes, hypothetically) the V2 rocket in the Large Exhibits Gallery. This *could*, she emphasises, 'have been used to remind visitors of the 20,000 slave-labourers who had died working on its production in the Dora concentration camp.'⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum: Challenges of Representation, in Rainer Schulze (ed.), *The Holocaust in History and Memory. Volume 1: Representing the Unrepresentable – Putting the Holocaust into Public Museums*, University of Essex, Colchester 2008, pp. 27-40.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 27.

⁶⁶ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Genesis and Development of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition Project', *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), pp. 28-37 explains the focus on the Holocaust as the result of a fear of overwhelming visitors with an 'indigestible' exhibition. She also outlines the plan for the Crimes Against Humanity Exhibition on the floor above in response to the suggestion that the IWM planned to 'belittle the other genocides of this century' (p. 31) – perhaps inadvertently doing just that.

⁶⁷ See Anita Ballin, 'The Imperial War Museum as Educator', *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), pp. 38-43 which briefly outlines the activity since the 1970s and raises questions about the future exhibition.

⁶⁸ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961', p. 147. This aporia is still an issue in the presentation of the V-2, now displayed vertically. The information tablet in the Large Exhibits Gallery makes this aspect of the object's history prominent: describing it in the last paragraph. The display outside 'Bomber Offensive', however, makes no mention of this: instead, it notes that the V-2 attacks 'brought the number of civilians killed in Britain by air bombardment to over 60,000.' (Field notes, 2 June, 2010.) The display of the V-2 has caused controversy elsewhere: Edward T. Linenthal, 'Struggling with History and Memory', *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (1995) discusses the display of a V-2 in the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) in Washington DC in the wake of the controversy surrounding display of the *Enola Gay* in 1994-95. Linenthal notes the transition in the NASM from a technocratic approach to the object to a more nuanced display, claiming that V-2's caused 2,000 deaths in England. As a proportion of the 60,000 quoted above, this is significant but still highlights the IWM's tendency to overstate the importance of the V-weapons. For an account of the real terror that these weapons occasioned, however, see Maureen Waller, *London 1945: Life in the Debris of War*, John Murray, London 2004, especially Chapter 1, 'Rockets Fell like Autumn Leaves', pp. 17-70.

Mostly, though, she notes that the major subject of her article is 'addressing an absence, rather than a presence'.⁶⁹ Bardgett describes how proposals for an exhibition on the history of the Third Reich in 1977, though definitively ended due to a very negative article in the *Guardian* newspaper, were abandoned for a combination of practical and ideological reasons.

Practically, Bardgett emphasises the lack of material. The intention was to rely heavily on two private collections of 'German militaria' as 'loans from behind the Iron Curtain would have been thought impractical' and the testimony of survivors was not considered at the time to be 'as concrete as it is today'.⁷⁰ This last issue, though, was connected to the feeling amongst museum staff – who, unusually for the period, were consulted on the idea – that 'the subject of the Holocaust was considered well to the margins of the Museum's terms of reference at this point.'⁷¹

Bardgett reproduces the comment of a staff member concerned that the exhibition 'might appeal to a certain section of the public for very dubious reasons [because?] the main problem is that Nazism was very successful in presenting a glamorous image and in humiliating its victims.'⁷² The question raised in summary was whether the exhibition of Nazism's crime ran the risk of reinforcing rather than exposing Nazi ideology.

This is a concern I have shared in the contemporary exhibition. The sections on 'Antisemitism: the Longest Hatred' and 'The Racial State' tread a delicate line between giving an account of Nazi beliefs and reinforcing them. One display shows a segment of Nazi film illustrating racial superiority and has above this the caption:

RATS, BUGS AND FLEAS ALSO OCCUR NATURALLY, JUST LIKE THE
JEWS AND THE GYPSIES. ALL LIFE IS A STRUGGLE. THAT IS WHY WE
MUST GRADUALLY BIOLOGICALLY ERADICATE ALL THESE PESTS, AND
TODAY THAT MEANS SO FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING THEIR LIVING
CONDITIONS THROUGH PREVENTIVE DETENTION AND STERILISATION

⁶⁹ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961', p. 146.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* pp.149-150.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 149.

LAWS, SO THAT ALL THESE ENEMIES OF OUR PEOPLE ARE SLOWLY BUT SURELY ERADICATED.⁷³

The juxtaposition of the quote with two portraits of victims of the sterilisation programme, blown up to seven times life size, puts the intent of the curators beyond doubt, but it raises a recurring problem with the early section of the exhibition: that it does reproduce a Nazi aesthetic. In isolation, this display might fit very neatly into a Nazi-sponsored exhibition: is it possible to show how evil was made to make sense and even appeal without making sense or appealing to one's visitors? To accept the aesthetic qualities of evil – as an exhibition has to – is to also accept the responsibility to keep asking oneself these questions, as Bardgett clearly does. Of the two portraits next to 'The Racial State' she notes that they 'showed the ghastly outcome of the Nazis' perversion of biological science in very human terms.'⁷⁴ Whether there is any answer to the 'genuine dilemma' identified by Tony Kushner 'between the need to know [...] and the need to respect'⁷⁵ is not clear.

As Kushner explores, the reproduction of images of suffering and nudity is insufficiently problematised, though it is not clear to me how one can depict suffering. The example he uses, of a 'semi-naked terrified young Jewish girl who has been subjected to sexual abuse through a "local" action in Lvov'⁷⁶ is indeed disturbing: but it is supposed to be. The juxtaposition of 'antisemitic propaganda from all over the world alongside Jewish religious items' is more problematic, since (following Kushner) I agree that the display alienates the visitor from these strange exotic creatures – Jews on the one hand – and anti-Semites on the other.⁷⁷

Overall, the opening of the Holocaust Exhibition is depicted by Bardgett as an important step in the Museum's changing conception of itself, bringing

⁷³ Field notes, 27 February, 2008. The quotation is referenced in the display as being from Dr Karl Hanneman, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Ärztebundes* (Journal of the German Medical Association), 1938.

⁷⁴ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum: Challenges of Representation', p. 30.

⁷⁵ Tony Kushner, 'The Holocaust and the Museum World in Britain: a study of ethnography' in Sue Vice (ed.), *Representing the Holocaust: in honour of Bryan Burns*, Vallentine Mitchell, London 2003, p. 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 24.

the IWM 'a more serious atmosphere' as well as new audiences.⁷⁸ This is not to say, however, that problems do not still remain. Robert Crawford, Director-General of the IWM between 1995 and 2008, wrote in his foreword to the Holocaust Exhibition catalogue that the exhibition would contribute to the work of the museum in showing 'the efforts and sacrifice of many people' by depicting 'the nature of the evil they helped to defeat.'⁷⁹

The implication of Crawford's statement is that the Second World War was fought consciously to end the Holocaust. This is, as many historians have demonstrated, a problematic assertion.⁸⁰ Indeed, a point of controversy in the Holocaust Exhibition was the inclusion of material that demonstrated how much information about the fate of European Jewry was available. Bardgett argues under the heading 'Achieving balance' that the issues of knowledge surrounding 'the clear official reluctance to place the suffering of the Jews at the centre of the Ministry of Information's propaganda strategy'⁸¹ were dealt with in the sections entitled *News Reaches Britain*, and that these provide 'exactly the right amount of information' about 'the role of the Allied governments'.⁸²

I am sceptical of this. The image of the war generated during the conflict had little to do with the sufferings of European Jewry. Tony Kushner has demonstrated that, although there was a certain amount of knowledge of the persecutions, this was accompanied by a reluctance to see the Jews as particular targets of Nazi atrocities, as well as by a lack of knowledge, which meant that, even as the war ended and the pictures of liberation etched themselves onto British consciousness, 'the heart of the Holocaust, the crucial

⁷⁸ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961', p. 156.

⁷⁹ Robert Crawford, 'Foreword, in G Steve Paulsson, *The Holocaust Exhibition at Imperial War Museum London*, Imperial War Museum, London 2000-2006, p. 3.

⁸⁰ See Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, Pimlico, London 2001 [1981] or the collection previously mentioned edited by Neufeld and Berenbaum, *The Bombing of Auschwitz* (2000), which reproduces documents (Part IV, pp. 239-280) which combine British, American and Jewish perspectives on the appeals to bomb the camps.

⁸¹ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum: Challenges of Representation', p. 32.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 33.

period between summer 1941 and summer 1944, in spite of the often detailed information available, had yet to be assimilated.⁸³

Kushner argues that this arose from a combination of influences, in particular ‘the importance within liberal ideology of playing down Jewish particularity and the concomitant tendency to view anti-Semitism as a response to Jewish separatism’ but also ‘the limitations imposed by the power of exclusive American and British national frameworks in contemporary perceptions of the war.’⁸⁴ The Imperial War Museum is a vivid reminder that the Holocaust has been assimilated rather than truly integrated into the history of twentieth-century Britain, and the *News Reaches Britain* sections, though an excellent starting-point, do not address this as strongly as they might in the context of the heroic narratives of the Second World War played and replayed in the rest of the museum. As Kushner has noted, the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum is ‘indirectly, an exhibition on Britishness, one that focuses on what it is not – Nazism/Germanness.’⁸⁵ We have returned to the ‘Great British Checklist’ of Calder and Connelly, a spirit evoked by Andy Pearce, who characterises the bulk of British postwar memory of the Holocaust to be ‘a carefully nurtured narrative of Second World War heroism and moral superiority.’⁸⁶ David Cesarani evoked this kind of view in 1998, arguing that there was a ‘particular, urgent rationale’ for having a British exhibition.

The Holocaust is a part of British history. Britain was a place of refuge for Jews fleeing Nazism, a fact that still calls for appreciation and celebration. Britain’s refusal to surrender and her magnificent war effort were fundamental to the defeat of Germany, thereby saving what Jews remained in German hands.⁸⁷

⁸³ Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1994, p. 145.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Tony Kushner, ‘The Holocaust and the Museum World in Britain’, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Andy Pearce, ‘The Development of Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain, 1979-2001’, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2008), p. 73.

⁸⁷ David Cesarani, ‘Should Britain Have a National Holocaust Memorial?’, *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), p. 19. Cesarani is less effusive about the problems of this view, noting that ‘there is a more negative side to Britain’s unique relationship to the Jews in this century and there is a serious need for this to be scrutinised honestly and objectively both for the sake of the historical record and out of a recognition that British national history is no longer homogenous, but pluralistic and shot through with contradictions as well as conflicts’ (p. 20) but overall argues that ‘to neglect [the Holocaust] is, potentially, to fail to do justice to this national epic.’ (p. 20) Aimee Bunting, ‘My Question Applies to this Country’: British Identities and the Holocaust’, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of History and*

This can be seen in *World War II in Photographs*⁸⁸ by Richard Holmes. The fate of European Jewry is deployed at the very beginning of the book as part of ‘The Rise of Hitler’, illustrating the ‘economic crisis, nationalism, militarism and anti-Semitism [which] all helped bring the Nazis to power’⁸⁹ with a burnt-out synagogue after *Kristallnacht*, and at the end of the book, where the ‘Discovery of the Concentration Camps’ is allocated a double-page spread⁹⁰ which is not integrated into the broader narrative of 1945 which starts the chapter.

One of the photographs in this final section shows German civilians – or ‘citizens from the nearby town of Weimar’ as Holmes puts it – looking out of the left of the picture “at” a mass grave in Belsen. Above the German civilians, ‘survivors of the concentration camp at Dachau celebrate their release by the US 45th Infantry Division.’ A GI looks out of the frame, the smile on his lips not matched by his eyes which, on the page, are directed toward the Belsen grave. Above the mass grave are skeletons in front of the ovens at Majdanek, though the gaze of the reader is drawn away from them by the bodies below.

This is an interesting set of images because it avoids the need for a real discussion of “how and why” these bodies – upon which we are called to focus – arrived in their grave: or indeed, through the use of the Dachau picture, who they were. But neither the bodies nor the survivors carry any indication of their reasons for being in the camp. It might be argued that we already ‘know’ who they are because of where they are depicted: they are in the camps; they ‘must’ be Jews. But Holmes’s text makes clear that it wasn’t only Jews who were incarcerated, but ‘Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and enemies of the Nazi regime.’ And the bodies in the mass grave are simply part of the ‘10,000 unburied dead’ which the caption leaves anonymous.

Culture, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2008), pp. 61-92 argues that there is ‘a continuing connection between Britain and the Holocaust that cannot be constrained by the term ‘bystander’.’ (p. 61)

⁸⁸ Richard Holmes, *World War II in Photographs*, SevenOaks 2000 (reprinted 2007). The edition I am referring to confines the connection to the museum with a note on the cover that it is produced ‘In association with the Imperial War Museum’ and the use of the museum logo on the title page. Holmes’s introduction makes clear, however, that the research staff for the project were museum staff. Also, a subsequent edition is on sale in the museum with the museum association more prominent than before. A more subtle point is that in terms of its use of type it is clearly intended to fit the “house style” of the museum.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 364-365.

Arguably, the question of who these bodies belonged to might also be left to “common knowledge”, except that the refusal to name the victims links to the use of the other two images of Jews in the book. The first is of Renate Lewy, an 11-year-old refugee, captioned as follows:

Nazi policies unleashed a flood of Jewish refugees, although not all were as fortunate as Renate Lewy, an 11-year-old who found asylum in Britain.⁹¹

Firstly, note the way in which immigration is not described neutrally: the verb “unleashed” (which is at the very least ambiguous) applies equally to the “flood” of refugees as to Nazi policy. It is also interesting that this bashfully smiling girl, one of a very fortunate few who ‘found asylum’ (rather than being *given* it) is given a very concrete identity: by contrast, an ‘aged Jew’ shown a few pages later being ‘detained’ in Warsaw by German soldiers is shown from behind, his face hidden. Lewy’s good fortune is personal but the other tragedy is anonymous. The Berlin synagogue at the beginning is empty and destroyed. As far as this publication – ostensibly intended to reflect the fact that ‘this war – arguably the greatest event in world history – affected millions of people who neither wore uniform nor shouldered a weapon’⁹² – is concerned, what happened to the Jews of Europe is almost entirely separate.

Secondly, the simple story implied by Holmes is far from the one told by Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox (echoed in the section entitled *Thousands Seek Refuge*), suggesting that ‘fortunate’ is a questionable term in relation to the refugees. They describe a complex of emotions ‘consisting of generosity, sympathy, understanding, fear, meanness of spirit, and a failure of the imagination.’⁹³

All of this, however, is offset by what I think is the masterstroke of the IWM Holocaust Exhibition: the final gallery, ‘Reflections’. This offers a peaceful space in which visitors are encouraged to think about what they have just been through, as the concluding thoughts of the survivors whose testimonies have taken them through the exhibition play on a loop, alongside footage showing the Auschwitz site today. In its fragmented nature, this dense

⁹¹ Richard Holmes, *World War II in Photographs*, p. 24.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁹³ Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century*, Frank Cass, London 1999, p. 151.

text recalls Karen Gershon's *We Came as Children*,⁹⁴ sometimes letting a survivor speak for some time, at others using a short comment. I concluded my visits to the exhibition in this space and noted down the words that struck home.

[Kitty Hart-Moxon] 'No lessons, or very few lessons, have been learned from the past.'

[Esther Brunstein] 'We'll go on telling in the hope that their future won't be our past.'

[Tauba Biber] 'Why me and not my sister?'

[Roman Halter] '...although I believe in God, I don't believe in all the prayers.'⁹⁵

Anne Karpf also liked this space, and the 'usefully varied and conflicting'⁹⁶ comments from the survivors. But without similarly 'usefully varied and conflicting' information on the computer databases in the preceding gallery, it would have much less impact.

Once again, these are so dense as to be impossible to adequately summarise. The process of engaging with this resource was a prolonged task: the content is divided into four overarching headings, each one subdivided into further smaller sections.⁹⁷ They offer a remarkably complex picture of the event and allow the visitor (if they wish) to ask questions of both the exhibitions and themselves that belie the assertion by Geert Mak that began this chapter. While the rest of the museum may at times turn history into myth and spectacle, this exhibition does not, except insofar as to represent is to choose terms and means of representation.

⁹⁴ Karen Gershon (ed.), *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography*, Papermac, London 1989 [1966].

⁹⁵ Fieldnotes, 2008-2010. The text is not reproduced in the 'Lower Floor Text January 2008' which I was given access to by Suzanne Bardgett, simply noting that the section contains an 'Audio-visual production: Reflections'. The role of the audio-visual productions in the IWM could be the subject of a chapter in itself and is superbly explored in both technical and philosophical terms in Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (eds.), *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television*, Wallflower, London 2005. The product of an IWM conference on the subject, it includes transcripts of a roundtable discussion with survivors about this aspect of the exhibition, as well as articles by Annie Dodds describing the process of compiling the presentations. Also see Tony Kushner, 'Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting', *Oral History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2001), which questions the strategies employed in using the testimonies of survivors, though noting that 'To expect the full richness of life story approaches to be utilised in this exhibition is perhaps expecting too much too soon.' (p. 92)

⁹⁶ Anne Karpf, 'Bearing Witness', *The Guardian*, Friday, 2 June 2000.

⁹⁷ The four main sections (according to my Field notes, March 2008) are: 'What was the Holocaust?'; 'Who were the victims?'; 'Country by country'; and 'What could be done to help?'

But this is the aspect of the Imperial War Museum I am most attracted to. In its eclectic and open-minded understanding of its remit, it shows how the museum should be open to question. The next chapter, about the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, will show what happens when there are nothing but questions.

Chapter 5 'After Auschwitz'?

*'A history through things is impossible without poets.'*¹

In their edited volume, *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston suggest two crucial questions for interrogating such cultural artefacts. Firstly, taking 'the given text as the basic datum and object of analysis'² the researcher must decide what the text is. Usually this means establishing the earliest version of the text and identifying subsequent amendments, elisions and alterations. Secondly, however, the researcher wants to know *who* the text is: that is, 'what are the social relations of production which [...] lie behind, or give rise to'³ the text.

I propose this as a start point because before challenging either the notion of 'after Auschwitz' or any of the 'dicta' which have become associated with it, we need to decide *what* we are after and *who* created this. Given the highly contested nature of Auschwitz as site or symbol, we must at least try to understand how this contest has arisen.

So, what are we after? Answers to this question come in two basic varieties. Firstly, the historical reality of 'KL Auschwitz'; secondly, the symbol Auschwitz has become. Deciding where one ends and the other begins is problematic as, to coin a phrase, Auschwitz came by its significance honestly: it *was* the single largest and most developed killing centre in World War II (at least in Europe) and, even by the most conservative estimates, the site of one-sixth of the deaths in what has come to be known as the Holocaust.

But the history of Auschwitz is not simply the history of the Holocaust. As Robert Jan van Pelt has observed, Auschwitz had a myriad of functions, which at times overlapped, at times ran at cross purposes, and at still other times reinforced each other. Van Pelt has identified ten functions and their approximate duration, presented here in table form.

¹ Neil MacGregor, *A history of the World in 100 objects*, p. xix.

² Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston, 'Introduction' in Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (eds.), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1993, p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*

	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
A concentration camp to serve local German security needs						
A production site for gravel and sand						
An execution site for the Gestapo Summary Court in Kattowitz						
An experimental farm						
A forced labour pool for the construction of the IG Farben plant in Monowitz						
A forced labour pool for the construction of an IG Farben company town						
An execution site for certain categories of Soviet prisoners						
A selection and extermination site for Jews						
A forced labour pool for various German factories built in the region						
A transfer station for Jews selected for work in the Reich						

Figure 1: Functions of Auschwitz. Devised by author on the basis of Robert Jan van Pelt's expert report for *David John Cawdell Irving vs. Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books*.

Even the most cursory glance is enough to justify confusion. Partly this stems from the complexity of Auschwitz itself, and partly from the 'artificial and ahistorical' tendency identified by Nikolaus Wachsmann to refer to "the' concentration camp'⁴ as though the plethora of institutions encompassed by the term can be easily reduced to a single theoretical construct. As Wachsmann makes clear, while the histories of individual camps can be viewed and analysed together, any general conclusions must be tempered with the awareness that the experiences of particular groups within individual camps differed greatly, and that the development of each camp was to an extent independent of the general trend.

Further, Wachsmann also alludes to a particular problem of Auschwitz: namely that while it cannot be understood without reference to the system of which it was a part, it also, in the public imagination, eclipses all other camps. He suggests that this is because 'everything was more extreme in Auschwitz: nowhere else did so many prisoners die; and no camp held more prisoners.'⁵

Van Pelt's list brings home the extremity of Auschwitz, making it clear that Auschwitz's role in the Final Solution is only a part of its history. But this list, it should be emphasised, is not complete, or certainly open to argument (like all lists). It excludes the extermination of approximately 20,000 Sinti and Roma, and arguably fractures the Polish experience of Auschwitz into its

⁴ Nikolaus Wachsmann, 'The dynamics of destruction: the development of the concentration camps, 1933-1945' in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, Routledge, Oxford 2010, p. 17.

⁵ Ibid. p. 31.

constituent parts. In addition, as van Pelt acknowledges, this ‘often labyrinthine context’ is further complicated by the ‘intentional camouflage of certain aspects of the camp’s history during the war and the wilful destruction of archival and other materials at the end of the war.’⁶

Geography is another element which the visitor must treat cautiously. Visitors to the museum are presented with a neat ‘Auschwitz’ consisting of Auschwitz I, the original concentration camp, and Birkenau, where most of the extermination took place.



Figure 2: Map of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in the Reception building. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2009.

In fact, however, the ‘Auschwitz’ we visit today is a highly edited version of the original complex. At its greatest extent, ‘KL Auschwitz’ consisted of three main camps: Auschwitz I, the administrative centre; Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the site of the major extermination facilities; and Auschwitz III-Monowitz which, in addition to a small camp to build the

⁶ Robert Jan van Pelt, ‘The van Pelt Report’, available from www.holocaustdenialontrial.com, website established by Emory University (where Deborah Lipstadt is employed) to store documents from the Irving Trial. On last access (17 February, 2011) the site had expanded to include more information on Holocaust denial more generally.

adjoining chemical factory, also administered a network of thirty five sub-camps, as well as five agricultural 'branch camps' within a forty square-kilometre 'area of interest': about half the journey by bus today from Kraków is in this zone.

The most distant camp in the Auschwitz complex was the factory owned by Oskar Schindler outside Brno in what is now the Czech Republic. The reality could not be fully memorialised without creating a scar across Europe, let alone Poland.

So, when we visit the site today, we are confronted with a necessary compromise between now and then which is further complicated by the imagination of those visiting. As Jonathan Webber has written, many people come to Auschwitz expecting that 'to the extent that Auschwitz [exists] in real physical space, it [is] little more than a desolate, silent and lonely field somewhere in Poland, where tall grasses swaying in the wind [have] now come up to cover their appalling guilty secret.'⁷ In fact, as visitors discover, much of the site is either intact or restored to some extent: many visitors are surprised by the apparent completeness of the site.



