

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Remembering Jasenovac: survivor testimonies and the cultural dimension of bearing witness.

Journal Item

How to cite:

Byford, Jovan (2014). Remembering Jasenovac: survivor testimonies and the cultural dimension of bearing witness. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 28(1) pp. 58–84.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 Oxford University Press

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1093/hgs/dcu011>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Holocaust Genocide Studies (Spring 2014) 28 (1): 58-84.
doi: 10.1093/hgs/dcu011

© Oxford University Press 2014; all rights reserved

Please note that this is the Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version of the article published in Holocaust and Genocide Studies in spring 2014. This is the version that has been accepted for publication following peer review, but before copy editing or typesetting. Thus, this article may not exactly replicate the authoritative document published in the journal. It is not the copy of record.

**Remembering Jasenovac:
Survivor Testimonies and the Cultural Dimension of Bearing Witness**

Jovan Byford, The Open University *

This article examines testimonies of Jasenovac survivors recorded in Serbia between 1989 and 1997 for the oral history collections of the Fortunoff Archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The author highlights the differences between the assumptions about survivors and testimony underpinning the US-based interview projects, on the one hand, and on the other the understanding of bearing witness that is apparent in testimonies recorded for projects in Serbia. Contrasting the emotion-centered American approach to survivor testimony with the atrocity-centered Serbian approach, the author argues for a more explicit acknowledgment among scholars, as well as among those involved in recording testimonies, of witnessing as a socially, historically, and institutionally embedded practice.

The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic rise in the production and systematic collection of Holocaust survivors' testimonies. At the forefront of this development were three US-based institutions established in the 1980s and the 1990s: the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale; the Oral History Project of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM); and by far the largest of the three, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which in 2005 would become the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History. Alongside other, smaller interview projects (some of which have been in existence since the 1960s, or even longer), these

* CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO:
Dr Jovan Byford, Psychology Department, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK, e-mail: Jovan.Byford@open.ac.uk

institutions have recorded, catalogued, and archived more than 100,000 testimonies from survivors living in the US, Israel, Europe, and elsewhere throughout the world.¹

The systematic recording of testimonies has made a significant contribution to the public understanding of and appreciation for the plight of European Jewry under Nazism. By capturing the authentic experience of suffering and survival, testimonies have enriched the public memory of the Holocaust with a perspective that hitherto had been sidelined in historical accounts and media representations. Footage of survivors recalling their harrowing past has become an indispensable form of Holocaust representation in classrooms and museum exhibitions, as well as in popular culture.

The systematic collection of testimonies and survivors' increasing presence in public life have opened up a number of questions about how testimonies should be understood, used, and represented. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and scholars of literature have explored and discussed survivors' accounts in relation to a variety of issues, including trauma, identity, gender, memory, and the place of testimony in Holocaust historiography. An important motif in this scholarship is the acknowledgment that testimonies, while by nature personal, are also inherently *social*. How a specific account of a particular experience is configured and reconstituted in a personal narrative is not just a reflection of individual memory or a function of accuracy of recall. Testimonies, and the symbolic power associated with the practice of bearing witness, are both contingent upon and mediated by several factors. Among the most important is the institutional dynamic behind their collection: the testimonies were collected as part of large institutional projects that involved particular agendas, priorities, and concerns. In addition, testimonies and witnessing are influenced by established cultural and storytelling practices, and by broader discourses of collective memory—all of which inevitably determine the parameters of Holocaust representation in any given culture or historical period.²

Existing writing on the social embeddedness and historical contingency of testimonies focuses mainly on the American context, and on the way in which oral history projects (as well as the testimonies themselves) reflected, but at the same time also helped to determine, the trajectory of American postwar representation and understanding of the Holocaust.³ From the outset, however, the larger interview projects had a distinctly international dimension. The organizers made efforts to record accounts of survivors residing in Israel, Europe, South America, and elsewhere; that is, in societies in which the dominant culture of Holocaust

memorialization was often very different from that of the United States. Not only were survivor testimonies collected in those areas embedded in a different context and influenced by a dissimilar postwar experience, but their collection (especially the pioneering efforts by the Fortunoff Archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) invariably involved an encounter between diverse and not always compatible cultures of memory.

This cultural “encounter” has received relatively little consideration in scholarly literature, even though those who have collected the testimonies occasionally draw attention to the inevitable “national, cultural differences” in the way that the Holocaust is understood and interpreted.⁴ Moreover, reflections on this issue tend to be confined to the “surface” features of testimonies—namely, to the differences in thematic content. Researchers have noted, for example, that among survivors from the former Soviet Union there is a tendency not to differentiate between the Holocaust and the suffering of the civilian population as a whole, and that concentration camp survivors living in France differ from those in the United States in terms of how they account for inmates’ response to concentration camp conditions, or evaluate the conduct of Jewish kapos.⁵ These differences are mentioned mostly in passing, however, with little further inquiry into their nature and origins or their implications for the way in which survivor testimonies are used for scholarly and commemorative purposes.

In this article I explore these issues in depth, using as an example accounts collected in Serbia—the first Eastern European country in which American institutions recorded audio-visual testimonies related to the Holocaust. Focusing on testimonies pertaining to the Jasenovac concentration camp recorded for the Fortunoff Archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s oral history collection between 1989 and 1997, I highlight the significant differences between the assumptions underpinning the US-based interview projects and the local understanding of the practice of bearing witness. As we shall see, the latter—a legacy of both the culture of memory that had evolved in socialist Yugoslavia and the specific political context in which the testimonies were collected—is marked by a very different, culturally specific attitude toward survivors as mediators of memory and interpreters of the past. In examining and contrasting the two distinct modes of engagement with survivor testimony, I argue for a more explicit acknowledgment, among scholars as well as those involved in the collection and dissemination of testimonies, of witnessing as a socially, historically, and institutionally embedded practice. I then consider the implications of this for the way in which scholars,

stakeholders, or publics engage with testimonies as a historiographic source, a commemorative genre, and a *lieu de memoire*.

Testimony Collection in Serbia, 1989–1997

Between 1989 and 1997, the Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM’s Oral History Department recorded more than a hundred interviews with Holocaust survivors in Serbia. An affiliate project based in Belgrade organized the collection of these testimonies, selecting and approaching potential interviewees, hiring the necessary equipment and technical staff, and conducting the interviews. In total, 78 individual audio-visual testimonies were recorded for the Fortunoff Archive, while the USHMM’s more modest collection, recorded in the summer of 1997, consists of 23 audio interviews with 25 survivors.⁶ The efforts of both institutions ended with the arrival in the region of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which in 1998 interviewed as many as 349 survivors in Serbia alone—a number that dwarfed all previous efforts and rendered further recording somewhat redundant.⁷

The Fortunoff Archive’s decision to begin the collection of testimonies in what in 1989 was still the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia came about as the result of a chance encounter between Geoffrey Hartman, one of the founders of the archive, and Jaša Almuli, a retired journalist and member of Belgrade’s Jewish community. Almuli, a Holocaust survivor, had approached Hartman during the July 1988 “Remembering for the Future” International Scholars Conference on the Holocaust (held in Oxford, UK) and expressed interest in the Yale project. The meeting occurred at a time when the Fortunoff Archive was expanding its initiative to Europe and setting up affiliate projects in France and the United Kingdom. In the months following the meeting in Oxford, and after successful negotiation with the relevant institutions in Belgrade (the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and the Jewish Historical Museum), Yugoslavia was added to the list of European countries to which the Yale initiative was to expand its operation. As the Fortunoff Archive’s Newsletter enthusiastically declared at the time, it heralded “the opening of Eastern Europe” and would “spur further documentation” in the region.⁸ The archive named Almuli, who shortly afterwards became president of Belgrade’s Jewish community, “project director” and tasked him with coordinating and recording five interviews as part of an initial pilot project.

Almuli recorded 37 interviews between 1989 and 1992, when the project was suspended because of international sanctions against Serbia. The project resumed in 1995, and over the following two years a further 41 testimonies were collected.⁹ In a practice unusual for the Fortunoff Archive, Almuli was the sole interviewer in 77 out of the 78 recordings. In fact, except for the first set of pilot interviews recorded under the auspices of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, the recording of the testimonies was very much Almuli's personal project. This is the main reason why copies of the video tapes, which in other instances the Fortunoff Archive makes available to affiliates for use in educational programs and for research purposes in the countries of origin, remain in his private possession, beyond the reach of the Serbian public and the scholarly community.

At a 1994 oral history conference in Paris, after he presented some of the work he had compiled for the Fortunoff Archive, Almuli was approached by a representative of the USHMM's Oral History Department. Soon after, he began to conduct interviews for the museum as well.