Figure 3: Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2009.

⁷ Jonathan Webber, *The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections*, Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, Oxford 1992, p. 2.

What remains is the result of sixty years of decision-making, trying to balance several contradictory principles and agendas, not just between various groups who claim the memory of Auschwitz as their own, but also the demands of central government. The desire to preserve the site 'for all time', in the words of the 1947 act of the *Sejm* (the Polish parliament) establishing the museum, is hard to reconcile with the simultaneous desire to try and educate the millions of visitors who have been to the site since the war. This is complicated by the fact that, as many authors have commented, the fabric of the site (and especially Birkenau) was constructed in order to disappear. As Teresa Świebocka, a curator at the museum between 1967 and 2009, observed in a piece written for *Polin*:

Unlike most monuments in the world, Auschwitz was never intended to last. Almost everything was poorly made – the barracks, the camp uniforms, the paper used for documents. Many buildings were erected by the Nazis for only temporary purposes. The Museum has to preserve even ruins, and it is a continuing, very difficult, and very expensive process to halt time and save the site with all its objects.⁸

In fact, Świebocka is slightly misinterpreting the evidence. Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, in *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, show how, while this assertion was partially true, especially in reference to Birkenau and the installations of mass killing there, Auschwitz I was just at the beginning of its projected history as a 'model' concentration camp in the 'paradise of blood and soil' projected by Himmler in a victorious Third Reich. The drawings reproduced in Dwork and van Pelt show not only the extent of the camp in the 'third and final master plan' of summer 1942, but the level of detail this had been conceived in: designs are included for the furnishings of Himmler's study in the *Kommandatur*.⁹

⁸ Teresa Świebocka, 'The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum: From Commemoration to Education', in Antony Polonsky (ed.) *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. Volume Thirteen: Focusing on the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London 2000, p. 293. I suspect (since she was for many years the first point of contact for English-speaking researchers, including the present author) she is the 'Polish official' referred to by Otto Friedrich, in *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, Penguin Books, London 1996, as saying 'Everything was poorly made, [...] the barracks, the crematorium, the paper used for documents. It is difficult to preserve something that was made to vanish.' (p. ix)

⁹ Deborah Dwórk and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, Yale University Press, London 1996, especially Part Two, 'Ambition and Perdition', pp. 163-353. The 'third and final master plan' can be seen in various illustrations, but most strikingly in the

Nonetheless, the task of preserving Auschwitz has presented the museum with a host of problems in being forced to preserve items that in any other setting would be replaced. The volume authored by Teresa Zbrzeska, *Preserving for the Future*,¹⁰ demonstrates the lengths to which the museum has gone to retain as much of the site's original fabric as possible.

But here the question of *who* the text is becomes important. Auschwitz since 1945 has been 'rewritten' to fit two principal narratives, which have frequently been seen as conflicting.

The most obvious narrative – from a Western European perspective – is that of the Holocaust. Approximately 1.1 million Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and the vast majority of them were killed almost immediately on arrival. In the words of Robert Jan van Pelt, 'If you would draw a map of human suffering, if you create a geography of atrocities, this would be the absolute centre.'¹¹

It is the Holocaust which supplied the site with the objects that stick in the minds of most visitors: the belongings of those who were deported to Auschwitz and their very bodies plundered for the enrichment of their murderers. Glasses, shoes, suitcases, even two tons of human hair, found after the war to contain traces of cyanide: this was shaved off the corpses of the victims and spun into cloth.

axometric drawing by Kate Mullin that appears on pp. 226-227. The designs for furniture for Himmler's study are on pp. 229-230.

¹⁰ Teresa Zbrzeska (trans. Jaime Ashworth), *Chronić dla Przyszłości/Preserving for the Future*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim 2003. This publication was produced for a conference on the future of the site in June 2003, the papers from which are collected in Krystyna Marszałek (ed.), *Preserving for the Future: Materials from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim 2004.

¹¹ Robert Jan van Pelt, quoted in D.D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial: History, Justice and the David Irving Trial*, Granta Books, London 2001, p. 150.



Figure 4: Relics in Block 5, 'Evidence of Crimes', Auschwitz I. Photos: Jaime Ashworth, January 2008.

The rest of the bodies were burnt: visible for miles around, columns of fire by night and smoke by day. The very ground records this: smoke knows no fences, spreads beyond the strictest confines. The ashes and bones still flow through the rivers, can still be found just below the grass. The words of the Bible, displayed in Block 27, can be taken here with awful literalness: 'The voice of the blood of your brother calls to me from the earth.'¹²

¹² Genesis 4.10.



Figure 5. : 'And God said to Cain, the voice of the blood of your brother calls to me from the earth.' Block 27, 'The Martyrology of the Jews', Auschwitz I. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2009.

This narrative of Auschwitz is common currency. Through testimony, museums, films, television programmes, or memorial days, Auschwitz is engraved onto European consciousness as the centre of the Holocaust, the endpoint of a thousand years of Jewish history in Europe. Czesław Miłosz praised Thomas Mann for seeing *Heart of Darkness* as 'inaugurating the twentieth century': 'Europeans had for a long time been hiding certain horrors in their colonial backyard, until they were visited by them with a vengeance.'¹³ Just fifty miles south-west of where Joseph Conrad spent his childhood, we find the heart of our own darkness.

But Auschwitz is also the site and, crucially, in its guise as museum, the product of more local memories. Approximately 70,000 non-Jewish Poles died here between 1940 and 1945: Auschwitz is also their largest cemetery. What the Polish Exhibition in Auschwitz I terms 'the struggle and martyrdom of the Polish nation' took place here too. And, after the war, it was the Polish

¹³ Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1981-82*, Harvard University Press, London 1983, p. 51. I have followed the peculiarities of individual publishers in the reproduction (or not) of diacritics in Miłosz's name.

survivors who chose to ensure that the site was preserved, and the Polish government which took financial responsibility for that preservation.

The manner in which they did this has been the subject of fierce debate. It has been argued that they raised the narrative of Polish suffering to an undue prominence and minimised the ordeal of European Jewry, relegating them to the secondary status of 'citizens of occupied nations' without acknowledging that the reason many from France, or Holland, or Italy, found themselves in Auschwitz had nothing to do with their citizenship and everything to do with their racial status in the Third Reich as Jews. It has been alleged that they appropriated symbols and meanings of the site in an effort to enhance their status as 'Christ among Nations' – a deeply offensive message to some Jews who see the crimes at Auschwitz as (at least in part) the crimes of Christianity.

But the idea of the 'Christ of Nations' needs to be taken seriously, at least as an idea with real social effects, and one derived from real suffering. The disappearance of Poland from the map of Europe in the 1790s meant that Poles became, as the Jews had long been accustomed to be, what Jonathan Boyarin has termed a community in time rather than a community in space.¹⁴ The Polish romantics of the nineteenth century responded by devising a formula through which, in the words of the anthropologist Zdzisław Mach, 'Poland suffers and dies, but is reborn, is resurrected, and through its suffering saves mankind.'¹⁵

The problem, as Mach continues, is that the formula not only 'presumes absolute moral purity and the superiority of the Polish people' it also 'precludes any culpability on the part of the Poles against anyone.' Thus, 'admitting that Poland bears any guilt would wreck the whole structure on

¹⁴ This is a central concern of Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1992, and especially the final chapter, 'Palestine and Jewish History: November 1989', pp. 116-129.

¹⁵ Zdzisław Mach, 'Poland's National Memory of the Holocaust and Its Identity in an Expanded Europe', in Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs (ed.) *The Holocaust: Voices of Scholars*, Austeria, Krakow 2009, p. 64. For a modern version of 'Christ Among Nations', see the article by Roger Cohen for *The New York Times* in the wake of the deaths of 95 prominent Poles in April 2010, 'The Glory of Poland', April 13, 2010, in which he uses the Polish story (or at least a fairly triumphalist version) to compare Poland favourably with the 'comparative victimhood' of the Middle East.

which the ethnic and romantic version of Polish identity rests.¹⁶ The genuine suffering of non-Jewish Poles in Auschwitz meant that, however uncomfortable some Jews were with the perceived 'Polonisation' of the site, it would also be a legitimate site for Polish remembrance.

These tensions crystallised in the 1980s and 1990s with, first, the establishment of a Carmelite convent in a building once used to store Zyklon-B, the gas used in Auschwitz to gas Jews, and then the erection of a cross, used during John Paul II's mass at Birkenau in 1979, on the site of an adjoining gravel pit. James Young, writing in *The Texture of Memory*, summarises the problem by pointing out that 'Where it reminded Polish Catholics of the meaning for all suffering, the reasons for life itself, European Jews recalled living under the shadow of the cross for two millennia, under unceasing pressure to convert, to relinquish their covenant, to disappear.'¹⁷

In fairness, some conflation of narratives did take place. Janusz Wiczorek, the Chairman of the Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, did refer, in a guidebook published in 1968 (as Poland was expelling the majority of those Jews who had stayed after World War II) to the 'six million victims – men, women and children – martyred, murdered by the Nazis,' as 'the price, paid by the Polish nation for its love of country and of liberty.'¹⁸ Jewish voices have pointed out that the record of Polish treatment of Polish Jews before, during, and after the war makes such conflation at best disingenuous and at worst mendacious.

At the same time, it must be pointed out that as time has gone on more and more Polish voices have made similar calls: first in a tone of reluctant contrition and then in more explicit apology. To paraphrase Jan Błoński (himself paraphrasing Czesław Miłosz), the poor Poles have looked at the ghetto and, for the most part, acknowledged that their suffering, while great, did not match that of the Jews.¹⁹ Further, they have, in the wake of the

¹⁶ Ibid. For a book-length extrapolation of this idea, see Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984.

¹⁷ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 148.

¹⁸ Janusz Wiczorek, 'Foreword to the First Edition' in Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939-1945*, Sport i Turystyka, Warsaw 1968, p. 9.

¹⁹ Jan Błoński, 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto' in Jan Kott (ed.), *Four Decades of Polish Essays*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois 1990, pp. 222-235. The article was originally published in *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies*, Volume 2 (1987) Błoński is

controversy surrounding Jan Gross's book *Neighbours*,²⁰ begun to acknowledge that as well as being bystanders or fellow victims, they took their turn as perpetrators as well.



Figure 6: Prison uniforms. Block 15, 'The Struggle and Martyrdom of the Polish Nation 1939-1945', Auschwitz I. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2009.

I sometimes worry, however, that this process goes too far and results, in part, from a misunderstanding of how the text of Auschwitz was in fact written after the war. The official formula to describe the victims was indeed 'four million citizens from the occupied countries of Europe', committing the sin of conflation. In the museum, however, this was rendered as 'twenty-eight nationalities' – using the Polish word *narodowość* (indicating cultural

paraphrasing the title of Miłosz's 1943 poem, 'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto', to be found in a variety of anthologies. The literature on Polish-Jewish relations is vast and complex, but two useful introductions are: Antony Polonsky, *Polish-Jewish Relations since 1984: Reflections of a Participant*, Austeria, Krakow 2009 and Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY 1997.

²⁰ Jan T. Gross, *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941*, Arrow Books, London 2003 [Polish 2000]. The debate surrounding this important work continued for some time after, and the volume edited by Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, *The Neighbours Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004, contains an excellent sample of the responses both in Poland and abroad.

belonging) as opposed to *obywatelstwo* (indicating citizenship). The museum authorities, in this period predominantly survivors of the camp, were not interested in concealing the nature of what had taken place in Auschwitz. Kazimierz Smoleń, a survivor of four and a half years in the camp, author of the permanent exhibition, and Director of the museum between 1955 and 1990, said at the outset of his exhibition scenario that the murder of the Jews was the central event in the camp and the one the museum was most bound to remember.²¹

The museum did, however, have to accommodate itself to a communist regime which preferred to erase *narodowość* in favour of anti-fascist citizenship. The friendship between Smoleń and Józef Cyrankiewicz, another Auschwitz survivor and Prime Minister of Poland between 1954 and 1970, meant that the museum could take liberties with the official narrative, which would have preferred the museum to speak of 'citizens of occupied Europe' as 'victims of fascism' regardless of ethnic differences.

The official 'Polish narrative' of Auschwitz was in fact dismissive of many of the most important strains of Polish memory of the site: the communist authorities were never comfortable with the canonisation of Maximilian Kolbe by John Paul II, whose 1979 sermon praising Kolbe's 'victory of faith and love' is best seen as a call to Polish society to throw off communist rule rather than an attempt to 'Christianise' Auschwitz. As Jan Kubik has written, the first "pilgrimage to Poland" was a key moment in the history of postwar Poland when 'many Poles realised or were reminded that non-Marxist discourses did exist and could be used effectively to articulate and analyse political, social, and even economic problems.'²²

Potentially, though, Auschwitz was a site where the common 'moral imperative to condemn Nazi war crimes'²³ could suggest that, at least on this issue, church and state were united. As Marek Kucia has shown, the visit was

²¹ Kazimierz Smoleń, *Scenariusz wystawy stałej Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu* (1954), Auschwitz Museum Archives ref. S/Smolen/6.

²² Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1994, pp. 144-145. Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2003 is a history of the museum in this period.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 143.

added to the papal itinerary at the insistence of the Warsaw government.²⁴ It is important to remember, therefore, that the homily in Auschwitz should be read as part of multiple discourses, not simply as a ritual intended to memorialise the Holocaust.

John Paul II, in fact, drew attention to the inscription in Hebrew on the Birkenau Memorial:

In particular I pause with you, dear participants in this encounter, before the inscription in Hebrew. This inscription awakens the memory of the People whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This People draws its origin from Abraham, our father in faith (cf. Rom 4:12), as was expressed by Paul of Tarsus. The very people that received from God the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' itself experienced in a special measure what is meant by killing. It is not possible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference.²⁵

Critics, however, point to the subsequent paragraph, in which John Paul II referred to the 'six million Poles [who] lost their lives during the Second World War' in a manner reminiscent of the communist authorities. They also question his reference to 'the death in the gas chamber of a concentration camp of the Carmelite Sister Benedicta of the Cross, whose name in the world was Edith Stein', asking whether her death in the gas chamber due to her place in the Nazi racial hierarchy can be incorporated into a Christian narrative of Auschwitz.

Essentially, however, as Kubik suggests, the homily was part of a much broader address to Polish society in 1979, which marked 'the end of the Party-state's monopoly over public discourse'.²⁶ The core of the speech was an appeal to question ideologies 'in which human rights are subjected to the

²⁴ See Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny: Historia, współczesność i świadomość społeczna KL Auschwitz w Polsce* [Auschwitz as a social fact: historical and contemporary social awareness of KL Auschwitz in Poland], Universitas, Kraków 2005, pp. 239-244. Kucia is a prolific and authoritative source on the sociology of Polish perceptions of Auschwitz: see Marek Kucia, 'Visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum', *ProMemoria* 20 (2004), pp. 39-42 and Marek Kucia, 'Auschwitz Concentration Camp in the Perception of Polish Students', *ProMemoria* 27 (2007), pp. 99-108.

²⁵ John Paul II, 'In the concentration camp at Oswiecim (Auschwitz)', in *Return to Poland: The Collected Speeches of John Paul II*, Collins, London 1979, pp. 124-129. It should be noted that the homily was actually given in Birkenau, and that the conflation of Auschwitz and Birkenau was seen as provocative – though it should equally be pointed out that Jewish inmates were held in Auschwitz I just as civilians deported from Warsaw after the failed 1944 uprising were held in Birkenau.

²⁶ Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power*, p. 144.

demands of the system, so completely subjected to them, so as in practice not to exist at all'.

Moreover, to those listening to John Paul II in 1979, who lived among the ruins of Jewish civilisation in Poland as part of their everyday lives, no more needed to be said. The hole left in Polish society by the years 1939-45 is not just the outline of a *mezuzah* in doorposts, but the awareness in Poland that a vital part of what the society had been – should be now – was and is no more. As the work done by Jonathan Webber and Chris Schwarz illustrates, 'the enormity of the destruction that took place at the local level' can still be seen with only a little effort.²⁷ The question for Polish society was not in some senses how to memorialise but rather how to live amongst the traces. As the novelist Anne Michaels has written, there are places where 'one could probably not walk a block without stepping into a place of mourning; we could not mark them all.'²⁸

In addition, though, the awareness that, however they pointed to those who saved Jews (more than anywhere else in Europe, notwithstanding a cruel occupation) fundamentally Polish society had connived with the occupier, left a defensiveness which forty-five years of communist rule did nothing to defuse. As Jan Nowak-Jeziorański wrote in 2001:

It is human nature to remember the wrongs done to us, and that we do not want to remember the wrongs that we have done unto others. Instinctive self-defence compels us to call into question even indisputably proven facts, to seek mitigating circumstances, to clear our own conscience while blaming others.²⁹

It is in this context that efforts have been made by the museum to highlight the 'People of Good Will' in the town of Oświęcim who 'out of the goodness of their hearts [...] came forward to aid the prisoners in

²⁷ Jonathan Webber, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory: The Jewish Heritage of Polish Galicia*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization/Indiana University Press, Oxford/Bloomington and Indianapolis 2009, p. 3. See also Chris Schwarz, *Photographing Traces of Memory: A Contemporary View of the Jewish Past in Polish Galicia*, Galicia Jewish Museum, Krakow 2006.

²⁸ Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*, Bloomsbury, London 2009, p. 105.

²⁹ Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, 'A Need for Compensation', originally appeared in the Polish daily *Rzeczpospolita* on 26 January 2001, translation from Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, p. 87.

Auschwitz.³⁰ It is notable, however, that a museum publication describing these efforts is entitled 'Extraordinary Oświęcimians'.³¹ By definition, not everyone is extraordinary: the implied dichotomy between the heroism of the few contrasted with the inaction (for the best of reasons, perhaps) of others is one that haunts much Polish discussion of the period, even (as here) in heroic mode.

The uglier side of the compulsion identified by Jeziorański can be seen in an article by Antoni Macierewicz, which made repeated reference to the old canard of the *żydokomuna*: the perceived dominance of Poles of Jewish origin amongst the communist elite. Macierewicz narrativised the postwar era as 'fifty years of occupation directed by communists of Jewish origin supporting Russian Bolshevism'.³²

Macierewicz is unabashedly peddling an extreme view, but the resonance of this perspective can be seen in works by much more nuanced commentators. The article by Andrzej Żbikowski of the Jewish Historical Institute on 'Jewish Reaction to the Soviet Arrival in the Kresy in September 1939' is an interesting example. It spends its opening section conceding that 'the average Polish Jew had no reason to be greatly enamoured of the Polish authorities after twenty years' in which Polish society had been a 'capricious and often harsh stepmother',³³ while never entirely rejecting the premise of his own questions about the occupations. Żbikowski notes toward the end of the article that the forced nature of much Jewish "collaboration" made little difference to public understanding.

That this collaboration was for the most part forced and rarely openly directed against the Poles was of little interest to those who formed public opinion in

³⁰ Plaque in temporary exhibition 'Ludzie Dobrej Woli/The people of good will' erected in the Reception Building of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Summer 2009. Photographic record in author's collection.

³¹ Stefan Wilkanowicz (ed.), *Niezwykli Oświęcimianie: jak ratowano więźniów KL Auschwitz* [Extraordinary Oświęcimians: how they rescued prisoners of KL Auschwitz], Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu, Oświęcim 2006.

³² Antoni Macierewicz, 'The Revolution of Nihilism' in Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond* [op cit.], p. 96. Macierewicz is the editor of *Głos*, in which the article appeared in February 2001.

³³ Andrzej Żbikowski, 'Jewish Reaction to the Soviet Arrival in the Kresy in September 1939', in Antony Polonsky (ed.) *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. Volume Thirteen: Focusing on the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, p. 63. It is also worth noting that the question which heads each page of the article in italics is: '*Why did Jews Welcome the Soviet Armies?*', which again accepts the basic premise.

occupied Poland. In the unwritten code universally rejecting the occupation, and the call for at least passive resistance (which was so close to the tradition of Polish society under the partitions), there was no room for exceptions: who is not with us is against us.³⁴

In short, debates in the early twenty-first century continued along the lines identified by Timothy Garton Ash in the 1980s: as a struggle between competing nationalisms (in the Orwellian sense) which would not accept certain 'intolerable' facts. Garton Ash summarised these pithily:

For the Polish Nationalist: There was virulent and widespread antisemitism in Poland during the Second World War.

For the Jewish Nationalist: The conditions of German occupation were worse for the Poles than for any other nation except the Jews.³⁵

The problem, however, with Garton Ash's view is that while he acknowledges the extent to which antisemitism 'remained an issue, and an instrument of political manipulation, in postwar Poland,³⁶ his fundamental view appears to be that the Polish-Jewish problem was (and by extension is) about the past rather than the present. In the same article, he terms the Holocaust the 'worst and final period' in the common history of Germans, Poles and Jews. This is an unusually over-literal interpretation for a very nuanced observer and perhaps links to his concluding plea for the historical profession to 'protect us against memory.'³⁷ I think, however, that instead of seeing the core problem as being the events of the past, in fact it is the competing efforts of Poles and Jews to work out their histories for themselves in the present that causes the continuing difficulty.

As Geneviève Zubrzycki points out in her book on the 'war of the crosses' in the 1990s, the controversies around Auschwitz came during periods of intense social change within Poland. The international controversy about the establishment of a Carmelite convent in the 'Old Theatre Building' coincided with the imposition of martial law and the eventual collapse of the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁵ Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Life of Death' in Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Random House, New York 1989, p.134. The article originally appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in 1985.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 132.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 142.

communist bloc. The 'war of the crosses' came at a time in the early 1990s when Polish society was reconstructing itself and any pressure from outside was perceived as 'a threat to, or even an assault on, their state's newly regained and still fragile sovereignty.'³⁸

This sense of fragility continues to be an important current in Polish understanding of the Holocaust and Auschwitz. A commemorative volume produced to coincide with the visit of Benedict XVI to Poland in May 2006 illustrates this well. Entitled 'From Auschwitz to Heaven', it contains biographies of seventeen Catholic figures that perished in Auschwitz. Kolbe and Edith Stein are the first two, with the subheadings 'Patron of a harsh century' (for Kolbe) and 'Co-patroness of Europe' (for Stein).³⁹ The excerpts from speeches by John Paul II are also revealing. For Kolbe, the editors have chosen the passage from the 1979 homily emphasising Kolbe's 'victory through faith and love, similar to the victory of Christ himself, giving himself up to death in the starvation bunker – for a brother.'⁴⁰

For Stein, however, the editors select a passage from the Apostolic letter of 1999 designating Stein a 'Co-Patroness' of Europe. Setting her biography in the context of a speech which talked of her 'journey towards Christian perfection' seems provocative, notwithstanding the concluding admonition to 'also remember the Shoah' taken from John Paul II's homily on the occasion of her canonisation in 1998.⁴¹

This kind of reference, which treads a narrow line between venerating the Polish tragedy and minimising the Jewish, has to be seen in context. It is

³⁸ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2006, p. 6.