Both the Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM have catalogued the testimonies collected by their affiliate in Belgrade as part of a "Yugoslav" collection or as reflecting "Yugoslav voices from the Holocaust." Yet, it is important to note that all the interviews were with survivors resident in Serbia at the time of the recording. The parent institutions in the US did not appear overly concerned with this limitation, perhaps because the experiences recounted in the interviews pertained to the Holocaust in Yugoslavia as a whole.¹⁰ However, bearing in mind *when* the testimonies were collected, the project's limited geographical reach is not unimportant. The recording coincided with the gradual dissolution of the Yugoslav federation and the rise of militant nationalisms in constituent republics. This development, which ultimately led to the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, had a profound impact on local Jewish communities as well as on the treatment of the Holocaust in the public sphere. Yugoslav Jewry, which had hitherto been fully assimilated into a multi-ethnic Yugoslav society, suddenly found itself divided among the successor states, and in a situation in which each local community had to confront the challenges posed by the new political and ideological milieu.

Moreover, one of the first "victims" of rising nationalism, especially in Serbia and Croatia, was the memory of the Second World War, and by extension also of the Holocaust. In Croatia the prevailing trend was towards the rehabilitation of the Croatian Ustasha movement,

and was accompanied by well-documented attempts at Holocaust denial or minimization. In Serbia the new historical narrative had at its core the story of the collective martyrdom of Serbs at the hands of the Ustashe and a comparison of the fate of the Serbs to that of the Jews. Testimonies of survivors recorded in Belgrade during the 1980s and 1990s were therefore embedded in a highly specific, multifaceted, and politically charged context—one that was representative neither of Yugoslavia as a whole, nor of any of the other successor states.

At the center of the ideological debates and “memory wars” between Serbian and Croatian nationalists at the time was Jasenovac, the largest concentration camp on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, located in the Independent State of Croatia and run by the local pro-Nazi Ustasha militia. Between 1941 and 1945, approximately 80,000 inmates perished there, most of them Serbs—although among this total are also up to 17,000 Croatian and Bosnian Jews and approximately 10,000 Roma.¹¹ In Serbia in the late 1980s and the 1990s the memory of Jasenovac was routinely instrumentalized for propaganda purposes, and used to frame the relationship between Serbs and Croats as an eternal struggle between victims and perpetrators.¹²

Crucially, the importance accorded to Jasenovac in Serbia at the time left a mark on both the Fortunoff collection and that of the USHMM. In the case of the Fortunoff Archive, Jasenovac survivors were among the first to be interviewed: four of the six interviews conducted as part of the pilot project in 1989 were with Jasenovac survivors.¹³ Also, eight of the nine Jasenovac testimonies in the collection were recorded in the first three rounds of recording between 1989 and 1992.¹⁴ In the case of the USHMM’s oral history collection, alongside a generic “Former Yugoslav Republics Project” (which covers a wide range of Holocaust experiences including internment, hiding, and resistance), there is a separate “Jasenovac Oral History Project” which includes testimonies from four Jewish and six Serbian survivors.¹⁵ There can be little doubt that the salience of Jasenovac within the collections reflects not just the genuine importance of this camp in the history of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia, but also the spirit of the time when the testimonies were collected and the associated assumptions about which aspects of Holocaust experience are particularly worth preserving and publicizing. This, it could be argued, makes Jasenovac testimonies an especially apposite case study for the exploration of the encounter between American and Serbian cultures of Holocaust representation and engagement with witness testimony.

The present analysis does not include testimonies by Jasenovac survivors recorded by the Shoah Foundation. This is not just because representatives of the Foundation re-interviewed survivors in Serbia whose testimonies had previously been recorded for the Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM, but also because the two earlier, and in many ways pioneering projects (with overlapping histories) had allowed the local affiliates much more freedom and flexibility when it came to conducting interviews. This makes them particularly relevant for examining the cultural underpinnings of bearing witness. Thus, although a detailed comparison of all three testimony collection projects would be interesting and worthwhile, both in the Serbian context and more generally, this kind of analysis lies beyond the scope and specific focus of this article. At the same time, the exclusion of the Shoah Foundation interviews should not be taken to mean that many of the features of Jasenovac testimonies identified in this paper are not present in the accounts collected by that institution as well.