³⁹ Ryszard Szwoch (ed.), *Z Auschwitz do Nieba: Święci i błogosławieni* [From Auschwitz to Heaven: Saints and Blessed], Wydawnictwo Bernadinum, Pelplin 2006, p. 9 and p. 25 respectively.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32. The homilies given in 1998 and 1999 first canonising Stein and then designating her 'Co-Patroness of Europe' can be accessed via the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein_en.html (1998, accessed 18 February 2011); http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu_proprio_01101999_co-patronesses-europe_en.html (1999: accessed 18 February 2011). For a different perspective on Stein, see Zev Garber, 'Edith Stein: Jewish Perspectives on Her Martyrdom' in Zev Garber, *Shoah: The Paradigmatic Genocide. Essays in Exegesis and Eisegesis, Studies in the Shoah Volume VIII*, University Press of America, Lanham, New York and London 1994, pp. 79-96. which explores the complexities raised by Stein's decision to convert from Judaism to Catholicism and suggests that these could be the basis of interfaith dialogue.

important, for example, to remember that Natan Rapoport's memorial to the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was erected in 1947: the museum commemorating the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 did not open until sixty years later, in 2004. And early attempts to understand how this past played out in the present did not always give either the facts or the memorials their due. For example, Konnilyn Feig in her 1979 book *Hitler's Death Camps*, claimed that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was 'not identified in specific terms, but described rather as a revolt of the national Polish resistance.'⁴²

In fact, almost the reverse was true. As the Warsaw Uprising Museum now records, in that time the memory of the Polish uprising against the Nazis was suppressed: another 'battle for memory'.⁴³ A plaque in the museum records that between 1945 and 1956, insurgents were imprisoned alongside 'German war criminals'. The same plaque quotes the verdict of a 1975 'Encyclopaedia of the Second World War' on the Home Army:

The AK [*Armia Krajowa* – Home Army] was an organisation with a structure inappropriate for the needs of the ongoing fight against the German occupant, but instead intended to ensure that the Government-in-Exile could take over power in the country through a popular uprising [...] The AK command slowed down the armed struggle in accordance with the Allies' 'policy of the two enemies' (Germany and the USSR) [...] During the occupation, they conducted a policy of protection of the interests of the bourgeoisie and landowners.⁴⁴

Such was the context for the plethora of memorials listed in the 1968 guidebook. And a more specific resentment lurks in the text. In the entry for the 'Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw', the authors note that 'After the crushing of the Insurrection, Warsaw, with the exception of Praga, was entirely depopulated.'⁴⁵ The exception of the Praga district was due to its occupation by the Red Army, immortalised in a monument known to Varsovians as 'the monument to the sleeping soldier' but reverently described

⁴² Konnilyn G. Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness*, Holmes & Meier, New York and London 1979, p. 394.

⁴³ For example, the collection edited by Anna Machcewicz, *Walka o pamięć: władze i społeczeństwo wobec Powstania Warszawskiego 1944-1989* [Struggle over memory: the authorities and society in regard to the Warsaw Uprising 1944-1989], Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2008.

⁴⁴ Plaque/leaflet, 'Memory and History', Warsaw Rising Museum, author's collection.

⁴⁵ Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939-1945*, Sport i Turystyka, Warsaw 1968, p. 25.

in the 1968 guidebook as the 'Monument to the Brotherhood in Arms'.⁴⁶ Young sees the use of the Ghetto Monument by *Solidarność* in the early 1980s as a popular '[figuring of] contemporary resistance in the memory of the Ghetto uprising' in response to an 'official move to represent memory of the Poles' averted genocide in the trope of the Jews' actual fate.⁴⁷ What Young does not adequately consider is whether a real consideration of non-communist resistance during the war was possible in any other terms.

So it has to be understood that when the period of the 1944 uprising is referred to as *dnia wolności* (the days of freedom) this is not to be understood ironically. The scars of what John Paul II termed (in a message to the Mayor of Warsaw in 2004) 'earlier attempts to erase those events from the national memory'⁴⁸ ran, and still run, deep.

And the Polish past is as complicated and contradictory as any other. The 'Extraordinary Oświęcimians' celebrated by the museum are one story. The history of the town is another. As Jan Ptaszkowski reflected in an introductory essay to a pamphlet produced in 1999 to commemorate the outbreak of World War Two: 'Oświęcim with its Piast, Jagiellonian, Austro-Hungarian or interwar history is little known.'⁴⁹ The tragedy of the camp's existence has 'veiled its interesting, centuries-long history.'⁵⁰

The accounts in the pamphlet from inhabitants of prewar Oświęcim refer to the retreat of the Polish Army from the barracks (which would become the camp) and the panic amongst the inhabitants at the German advance and their attempts to get on trains going east. 'The people started to panic, and the radio made it even worse.'⁵¹ Many of them testify to the good relations between the Polish and Jewish communities. One witness testifies that 'Even

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 37.

⁴⁷ See Young, *The Texture of Memory*, pp. 155-184, for a fuller account of the monument's place in Polish memory.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, 'Warsaw – An Invincible City' in Paweł Kowal and Paweł Ukielski (eds.), *The Days of Freedom*, Warsaw Rising Museum, Warsaw c. 2004, pp. 22-23. Also see the *Guidebook to the Warsaw Rising Museum*, Warsaw Rising Museum, Warsaw 2007, and *Katalog Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego* [Catalogue of the Warsaw Rising Museum], Warsaw Rising Museum, Warsaw 2009, for other statements about the significance of its opening in 2004.

⁴⁹ Jan Ptaszkowski, 'Wrześniowe Świadczenia Mieszkańców Oświęcimia z 1939 R.' [September Testimonies of Oswiecim Inhabitants from 1939] in Leszek Szuster (ed.) *Oświęcim w pierwszym dniu wojny* [Oswiecim on the first day of war], Międzynarodowy Dom Spotkań Młodzieży w Oświęcimiu, Oświęcim 1999, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Testimony by Józefa Handzlik and Joanna Urbańska, Ibid. p. 29.

among us, boys who had formerly been scouts, everyone volunteered for the army.⁵²

Jan Karski remembered Oświęcim in the early part of the war very differently. Later in the war, Karski would risk his life to get news of what was happening under occupation – including entering the Warsaw Ghetto – to the Allies.⁵³ In September 1939, he was part of the garrison in Oświęcim. His account of the retreat contrasts dramatically with the idylls of the pamphlet.

As we marched through the streets of Oswiecim towards the railroad, to our complete astonishment and dismay, the inhabitants began firing at us from the windows. They were Polish citizens of German descent, the Nazi Fifth Column, who were, in this fashion, announcing their new allegiance.⁵⁴

Local history interacts with national and international history in surprising ways in this context. While living in Poland, I had students and friends for whom the most sinister places were also home: several from Oświęcim; one from Malkinia, the village near Treblinka. For them, the history of the war was the history of their families, some of whom had spent time in the camps, even died there. These were, paraphrasing the article by Gordon Horwitz,⁵⁵ places both near and far. Visiting my ex-wife's family in Tarnów (from which the first deportees to Auschwitz came in 1940), we would pass 'Jewish Street' with the remains of a *bima*, the only remnant of the synagogue razed to the ground during the war. The gates to the town's Jewish cemetery are now in Washington DC, part of the USHMM collection.⁵⁶

While taking a train from Krakow to Warsaw during my fieldwork, I fell into conversation with an elderly lady in my train compartment. On hearing of my research topic, she told me of how, as a child in Kielce during the war, she had been sent by her mother to buy bread, coincidentally as the Kielce Ghetto was being liquidated. On one level, this story might seem to confirm the view of Polish society in relation to the Holocaust in Czesław Miłosz's poem

⁵² Testimony by Jan Knycz, *Ibid.* p. 36.

⁵³ See for example, his appearance in *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann 1985) in which he describes this.

⁵⁴ Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1945, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Gordon J. Horwitz, 'Places far away, places very near: Mauthausen, the camps of the Shoah, and the bystanders' in Omer Bartov (ed.), *The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath* (Rewriting Histories), Routledge, London 2000, pp. 204-218.

⁵⁶ Paweł Jaroszewski and Krzysztof Głomb (trans. Marek Jakubik), *Tarnow: Opowieść o mieście/A tale of the city*, Parol, Kraków 1996. No pagination.

'Campo dei Fiori', describing how the Warsaw Ghetto burned while on the other – Polish – side of the wall a funfair was in full swing. As Milosz wrote:

The bright melody drowned
the salvos from the ghetto wall,
and couples were flying
high in the cloudless sky.⁵⁷

As she went on, however, noting that she had *gęsia skóra* (goosebumps) as she thought of it, she described how she had seen soldiers take newborns from their mothers' arms. Her eyes dimmed with tears and her voice shook as she spoke, miming how the soldiers had held the babies by their feet and dashed their brains out. Only eight when the war ended, a child of five or six at the time, she said that the memory had never left her.

On a different note, she described how she had been blessed by the mother of a Jewish friend of hers when she had insisted that her parents feed the starving child. But the memory of mothers crying for their babies was still with her as she looked out of the carriage window of our train, drawing into Warsaw.

Such direct personal relationship to atrocity is something we have to factor in when looking at the Polish relationship to the Holocaust. Outside Birkenau, the plaques erected by the town to the villages razed to the ground – their bricks used to build barracks in Birkenau – remind us (or at least should remind us) that Auschwitz was not created out of nothing, nor is the country in which it now exists merely a blank canvas for atrocity. The wall of shattered gravestones in the Remuh cemetery in Kraków, rescued from the streets where they had been used as pavement, are not the only such displaced material.

⁵⁷ Czeslaw Milosz (ed. Robert Hass), *Selected Poems 1931-2004*, Harper Collins, New York 2006, p. 13.



Figure 7: wall of shattered gravestones, Remuh cemetery, Kraków. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2009.

Similarly, the controversies of the 1980s and 1990s about the placement of Christian forms of commemoration in the vicinity of the camp have to be seen as taking place within a much more complex discourse. As Isabel Wollaston describes it, a balance has to be struck between inappropriate and 'legitimate, albeit occasionally tactless forms of Christian self-expression.'⁵⁸

We have to remember, in the words of Władysław Broniewski, that 'On [this] land/ [were] millions of graves/ through [this] land/ came the fire/ through this land/ came misfortune/ on [this] land/ was Auschwitz.'⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Isabel Wollaston, *Auschwitz and the Politics of Commemoration*, Holocaust Educational Trust, London 2000, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Author's translation of fragment of Broniewski's poem 'A Word about Stalin' (1949), as displayed in Block 15, Auschwitz I. An alternative translation by June Friedman of a slightly longer fragment can be found in Adam A. Zych (ed.), *The Auschwitz Poems: An Anthology*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oswiecim 1999, p. 79. Although all questions of translation are fundamentally subjective since the gap between original and target language will never entirely be closed, I question Friedman's translation as lacking something of the original. It should also, though, be noted that I have followed her in translating 'Oświęcim' into 'Auschwitz', a change which arguably obscures the specifically Polish memory central to the poem.



Figure 8: plaques commemorating the expulsion of Polish villagers in the construction of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, July 2009.

My use of this verse, of course, does more than problematise the Polish experience of Auschwitz. It also re-opens the can of worms marked ‘Adorno’, and the German philosopher’s putative ‘dictum’ that it is ‘barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.’

I am not going to address (at least at length) the point made elsewhere that this is not actually what Adorno said.⁶⁰ That Adorno’s speculation about *whether* it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz has been turned into a dictum prohibiting it is a social fact and it is the body of work that attempts to adhere to it I want to take issue with.

First there is the cheap debating point: that it does more justice to Adorno to understand ‘Auschwitz’ here as signifying what Auschwitz *meant* as a symbol of the depths to which humanity had sunk. In short, in the dictum prohibiting poetry, the word ‘Auschwitz’ is itself used poetically to stand for more than what Auschwitz was. This alone is sufficient to suggest that Adorno’s later retraction of the comment is worthier of our attention.

⁶⁰ Klaus Hofman, ‘Poetry after Auschwitz – Adorno’s Dictum’, *German Life and Letters*, Volume 58, Number 2 (April 2005) is an excellent summary of the problems attending the mistranslation of Adorno, though he avoids considering whether, fifty years later, the damage is undoable.

But even if we took Adorno as meaning some concrete 'Auschwitz', I hope I have made clear the complexities contained within that word. There is no convenient master narrative for what Auschwitz was: as van Pelt makes clear, the exercise of identifying narratives as separate is futile, since they overlapped and contradicted each other. We therefore have to find a way of comprehending the whole.

But this, of course, is impossible, since the most important parts of what Auschwitz was are incomprehensible. Robert Jan van Pelt partially addresses this in *The Case for Auschwitz* by comparing the gas chambers to the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple: one 'a forbidden place where a man could attain knowledge at the price of his life' and the other, 'a place forever inaccessible to our knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, imagination.'⁶¹

While van Pelt's subtle and thorough analysis of the evidence for Auschwitz is a brilliant analysis of the sources of our knowledge, it seems to me that he falls into the reverse of the trap of the Attorney Perl in Amir Gutfreund's novel *Our Holocaust*. Perl rejects the narrator's suggestion that the Holocaust is incomprehensible.

People were as they are today. Everything worked according to the regular rules. It was not a different world. It was our world, familiar and examined. My Laura came to Belzec on a train whose travel time was precisely the distance of the route divided by its average speed. The gas in the chambers behaved according to the laws of gas formulated by the chemist Avogadro. The engine output determined the speed at which the gas diffused through the given volume of the chambers. And from there, physiology. The duration of time until death was determined by certain parameters: the ratio of gas to air, lung supply, the rate of metabolism in the body. Even Laura's final seconds, inside, can be described. Everything she went through during her final breaths. Doctors and experts have helped me to understand. And I talked with a survivor from the Sonderkommando who was somehow saved from death. His job was to clean the excrement and blood from the gas chambers. He described, at my request, everything he saw inside the chambers themselves. So you see, I know everything. I can go on with her until the last moment.⁶²

But he can't because he didn't. And if he could, he wouldn't be here. As Primo Levi wrote, the survivors are 'an anomalous minority', the few saved in comparison to the scores drowned. All of his fellow writers about their experiences in Auschwitz came up against this and other barriers to

⁶¹ Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, p. 67.

⁶² Amir Gutfreund (trans. Jessica Cohen), *Our Holocaust*, pp. 157-158.

expression. All questioned whether there was anything after Auschwitz, or whether all that they truly were had remained in the camps. All recognized that to try and communicate the experience entailed a work of the imagination, since the most important facts of either individual or collective experience in Auschwitz lay outside either documents or remains. At the same time, van Pelt's comparison to the Temple makes it possible for the lazy to give up – or worse, proscribe – the attempt. Neither seems likely to be very fruitful.

In the face of this sort of dilemma – in the knowledge that we will never truly be after Auschwitz, since its meaning is always unfolding, as each generation tries and fails to make sense of it – poetry is not just permissible: it is required.

Jonathan Webber described the process of rewriting the inscription on the Birkenau Monument in the early 1990s as the creation of a 'vernacular sacred text'⁶³ which had to 'compress reference to all the different groups of victims within the space of a single inscription'.⁶⁴ He realized that in the final analysis the meanings the International Auschwitz Committee was being asked to supply were 'not empirical but symbolic.'⁶⁵ In supplying symbolic meaning, the empirical will always fail, for who can comprehend the ineffable in concrete terms?

⁶³ Jonathan Webber, 'Creating a New Inscription for the Memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Short Chapter in the Mythologisation of the Holocaust', in Davies and Wollaston (eds.), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, p. 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 58.

Chapter 6

Discussion: To the end of the story?

As time has gone on, this project has changed quite profoundly. It began as a relatively simple comparative study of Holocaust memory in the UK and Poland, but has become a much broader study of the limits of memory and the consequences of interpretation in not just Poland and the UK, but Israel as well.

As I explore in the epilogue, it has also become a polemic for a refocusing of Holocaust studies, away from the questions of what happened (though these will never entirely disappear) and towards questions of *meaning*. The reasons for this will, I hope, become apparent in the light of the three sections examining the specific strategies employed by each institution in displaying the Auschwitz Album.

In doing so, though, I want at the same time to underline that meaning is in fact an unavoidable by-product of description or representation, just as we must define or describe or represent in order to find meaning. To describe this tension between what happened and what it meant (or means, or will mean) I use the term mythology.

Mythology might seem a provocative choice to describe responses to an event still within living memory. I am using it, though, in the Barthesian sense of a meta-language *in which* we speak of something. Victor Pelevin has explored this in his retelling of the Theseus myth, defining myths as 'mental matrices we project onto complex events to endow them with meaning.'¹ That the Holocaust was itself a complex event does not mean it cannot be a prism through which other things are viewed: in fact I am suggesting that the Holocaust is more and more a story used to talk about something else. An obvious form of this can be

¹ Victor Pelevin, *The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2006, p. x. This is part of a series on myths and retelling introduced by Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2005 and which includes David Grossman (trans. Stuart Schoffman), *Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2006.

seen in the comparison of images from Serbian concentration camps with Holocaust images during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s.²

A more subtle variation is the use of 'holocaust' for any process involving mass death or suffering, as explored by Peter Novick. In *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, he describes how in the late 1990s the Holocaust became 'the bearer of urgently important lessons – not just for Jews but for all of us'³ whether or not the comparisons stood up to scrutiny.

The range of lessons Novick identifies as being drawn from the Holocaust in the 1990s are certainly bewilderingly eclectic. Spanning the political spectrum from gay rights to the right to bear arms, Novick lists a variety of causes to which

² See, for example, the final chapter of Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*, Chicago University Press, Chicago and London 1998, which explores the legacy of Holocaust photography in the portrayal of genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. For a very detailed account of both the production of significant images from the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s and an unsuccessful attempt to contest their authenticity with resonance to claims by Holocaust deniers, see the two-part article by David Campbell, 'Atrocity, memory, photography: imaging the concentration camps of Bosnia – the case of ITN versus Living Marxism', *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2002), pp. 1-33 and Vol. 1, No. 2 (2002), pp. 143-172.

³ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience*, Bloomsbury, London 1999, p. 238. When dealing with Novick's work, I believe it necessary to be cautious for a variety of reasons. First of all, like any cultural critique of historical meaning (including the present one), his conclusions are a hostage to fortune: in the world as it was after the dust settled on Ground Zero in September 2001, the way in which the Holocaust was perceived underwent a radical change, for this author most strikingly illustrated by the choice of Art Spiegelman to design the cover of *The New Yorker* the following week: the need to wrestle with the representation of tragedy was brutally borne upon us.

Secondly, though, it is hard to entirely extricate Novick from the debate – not to say furore – caused by Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, Verso, London 2000. Novick's and Finkelstein's books are often paired for discussion, and Finkelstein makes several sharp points at Novick's expense. Despite the differences in tone (and Finkelstein's willingness to indulge in personal attacks), the two authors have many views in common: their principal disagreement is over whether, as Novick argues, the Holocaust became a prominent part of culture due to perceived weakness of Israel before 1967 or, as Finkelstein argues, as a way of increasing 'leverage' when negotiating with Egypt in the 1970s. Also see Zev Garber, 'Why do we call the Holocaust "The Holocaust?" An Inquiry into the Psychology of Labels' in Zev Garber, *Shoah: The Paradigmatic Genocide*, pp. 51-66.

A final reason for caution when engaging with both Novick and Finkelstein is a written and conversational style that is confrontational, humorous, and easily quotable, which possibly lends itself to misrepresentation. Of the two, Finkelstein's book is the more choleric, though the reader of Novick should bear in mind the (tongue-in-cheek) tone of his paper, 'My Correct Views on Everything', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (1991), pp. 699-703, a rebuttal of a review of his work on the American 'historical profession'.

the rhetoric of Holocaust memory has been applied.⁴ I suspect that almost everyone will find some parts of his list ridiculous according to ideological and political preference, but the overriding theme here is of a cultural centrality that is hard to dispute.

What I mean, though, in this study is the way in which each of the museums tells other stories through the story of the Holocaust. In Yad Vashem, the Holocaust is used to explain why there is a state at all; in the Imperial War Museum, it is part of a heroic story of lost influence; in Auschwitz, the lack of a clear narrative illustrates the difficulties for its custodians of articulating a clear history of their own.

This is a crucial time in the understanding of the Holocaust. It is rapidly receding from living memory, and the marginal gains of historical research are diminishing. We are moving from a period in which the overriding question was to know what happened, to a period in which we ask more than anything else what it meant. The stories we tell through the Holocaust are key indicators in this, as the way in which we connect the dots of past and present gives shape to them both.

More fundamentally, though, this process requires that we see the story as in some senses over, complete. We must define what happened to us in order to move beyond it. As Ora, the protagonist in David Grossman's novel *To the End of the Land*, muses: 'only when it's all over, the whole story, will we really know who was right and who was wrong, isn't that so?'⁵

The obvious objection to Ora's question is that history never ends: there is always another consequence just around the corner. This is true but, as I explore later, there is also a choice we can make to draw that line, to say that we let the past be past, when we stop demanding that it 'be different from how it was.'⁶ At

⁴ For the bulk of Novick's examples, see chapter 11, 'Never Again the Slaughter of the Albigensians' in *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, op. cit., pp. 239-263. Once again the reader has to be aware of the tone of Novick's writing.

⁵ David Grossman (trans. Jessica Cohen), *To the End of the Land*, Jonathan Cape, London 2010, p. 55.

⁶ Oliver Burkeman, 'This column will change your life. Forgiveness? Just let it go', *The Guardian Weekend*, 31 July, 2010.

the same time, we need to recognise that the choice as to ‘how it was’ rests with us and our decisions in the telling of the story.

The Auschwitz Album is just one document of the Holocaust – and as explored in Chapter 2, an incomplete one. As decisions about the telling of the Holocaust go, the deployment of less than two hundred images may seem a minor aspect to focus on. The place of the Album, however, in the three institutions illustrates the different types of story that each is trying to tell, and with that the kind of institution each is trying to be.

On that note, this seems to be an appropriate juncture at which to reiterate the way this study works in relation to the three institutions. As with the three chapters describing their broad approach, the sections which follow are quite different. This is because I am trying to interrogate the assumptions and consequences of each interpretation rather than comparing them to an external ‘model’ of my own design. Part of the significance of this study lies in the realisation that, apart from the trite observation that memory will vary from place to place, we are moving into an era where the stories told through the Holocaust will require different modes of presentation as well. A mythology is not just told but *retold*.