Testimony, Survivor Identity, and the American Culture of Holocaust Memorialization

By the time the recording of interviews in Serbia began in 1989, the US-based testimony collection projects had already developed a set of basic assumptions about survivor testimony and its social functions—assumptions that guided their mission both at home and internationally. In the early 1980s, when the Fortunoff Archive began its pioneering effort, those who in the immediate aftermath of World War II had been referred to as “war refugees” were gradually becoming recognized, listened to, and honored by the American public as “Holocaust survivors.” As such, they held significant moral authority when it came to remembering and representing the experience of European Jews under Nazism.¹⁶ The primary motive behind the testimony collection initiated at Yale, it appears, was to help accelerate this change in public attitude towards survivors. This mission was later embraced by other projects. In addition to allowing the survivors’ voices to be heard, the use of video technology helped to “rehumanize” and “reindividuate” victims of the Holocaust. Each survivor’s unique language, gestures, emotions, life-story, and memories, captured on film, mounted a challenge to the image that had threatened to take over the public imagination of Jewish tragedy under Nazism: that of the anonymous “corpses and skeletal prisoners” recorded on film after the liberation of the camps.¹⁷

In line with the aims of preserving survivors' voices, adding "texture to memory," and rescuing the Holocaust from what Jean Améry called the "cold storage of history," most interview projects focused explicitly on the witnesses' subjective experience and affective state.¹⁸ In the case of the Fortunoff Archive, the interviews focused not so much on documentary knowledge of the past, but "on the mind as it struggles with its memories, making sense of or simply facing them, on transmitting in oral form each version of survival." The questions posed were about "the day-to-day, night-to-night existence, the human and psychological milieu: how it felt then, how it feels now."¹⁹ Similarly, the United States Holocaust Museum's oral history program placed the emphasis on survivors' "personal reflections" and those aspects of experience that cannot be gleaned from official documents or archival sources: "day-to-day activities are essential—what [survivors] knew, saw, thought, dreamed, and feared; who were their friends, lovers, enemies; ... their work; their relationships; and even philosophic ruminations about their outlook on life."²⁰ In both instances, the aim was to "accompany the witness on a journey back in time, in the most intimate manner possible," and in doing so to uncover the deep-seated "emotional layers of experience."²¹

The emphasis on the personal, the intimate, and the traumatic in survivor testimony gave the interviews a distinct psychological dimension. Nathan Beyrak, who led the Israeli project for both the Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM, described his endeavor as "blending together" the "psychological and historical approaches."²² For Beyrak, audio-visual testimonies occupy a space between history, which is traditionally not interested in the survivor as an individual, and psychology—which, while focused on the individual, has only marginal interest in the relationship between experience and historical truth.²³ The psychological approach is especially noticeable in the Fortunoff interviews, where interactions between the survivor and the interviewer are geared towards assisting the former in the process of working through and making sense of his or her unprecedented traumatic experience. Even the ascetic studio set used in many of the Fortunoff interviews recorded at Yale University in the 1980s was designed to facilitate the process of "entering" and "releasing" traumatic memories; the camera captures "the survivor's defining struggle with trauma and loss."²⁴ In the literature on survivor testimonies one often encounters psychological vocabulary. Scholarly works contain numerous references to "latent" or "dissociated" memories, and to survivors' need to exorcise the "ghosts of the past," overcome the repression and denial that "contaminate" their lives, and uncover and confront

“buried truths.”²⁵ Even within the USHMM project, where the emphasis on the psychological is less explicit, organizers have occasionally alluded to recovered memories: as Joan Ringelheim put it, the stated task of the testimonies is to “connect with memories which lie deeper and are therefore more difficult to commemorate,” and, by penetrating beyond the formalized and established accounts, to “recover the story that might surprise the witness himself or herself.”²⁶

It is worth noting, however, that in the literature on audio-visual testimony there is a noticeable fluctuation in emphasis between the “positivistic aspects” of testimonies (their relevance as a “primary” historical source) and their other, more intimate, emotional features. Geoffrey Hartman, one of the architects of the Fortunoff project, stresses that in spite of the importance of the personal and the subjective in testimony, bearing witness is “a historical rather than [a] therapeutic occasion,” and that the psychiatrist’s or psychoanalyst’s agenda is not always compatible with the aims of an oral history interview.²⁷ Nevertheless, the fact remains that within the genre of audio-visual Holocaust survivor testimony, accounts of experience are not collected primarily for their factual accuracy or reliability (although historians are repeatedly encouraged to use them in their research). The power of testimony lies in its indisputable *authenticity*—in its ability to access the “psychological and emotional milieu of the struggle for survival.”²⁸ It offers an alternative, intimate version of history and a different kind of *truth*: “traumatic truth” or the “embodied truth of experience.”²⁹