This approach, though, raises the question of whether I am treating the institutions as, following Pierre Nora, *lieux de mémoire* or *milieux de mémoire*. In his groundbreaking 1989 article, Nora argued that ‘there are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.’⁷ Following from this, Nora proposed a stark opposition between memory – conceived of as living, evolving, ‘open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting’ – with history. The latter is not very clearly defined, but implicitly it is the ‘problematic and incomplete’⁸ polar opposite.

The problem for the study of museums is that they possess attributes of both memory and history. In their reliance on the material traces of the past, they adhere to ‘historical’ standards of accuracy and reliance on provable ‘fact’: the

⁷ Pierre Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 8.

result not least of the training of many museum staff in the discipline of history.⁹ At the same time, in their self-conceptualisations as bearers of part of the national story – something which each of these three sites, as we have seen, does to some degree – they are part of a more numinous dialogue about the self-perceptions of their visitors. If only to the degree that they are often the seeds of much broader conversations, they become *milieux de mémoire*.

Indeed, it is worth remembering the atmosphere in which Nora's article was written when considering his argument's limitations. As Tony Judt has pointed out, the project which Nora directed (and which his article in *Representations* introduced) was conceived out of a *milieu* of uncertainty, in a time 'of doubt and lost confidence' in which 'the centuries-old structures of French life [...] all were going or gone.'¹⁰ In other words, the *lieu de mémoire* of Nora's project was the result of a *milieu* whose continued existence he doubted. In the same way, museums are both concrete propositions about the past and a setting for a conversation about it. The purpose of the next three sections is to discuss further how those conversations are conducted through the use of the Auschwitz Album and what they might mean.

Yad Vashem: sacred site

The discussion in Chapter 3 of Yad Vashem paid considerable attention to the placement of biblical inscriptions in and around the memorial campus, and by doing so to make itself a canonical text. This ambition to occupy a central place in the memory of the Holocaust is reflected in a variety of sources, not the least of which is the full name of the institution: the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance *Authority*. Roni Stauber has described the process by which Yad Vashem became the central focus of official Israeli Holocaust memory.¹¹ Avner Shalev, the current Chairman, has written frequently of how the site aims to be a

⁹ Suzanne Bardgett of the IWM, for example, has a degree in German Medieval History.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, 'À la recherche du temps perdu: France and Its Pasts', in Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, Vintage Books, London 2009 [2008], p. 202.

¹¹ Roni Stauber, *The Holocaust in Israel Public Debate in the 1950s*.

'focal point of identification'¹² – a memorial authority not just for Israelis but for 'every Israeli, Jew and person of conscience'.¹³ The phrase 'focal point' recurs in the first section of the museum audio guide.

So how does the site focus attention? Simply, by taking the form of a sacred site. Firstly, the name of the site – Har Hazikaron, the Mount of Memory – puts Yad Vashem in a group with other 'mounts' in Jerusalem: Mount Herzl, Mount Scopus, Mount Zion and the Temple Mount. As Yaron Eliav has explored, the ascent of these mounts is less a statement of topography than of how a place is registered in the mind.¹⁴ A *har* is a place of pilgrimage, whether one literally ascends or not.

On the site, the organisation into precincts recalls Seth Kunin's identification of progressive restriction as the key motif in Jewish sacred space. He represents the construction of this through a series of concentric circles: first from the outside world (through the country, the city and the Temple) to the Holy of Holies; and then (modelled on this) from the outside world to the High Priest. This 'segmentary opposition model in which each smaller level is qualitatively more positive than the previous level'¹⁵ can be seen at Yad Vashem in the four gates through which visitors must pass to reach the Holocaust Exhibition. Firstly, the outermost gate, designed by Roman Halter:

¹² Shalev uses this phrase in 'Building a Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem' in Joan Ockman *et al.*, *Yad Vashem, Moshe Safdie – The Architecture of Memory*, pp. 50-63, and in his 'Remarks by the Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate' in Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (eds.), *To Bear Witness*, p. 9.

¹³ Avner Shalev, 'Building a Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem', p. 61.

¹⁴ Yaron Z. Eliav, *God's Mountain: The Temple Mount in Time, Place and Memory*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2005.

¹⁵ Seth Kunin, 'Judaism' in Jean Holm and John Bowker (eds.), *Sacred Place* (Themes in Religious Studies), Continuum, London and New York 1994, p. 120.



Figure 1: Yad Vashem first gate. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, Summer 2007.

Second, the wall inscribed with words from Ezekiel, described by the architect, Moshe Safdie, as ‘an aqueduct-like screen that would separate the sacred site from the surrounding city’.¹⁶



Figure 2: Yad Vashem second gate. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, Summer 2007.

Thirdly, the walk through the reception building, or *mevoah*, which Safdie envisaged as another wall, its roof creating a ‘lacework of dark and light lines, dematerialising all who pass’:¹⁷

¹⁶ Moshe Safdie, ‘The Architecture of Memory’ in Joan Ockman *et al.*, *Yad Vashem, Moshe Safdie – The Architecture of Memory*, p. 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*



Figure 3: Yad Vashem reception building. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2007.

Finally, the walk across a bridge to the exhibition itself: as Joan Ockman describes it, ‘a delicate wood-and-steel bridge that plunges into [a] gaping concrete mouth.’¹⁸ All the contributors to the volume of essays devoted to the site’s architecture stress that this is not a mundane journey, but an odyssey through history: from ‘the gloom of the subterranean passageway’ (exhibition/Holocaust/Diaspora) to ‘an expansive sunlit balcony.’¹⁹ (Jerusalem/Israel). This is a journey *From Holocaust to Rebirth*, as the sculpture by Naftali Bezem has it.

This explicitly sacred character is echoed in how the Auschwitz Album is displayed. Under glass, separated from the visitor, it is one of the relics contained by the ‘giant burial caves’²⁰ envisaged by Safdie. It is a key point on the symbolic pilgrimage made by official visitors to Yad Vashem, as in the picture below of (then senator) Barack Obama during his campaign stop in Israel in 2008.

¹⁸ Joan Ockman, ‘A Place in the World for a World Displaced’ in Joan Ockman et al., *Yad Vashem, Moshe Safdie – The Architecture of Memory*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Moshe Safdie, ‘The Architecture of Memory’, p. 95.



Figure 4: Senator Barack Obama stops in front of the Auschwitz Album with Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev, 2008. www.yadvashem.org

One might argue that it is only sensible that the preservation of such a valuable artefact be given priority: after all, as long as the images are reproduced, the object is of secondary importance. This was reflected in the past by not putting the Album itself on display at all, instead storing it in the vaults of the museum, while using images from it. The decision to locate the album itself on display, though, seems to me to make a more overt claim to ownership of not only the object, but its content and significance as well.

What is curious, though, is that the audio guide – an important part of a visit – makes very little reference to the images from the Album which are displayed in the vicinity or used individually in other galleries. Instead, the status of the Album as a ‘unique artefact’ is stressed, along with the story of its discovery. In museological terms, this is an auratic display: one which emphasises ‘the authentic frisson of the communication of the experience of the past from a small number of surviving artefacts.’²¹

The album includes approximately 200 photographs that document step by step, the arrival of a Jewish transport from Hungary, and the process that led them to their deaths. On the day that the Dora Mittelbau camp in Germany was liberated, Jewish prisoner Lili Jacob heard that American forces had entered the camp. Sick and starving, she used her remaining strength to drag herself to the camp's gate.

²¹ Charles Saumarez Smith, ‘The Future of the Museum’ in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, pp. 550-551.

On her way there she collapsed and lost consciousness. In the hope that she would recover, prisoners who found her unconscious moved her to the adjacent shed, which had previously been used by the camp's German staff. When she awoke, she was shivering, as she was suffering from typhoid at the time. Lily looked around the shed for something to cover herself with, but found only a leather-bound album. When she opened the album, Lily froze. The first pictures she saw showed two of the rabbis from her own community, the town of Bilke, in the Kerpetorus district. In the other photos she identified her relatives, including her two young brothers whom she hadn't seen since the selection at Birkenau. At this point, she already knew that they were no longer alive.²²

The second part of the commentary makes claims for the importance of the Album.

It turns out that the Germans documented a transport of Hungarian Jews who arrived at the camp in May, 1944. Lily and her family were among them. The photos, which were taken by SS personnel at Auschwitz, document the process that victims underwent from the moment they got off the deportation car, through selection and condemnation to extermination, and finally, the looting of their belongings. Although the actual murder wasn't photographed, a number of photographs display the trucks taking those who had difficulty walking to the gas chambers. In other photos, women and children are depicted sitting in a grove nearby waiting to be sent to their deaths, perhaps for minutes or perhaps for hours. The photographs also depict the crematorium's chimneys. These are the only photographs we have that document the stages that preceded the murder of the victims at Birkenau. All well-known visual images of the Auschwitz camp were taken from this album.

After this ambitious claim – contradicted by the picture of Birkenau behind Avner Shalev in Fig. 4, taken by a Red Army soldier after liberation²³ – the commentary moves to how Yad Vashem has used the Album.

Yad Vashem has recently published this unique album as a book, as part of our constant efforts to identify the people who are portrayed in it. Dozens of the women, men and children who appear in this album have been identified by name, but many others remain anonymous.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the process of identification is much less certain than it is made to sound here. Identifying individuals more than sixty years later is difficult, made all the more so by the desire of individuals to

²² Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 615.

²³ The photograph is catalogued at the Auschwitz Museum as APMO 871. It has been reproduced on countless occasions. See for example the cover of Saul Friedländer's *The Years of Extermination*.

recognise friends and family.²⁴ But as made clear by the architecture of the Hall of Names at Yad Vashem, it is the attempt that is important. Another stop in the tour for official visitors (or at least a stop usually captured on film), the Hall is a vast circular space capped by a cone of photographs and built around a yawning chasm.



Figure 5: Senator Barack Obama in the Hall of Names, 2008. www.yadvashem.org

All over the walls, shelves hold the details of victims on Yad Vashem's 'Pages of Testimony'. These forms (now available for download from the museum's website²⁵) record the names and whatever is known about victims. The museum catalogue explains the task by quoting Benzion Dinur, the first director of Yad Vashem:

Let no person be found who knows the name of brothers and sisters, relatives, teachers and classmates, friends and acquaintances who were annihilated and who will not commit them to writing. A name is a source of strength, [as in] Yad Vashem. The strength of the nation lies in its memory, in the proficiency of its memory. This is what distinguishes man. If we wish to live, and we wish and aspire

²⁴ Agi Rubin and Henry Greenspan, *Reflections*, is an interesting meditation on this problem: Rubin has identified herself (after being told about it by a friend) in one of the Auschwitz Album images (see Chapter 1) but notes that the view of 'herself' does not correspond to any memory of someone taking photographs, nor did the picture provoke any other memories. See Chapter 4, 'Identities' in Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint*, pp. 81-103 for a case-study in the problems of this kind of identification. For a modern parallel, see David James Smith, 'And they Leapt into the Unknown', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, September 4, 2011, pp. 40-49: an investigation into the problems of identifying – or even talking about or displaying – the images of those who jumped from the World Trade Center on 11 September, 2001.

²⁵ http://www1.yadvashem.org/remembrance/names/pot/daf_ed_Eng_general_A4_2006_7.pdf
Accessed 12 October, 2010.

to will life to our offspring, if we consider ourselves duty-bound to pave a way to the future, then first of all we must not forget and we must write.²⁶

Dinur's words are revealing: their equation of name with memory, and the further equation of memory with strength, are themes that recur on the site. Witness, for example, the massive monument to Jewish soldiers and partisans or the biblical solemnity of the Valley of the Communities. As alluded to by Dinur (and at frequent intervals in the audio guide) the very name of the institution means 'a monument and a name'. The hall, however, reveals the ambivalent nature of that task as most of the shelves are empty, and will remain so: as the work on the Auschwitz Album inadvertently makes clear, for every face in the crowd that is identified, another is left unknown. In some cases, the same face is identified as different people, raising questions about whether either can be entirely trusted historically. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the work of identification is less about the facts of the past than the needs of the present.

The needs of the present cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, however. Making sense of the past is necessary if we are to live in the present, but should we be doing so in a way that offers no possibility of letting the past be past? Is the continuing quest – to ensure that 'no Holocaust victim is forgotten' (as the banner at the bottom of the 'Pages of Testimony' form reads) – one that allows the past to be contained – shelved, in fact – or does the continuing presence of empty space commit the future to a task that will never be complete?

This impossibility of completion is in accord with much of the critical discourse around the Holocaust, which is replete with references to the impossibility of bearing witness, a current of thought given recent expression in an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum which termed the Holocaust *Unspeakable*.²⁷ Lawrence Langer has written of 'the frontier separating the

²⁶ Quoted in Bella Gutterman and Avner Shalev (eds.), *To Bear Witness*, p. 277.

²⁷ *Unspeakable: The Artist as Witness to the Holocaust*, Imperial War Museum London 4 September 2008 – 31 August 2009. This is, of course, not the first time the word has been used in this context: nonetheless, as an example from one of 'my' institutions during the period of research it is included here to emphasise the continued importance of such approaches. It is worth noting that a 2001 exhibition of Holocaust Art at the IWM was entitled *Legacies of Silence*. The exhibition catalogue by Glenn Sujo, *Legacies of Silence: The Visual Arts and Holocaust*

normal world from the abnormal universe of Auschwitz'.²⁸ Michael Benard-Donals and Richard Glejzer define the Holocaust as 'what defies knowledge, what transcends the very possibility of representation.'²⁹ Alternatively, James Young suggests that 'the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution.'³⁰

All of this is fine in the context of an academic discussion or the coining of slogans to interest visitors. But what are the consequences for those who must live this perpetual irresolution? Amir Gutfreund and David Grossman have both explored the nature of life in this shadow and both find it wanting. In an opening address to the Berlin International Literature Festival in 2007, Grossman described the writing of *See Under: Love* as the result of the 'thick and densely populated silence'³¹ of his childhood: something explored in the novel as Momik tries to make sense of the 'Nazi beast' he hears so much about. With a child's simplicity in the face of an unwieldy metaphor, Momik imagines an actual beast in the cellar, an 'imaginary monster or huge dinosaur that once lived in the world which everyone was afraid of now.'³²

As an adult, Momik continues to engage with the spectre of the Holocaust, trying and failing to write about it (the putative attempts are other chapters of the novel). But the memory of the child he was runs deep: he tries to write a children's encyclopaedia of the Holocaust 'To spare our children having to guess or reconstruct it in their nightmares.'³³

Memory, Philip Wilson Publishers/Imperial War Museum, London 2001, draws together a remarkable collection of material from during and after the period.

²⁸ Lawrence Langer, 'The Literature of Auschwitz' in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds.) *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1998 [1994], p. 602.

²⁹ Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation*, SUNY Press, Albany 2001, p. 132.

³⁰ James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 21.

³¹ David Grossman, 'Individual Language and Mass Language' in David Grossman (trans. Jessica Cohen), *Writing in the Dark: Essays on literature and politics*, Bloomsbury, London 2008 [2009], p. 71. a slightly abridged version was published as 'Confronting the Beast' in *The Guardian*, 15 September, 2007.

³² David Grossman (trans. Betsy Rosenberg), *See Under: Love*, Vintage Books, London 1999 [1989], p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 155.

A similar route is taken by 'Amir', the protagonist of Amir Gutfreund's *Our Holocaust*. Like Momik, Amir grows up in a world inhabited by survivors: in his case a Haifa suburb, Kiryat Haim, in which its residents had settled 'with their memories [...] Like a huge flock of storks, they came all at once and landed near the woods on the edge of Kiryat Haim [...] Sick people, confined by their memories.'³⁴ And like Momik's, Amir's questions (and those of his friend Effi) are met with answers that do not satisfy him, clarity postponed with the evasions that they would know when they were Old Enough.

Left with the sense that 'way back at the beginning of time, in 1939, the Big Bang had occurred,'³⁵ Amir and Effi try to fill in the stories, to make an 'integral whole' out of the episodes between which 'lay chasms.'³⁶

Effi grows tired of this project and becomes a doctor, but Amir continues to collect facts and information. Spending hours at Yad Vashem he is guided by a (semi-fictional³⁷) survivor, the Attorney Perl, to investigate, to give his desire for answers over to 'the reign of logic and precision, the Holocaust up for study.'³⁸

Eventually, both Amir and Momik have to abandon their search for the meaning of the Holocaust in its events. As Ayala, Momik's lover, tells him; the documentation he spends his time pursuing is inadequate or even grotesque.

This whole encyclopaedia business is utterly worthless. It doesn't explain anything. Look at it; you know what it reminds me of? A mass grave. That's what it reminds me of. A grave with limbs sticking out in every direction. All disjointed. [...] your whole encyclopaedia is not enough to fully encompass a single day or a single moment of human life.³⁹

This macabre quality is reflected most graphically in a third response to the Holocaust by a Hebrew author: *Adam Resurrected* by Yoram Kaniuk. Telling

³⁴ Amir Gutfreund, *Our Holocaust*, p. 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 51.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 65.

³⁷ In the Afterword to the novel, Gutfreund notes that many of the characters of the novel, including the Attorney Perl, are given names of real members of the Jewish community of pre-war Bochnia. As Gutfreund explains, the Attorney Perl 'lived in the house at 7 Leonarda Street in the Bochnia Ghetto, with my father's family. He and his wife, whose name I do not know, were killed in Belzec together. Dad remembers him as an educated and dignified attorney, an imposing persona.' Gutfreund, *Our Holocaust*, p. 406.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 157.

³⁹ David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, p. 450.

the story of Adam Klein, a clown forced to entertain other Jews on their way to the gas chamber, the action is located at an 'Institute for Rehabilitation and Therapy' in the Negev and offers little in the way of reassuring resolution. The narrative is hallucinatory, impressionistic: the vividness of the phrasing bringing home the intensity of the mania to escape memories that cannot be kept at bay.

And Kaniuk makes clear that the Institute is meant as a metaphor for the country itself. As one inmate explains to another (who is also the Institute's American benefactor):

Do you know, my dear Mrs. Seizling, why these cries, these shrieks, are heard in this land in the dead of night? All those numbers screaming and crying because they have no idea of the why or the wherefore or the how or the how long or the whereto of it all? They cry because there is no escape. The insult scorches. The knowledge, the final realisation that they were simply raw material in the most advanced factory of Europe, under a sky inhabited by a God in exile, by a Stranger, this information drives us crazy.⁴⁰

The nocturnal screams that are localised in Grossman and Gutfreund's work are here broadened to the entire country. Even the *Sabra* nurse is affected by this, if only in that when she hears the inmates talk of their experiences she feels 'a supreme sense of guilt [...] Because she wasn't there.'⁴¹ Throughout the novel, the general wound is made clear, the dichotomy of Israeli life, that 'during the day they play muscle men and soldiers, and at night they weep.'⁴²

The fractured nature of the inmates' reality is described in detail. The best that can be said for the fate of the protagonist, however, is that in engaging with a child inmate, 'a smile escapes his heart, the smile that will again be stuck, like a wedge, in the wheels of death.'⁴³ But even as the two of them laugh together, 'beyond the window the sun sinks into the desert like a red ball which has been crammed into some terrible inferno.'⁴⁴ As one inmate observes, 'their bodies have reached this land, but their souls are still in the furnaces.'⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Yoram Kaniuk (trans. Seymour Simckes), *Adam Resurrected*, Grove Books, New York, 1971, pp. 50-52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 157.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 330-331.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 331.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 55.

It is this sense of incompleteness that haunts David Grossman's fiction and non-fiction. Speaking in Berlin in 2007, he reiterated a distinction between the way Jews and non-Jews refer to the Holocaust: namely that non-Jews refer to what happened *then*, while Jews talk about *there*. The difference, he argues is profound.

"Then" means in the past tense; "then" enfolds it within something that happened and ended, and is no longer. While "there", conversely, suggests that somewhere out there, in the distance, the thing that happened is still occurring, constantly growing stronger alongside our daily lives, and that it may re-erupt. It is not decisively over. Certainly not for us, the Jews.⁴⁶

This sense of still-unfolding catastrophe is crucial to understand in examining Israeli memory of the Holocaust, and which makes me so sceptical of James Young's polemic for 'perpetual irresolution'. Joan Ockman, in her essay on the memorial campus, argues that 'there is no way, of course, to provide closure or resolution for a trauma like the Holocaust' and moreover that 'the purpose of a consecrated site like Yad Vashem is precisely to keep the memory of the Holocaust painfully alive rather than allow it to pass into history.'⁴⁷

The work of Idith Zertal draws out this strain in Israeli history, arguing that the Holocaust has been 'translocat[ed] to the sacred and absolute', along with issues of 'power, justification of power, land and borders'.⁴⁸ This distortion, in Zertal's view, is the result of a failure to mourn completely. In other words, a failure to find an ending that has, if not a positive outcome, then at least positive consequences.

Jacqueline Rose has suggested that the mourning (or lack thereof) of the Holocaust is just one layer of the real problem: the problematic relationship between Zionism and violence. She argues that the Holocaust fits into a Zionist narrative of humiliation which requires ever-escalating attempts at compensation. She terms the founding of Israel 'not so much restitution, as a colossal

⁴⁶ David Grossman, 'Individual Language and Mass Language', p. 70. This passage closely resembles a portion of an article written for *Die Zeit* in January 1995: published as 'The Holocaust Carrier Pigeon' in David Grossman (trans. Haim Watzmann), *Death as a Way of Life: Despatches from Jerusalem*, Bloomsbury, London 2003, pp. 11-18.

⁴⁷ Joan Ockman, 'A Place in the World for a World Displaced', p. 24.

⁴⁸ Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, p. 168.

sublimation of historical pain⁴⁹ and connects this to the denigration of the diaspora and the survivors. She quotes David Ben-Gurion's reaction to Jewish persecution in 1939: 'we are choking with shame about what is happening... We do not want to be such Jews.'⁵⁰

Zertal's research into the encounter between Holocaust survivors and the Yishuv and early Israeli state bears this out. She argues that 'the close yet distant diasporic' aroused conflicting emotions in the 'Zionist subject'.⁵¹ Analysing poems by Yitzhak Sadeh and Nathan Alterman in her conclusion, she identifies the ambiguity of the 'feminine' arriving Jews in relation to the manly reception committee from the *Yishuv*. In both cases, she points to an underlying horror on the part of those receiving the survivors, a suspicion that 'they survived because they, in some way, defiled and surrendered their bodies and souls to the perpetrators.' In this way, the encounter was never easy: in their efforts to push away the helplessness of the Holocaust, it has been made into 'a kind of forbidden territory, a sacred, fetishistic space surrounding the event'.⁵² Few would argue that this tendency cannot be seen in the way Yad Vashem constructs the memory of the Holocaust in its enclave on *Har Hazikaron*, the Mount of Memory.

Zertal concludes by observing that 'Zionism's work of mourning [...] for the Jewish catastrophe still has to be done.'⁵³ As I have suggested, both above and in Chapter 3, it is the search for an end to the story – or at least a genuine beginning to the mourning – that Yad Vashem perhaps needs to consider. For as Kaniuk observes: 'the future is fixed, inflexible. Only the past changes.'⁵⁴ How this might be accomplished is considered in the epilogue.

⁴⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Princeton University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 130.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 140.

⁵¹ Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power*, p. 263.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 273.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 274.

⁵⁴ Yoram Kaniuk, *Adam Resurrected*, p. 145.

Imperial War Museum: *Verfremdungseffekt*

During the course of my fieldwork at the IWM, one of the most striking things was the renovation work conducted in early 2009. Over the scaffolding was a sheet painted with the façade underneath: in photographs, it was hard to tell it was there at all. This kind of knowing illusion is central to understanding the IWM and the Holocaust Exhibition, which is the most self-aware of the exhibitions discussed in this study. By this, I mean that it is at pains to emphasise that its conclusions are not set in stone, and that its relationship to the subject matter is one of some distance. It acknowledges that the business of the museum is the manipulation of appearance and is prepared to acknowledge the artifice: I have used the term coined by Brecht, *Verfremdungseffekt*, to highlight this self-conscious alienation from reality or unreality.

Peter Brooker has explored the ambiguous origins and significance of *Verfremdungseffekt* in Brecht's writing. He notes the comparison with the Russian Formalist idea of *Priëm Ostraneniya*, or 'making strange', though also drawing attention to the differing emphases. He contrasts the aim of Viktor Shklovsky to 'increase the difficulty and length of perception'⁵⁵ with Brecht's aim that 'the spectator should be changed, or rather the seeds of change should have been planted in him, seeds which must come to flower outside the limits of the performance.'⁵⁶ The emphasis for Brecht is on what happens *outside* the theatre, *after* the performance, while Shklovsky focuses more on the audience *within* the theatre.

How this might be carried into other disciplines is considered by Bruce Trigger. He describes the writing of a history of Huron American Indians from the point of view of *Verfremdung*: that is, countering the degree to which 'the historian is tempted to identify himself with one party or another and to seek to influence the reader to make a similar identification.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Peter Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics*, Croom Helm, London/New York/Sydney 1988, p. 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 86.

⁵⁷ Bruce G. Trigger, 'Brecht and Ethnohistory', *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1975), p. 54.

While, as an immersive experience, a museum on some level actively seeks identification with the subject, it is striking that, as discussed in Chapter 4, the IWM's Holocaust Exhibition concludes with didactic and reflective spaces that encourage visitors to challenge – or at least engage in dialogue with – the assumptions made in the exhibition itself.

Another example of this is the screens in *The Children's War* exhibition, which fade between contemporary images of those whose testimonies run through it and the children they once were. The visitor is always forced to confront the passage of time, even when being asked, as in the '1940s House' (part of *The Children's War*) to pretend that no time has passed.

In the Holocaust Exhibition, this tendency is clearly illustrated by the central use of the Auschwitz Album in the exhibition: not as images but as a huge model. Thirteen metres long, the model gleams white at the centre of the ground floor of the exhibition. Approaching through the remains of a cattle car in the 'Deportation' section, the visitor's first glimpse is of a blinding presence through a narrow window: recalling perhaps the glimpse of the camp through a crack in the boards of the car.

This might suggest that there is a performative or mimetic aspect to the exhibition somewhat at odds to the statement above. This cannot be denied, but as the title of this section (meaning 'the effect of making strange') suggests, it is a specific kind of performance: one which freely acknowledges the strangeness of both what it is depicting and the circumstances of that depiction.

Keeping this distinction was a huge task for both the curators and the artist responsible for its creation. Suzanne Bardgett notes that the model was a departure from the rule the project team set itself of using 'only material from the time', meaning 'no theatrical recreations of street scenes or of camp life, and no works of art, unless they faithfully documented events of the time, and were made at the time, or very closely thereafter.'⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Holocaust Exhibition at The Imperial War Museum: Challenges of Representation', p. 35.

The reason for the exception being made was the lack of alternatives in the view of the project team: 'in the absence of photographs and films of the gassing process' a means of display that was both 'sound and persuasively strong'⁵⁹ was required, and a model seemed to fit these criteria.

The museum staff approached Gerry Judah, a London-based artist and designer of Baghdadi Jewish heritage, to carry out the commission. In his words, his brief was to create a 'representational model' which focused 'on the selection ramp where trains pulled up on a specially built spur line to discharge prisoners to their virtually certain fate.'⁶⁰ Judah commented that the project was one which 'required me to look much further than my own creative resources.'⁶¹ He was also clear, however, that this 'was not to be a memorial.'

If, though, we define a memorial as an object which remembers the past through its presence rather (or at least more) than its content, then the IWM model is most certainly a memorial of sorts. At thirteen metres long, the model dominates the part of the exhibition in which it is placed. The bright white of the plaster under spotlights casts a glow into other parts of the exhibition, distracting attention from the shoes of deportees displayed in a wall to one side. The scale of the model, and the difficulty in examining it other than in its entirety, structure the relationship between visitor and object in ways that have more in common with a monument than an educational tool.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gerry Judah, 'The making of the Holocaust Exhibition's model of Auschwitz-Birkenau' (2000), given to me by Suzanne Bardgett.

⁶¹ Ibid.

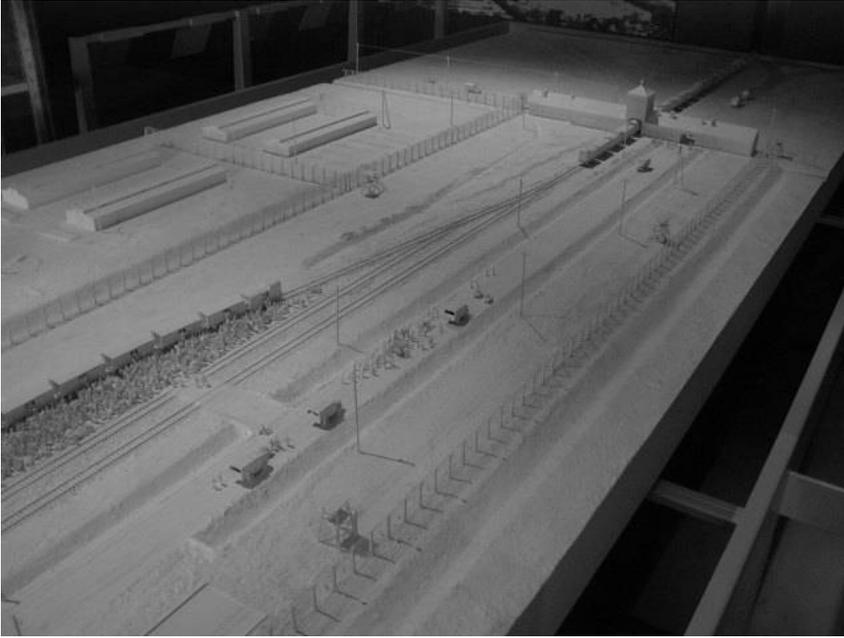


Figure 6: the model of Auschwitz-Birkenau, IWM. Courtesy of IWM.

It is also a memorial in its relationship to its source material. Judah and Bardgett emphasise the role played by staff from the Auschwitz Museum in ensuring that the model ‘accurately depicted’ the site down to the positioning of trees and pathways. The correspondence of the model with images from the Album is remarkable.

In contrast, however, to other models in the museum, this is not a simple attempt at *trompe l’oeil*. In the basement, models of the trenches of World War One or the devastation of post-Second World War Europe attempt a realism that can be made almost photographic, as the image below suggests.



Figure 7: model of devastated European street, IWM. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2008.

The model of Auschwitz however, refuses to engage in easy depiction, accuracy notwithstanding. The white of the plaster reminds the visitor constantly that this is artificial, draws the eye to explore the detail but constantly frustrates full identification. The realism of the photograph is transformed in a medium which, by removing the frame, exposes its limitations.

But this scopic fascination is suggestive of memorial rather than documentary. Even its creator cannot view it without seeing more than is there: Gerry Judah's description of the model slips into a historical continuous that goes far beyond what can actually be seen.

Halfway along the model, a column of women judged fit to work is being marched away from the arriving train. At the far end, another column is being marched to Crematorium 2 on their left, while to their right a column of old and unfit men and boys are being herded down the steps of Crematorium 3, expecting a shower but in reality to be gassed.

There is no movement in the model and, as explored in Chapter 2, the photographs are not straightforwardly sequential. The Album imposes a chronology on events that happen at the same time by dividing them into sections: some deportees were waiting in the wood *while* others were being

processed into the camp and *while* belongings were being moved from the ramp to 'Kanada'. The model violates chronology in an opposite way by depicting the sequential as simultaneous: some of those being sorted on the ramp in the IWM model are *also* depicted walking to the gas chamber or waiting in the wood. In either case, neither album nor model can escape the degree to which to represent the past, however faithfully, is also to distort it.



Figure 8: detail from the model of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, IWM. Courtesy of IWM.

Tony Kushner has expressed reservations about the model, comparing the bleak whiteness of the plaster to the installation 'Hell' by the Chapman Brothers and arguing that the IWM model is 'aestheticized and sanitised'⁶² by contrast. It is undeniably a different response, and one which does connect to a broader anonymisation of the victims within the IWM: for example in the massive image of bodies being pushed into a mass grave which confronts the visitor in the final section of the Holocaust Exhibition; or the equally large reproduction of a photograph of corpses in the 'Concentration Camps' section of the Second World War exhibition; or the use of testimony as 'an illustration, rather than to reveal its

⁶² Tony Kushner, 'The Holocaust and the Museum World in Britain: a study of ethnography' p. 27.

full potential as a genre in its own right'⁶³ by restricting its audibility to recessed booths at the side. It is hard to see, though, that any strategy for representing Auschwitz in operation is without problems. Something is always lost: there is always a road not taken.

It is also open to question whether the model is as much of an exception to the rule as might be inferred from Bardgett's text. While it never descends into the kitsch reproduction of the Blitz or Trench 'Experiences' (discussed in Chapter 4) it does choose means of 'staging' that are very evocative. The descent into the war years; the narrow passage into the section on Ghettos; the stairs recalling the Warsaw Ghetto bridge: these are all devices that create what might be termed a performative effect, even if they do not aspire to the condition of 'reality'. Suzanne Bardgett's acknowledgement that the dissecting table at the top of the stairs provides 'exactly the right physical and historical "crisis point" between the exhibition's two floors'⁶⁴ hints at this kind of reading of the exhibition space, however: and the two galleries immediately preceding the section on Auschwitz are openly pieces of what might, in a subtly different context, be termed 'installation'.

The first of these, a room entitled 'Final Solution' is one of the most compelling representations of the Holocaust I have ever seen. Bare except for a typewriter neatly arranged on a desk, the visitor's attention is drawn to the organisational chart which covers the wall. The spotlights which illuminate the room leave the tracery of organisational responsibility in shadow at the top of the wall. One can see oneself darkly in the glass walls. The comforting idea that the visitor may have acquired earlier in the exhibition that this was the work of a few monsters is thrown into doubt by the neat diagram which covers the wall: ranging across countries and between organisations, what Hilberg termed 'the machinery of destruction' is laid bare.⁶⁵ Isabel Wollaston wonders whether this is 'an attempt

⁶³ Tony Kushner, 'Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting', *Oral History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2001), p. 92.

⁶⁴ Suzanne Bardgett, 'The Depiction of the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum since 1961', p. 156.

⁶⁵ See the discussion of Hilberg in Chapter 1.

to contrast the darkness of the Holocaust [...] with a commitment to highlighting the misdeeds of the perpetrators?'⁶⁶



Figure 9: 'Final Solution', IWM Holocaust Exhibition. Courtesy of IWM.

From this bright, antiseptic space, one moves into the dark interior of a cattle car. 'Deportation' is dark and oppressive, the light at the end of the tunnel provided by the reflected light from the model of Auschwitz. It is notable, however, that this cattle car is not intact but fractured, like a stage set rather than a recreation.

⁶⁶ Isabel Wollaston, 'Negotiating the Marketplace: The role(s) of Holocaust Museums today, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2005), p. 69.



Figure 10: 'Deportation', IWM Holocaust Exhibition. Courtesy of IWM.

It is also noteworthy that these two sections direct the visitor into the section about Auschwitz, where they are encouraged to stop for a moment. The testimonies are audible in alcoves along the wall, facing the model. There is a clear sense that a climax has been reached in the exhibition. Certainly, the texts on the walls make the claim that Auschwitz was 'where the Nazis perfected their killing technology'⁶⁷ and the broader, more open spaces which follow the Auschwitz section give the impression that some kind of tension has been released.

I also take some issue with the historiographical implications of the word 'perfected'. It gives the impression that the Operation Reinhard Camps were 'forerunners' of Auschwitz.

In fact, Auschwitz had been operational as a concentration camp for about eighteen months before the first of these camps (at Chełmno) came into operation in the autumn of 1941. The first experiments with Zyklon B at Auschwitz took place in September 1941: while Auschwitz may have been the most lethal of the extermination sites, it is important to remember that these

⁶⁷ Lower Floor text January 2008. Courtesy of Suzanne Bardgett.

institutions were parallel attempts at the same common goal which were abandoned when their role in the slaughter had been achieved.⁶⁸ Auschwitz was the most convenient site for a number of strategic goals – including German colonisation of ‘the East’ and the expansion of the war economy as well as the extermination of European Jewry – rather than necessarily the “most perfect”.⁶⁹ Also possibly lost through this ordering is the competition between the commandants of the various extermination sites to find the best and most efficient method of killing.⁷⁰

Perhaps what are most compellingly exposed here are the limitations of human beings (and the narratives they create) in describing parallel processes. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, something must always come first and therefore something else comes afterward. This is not entirely negative, either: to narrate is also to choose what is important and, done consciously and with care, can be a regaining of control and a means of recovery.

This inevitable choice is fundamental in understanding how memory works. There is a spiral of signification which ends in metonymy: because Auschwitz was both a concentration camp and extermination site, there were more survivors and therefore more accounts of its operation; this in turn pushed the other camps to the back of historical awareness.⁷¹ As time has gone on,

⁶⁸ For an account of the parallel development of the extermination centres in late 1941 and early 1942, see ‘Inventing the Extermination Camp’ in Christopher R. Browning and Jürgen Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy 1939-1942*, Arrow Books, London 2005 [2004], pp. 352-373.

⁶⁹ See Robert Jan van Pelt and Deborah Dwork, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, especially Chapter 5, ‘A Paradise of Blood and Soil’, pp. 127-159 and Chapter 7, ‘IG Farben’, pp 197-235.

⁷⁰ See, for example, the testimony of Franz Suchomel, an SS *Unterscharführer* at Treblinka, in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, Pantheon Books, New York 1985, pp. 52-57. Suchomel, unaware that he was being recorded, described how Eberl, the first commandant of the camp, requested assistance due to the camp’s inability to cope with the deportations from Warsaw. According to Suchomel, Christian Wirth brought ‘people from Belzec, experts’ to develop the camp’s infrastructure. Suchomel also spoke and corresponded with Gitta Sereny for her book, *Into that Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*, Andre Deutsch, London 1991 [1974]: a record of her investigation into the life and career of Franz Stangl, the second commandant of Treblinka, whose career within the Euthanasia programme also illustrates both the way in which expertise was utilised in the development of the Final Solution and the degree to which Auschwitz was an entirely different type of camp.

⁷¹ It is important to remember, though, that it was Belsen – the only major concentration camp to be liberated by the British Army – that was dominant in British conceptions of what had happened to European Jewry during World War Two. For more detailed consideration of this and the

Auschwitz has thus become not just the language *in which* one speaks but the thing *of which* one speaks as well. The quote from Rabbi Hugo Gryn⁷² on the wall in the Auschwitz display illustrates this.

THERE WAS REVELATION AT AUSCHWITZ – OF A DREADFUL AND DEVASTATING SORT – OF WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PRINCIPLE OF EVIL IS HARNESSSED TO UP-TO-DATE TECHNOLOGY – AND IN ATMOSPHERE THAT IS DENUDED OF MORALITY.

The point is not to dispute that Gryn's point is true of Auschwitz, but to remember that it was not *only* at Auschwitz. The risk that – as in Adorno's 'dictum' – Auschwitz encompasses and thus masks all Holocaust experience has to be borne in mind, and the claim that Auschwitz was a 'perfection' of the killing process increases this tendency. Narration is inevitable, as are the consequences it entails: but it has to be done in full awareness that these choices should allow us to come to terms with the past. We also, however, have to contend with our ignorance of what meaning the past – let alone the present – will acquire. It is always, in some sense, too early to tell what an event means in the present, let alone what it will mean in the future.

The Imperial War Museum features in two British novels of the early twenty-first century which have similar ideas at their core: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *The Song Before it is Sung* by Justin Cartwright. Both involve a reworking of the past for the present, and both revolve around the Second World War and its consequences.

Atonement is – until the final chapter – a fairly straightforward account of a love gone wrong and the attempt by its partially unwitting saboteur to put things

processes whereby Auschwitz overtook Belsen as the metonymic camp of the Holocaust in British culture, see Tony Kushner, 'The Memory of Belsen' in Jo Reilly, David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and Colin Richmond (eds.), *Belsen in History and Memory*, Frank Cass, London 1997, pp. 181-205, and the same author's 'From 'This Belsen Business' to 'Shoah Business': History, Memory and Heritage 1945-2005' in Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani (eds.), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, Imperial War Museum/Vallentine Mitchell, London 2006, pp. 189-216.

⁷² One should also point out that the prominence of Hugo Gryn as an authority in this way is testimony to a change in status of Holocaust survivors, a point raised in Tony Kushner, 'I want to go on living after my death: the Memory of Anne Frank' in Martin Evans (ed.), *War and memory in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit., pp. 3-25 in reference to Gryn being asked to contribute a foreword to an edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

right. The central protagonist, Briony Tallis, is a thirteen year-old girl who, through a series of misunderstandings, implicates her elder sister's lover, Robbie, in the rape of her cousin. Most of the novel is spent describing Briony's attempts to atone for this: both by explaining to her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie what she actually saw on the night of the rape and by becoming a nurse in wartime London.

In the final chapter, the reader's confidence in the narrative is totally undermined by the revelation that the fiction has two layers: the narrative you are asked to accept is revealed as Briony's definitive form of atonement, through giving Cecilia and Robbie a happier ending than the "facts" would allow. 'Briony' reveals that they were "really" killed in the Blitz and at Dunkirk respectively. At the end of the book, 'Briony' reflects on her power as storyteller and whether atonement is possible for the storyteller, for whom 'there is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her.'⁷³ There is a thread of guilt here that also runs through the writings of many survivors, despairingly trying to reconcile their compulsion to bear witness with their inability to do so completely.

And perhaps, as explored in the epilogue, they are struggling to find the awareness that 'Briony' comes to: that when telling the story is all you have left, simple service to 'the bleakest realism'⁷⁴ has to be tempered. It is not fashionable to see the possibility of redemption in the Holocaust – except, possibly, in Israel – but it can be done. Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*⁷⁵ are an unusual response to the enormity of the destruction, but they do suggest that even adherence to 'the facts' can be employed in a number of ways.

But the cost of doing so is to do violence to the tacit understanding that more detail, more information and more thorough recording are desirable. Justin Cartwright in *The Song Before it is Sung* questions this. Telling the story of the narrator's search for the footage of the 'Valkyrie' conspirators' hanging in

⁷³ Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, Vintage Books, London 2007 [2001], p. 371. The counterfactual approach to the Second World War is not limited to McEwan: see also Christopher Priest, *The Separation*, Gollancz, London 2007 [2002].

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, Vintage Books, New York 1988 [1982].

Plötzensee Prison, its narrative also ends at the Imperial War Museum as Conrad, the central character, finally views the film he has searched for. Having done so, he ‘lurches from the building’ and is sick, before setting off for Westminster Bridge ‘at a fast, snivelling jog, like a five-year-old.’⁷⁶ When he reaches the bridge, he stops, ‘his lungs gasping helplessly’:

His stomach produces a wretched spasm, a violent heave. Nothing but a clear, thin dessert spoon of liquid escapes him. His eyes are, by contrast, full of liquid. He reaches into the bag and takes the film can and drops it over the side. For a brief moment it floats, turning once, and then vanishes.⁷⁷

The question raised by the novel is an important one: do we need to know everything? See everything? Or are there some things that will not do any good to know precisely, because to watch them without being able to change them is voyeurism? Claude Lanzmann once remarked that if he found footage of a gassing he would be compelled to destroy it.

I used to say that if there had been – by sheer obscenity or miracle – a film actually shot in the past of three thousand people dying together in a gas chamber, first of all, I think that no one human being would have been able to look at this. Anyhow, I would have never included this in the film. I would have preferred to destroy it. It is not visible. You cannot look at this.⁷⁸

As explored in Chapter 2, the choice to record is something fundamental about the act of perpetration. The choice not simply to watch, but to *record*, would belie Lanzmann’s assertion that the act of killing is not visible. Footage of a gassing – though not something I am sure I could endure watching – would have fundamental importance for our understanding, even if it only, in the final analysis, gave concrete form to our confusion.

The footage of a mass execution in Lithuania on a loop in Yad Vashem gives this problem solid form, repeating the moment of death until it becomes, if not commonplace, then certainly less shocking. Gerry Judah’s model of

⁷⁶ Justin Cartwright, *The Song Before it is Sung*, Bloomsbury, London 2008 [2007], p. 237.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 238.

⁷⁸ Claude Lanzmann, Ruth Larson and David Rodowick, ‘Seminar with Claude Lanzmann 11 April 1990’, *Yale French Studies*, No. 79: Literature and the Ethical Question (1991), p. 99.

Auschwitz based on the Auschwitz Album is a superb compromise between these problems, as it at once gives solid form to the facts and at the same time refuses to reassure the viewer that he or she now 'knows' what happened.

Perhaps the most arresting summary of this dilemma is to be found in the basement exhibition floor of the IWM, in the section on 'The Concentration Camps'. The relatively sparse exhibits are eloquent testimony to the difficulties in framing a response to the Holocaust in this context even quite shortly before the opening of the Holocaust Exhibition. A striped uniform, a star, some quotations and documents seem somehow forlorn, as though lacking the animation that transforms an object into an exhibit.

Or perhaps it is that one particular object, the death-mask of Heinrich Himmler, commands such attention. Cast in white plaster, it seemingly hangs in mid-air, the trace of a smile playing across the lips. From certain angles, it seems to be animate: one wonders if the eyes might suddenly blink open.



Figure 11: death-mask of Heinrich Himmler. IWM. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2008.

'Most of you will know' said Himmler in 1943, 'what it means when a hundred corpses are lying side by side, or five hundred or a thousand are lying

there.⁷⁹ Thankfully, I have no idea and most likely neither do you, the reader. But there is a chill down my spine as I realise how little this object helps us to understand.