The emphasis on different modes of truth captured by survivors’ recollections is apparent also in the fact that in literature on testimonies, particular figures of speech, such as metaphors, similes, and hyperboles—or what Oren Baruch Stier calls the “vernacular poetics” of testimony—receive special attention.³⁰ The survivor Bessie K.’s reference to her baby as a “bundle,” or Edith P.’s evocation of the memory of the sun being “black” in Auschwitz, Serena N.’s recollection of four crematoria being blown up during an uprising in the camp (instead of just one), are some examples of the frequently cited “still snapshots” or “fragmentary sensations” communicated through non-literal, abstract, and often poetic expressions. One important reason for their prominence in the scholarship on testimony is that they capture the fundamental paradox of Holocaust representation: namely, that it is “a story that could never be told, but must be told.”³¹ They epitomize both the eloquence and the lucidity of survivors and the inherently inarticulate and unrepresentable traumatic reality (the “deep memory”) of the Holocaust.³²

This distinct approach to testimony is not uniquely “American”: it is to be found also in testimonies collected for the Fortunoff Archive in Israel, Germany, and France, for example. Nevertheless, it reflects two ways of conceptualizing survivors—ways that have developed primarily in the United States since the 1970s.³³ Henry Greenspan refers to these as *ceremonial rhetoric* and *psychiatric rhetoric*.³⁴ The former honors survivors as “celebrants and heroes,” often representing the fact of survival as a heroic, rather than an accidental outcome, and seeks redemptive, life-affirming meaning in the fate of survivors. The latter constructs those same survivors as “ghosts and wrecks,” and as “haunted victims of destruction.” The interaction between the two perspectives has helped to produce what today is sometimes referred to as the *survivor identity*. Survivors (not just of the Holocaust, but also of other genocides, 9/11, cancer, rape, domestic violence, and so on) are recognized for their inherent vulnerability induced by past victimization and suffering, but also for having the fortitude and strength to “break the silence” and speak about it publicly. As Kenneth McLaughlin put it recently, “the public expression of hitherto private secrets and hurt” has, since the 1970s, come to be seen as “freeing and self-transforming.”³⁵ More important, the label “survivor” brings with it certain expectations regarding public recognition: it “serves to endow the speaker with moral authority; as a victim who has survived, their view is meant to be taken seriously.”³⁶ Also, the genre of audio-visual testimony emerged at a time when emotional expression began to pervade public discourse and when television came to be seen, more generally, as the best means of engaging the audience and of communicating affect as well as fact or opinion.³⁷ The framing of extreme Holocaust experience in terms of survival and the imperative to bear witness transformed both the experience and the subsequent retelling of it into a source of inspiration, affirmation, and historical lessons.

In the case of testimonies recorded in the United States, the interviewers, the survivors and the audience appear to share (at least for the most part) these basic, culturally embedded assumptions about the nature of audio-visual testimony and the educational and commemorative role of survivors and their life stories. This is apparent in the narrative structure, thematic configuration, and tone of many of the audio-visual testimonies (especially those that make it into the public domain), in which the interactional context and the anticipated expectations of the audience produce a discernible focus on feelings and reflection, and often also on the universality of the Holocaust’s message. None of this means, of course, that testimony collection

projects do not differ from each other in terms of their underlying assumptions, agendas or foci. Nor does it imply that testimonies are in any way repetitive or formulaic, or that survivors do not sometimes resist these trends, or challenge interviewers' expectations. Rather, it simply means that, as James Young observes: "When witnesses share the same *Weltanschauung*, their respective grasps of experiences are relatively similar.... The narrators often share the same traditions and language used to describe experiences. In this way, disparate events told in the same figure [of speech or understanding] are unified in their expression, united by a common vision of experience."³⁸