Or at least, how little about either Himmler or the Holocaust it helps us to understand. As Alexander McCall Smith has written, 'when a tyrant falls, his portrait naturally becomes the symbolic target of those whom he oppressed [...] we have seen this vividly demonstrated in images of people venting their rage on the statues and portraits of deposed dictators.'⁸⁰ The presence of this object – almost medieval in its exhibition of a defeated enemy's physicality – in a museum in the middle of central London raises unsettling questions about our need for physical proof of victory. Above all, though, the mask suggests something fundamental about our relationship to the past: that it is the filling of traces with meaning rather than a simple extraction of significance. As can be seen most clearly at Auschwitz, the possibilities for a direct encounter with – or even knowledge of – the past are the product of negotiation and contingency.

Auschwitz: 'It happened here.'

The subtitle of this section is taken from a session at the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust held in 2000. Jonathan Webber, one of the speakers, argued that visits to 'authentic Holocaust sites' had four specific benefits, in that visitors could:

Be awakened to the realities of the Holocaust;
Develop a greater empathy for the victims;
Develop a 'hands-on' relationship with the past through an act of remembrance;
[and]
Obtain a moral or political message from the text of the inscription on the monument there.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Himmler's speech to SS Leaders, 4 October 1943, Document 908, in Jeremy Noakes and Geoff Pridham (eds.), *NAZISM 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader. Vol.3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1997, pp. 1199-1200.

⁸⁰ Alexander McCall Smith, 'Portraiture' in National Portrait Gallery, *BP Portrait Award 2008*, National Portrait Gallery, London 2008, p. 9.

⁸¹ Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, Report from Workshop 1 on Remembrance and Representation: 'It Happened there: the Existence and Meaning of Historical Locations', 'Presentation by Dr. Jonathan Webber', retrieved from www.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1129.html on 22 October, 2010. See also

At the same time, though, Webber conceded two fundamental problems of such visits: namely, that 'sites in themselves do not explain the Holocaust' and that 'Different people [...] will experience each site differently and will therefore interpret quite differently the message of the monument and its inscription.'⁸²

At the root of this problem is the concept of 'authenticity'. What this term means is not as clear or as straightforward as we might wish, and certainly not as clear or straightforward as sites would sometimes have us believe. At the root of it, though, is the claim, either implicit or explicit, that 'it happened here' and an assessment of how 'locally grounded traditions and lifestyles [have been] abridged into a space and presented in a reasoned fashion for decipherable consumption'.⁸³

Another speaker in Stockholm, Robert Sigel of the Dachau Museum and Memorial, used his presentation to consider what authenticity means, defining it not as measurable quality but as a relationship 'that develops between the place and the visitor', requiring attention to the preparation and debriefing of visitors. As Sigel trenchantly put it: 'Real authenticity only develops for people with a certain historical knowledge; a knowledge of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened.'⁸⁴

On one level, this is problematic, since we have seen that the most intimate acquaintance with the facts of the past – having lived through them – is no guarantee of understanding. And the nature of authenticity is always a compromise. Primo Levi, writing in the 1970s, noted almost despairingly that 'As for my own Camp, it no longer exists'.⁸⁵ not just because the camp he was

Jonathan Webber, 'The Significance of the Physical Traces of the Past for the Education of Modern Society' in Krystyna Marszalek (ed.), *Preserving for the Future*, pp. 106-115.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Deepak Chhabra, 'Positioning Museums on an Authenticity Continuum', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2008), p. 428. See also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke 1976, especially Chapter 5, 'Staged Authenticity', pp. 91-107.

⁸⁴ Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, Report from Workshop 1 on Remembrance and Representation: 'It Happened there: the Existence and Meaning of Historical Locations', 'Presentation by Dr. Robert Sigel', retrieved from www.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1124.html on 22 October, 2010.

⁸⁵ Primo Levi, 'Afterword' in Primo Levi (trans. Stuart Woolf), *If This Is a Man/The Truce*, p. 391.

actually in (Auschwitz III-Monowitz) had not been preserved but because there was almost no trace of the mud or the suffering he remembered.

In any case, Sigel's claim is potentially a recipe for exclusivity, arguing that only visitors with a proven level of knowledge can interpret the site 'correctly'. It also implies two other problems. Firstly, that there is a definable corpus of knowledge which must be mastered, without specifying who defines that corpus or why. Secondly, (especially for sites such as Auschwitz or Dachau), as explored in Chapter 5 in relation to Auschwitz, this runs the risk of reducing a complex and overlapping series of narratives into a story that is less than frank about what it omits (and includes) and why (or why not).

Thirdly, Sigel leaves unspoken the problem that faces all sites in relying on the material fabric of sites: that they are subject to processes of weathering and decay. In addition, as Kazimierz Smoleń pointed out, one central problem facing those who wished to preserve the site was how far to *recreate* a site which had been altered during the camp's existence and then further changed after liberation. 'Should the appearance of the camp be kept as it had looked when the camp was operational, or as it was when it was liberated in 1945, or as it was when the Museum was established two years later in 1947?'⁸⁶

Smoleń's repeated use of the phrase 'as it was' is striking. For, however hard we try, it will never be 'as it was' and we should be grateful for that small mercy. As Clive James reflected, standing on the roll-call square in Dachau in the 1980s:

In the *Aeneid*, there is a place called the broken-hearted fields. Standing in that snow-covered space I could think of no better phrase. Nor was there any point in self-reproach for being unable to shed tears. If we could really imagine what it was like we would die of grief.⁸⁷

This comes close to the kind of belief in the impossibility of representation discussed earlier: what Lawrence Langer terms 'Planet Auschwitz', which can be neither recreated nor imagined. Instead, I want to use it as a jumping-off point for

⁸⁶ Kazimierz Smoleń, in *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, p. 262.

⁸⁷ Clive James, *Flying Visits: Postcards from the Observer 1976-83*, Picador, London 1985, p. 168.

a more prosaic approach to the question of authenticity, framing it as part of a triad – authenticity, authority, credibility – which frames the truth-claims made by objects in front of the visitor. The use of the Auschwitz Album in the Auschwitz Museum is an excellent example of this.



Figure 12: Auschwitz Album displayed in Block 4 of Auschwitz I. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, February 2008.

The pictures from the Auschwitz Album have been part of the Museum's collection and exhibition since the mid-1950s. It is hard to be more precise as the Museum in this period did not keep all documentation relating to decisions about the exhibition even where such documentation was created. It has to be remembered that in its early period the museum staff were a close community of camp survivors and their relatives. Danuta Czech, the author of the immense *Auschwitz Chronicle* and former head of the Historical Department, described the museum as 'the big family' and this spirit of closeness is echoed in the recollections of other early museum staff.⁸⁸ Even major decisions, such as the 'restoration' of Crematorium I, could be and were taken without leaving much in the way of documentary evidence.

⁸⁸ Danuta Czech, 'We Shared an Extraordinarily Important Task', *ProMemoria* Information Bulletin No. 7, July 1997, pp. 63-67. This issue of *ProMemoria* is the starting-point for research on the early days of the Museum, collecting reminiscences from a variety of early members of the museum community.

What we do know, however, is that the exhibition scenario written by Kazimierz Smoleń in 1954 and put into display in 1955, called for a different arrangement of the room in Block 4 where the pictures can still be seen today. Entitled 'Transports to Death' by Smoleń, the room was to contain historical photographs of Jews waiting at the French transport camp of Drancy and of the deportation of Poles from the Zamość region. In addition, the room was to contain a painting by Jerzy Adam Brandhuber (a camp survivor who had been a successful artist before the war) and stills from the 1946 film *Ostatni Etap* (The Last Stage) directed by another former prisoner, Wanda Jakubowska.⁸⁹

Shortly after the 'Permanent Exhibition' was opened in 1955, the museum was visited by the Czech researchers Ota Kraus and Erick Kulka. They had been given copies of the Album pictures in Prague by Lilli Jacobs. Asking to see Kazimierz Smoleń (by this time the Museum Director) they presented him with the images.⁹⁰

The significance of this is that the room and the pictures are displayed as they were in the 1950s. Although the exhibition, as discussed in Chapter 5, tried to steer a middle course between communist political orthodoxy and the facts of Auschwitz's history, certain elements should have left the visitor in little doubt that the fate of European Jewry was a central fact of what had happened there. Enlargements of the tickets purchased by Greek Jews from Salonika to Auschwitz, and the visible stars on the coats of the deportees in the Auschwitz Album communicated in a way that did not require words that something very specific had happened to the Jews. It is also important to remember that, for many Poles in the 1950s and 1960s (and even now) the star was not an abstract artefact from a photograph but part of the world they had lived and even grown

⁸⁹ This is a summary of information from Kazimierz Smoleń, 'Scenariusz wystawy stałej Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu' APMO S/Smoleń /6.

⁹⁰ This account of the photographs' arrival in Oswiecim is the result of conversations with museum staff over a period of years: Serge Klarsfeld (ed.) *The Auschwitz Album: Lilli Jacob's Album*, The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, New York 1980, describes the photographs as being 'sent' by the Jewish State Museum in Prague to the Auschwitz Museum in 1957 or 1958.

up in.⁹¹ When the guidebook in the 1960s mentioned that ‘the entire population of districts, lying at even some distance from Auschwitz, began to talk about the burning of the Jews’⁹² it was addressing many of those who had seen and smelt the flames.

The other significance of the prominent display in Block 4, however, was that Birkenau was largely neglected in the period 1945-1990. Looking back at footage of then-contemporary Birkenau in documentaries such as Alain Resnais’s 1955 documentary *Night and Fog*, or the 1970s television series *The World at War* (Thames Television, 1974), it is remarkable how neglected the site seems compared to the present day. Watching Kitty Hart-Moxon walk round Birkenau in *Return to Auschwitz* (Yorkshire TV, 1978), one notes that she and her son appear to be alone on the site: not something that a recent visitor can easily imagine.

For most visitors in the late 1970s, the photographs and models in Block 4 and reconstructions in Block 7 stood in for the actual Birkenau site. Whether this was an ideological statement, a concession to the practicalities of visitor management, or a more conscious attempt to preserve Birkenau by not flooding it with visitors is unclear. It has to be remembered that the millions who have toured the site have eroded its fabric at the same time, something which can be seen dramatically in the Block 4 stairwell in Auschwitz I.

⁹¹ In my opinion, it is also arguable that the reason for the lack of documentation regarding the decision to use the photographs may have been an attempt to avoid the supervision of such a choice by the authorities who monitored the museum.

⁹² Kazimierz Smoleń, *Auschwitz (Oświęcim) 1940-1945* (Second Edition), Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oswiecim 1966, pp. 23-24.



Figure 13: Stairwell of Block 4, Auschwitz I. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, February 2008.

The Auschwitz Album images are still displayed in Block 4, and now the captions make much more explicit reference to their content. Birkenau, however, has been transformed in the past twenty years and the Album has been a key document in this process. After a tacit admission of Birkenau's relative neglect in the period 1945-1990, Teresa Świebocka describes the 'new methods of communication and explanation' that appeared on the site in the 1990s – after, that is, the site had been restored 'at great expense and with much hard work.'⁹³

These new methods consisted of three elements:

1. textual information concerning the history of a given place;
2. plans of buildings and sections of Birkenau camp, with places remembered for specific events marked;
3. printed photographs taken during the camp's existence.⁹⁴

⁹³ Teresa Świebocka, 'The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum: From Commemoration to Education' in Antony Polonsky (ed.), *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. Volume Thirteen: Focusing on the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London 2000, p. 295.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 296.

In practice, the third element is dominated by reproductions of the Auschwitz Album, placed as near as possible to where they were taken. Some of them have lengthy explanatory texts, others, like the ones below, are almost left to speak for themselves.



Figure 14: Memorial plaques at site of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, The caption on the plaque on the left reads: 'Jews selected by the SS for immediate death in the Gas Chambers of Crematoria IV and V were herded along this road.' Photo: Jaime Ashworth, summer 2009.

Taken together, the plaques accomplish something similar to the model at the IWM in giving back a measure of spatial reality to the two-dimensional image. Unlike at the IWM, however, there is little guarantee that most visitors will be able to appreciate the effort that has gone into this. Few visitors see the point at which the deportees waited in the wood, within sight and earshot of the gas chambers. Most visitors spend only a couple of hours in Birkenau, and visit the parts of the site which are of obvious significance: the wooden and brick barracks, the selection ramp and, of course, the watchtower, from which the entirety of the camp stretches out beneath them. There is no set route through either Auschwitz I or Birkenau – guides can show visitors as much or as little as the visitors want to see, though groups guided by museum staff are expected to visit both sites. The location of the plaques pictured below at the far north corner of the camp

does, however, mean that only visitors or groups really concerned to see everything are likely to get this far.⁹⁵



Figure 15: memorial plaques in Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, summer 2009.

Some will, of course, and there is no doubt that what might be dismissed as an unexpectedly picturesque part of the site is enhanced by the addition. The caption certainly leaves little in doubt for those who reach this spot.

On their arrival to Auschwitz most Jews were sent by the SS for immediate death in the gas chambers. However, they were often forced to await their turn in this clump of trees if the gas chambers were full at the time. In the background can be seen the warehouses of 'Canada II'. These warehouses were destroyed by the SS when they evacuated Auschwitz at the end of the war.

But the wealth of information does not change the fact that these plaques are well away from the route taken around the site by most visitors. There is another agenda here: that of establishing the museum as an authority with the credentials to tell the story of Auschwitz. The placement of informational material

⁹⁵ The short guidebook to Auschwitz, Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Guide-Book*, Oswiecim 2008, indicates 'main visiting routes' on the maps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. As described above, the tour for Birkenau is centred on the central selection ramp and does not take visitors to more distant parts of the site. Observation on the site over many years, along with informal conversations, have made clear that the precise configuration of a visit is essentially unique to the group.

is carried out with a thoroughness that goes beyond the needs of the average visitor: the museum's aim is not just to satisfy the curiosity of what might tentatively be termed the 'casual' visitor: those 'who are passing through [and] merely curious.'⁹⁶ These plaques are both educational and memorial in character: embracing the inevitable confusion which the IWM sought to evade. This can be seen even more clearly at the site of the *Alte Judenrampe*, between Auschwitz and Birkenau, which even diligent study groups do not always see. The same is true at the site of Bunker 1, the 'little red house', the first provisional gas chamber: now an empty plot between houses on a country road.⁹⁷



Figure 16: the *Alte Judenrampe*. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, summer 2009.

It is this combination which perhaps summarises the *genius loci* of historical sites. As Geert Mak has written, if the camp has become for many 'a symbol more than a reality', the fact of the place in front of you forces a confrontation with the contradictions: 'there it stands, unmistakable and real, the building you have seen in all those films and all those photographs, the gateway with the rails running through it and the platform beside.'⁹⁸

⁹⁶ John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, Thomson Learning, London 2004 [2000], p. 10.

⁹⁷ These sites are recent additions to the Museum's territory: the site of Bunker 2 was purchased from private ownership in 2001, and a memorial unveiled there in 2005.

⁹⁸ Geert Mak, *In Europe*, p. 405.

And the power of those historical images can be seen in behaviour on the site, as visitors line up with cameras to take away their interaction with the site by personalising the symbol. Here is my journey to Auschwitz, my moment of contemplation, my attempt to record what the blank acres mean to me as I stood there. Marjorie Perloff has described similar processes in relation to tourist photography of Venice, arguing that they think ‘they are taking “authentic” photographs’ when in her view they are ‘recognising the reality through the lens of a set of clichés they have unconsciously absorbed.’⁹⁹



Figure 17: tourists posing for pictures, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, summer 2009. Photo: author.

It is hard not to wonder what happens to such pictures: do you put them in an album? Or frame them on the wall? Probably not: and the difficulty in imagining what becomes of these images exposes a flaw in mingling tourism and commemoration, as it becomes hard to tell one from the other, as an encounter with genocide sits in the family photograph album alongside meals in restaurants or hiking in the mountains. As John Lennon and Malcolm Foley explore, tourism’s

⁹⁹ Marjorie Perloff, ‘What has occurred only once: Barthes’s Winter Garden/Boltanski’s archives of the dead’ in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, London 2003, p. 36.

'commodification of anxiety and doubt'¹⁰⁰ is an imperfect means of engaging with history.

But as with so much of this study, we have to take the world as we find it. Tourism may be an imperfect means of engaging with these sites, but it is a dominant one – it is important to note the title of an article by Isabel Wollaston cited earlier, 'Negotiating the Marketplace' – and the framing of family groups against a background of atrocity is a powerful indicator of the cultural presence of these images. Edmundo Desnoes wrote that 'History took place where photographs were taken',¹⁰¹ and the rows of people lining up to abstract their photographs from the scene illustrates the back-and-forth of this: just as the photographs are evidence of these things *having been*, so our images are confirmations of our *having-been-there*. Nonetheless, this demonstration of the power of the visual to define reality can be unsettling, as the equation of the visible with the important always leaves the question of what remains invisible.

Conclusion?

A more extreme version of this unease was expressed by Tony Judt. In considering the 'forgotten twentieth century', Judt had serious reservations about the role of museums and memorials (let alone memorial museums) as pedagogy.

Instead of teaching children recent history, we walk them through museums and memorials. Worse still, we encourage citizens and students to see the past – and its lessons – through the particular vector of their own suffering (or that of their ancestors).¹⁰²

This suspicion of 'public history' as either 'nostalgio-triumphalist'¹⁰³ or overly focused on collective suffering is a theme taken up in the epilogue to Judt's epic history of postwar Europe. Entitled 'From the House of the Dead', it

¹⁰⁰ John Lennon and Malcom Foley, *Dark Tourism*, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Edmundo Desnoes, 'Cuba Made Me So', in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, p. 313.

¹⁰² Tony Judt, 'Introduction: The World We Have Lost', in Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, p. 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 3.

explored the reasons behind the initial faltering and subsequent flourishing of Holocaust remembrance across Europe.

Judt's basic assumption was that because 'impossible to remember as it truly was [the Holocaust] is inherently vulnerable to being remembered as it wasn't.'¹⁰⁴ He quotes Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's argument in *Zakhor* that 'Only the historian, with the austere passion for fact, proof, evidence, which are central to his vocation, can effectively stand guard.'¹⁰⁵ Coming full circle, though, can we, on the basis of the discussion in Chapter 2, entirely trust this 'austere passion'? Or do we instead have to accept that it will be as driven by the same desire to make sense of the incomprehensible as the most abstract of monuments?

I began this chapter with the musings of David Grossman's protagonist in *To the End of the Land*: 'only when it's all over, the whole story, will we really know who was right and who was wrong, isn't that so?'¹⁰⁶ We have to accept that the story lasts for as long as we choose to tell it, and no longer; and that it means what we need it to, and no more. Otherwise, as James Young argued in his presentation in Stockholm in 2000, the 'never-ending debate over Holocaust memory' risks 'becoming a substitute for taking any kind of action on behalf of such memory.'¹⁰⁷ Interpretations must be open to scrutiny, analysis and interrogation: otherwise we run the risk of what Dan Stone has pointed out has been termed 'semiotic totalitarianism'.¹⁰⁸

Equally, though, we have to accept at some point that it is time to allow the past to truly be past, and that means accepting the imperfections of a particular interpretation – so long as it adheres to basic standards of what historians term truth. For there is a bedrock truth, and the title of the panel in Stockholm contains it: 'it *happened* here.' As a survivor, Philip K, told Lawrence

¹⁰⁴ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, Vintage Books, London 2010 [2005]. p. 830.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ David Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁷ Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, Report from Workshop 1 on Remembrance and Representation: 'It Happened there: the Existence and Meaning of Historical Locations', 'Presentation by Dr. James E. Young', retrieved from www.dccam.org/Projects/Affinity/SIF/DATA/2000/page1130.html on 22 October, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*, p. 147. Stone borrows this term from Michael André Bernstein.

Langer: ‘they seem to think the Holocaust passed over and it’s done with: It’s my *skin*.’¹⁰⁹ This dialectic of debate and uncertainty could be carried on *ad infinitum* and has been in microcosm in a variety of ways. The debate between Dan Stone and David Cesarani in *Patterns of Prejudice* about whether the UK should institute a Holocaust Memorial Day, for example, had this as its mainspring. Stone argued that what was needed was ‘more ‘forms of commemoration that are based around questioning both the events and our understanding of them.’ rather than a memorial day contributing to a ‘unidirectional, progressive historicity’¹¹⁰

David Cesarani responded by pointing out that Holocaust Memorial Day would do just that, as ‘from the moment [it] is launched its operation will devolve onto thousands of educationalists, local government officials and volunteers from all sorts of associations.’¹¹¹ In short, the *enactment* of the day would mean that far from allowing the memory of the Holocaust to ossify, it would become a question of organisation and involve many in actively thinking about how best to memorialise. Though Holocaust Memorial Day is an imperfect vehicle – Tony Kushner has asked if it is not ‘too little, too late’¹¹² – it is also a success in quantitative terms. The evaluation of Holocaust Memorial Day 2011 carried out for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust makes clear that people are still getting involved – one in four of the respondents had taken part for the first time in 2011 – and that ‘very nearly all plan to get involved again in the future.’¹¹³

Many of these events and commemorations will be problematic because what they remember is. As Tony Kushner has written, ‘The Holocaust is too big,

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 205.

¹¹⁰ Dan Stone, ‘Day of Remembrance or Day of Forgetting? Or, Why Britain Does Not Need a Holocaust Memorial Day’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, Volume 34, Number 4 (2000), p. 59.

¹¹¹ David Cesarani, ‘Seizing the Day: Why Britain Will Benefit from Holocaust Memorial Day’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, Volume 34, Number 4 (2000), p. 66.

¹¹² Tony Kushner, ‘Too Little, Too Late? Reflections on Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day’, *The Journal of Israeli History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2004), pp. 116-129. Mark Levene, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day: A Case of Post-Cold War Wish Fulfillment or Brazen Hypocrisy?’, *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (2006), pp. 26-59 goes further (as its title suggests), arguing that ‘the moral high ground which Western states have attempted to milk from a Holocaust association is meretricious cant.’ (p. 26).

¹¹³ ‘Executive Summary’ in *Evaluation of Holocaust Memorial Day 2011*, Echo Research Ltd, 2011, pp. 1-2. Retrieved from http://hmd.org.uk/assets/downloads/HMD_2011_Evaluation.pdf on 28 October, 2011.

too global, to possess narrative cohesion and presenting it as such [...] has to be at a cost.¹¹⁴ As in the past, the discussion and analysis of different imperfect representations – and their costs – is likely to be the enduring form of memorial. We have to make sure, however, that we accept that to represent is above all to choose: we have to say or do *something*.

¹¹⁴ Tony Kushner, 'Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience', p. 92.

Epilogue: After-thought, After-writing

*'I'm sorry, it was my fault. I was too...dispassionate, I suppose. The Holocaust is not yet an abstract question. Though in time, of course, it will be.'*¹

An appeal to the unresolvable would be one way to end this study. I could simply reiterate the view expressed by James Young, that all memory is to some extent local memory, and that the continuing debate over how and why particular responses fail (or more rarely, succeed) is the best way to remember the past. In the course of researching and writing this study, however, it has often seemed to me that this condemns us to the worst aspects of both answers. What seems clear is that memory and meaning are fungible and that the debate concerns to what degree. Given this, it seems to me that we can consider whether a particular mode of remembering allows us to remember more effectively.

What follows, therefore, is my avowedly personal attempt to sketch out a way of moving into the future with the memory of the Holocaust so that it might become a scar rather than a wound: something which happened rather than something which is always happening. I am by no means certain that I am right in this analysis, nor even that I am entitled to make it. I also feel, however, that without venturing my own observations and reflections about the future of Holocaust remembrance this study would fail to deliver what it promises.

In 2007, Avraham Burg, a former speaker of the Knesset, published a book with the provocative title *Defeating Hitler*. It was published in English the following year as *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise From Its Ashes*.² In an impassioned plea to bring the memory of the Holocaust under control, Burg argued that the Shoah has been 'pulled out of its historic context and turned [] into a plea and a generator for every deed. All is compared to the Shoah, dwarfed by the Shoah, and therefore all is allowed – be it fences, sieges, crowns, curfews, food and water deprivation, or unexplained killings. All is permitted

¹ Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*, p. 79.

² Avraham Burg (trans. Israel Amrani), *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise From Its Ashes*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.

because we have been through the Shoah and you will not tell us how to behave.³

Responses to the book inside and outside Israel were vitriolic. In *Commentary*, Hillel Halkin entitled his review 'A Wicked Son' and poured scorn on Burg, terming his work 'shallow-minded and deliberately outrageous' and 'hardly calling for serious refutation.'⁴ In the *Jerusalem Post*, Efraim Zuroff and Isi Liebler attacked Burg's arguments as (respectively) 'collective suicide if implemented in our dealings with our radical Islamic foes and neighbours'⁵ and 'a Jewish imprimatur to demonise and delegitimise the Jewish state.'⁶ A letter to the paper from an Israeli reader denounced Burg:

There may be a place in Israeli democracy for slanderous depiction of one's country. But there is also a much-needed place for government, together with the general public, to do something to minimise – and hopefully eliminate – the likening of some things going on in Israel to Nazi Germany, as Avraham Burg has done. This degrades the Holocaust itself, bespeaks a lack of basic civility and points to something amiss in one's character as a person and a Jew.⁷

What none of the responses mentioned above considered was the degree to which they demonstrated Burg's central thesis: that the Holocaust is, more than sixty (almost seventy?) years later, still a dominant theme in Israeli discourse, and one which allows for the use of language that refuses moderation. In particular, the letter is noteworthy for its implicit assumption that there is a right – and therefore also a wrong – way to remember the Holocaust. The author of the letter might easily be seen as confirming Burg's observation that Israelis 'hold the memories and the traumas [...] cling[ing] to the tragedy [which] becomes our justification for everything.'⁸ Zuroff, in his review, in fact argues (ostensibly in refutation) that 'the only hope we have to make peace with the Arabs is if we free

³ Ibid. p. 78.

⁴ Hillel Halkin, 'A Wicked Son', *Commentary*, September 2007, pp. 55-59.

⁵ Efraim Zuroff, 'Beyond the Shoah', *Jerusalem Post*, January 16, 2009, p. 28.

⁶ Isi Liebler, 'Avraham Burg: The ultimate post-Zionist', *Jerusalem Post*, December 25, 2008, p. 16.

⁷ Letters page, *Jerusalem Post*, December 28, 2008. It should be noted that many of the responses to an interview with Burg in the more moderate *Haaretz* were equally vitriolic and personal in character.

⁸ Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust is Over*, p. 9.

ourselves of our Shoah mentality, and stop acting like a small Eastern European shtetl.' Which is Burg's point entirely.

Except of course it isn't. Zuroff's arguments recall Bruno Bettelheim's 1962 article in *Midstream*, 'Freedom from Ghetto Thinking', in which he juxtaposed the passivity of the Diaspora with the new Israeli:

Ghetto thought belongs to the ghetto Jew, and he, let us remind ourselves, is the Jew in exile, dispersed. The other Jew, the Israeli, the one at home in Judea, has a tradition that is different: he is not compliant but fights back, as he does in Israel today.⁹

What Bettelheim and Zuroff ignore is the extent to which a rejection presupposes a deeper acceptance. The choice *not* to be passive is derived from a judgement on passivity. Insistence on *not* being in the ghetto requires a deep awareness of the walls whose captivity you reject. And the insistence is more programmatic than anything else: Israel, *not* passive, *must* therefore be aggressive.

And the Holocaust is, whatever Burg's critics claim, a major prop in the maintenance of a state of siege, at whomever's feet one lays the responsibility for this. Michael Berenbaum, writing in *Midstream* about the sixtieth anniversary of Israel's founding, pointed to the use of the Holocaust by Israeli politicians: the comment by Israel's Ambassador to the UN that 'If only there was the State of Israel in 1939, the Holocaust would not have happened'; the comment by both Abba Eban and Binyamin Netanyahu that 'A retreat to the borders of 1967 is a retreat to the borders of Auschwitz'; an email received by Berenbaum in the build-up to the Annapolis conference: 'Help prevent another Holocaust. Please email the following 6 Israeli legislators...'¹⁰

In the following issue of *Midstream*, Tzipi Livni, then Israeli Foreign Minister, added another epigram to the store of Holocaust analogies. She

⁹ Bruno Bettelheim, 'Freedom from Ghetto Thinking, *Midstream*, Spring 1962, pp. 16-25. Also see Bruno Bettelheim, 'The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank' in Hyman A. Enzer and Sandra Solotaroff-Enzer (eds.), *Anne Frank: Reflections on Her Life and Legacy*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 2000, pp. 185-191.

¹⁰ Michael Berenbaum, 'Israel and the Holocaust: Some Reflections on Israel's 60th Anniversary', *Midstream*, July/August 2008, pp. 8-11.

recalled the last visit of Congressman Tom Lantos – a survivor of the Hungarian *Aktion* of 1944 – to Israel:

[We] saw Israeli Air Force pilots flying over the gates of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I said on that occasion that the Star of David has been transformed from the yellow Star of David on the clothing of prisoners in the camps into the Star of David on Israeli jet planes, which defend the State of Israel. But I would also like to add that we are proud of the fact that the Star of David is now the flag of the State of Israel, and we are not willing to have it transformed again by antisemites back into the yellow Star of David to be used against Israel. That is over, and part of this gathering is to state that it will never be again.¹¹

Without wishing to redesign the Israeli flag, I suggest that Livni's comments are naïve in their understanding of the way in which symbols work. Just as the swastikas in Indian temples will never quite be the same again (at least for Western tourists) after the Nazi appropriation, the Star of David will always carry a certain charge from its use in the Holocaust: especially when, as in Livni's text, the insistent *not* is employed to dispel it, only to reinforce the paradox.

On the other hand, one has to bear in mind the words of Rabbi Meir Lau in Yad Vashem's annual report of 2009: 'Remembering the symbolic *Amalek* throughout Jewish history is a positive commandment that commits us as Jews not simply to remember for the past's sake, but to see its continued relevance to our lives throughout the generations.'¹² Born in Poland in 1937, Lau was found, aged 8, in Buchenwald, a story told in the audio guide at Yad Vashem.¹³ The question asked by the narrator on behalf of Lau and the many others like him is one I have no easy answer to.

Everywhere we go, we face the survivors' grief. The sights are not easy, the sadness in their eyes, the tiredness. They can barely stand on their feet. How can they, at such a moment, rise above their past and take their fate in their own hands? How can they stand upright and venture out on a new journey, when they can barely hold up their aching bodies?¹⁴

¹¹ Tzipi Livni, 'On the Old and New Antisemitism In the 60th Year of Israel's Independence', *Midstream*, September/October 2008, pp. 5-6.

¹² Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, 'From the Chairman of the Council', in *Transmitting Holocaust Remembrance Worldwide: Annual Report 2009*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2009, p. 5.

¹³ Yad Vashem Audio Guide, Track 807.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The picture I am painting here is of an irresolvable dispute in which all attempts to put the past behind us only manage to place it once again ahead of us. I confess that this is how it seems to me, and I want to suggest a way in which this paradoxical situation might be resolved.

To do so, though, we have to go back to first principles and ask what kind of event we are endeavouring to conceptualise. Following Alan Mintz, I want to reject the common terms of *Shoah* and Holocaust and explore the implications of a third choice: that of *Hurban*, or catastrophe.

As Mintz argues, the characteristic of catastrophe is its 'power to shatter the existing paradigms of meaning, especially as regards the bonds between God and the people of Israel.'¹⁵ But as Mintz demonstrates, there is a parallel history of catastrophe: that of the responses, the 'attempts first to represent the catastrophe and then to reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning, and thereby make creative survival possible.'¹⁶¹⁷

This notion of creative survival is fundamental to my argument. For, as the novelist David Grossman has written, there is a growing sense in Israel that despite a view of Israel (even among deeply secular Israelis) as a 'political, national, human miracle', there is an equal sense that Israel 'has been squandering, not only the lives of its sons, but also its miracle: the grand and rare opportunity that history bestowed upon it' in a dispute to which almost all parties know the solution and yet refuse its vision. Grossman concluded his 2006 speech in memory of Yitzhak Rabin with a question. 'Ask yourself' he said, 'if this is not the time to get a grip, to break free of this paralysis, to finally claim the lives

¹⁵ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. x. The definition of catastrophe employed by Mintz is also referred to in Chapter 3, which takes much of its shape from his observations about how responses to catastrophe are structured. I repeat some of his text here for the sake of clarity.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹⁷ This is drawn out in Isaac Hutner, 'Holocaust', in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God*, op. cit, pp. 556-564. Hutner argues that Shoah and Holocaust both isolate the events from Jewish history, while *hurban* 'is an integral part of our history, and we dare not isolate and deprive it of the monumental significance it has for us.' (p. 563)

we deserve to live.’¹⁸ In the words of Barack Obama’s inaugural address, to seek out and choose our better history.¹⁹

Grossman has also written that he embarked upon his novel *See Under: Love* in an effort to conquer ‘the constant quiver of a profound lack of confidence in the possibility of existence’ engendered by knowledge of the Holocaust. As much as he resisted it, he realised that he ‘could not truly understand [his] life in Israel as a man, as a father, as a writer, as an Israeli, as a Jew, until [he] wrote about [his] un-lived life, over there, in the Holocaust.’²⁰ And once he had written it, he realised that he had done so ‘to redeem for us the tragedy of the one from the statistics of the millions. The one about whom the story is written, *and* [my emphasis] the one who reads the story.’ It is this kind of redemption that I indicate with the term creative survival: to live with the past in its proper place, to know that whatever death we describe, for us to be here reading it means that someone survived, that it was not a holocaust. For a *holokauston* is an offering burnt in its entirety. *She’erit Hapletah*, a surviving remnant, however small, however traumatised, is still a remnant, and still survives. The paradox is that of the Book of Lamentations, which says:

You summoned, as on a festival,
My neighbours from roundabout.
On the day of the wrath of the LORD,
None survived or escaped;
Those whom I bore and reared
My foe has consumed. (*Lamentations* 2:22)²¹

But for the tale to be told, for us to be reading, visiting, looking at these images, someone escaped: something survived. All tales of destruction offer us that hope, however small it may at times seem.

But how can we engage with the Holocaust on the terms of *creative* survival? Many argue that the nature of trauma is inherently incommunicable. In the words of Cathy Caruth: ‘The traumatised, we might say, carry an impossible

¹⁸ ‘David Grossman’s Speech at the Rabin Memorial’, 5 November 2006, retrieved from <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/784034.html> on 17 February 2009.

¹⁹ Barack Obama, *The Inaugural Address 2009*, Penguin Books, London 2009, p. 5.

²⁰ David Grossman, ‘Confronting the Beast’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 15 September 2007.

²¹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*.

history within them, or they become themselves a symptom of a history that they cannot fully possess.'²²

Further, Caruth argues that recovery compromises the past. She places a quote from a Vietnam veteran at the beginning of one of her works: 'I do not want to take drugs for my nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends.'²³ In this model, the traumatised are not only unable to express what has happened, but are barred from working through it because to do so would compromise the past.

This may be true for some survivors. I cannot presume, having not lived through catastrophe, to judge how they respond: as I have reiterated at intervals throughout this study, I do not presume to dictate the terms of grief. What I can do, though, is point out that we non-survivors seem to have absorbed their trauma without questioning our right to do so. As discussed above, the Holocaust is termed *unspeakable*, both in the sense of horror and in the sense of being beyond representation.

The sources of this belief are easy to find. Adorno's comment, though reversed later, has been an enduring feature of the debate around representing the Holocaust. 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' goes alongside Elie Wiesel's comment (often-repeated, by him and others) that 'a novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka.'²⁴ Once again, these are sentiments that this study has wrestled with.

What neither comment addresses is their own contradictions. The use of Auschwitz to stand for far more than the historical reality is poetic. Wiesel's comment could equally suggest that the search for not being able to write about Treblinka is the most effective way of writing about it. But it can be written about. The claim that the Holocaust cannot be represented has to stand alongside the awareness that the term Holocaust is in itself a representation, however imperfect.

²² Cathy Caruth, 'Preface' to Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.* p. vii.

²⁴ Elie Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration' in Eliot Lefkowitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust* p. 7.

The only way in which these claims can stand is if one assumes that there is what Mintz terms 'a discoverable essence'²⁵ to catastrophe. That is, if one can posit a truth about it that can be demonstrated in terms that divide means of representation into correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate.

In fact, though, as Mintz demonstrates, 'meaning, instead of being a discoverable essence, depends upon the interpretive traditions of the community or culture seeking that meaning.'²⁶ What seems strange to us now made perfect sense to those in the past. As Mintz shows in his careful forensic excavation of Hebrew responses to catastrophe, events that at the time 'convulse[d] or vitiate[d] shared assumptions about the destiny of the Jewish people in the world'²⁷ have become the building blocks of new assumptions. Or rather, have become the old wisdom that new catastrophes would in turn convulse and vitiate.

An obvious counter-argument here would be that the Holocaust was something both quantitatively and qualitatively different. And the statistics and the stories are horrifying, in number and content. The Talmudic observation that 'He who saves a single life saves the world entire' is thrown into awful relief by the destruction of so many worlds entire. The loss is incalculable, but is this a reason to continue calculating, or a reason to stop?

We have to return to earlier catastrophes to see the implications of this. Both Mintz and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi examined the responses to the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648, at the time the worst tragedy of European Judaism. Yerushalmi terms them 'a blow whose scars were never healed.'²⁸

It might be expected that the records of this disaster emphasise its specificity, what in the case of the Holocaust might be termed its uniqueness. Yet, as Yerushalmi demonstrates, the responses to 1648 instead took the form of *selihot* – or memorial prayers – which described the massacres as a *repetition*, in this case of the Crusades, the previous benchmark for violence. In 1650, the Council of the Four Lands in Lublin mandated the saying of prayers on the

²⁵ Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 2.

²⁸ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 1996 [1982], p. 49.

twentieth of Sivan, the date of the earlier disaster. Further, throughout Poland, according to Yerushalmi, the two preferred *selihot* to remember 1648 were composed in memory of a twelfth-century massacre at Blois. Yom Tob Lippmann Heller, the originator of this trend, described his reasoning as follows.

What has occurred now is similar to the persecutions of old, and all that happened to the forefathers has happened to their descendants. Upon the former already the earlier generations composed *selihot* and narrated the events. *It is all one*. Therefore I said to myself – I shall go and glean among them, “for the fingernail of the former generations is worth more than the belly of the later ones”. Also because by reciting their prayers it will help our own to be accepted, since one cannot compare the words uttered by the small to those of the great. And thus their lips will move in the grave, and their words shall be like a ladder upon which our prayer will mount to heaven.²⁹

As Yerushalmi notes, this choice enabled the preservation of ‘the essential memory of the event, without *necessarily* [my emphasis] preserving its historical details.’³⁰ It is to the peculiarity of our modern catastrophe – the desire to retain the details, indeed accrue them in ever greater numbers – which I now turn.

We live in historical times. New kinds of document, with the increased durability of records, alongside the means of exploring and interrogating them at a distance, make it easier than ever before to investigate the historical truth of an event. We have absorbed the idea that establishing the story of what happened to us allows us to create what John Tulloch, professor of media studies and a survivor of the London bombings of 2005, notes is called ‘narrative control’, employed to allay the strains of ‘what otherwise is a horrendously vulnerable experience, living on in dreadful flashbacks after the bomb.’³¹

Individuals write diaries under the guidance of psychologists. Societies build museums. In them, we re-inscribe the details of what happened, oblivious to the fact that, as Tulloch observes, ‘other details get lost in the shock and the trauma.’³² And in compiling the details of an event’s uniqueness, we lose the possibility of absorbing it as a new assumption, except destructively. Focusing on

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 50-51.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 51.

³¹ John Tulloch, *One Day in July*, p. 12.

³² Ibid.

'something wider, more significant, and, precisely because it is so all-pervasive, very much harder to pin down: a sense of "who we are" and "how the world is for us".'³⁵

But this is problematic if, as Avraham Burg and David Grossman describe, this sense of 'who we are' and 'how the world is for us' is so unstable. The deep awareness of weakness or powerlessness, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is a feeling that the insistent *not* exacerbates: even (perhaps especially) when it helps least.

One way of looking at the process of historical enquiry is to see it as a refusal to forgive the past, to endlessly pick over the detail in the hope of revealing an absolute truth, rather than content oneself with the vagaries of memory. As Richard Kearney has pointed out, there is a conflict between '*when* it is right to remember and *when* it is better to forget' and both are contingent on a judgement about '*how much* we should remember or forget.'³⁶ Are we then simply looking for the wisdom to tell the one from the other?

As discussed in Chapter 6, the Israeli historian Idith Zertal has argued that Israel, rather than mourning the Holocaust, has instead acted out grief. 'In order to forge from the catastrophe of millions a redemption and power for millions, in Ben-Gurion's words, the Zionist collective had to sanctify the victims and tarnish them at the same time, turning them into objects to be carried.'³⁷ The plethora of monuments, books, memorial days have, instead of lessening the pain, brought it forward. As Burg notes of the trips to Poland – or rather, to the death camps – by Israeli groups, a reality has been created which holds no promise of change. 'We are cultivating', he says, 'a subconscious mental reality, in which all past horrors are reconstructed, cloned, only to be renewed and perpetuated by future generations.'³⁸

³⁵ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p.1-2.

³⁶ Richard Kearney, 'Remembering the Past: The question of narrative memory', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3 (1998), p. 59.

³⁷ Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power*, p. 274.

³⁸ Burg, *The Holocaust is Over*, p. 235.

Research conducted by Jackie Feldman into the visits to Poland has described a process whereby the trips 'affirm an enclave view of the world and a closed, triumphalist Jewish-Israeli identity'³⁹ despite individual attempts to make a more nuanced judgement about the intertwined histories of Poland, Israel and the Holocaust. By choosing the story of victimhood; victimhood is perpetuated. Alternatively, following Jean Améry, the attempt to communicate pain is achieved in the only way possible: by inflicting it.⁴⁰

But what other story can be chosen? The facts seem to speak for themselves, though this goes against the grain of theory, which suggests – as Robert Eaglestone has shown,⁴¹ to a large extent because of the Holocaust – that facts never speak for themselves, but are spoken by someone in the name of something. There is always a meta-language *in which* we speak and the choice of that language rests with us.

So what language might work? In terms of the writing of history, I take issue with Dan Stone's criticism of much historical writing as 'unidirectional and teleological [not admitting] that details have been left out, [is] univocal, and impl[ying] a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict.'⁴² The virtue of history is that it confers an end on what might otherwise continue to traumatise. As one of the survivors whose testimony concludes the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition says, the ripples of a stone dropped into water must eventually cease.

The metaphor, of course, is problematic because equally the stone remains. And history and historians will and should continue to describe it and its

³⁹ Jackie Feldman, 'Marking the Boundaries of the Enclave: Defining the Israeli Collective through the Poland "Experience"', *Israel Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2002), p. 108. For a thoughtful account of participating in a tour of Poland, see Carolyn Slutsky, 'March of the Living: Confronting Anti-Polish Stereotypes' in Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska (eds.), *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future*, Bowman and Littlefield, Plymouth UK 2007, pp. 189-196.

⁴⁰ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, especially Chapter 12, 'The Postmodern, The Holocaust, and the Limits of the Human', pp. 315-338.

⁴² Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography*, Valentine Mitchell, London 2003, p. 146. Stone's views are complex and a more rounded view of his thought can be gained by exploring the essays in Dan Stone, *History, Memory and Mass Atrocity*, Valentine Mitchell, Edgware 2006.

location, as well as monitoring the ripples which will continue to trace, in ever-widening circles, across time.

More broadly, I spoke a moment ago of history as a refusal to forgive the past, and this poses the final problem I wish to address.

Forgiveness is a paradoxical act in a number of ways. To forgive means to simultaneously recognise and remember the offence while forgetting it. It is a step of great simplicity that can be fiendishly hard, requiring enormous courage to overcome all the reasons why it is impossible. It requires seeing the future as more important than a past that will not let go.

Nicholas de Lange has described with great concision the Jewish theological obstacles to enacting forgiveness for the Holocaust in the *Penguin Dictionary of Judaism*:

Pardon of sin or harm. In the Bible, a prerogative of God. The sixth benediction of the AMIDA is a prayer for forgiveness, and such prayers form a dominant theme for the day of ATONEMENT. According to the rabbis there are three prerequisites for forgiveness: confession, repentance, and a sincere resolve not to repeat the deed in question. In accordance with the principle of IMITATO DEI, humans are also encouraged to forgive one another; the wrong must be put right and the injured party must be appeased by the wrongdoer. The topic has become a subject of debate between Christians and Jews in connection with the Holocaust, and one which has given rise to misunderstandings rooted in the difference between Jewish and Christian understandings of forgiveness. Judaism knows nothing of vicarious forgiveness, in which one person forgives on behalf of another, nor can one forgive somebody other than the perpetrator of the offence. It follows that there is no forgiveness for murder, and that neither Holocaust survivors nor Jews in general can offer forgiveness, to perpetrators or their kin, for the wrongs done to those who perished.⁴³

⁴³ Nicholas de Lange, *The Penguin Dictionary of Judaism*, Penguin Books, London 2008, p. 109. The literature on the theory of forgiveness is extensive, and runs aground (in this author's opinion) on the same problem that dogs de Lange, namely, the question of whether the obstacles to forgiveness outweigh the benefits to the victim/forgiver. Pamela Hieronymi, 'Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2001), pp. 529-555 is at least partially a response to David Novitz, 'Forgiveness and Self-Respect', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1998), pp. 299-315: both focus on the benefits to the person being forgiven, at some detriment to their arguments. Cheshire Calhoun, 'Changing One's Heart', *Ethics*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (1992), pp. 76-96 is closer to what I argue here, though ultimately he too fails to fully understand his own title. Jeffrey G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003, is even more frustrating, managing to take the starting-point of a choice on the part of the victim about 'what kind of victim should I try to be' (p. 3) and turning it into a defence of what Murphy terms the 'vindictive passions' (p. 16). On the positive side of the equation, Fabiola Azar, Etienne Mullet, Genevieve Vinsonneau, 'The Propensity to Forgive: Findings From Lebanon', *Journal of*

This definition is given human dimensions by Ruth Kluger, in a response to Julia Kristeva's reflections on forgiveness. She describes how she visualises her brother: 'a mere boy when he was shot [...] healthy and alive at his own graveside.'⁴⁴ And she cannot forgive, because she is not 'authorised' to forgive 'what was done to others, to the real victims – that is the dead, as distinct from survivors like me.'⁴⁵ Another survivor, whose words close the Imperial War Museum Holocaust Exhibition, states more baldly: 'You cannot forgive the unforgivable.'

But, however hard it may be, these objections are not final. As an act between humans, to seek forgiveness of or from the dead is impossible. Giorgio Agamben, commenting on Primo Levi's despairing acknowledgement that 'they are the rule, we are the exception': 'the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted.'⁴⁶

It is those who live that are empowered to forgive what affects them, here and now, however hard that may be. Kluger cannot forgive on behalf of her brother, but she *could* forgive his murderers for his absence from her life. I do not minimise the scale of this act, nor am I by any means certain that I could find it in myself to do the same, still less do I prescribe for Kluger. But I have the luxury of being neither victim nor survivor.

But so could Kluger, if she chooses to take it. A Holocaust survivor – originally from Lodz, rebuttoning his sleeve where he had raised it to show his tattoo – told me the following joke.

A Holocaust survivor wins six million dollars in a lottery. He keeps a million for himself; gives his wife and family two million; the synagogue two million. The last million, he tells two friends, he intends to give to the SS Officers' Benevolent Fund. The friends are appalled and ask him how he could think of this, after all he

Peace Research, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1999), pp. 169-181 suggests the value and possibility of forgiveness even in the most catastrophic and entrenched of conflicts.

⁴⁴ Ruth Kluger, 'Forgiving and Remembering', *PMLA* Vol. 117 No. 2, (2002), p. 312. Kluger's article was written in response to Julia Kristeva and Alison Rice, 'Forgiveness: An Interview', *PMLA* Vol. 117 No. 2, (2002), pp. 278-295.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 311.

⁴⁶ Giorgio Agamben (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York 1999, p. 34.

suffered. 'Well,' he replies, touching his left forearm, 'they gave me the numbers, after all.'

When I tell this joke, reactions vary. But it seemed to me at the time – still seems to me – that in its refusal to take the meaning of the past for granted, to see the Holocaust as necessarily shattering, it offers a way of coping that is forgiving and creative. Once again, I do not minimise the scale of the task. Nor am I entirely sure that I have the right to repeat it, except to say that I am certain that the survivor who told me meant to underscore his own humility in the face of the past. And if he does not presume to know what that means, why should I?

But the scale of a task hints at the scale of its reward. Judith Butler has pointed out that the belief in a cycle of violence is in itself one of the most fundamental obstacles to arresting it. 'A narrative form emerges to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability'⁴⁷ and this form presupposes further violence. If we are to move through this cycle, Butler argues, we have to ask 'what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war.'⁴⁸ She admits, however, that she is unclear as to how to theorise the way in which 'inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community.'⁴⁹

Forgiveness is a principle which meets many of the criteria implied by Butler's analysis. It arrests the impulse to strike back; it asks us to consider carefully how we respond; to 'take collective responsibility for a thorough understanding of the history that brings us to this juncture.'⁵⁰

Before that responsibility can be taken, though, one needs to see the story as open to other interpretations. Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* also suggest, in a more subtle way than the joke above, that the meaning to be derived from the Holocaust is negotiable. In the final tale, 'Rejoining the Human Race' a survivor makes her way to Majdanek for the public hanging of a war criminal. As Eliach relates, on her way to the execution, the survivor wanted

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, 'Explanation or Exoneration, or what we can Hear' in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London 2006 [2004], p. 7.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, 'Preface' to *ibid.* p. XII.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp. XII-XIII.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, 'Explanation and Exoneration', p. 10.

revenge: 'revenge for every Jew whom she had buried with her own hands, for each child shot in Drohobycz, for her mother, father, grandparents, for her beloved Zygus, for the world of her youth that was so brutally murdered.' But as the execution proceeds, she realises that cheering death is a path that leads nowhere. 'Death begets more death, hatred more hatred'⁵¹ and in that moment her revenge loses its sweetness. The search to recreate the idyll of her youth elsewhere becomes the foundation of a new life. The recognition that life is more important than the pursuit of vengeance is the most basic form of forgiveness: the most fundamental step in starting again. Not so much breaking the cycle as seeing the cycle itself as a matter of choice, and not only on the collective level.

We have to be aware that collective responses carry risks in the abrogation of individual responsibility (as though the Holocaust itself did not suggest that). If 'isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation'⁵² it also absolves us of the need to see 'our' choice as a collection of individual responses. Forgiveness – as something which must fundamentally happen on an individual basis – demands that the story be re-examined in the privacy of our own stories about our collective past. And the conclusions arrived at in such a process cannot be dismissed as 'what one does' or 'what one thinks'. Instead they have the force of personal conviction, personal responsibility, personal responsiveness to the moment in which we find ourselves. Once again, I am not saying that this is easy.

The problems posed by de Lange's definition can, though, be approached another way. De Lange assumes that forgiveness for the Holocaust must be addressed to the perpetrators. If this is the case, then the chances of moving beyond the Holocaust are slim indeed. Eliach describes Miles Lerman, the leader of President Carter's Commission on the Holocaust in 1979, in the Remuh Synagogue in Kraków, calling God to a *Din Torah*, summoning God to answer for the destruction.

⁵¹ Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, pp. 226-229.

⁵² Judith Butler, 'Explanation and Exoneration', p. 5.

God! How could you stay here when next door are Auschwitz and Plaszow? Where were you when all over Europe your sons and daughters were burning on altars? What did you do when my sainted father and mother marched to their deaths? When my sisters and brothers were put to the sword?⁵³

Eliach refuses to participate, saying she has no quarrel with God but with men:

I would put on trial each Western university and library, for harbouring millions of malicious words written against an ancient people, words like murderous daggers hiding beneath the cloak of science and truth – the propaganda of conceited little men. I want to bring to trial the pulpits of countless churches where hate was burning like eternal lights. I want to try the music of Bach and Beethoven for allowing itself to be played while my brethren were led to their deaths. I want to try the botanist for cultivating flowers under the Auschwitz sun, the train conductors with their little red flags for conducting traffic as usual. I want to bring to trial the doctors in their white coats who killed so casually, who exchanged with such great ease the Hippocratic Oath for sheer hypocrisy.⁵⁴

If we return to Mintz's definition of catastrophe, we should note that it offers some hope in this kind of choice between the pursuit of human vengeance or divine explanation, albeit of a cautious and wary kind. For if catastrophe is an event which convulses and vitiates shared assumptions about the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and if as de Lange notes forgiveness is principally a divine prerogative, then the task is as simple and as hard as forgiveness: to make peace with God.

In this, history is problematic, since it takes human action and agency as its starting-point. But Mintz notes that the Holocaust is unusual in the history of Jewish catastrophe in that its representation is concerned not with the drama between Israel and God, but Israel and the world. Since the Book of Lamentations, the perpetrator's identity has been of marginal importance, since the defining problem was what the event said about the Jewish relationship with God. Why can this not be the case with the Holocaust?

The raw trauma of the body count might be one answer. What is certain is that there is no easy answer to the statistics. The deaths of millions of innocents make us, as human beings, want to ascribe responsibility on a level we can see,

⁵³ Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, pp. 212-213.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

hear, touch – and punish. But, like the survivor in Eliach’s story, we have to ask ourselves if cheering death can beget anything more than further death?

But there is hope. David Patterson and John K. Roth define forgiveness, reconciliation and justice as ‘after-words’. That is, words whose meanings in the wake of disaster are stretched ‘to the point where they are unavoidably silenced’.⁵⁵ But as they point out, silence itself invites a response, an attempt to fill the void somehow, and ‘the fact that they have not been silenced, that they are still spoken and heard, indicates that these words are needed.’⁵⁶ Even if we reject forgiveness as a possibility, the fact that we are asking the question leaves open the possibility that we will return to it and this time find an answer. A survivor of the Rwandan genocide, interviewed by the playwright J.T. Rogers and the director Max Stafford Clark for Rogers’s play *The Overwhelming*, framed a response to this dilemma:

What we are seeking is a repatriation of memory. We are testimony that the genocide happened. There is no way we live the way we do without a genocide. The victims will never forget. The more you think and talk about it, there is a slow healing. If not, it will just erupt.⁵⁷

And history suggests, as well, though it takes time – and a lot of it – something resembling ‘normal service’ is resumed, as we take for granted that the past went this way, and not that. In the aftermath of World War One, it seemed as though there was no way in which the grief and anger that shattered Europe could be anything but shattering, constantly wounding. As Jay Winter and Antoine Prost have explored, the effort to understand what had happened or to communicate what the experience had been was vast.

As with the Holocaust, the survivors claimed privileged status to know what it had been like. As Winter and Prost note:

⁵⁵ David Patterson and John K. Roth, ‘Prologue: ‘Did you say after? After what?’, in David Patterson and John K. Roth (eds.), *After-Words: Post-Holocaust Struggles with Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Justice*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 2004, p. xiv.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. xv.

⁵⁷ Odette Kayirere, quoted in ‘Just Words’ in J.T. Rogers, *The Overwhelming*, Faber and Faber, London 2006, p. 141.

The first conversation in the discursive field of remembrance was between and among combatants. It proudly asserted the authority of direct experience, and spoke to a public with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for accounts of 'what the war was really like'. These witnesses of warfare were overwhelmingly male, and deeply committed to a privileged insight into the events of the recent past.⁵⁸

But, as Winter and Prost also demonstrate, this was but a passing phase. While the national paradigms of writing and research endured – indeed, endure still – what has changed is that the event's representation has acquired a stability that allows us both to recall and forget. 'Each conception of the history of the Great War is a response to the questions of the here and now, of a particular milieu and a particular time; no one ever hears the response to a question no one poses.'⁵⁹ Because we never hear the language *in which* we speak as a language at all, merely taking it for granted as part of what Primo Levi termed 'the world of things that exist',⁶⁰ one of the 'stories, myths and legends that ordinary people tell about the past, usually their past, but sometimes about the abstract national past.'⁶¹

This has been a slow process, and one which, like all processes of representation, is ongoing. Two exhibitions in the Imperial War Museum illustrate the point.

Opened in the 1990s, the Trench Experience in the basement sought to recreate the sights, smells, sounds and feelings of trench warfare: in short, to persuade the visitor, for a moment, that they had been there. As the museum guidebook has it, 'visitors can experience at first hand what it was like to be a Tommy in the trenches.'⁶² As discussed above, we see something similar, if more subtle, in the Holocaust exhibition as a cattle car's skeleton surrounds us, making us all into deportees, all bound for the next stop: Auschwitz.

By contrast, though, the exhibition commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of the Armistice, 'In Memoriam', did not attempt such identification. Its clean lines and orderly structure did not attempt to conceal from the visitor

⁵⁸ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History*, p. 174.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 211.

⁶⁰ Primo Levi, 'The Truce', in Primo Levi (trans. Stuart Woolf), *If This Is a Man/The Truce*, p. 188.

⁶¹ Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, p. 190.

⁶² *Imperial War Museum London*, unknown date, p. 10.

that this was past but instead made it timeless: its subtitle, '*Remembering the Great War*' focusing the visitor on the sense to be made of the event rather than its detail. The economy of the poppy logo underlines that conventional means of representation were found and have become, for want of a less punning word, entrenched. These symbols are a powerful and yet crucially limited means of reviving memory whilst at the same time taming it.



Figure 1: the entrance to 'In Memoriam', IWM. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, 2009.

Most importantly, the exhibition delivered the visitor not into the historical, but into the symbolic. The art galleries are a chance to consider how *removed* we are from that moment, rather than further embroiled.

I am not, in conclusion, saying that the effort to understand the Holocaust historically should cease. As Winter and Prost's analysis of the historiography of World War One shows, the work of historians is ongoing and vital to the changed meanings events acquire. At the same time, though, the purpose of that history must change. Only by undertaking a search for our better history can we find a better future. And, to repeat Susan Sontag's comment in her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a surfeit of memory impedes the process of

healing. 'To make peace', she wrote, 'is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be partial and faulty.'⁶³

Ruth Kluger, for all that she cannot forgive, also notes that 'we speak of the virtues of memory, but forgetfulness has its own virtue.' In the long-term, once the event has been described, she is wary of the 'deterrence' of historical examples: 'A remembered massacre may serve as a deterrent, but it may also serve as the model for the next massacre.'⁶⁴

Jason Burke, reviewing Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* in the *Observer*, wrote disparagingly of 'our relative relegation of this greatest of European traumas to memorial days, museums and books [as] a useful way to avoid confronting the most difficult questions of all, which are not about the victims, but about the killers.'⁶⁵ But, following Améry's maxim quoted earlier – that the only way to communicate pain is to inflict it – I worry that the only way to truly understand the perpetrator is to become one. There are many questions to ask ourselves about the perpetrators, and whether we could do the same, but I fear it is a question that can only be definitively answered in the positive, and the price is too high.

But it might be argued that partial and faulty memory is antithetical to Judaism. In a frequently-quoted passage from his novel *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer claims that 'Jews have Six Senses':

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. [...] When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *what does it remember like?*⁶⁶

⁶³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 103.

⁶⁴ Ruth Kluger, 'Forgiving and Remembering', p. 313.

⁶⁵ Jason Burke, 'The evil that ordinary men can do', *Observer Review*, Sunday, 22 February 2009, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, Penguin Books, London 2007 [2002], pp. 198-199.

For Foer, recall is involuntary. But Yerushalmi, in addition to demonstrating the ways in which memory was deliberately – in modern terms at least – obscured, notes that the idea of memory is in itself an illusion.

When we say that a people ‘remembers’ we are really saying that a past has been actively transmitted to the present generation and that this past has been accepted as meaningful. Conversely, a people ‘forgets’ when the generation that now possesses the past does not convey it to the next, or when the latter rejects what it receives and does not pass it onward, which is to say the same thing. The break in transmission can occur abruptly or by a process of erosion. But the principle remains. A people can never “forget” what it has never received in the first place.⁶⁷

All there is, therefore, is a choice which each generation confronts in how to communicate – or whether to communicate – the stories that it deems important. Why should we not seek a better history? Tzvetan Todorov has observed that the Holocaust also offers ‘an opportunity – a rare one, unfortunately – to see in the efforts made by some to help the persecuted and save those living under threat of death, how goodness can flourish too.’⁶⁸

And even literary voices are not unanimous in celebrating the virtue of memory. Sholem Asch opened his 1939 novel *The Nazarene* with a warning of the consequences if the ‘Angel of Forgetfulness’ should forget ‘to remove from our memories the records of the former world.’ Asch feared the memories ‘drift[ing] like torn clouds above the hills and valleys of the mind, and weav[ing] themselves into the incidents of our current existence.’⁶⁹ Admittedly, Asch was writing before the camps unleashed their terrible legacy, but the counterpoint is nonetheless striking.

Amir Gutfreund’s *Our Holocaust* reaches a related conclusion, however. As ‘Amir’ realises that the historical method will not produce the answers that he seeks, and that his quest is threatening his present life: finally, an encounter with

⁶⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, p. 109.

⁶⁸ Tzvetan Todorov (trans. Arthur Denner), *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 2001 [1999], p. 1.

⁶⁹ Sholem Asch (trans. Maurice Samuel), *The Nazarene*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London 1939, p. 3.

a German researcher who explains his past as a *Lebensborn* orphan, opens his eyes to the possibility of a new approach.

As I look at Hans Oderman, I realise what his role is, what it has been from the first day I saw him. He is my reflection. That's it. I can no longer say *us* and *them*. Every move I make, every line I draw, there will be a line on my reflection too. Every thought of mine will produce a thought on the other side too. There is no more *us* and *them*.⁷⁰

Susan Rubin Suleiman has explored the notion of 'crises of memory', moments 'of choice, and sometimes of predicament or conflict, about remembrance of the past, whether by individuals or groups.'⁷¹ But she qualifies this by writing that 'one writes for the present' and that 'what the next century will consider important is not my concern.'⁷²

I wish to reject this qualification. We have to see ourselves and our relation to history in a constant state of creative crisis – of choice. As professional academics, we have to acknowledge and celebrate the power we wield in describing and shaping the past in full awareness that what the next century will remember is very much our concern, if only because, as human beings, our actions in the present are stones dropped in the water whose ripples will spread far beyond us. We have to remember, as Suleiman puts it, that 'the future perfect is the historical tense par excellence.'⁷³

But these processes do not happen overnight, nor will they in this case: there is no Angel of Forgetfulness for us in the here and now. It is harder and slower to forget than to remember, and Michael Burleigh's observation that for many 'Nazism is not a matter of academic contemplation'⁷⁴ is still too true for too many. The cycle of seventieth anniversaries that began in November 2008 is likely to resemble the cycle of sixtieth anniversaries that ended in 2005: but the eightieth anniversaries may be different, or the ninetieth, or the hundredth.

⁷⁰ Amir Gutfreund, *Our Holocaust*, pp. 402-403.

⁷¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁷⁴ Michael Burleigh, 'Introduction' in Michael Burleigh (ed.), *Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History*, Collins and Brown, London 1996, p. 3.

Our goal for these future anniversaries as historians must be to ensure that they emphasise the creative rather than the destructive: that they address the questions of meaning that were shaken and posed by the Holocaust rather than returning to the facts unquestioningly. And to do so in the humble knowledge that we operate as professional academics as ‘minor actors in a much larger set of cultural productions.’⁷⁵ This is because, in the words of Barack Obama in November 2008, ‘our stories are singular but our destiny is shared.’⁷⁶ And the nature of that destiny will depend, as it always does, on the kind of stories we frame it with

One powerful story that photographs tell is that the past is over but that the responsibility for its meaning – and for accessing that meaning – lies with us. As I have written this study, I have returned to the photos of the Auschwitz Album time and again, both for research and for teaching. Each time I do so, I try again to decide what is happening, what these people are thinking, what they mean to me. Now, as I prepare to end the writing, I realise that I can only guess at the first two questions, and that those guesses are refracted through the answer to the third. Does this mean that my answers are wrong or inadequate? Not necessarily: but if I am to move on, I must balance the certainty of what I feel I know about them with the knowledge that all answers are provisional. I finally realise that the story is created through the relationship of the last image to the next one.

⁷⁵ Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, p. 190.

⁷⁶ Barack Obama, ‘Election Night: November 4, 2008, Chicago, Illinois’ in *Obama for America, Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama’s Plan to Renew America’s Promise*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2008, p. 287.

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In a study of this kind, maintaining a firm distinction between primary and secondary material is problematic. This is both a problem of individual classification and a broader problem about what information seems to be derived.

A good example of the first problem is Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The publishers of the most recent paperback edition (see below) are confident in categorising it on the back cover as 'Biography/Autobiography' and it is routinely referred to as a Holocaust memoir, an impression given weight by the inclusion of Wiesel's 1986 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech. But as Wiesel notes in the foreword, what the reader is engaging with is a new English translation of a French translation of a Yiddish text: itself a document over which Wiesel took considerable pains. One cannot dismiss this as a fiction: Wiesel was in Auschwitz and did witness what he describes. But equally it is not unconcerned with presenting a particular attempt at making sense of those events to a reader: it is a worked text and deals with questions that Wiesel conceded in his memoirs (*All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 1996) were beyond him while the experiences he describes were happening: 'There in the camp, I had neither the strength nor the time for theological meditation or metaphysical speculation about the attributes of the Master of the Universe.' (p. 83) In reading *Night*, therefore, we are in many ways engaging with a reflection on what it means to *have experienced* Auschwitz, rather than a "simple" description. Wiesel's status as direct witness has to be balanced with the problems inherent in communication: that it necessarily selects and emphasises without always being fully aware of the choices being made. I felt that 'Testimony' encompassed this most fully.

In a sense, much of what appears below could be subjected to a similar set of questions, with many entries classifiable in different ways. Whether these are right or wrong is largely a matter of personal preference. Attention should be drawn to some choices, however: Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, appears (alongside *Night*) as a testimony even though the 'Tadek' who narrates is not identical with the author: in some ways, I feel that this is an acknowledgement of the separation between writer and witness that deserves to be recognised. Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* and Karen Gershon's *We Came as Children*, however, have been put in the general category, chiefly because it is unclear what the relationship between writer and witness actually is. In line with the fact that the relationship between author and event is all too clear, Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* appears as fiction. After some thought, David Grossman's *Lion's Honey* was put in the general category as, while it is allusive and interesting, it is a commentary on the Biblical passage rather than a retelling.

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ONLINE RESOURCES (SELECTED)

Where individual websites have been visited once, the web address and retrieval date has been given in the footnote: this section is intended to give the reader access to those sites which have been used frequently.

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum: www.auschwitz.org.pl

Imperial War Museum: www.iwm.org.uk

'Irving Trial' Resources: www.holocaustdenialontrial.com

Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust:

www.humanrights.gov.se/stockholmforum/2000/conference_2000.html

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org

Yad Vashem: www.yadvashem.org

FILM AND TELEVISION

Blitz Street (Channel 4/Impossible Pictures 2010)

The Cruel Sea (Charles Frend, 1953)

The Dam Busters (Michael Anderson, 1954)

Hellboy (Guillermo del Toro, 2005)

Ice Cold in Alex (J. Lee Thompson, 1958)

A Matter of Life and Death (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946)

Mrs Miniver (William Wyler, 1942)

Nuit et Brouillard [Night and Fog] (Alain Resnais, 1955)

The One That Got Away (Roy Ward Baker, 1957)

Reach for the Sky (Lewis Gilbert, 1956)

The Reader (Stephen Daldry, 2008)

Return to Auschwitz (Yorkshire Television, 1978)

Schindler's List (Steven Spielberg, 1993)

Target for Tonight (Crown Film Unit, 1941)

The World at War (Thames Television, 1974)