Jasenovac Survivors and the Local Tradition of Bearing Witness

The testimonies of Jasenovac survivors recorded in Serbia in the late 1980s and the 1990s lack many of the characteristics of the US-based projects. The Serbian accounts were embedded in a culture of remembrance very different from the one described above, and were united by a different "vision of experience." First and foremost, unlike in the United States, where the effort to collect audio-visual testimonies in the 1980s was motivated by a perceived marginalization of the survivors' perspective, in Yugoslavia, former inmates of concentration camps had been recognized throughout the postwar period as valuable witnesses to the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their accomplices. The earliest official Yugoslav reports on crimes committed in concentration camps, compiled by the Yugoslav War Crimes Commission in 1945 and 1946, relied extensively on information collected from survivors.³⁹ Jasenovac offers a relevant example: the Commission's report on this camp, which laid the foundation for the subsequent representations both in official historiography and in public memory, was based almost exclusively on depositions from fifty-six survivors—some of whom guided the investigators through the camp's ruins after the end of the war.⁴⁰

The collection of testimonies and the publication of memoirs continued in subsequent decades, mainly under the auspices of the state-sponsored veterans' association, the Union of Fighters of the People's Liberation War. Although prior to publication these first-hand accounts of camp experience were vetted and edited by state-sponsored guardians of the dominant commemorative culture, they were nevertheless treated uncritically within the boundaries of what was politically permissible. Testimonies were collected and disseminated as "historical material" in accordance with the view (advocated by the veterans' association) that the writing of

the history of World War II should remain the prerogative of those who experienced it firsthand.⁴¹ Thus, until the 1980s, with the exception of a small number of articles published in marginal historical journals, literature on Jasenovac consisted almost exclusively of memoirs, edited collections of extracts from survivor testimonies, or brief chronicles of the camp that drew extensively on the official and authoritative War Crimes Commission's report from 1946.⁴²

Implicit in this attitude towards survivors and their memories is a notion of “witnessing” very different from that which underpins testimony collection projects in the United States. The Yugoslav approach was certainly not conducive to the development of a *survivor identity* of the kind that is built into the agenda of the US-based initiatives. Survivors (more commonly referred to as “former inmates”—*bivši zatočnici*) were neither celebrated nor pitied, and their trauma-induced turmoil and pain were never the focus of much public interest. On the contrary, survivors were often explicitly discouraged from weaving an intimate, personalized version of camp existence. The expectation was that the testimonies would focus on *facts*—places, names, and dates related either to specific crimes or noteworthy acts of heroism. The purpose of bearing witness, as understood at the time, was to describe “what happened” and, in doing so, to corroborate the dominant narrative of the collective suffering and resistance of the Yugoslav nations. Testimony was to embellish that narrative with poignant images and to assimilate the history of the camps into the established framework for interpreting the events of World War II and the Socialist Revolution.⁴³

In testimonies collected during the socialist era, the dominant motif was that of resistance. This reflected the role of the veterans' association in the collection and dissemination of the testimonies. The memory of Jasenovac was marked from very early on, however, by an additional, equally important dimension. Because of the brutality of the guards and the barbaric methods of execution—the majority of the victims were killed with a blow to the head with a mallet or had their throats slit with a knife—the postwar collective memory of this camp focused also on the character of the perpetrators and their pathological disposition and behavior. Acts of sadism and ritualized killing orgies featured prominently not only in the early War Crimes Commission report and related publications, but also in newsreels, propaganda films, and the large exhibition that toured the country after the war on crimes committed by the occupiers and their accomplices.⁴⁴ Over time, this atrocity-focused discourse created a set of expectations about what counts as a relevant memory of Jasenovac. Hence, memoirs and testimonies produced

throughout the postwar period featured a fairly consistent set of recurring stories of barbaric executions, torture, disembowelment, blood drinking, cannibalism, sexual mutilation, and other outrages. These were not always recounted as part of the survivor's immediate personal experience, but rather as common knowledge of "what went on" at the camp, gleaned from camp rumor, fellow survivors, or other sources.

Testimonies collected in Serbia in the late 1980s and the 1990s from Jasenovac survivors reveal the strong influence of this distinct culture of memory and testimonial tradition. In these interviews there is no trace of the aforementioned "blending together" of psychological and historical approaches typical of the US-based projects. In fact, at the outset, Almuli dismissed the requirement for a psychologist to be present at the interviews, even though collaboration with the Fortunoff Archive included a contractual obligation to provide "all necessary psychological and human support." The stated reason for the omission was that the "spiritual strength" of Yugoslav survivors rendered this "unnecessary."⁴⁵ Evidently, Almuli did not approach his interviewees (and there is no evidence that they would want to be approached in this way) as vulnerable individuals working through unprecedented trauma. Instead, following the example of other testimony collection projects undertaken throughout the postwar period, he interviewed survivors as witnesses in a traditional, juridical sense of the word. Their role was to establish the link between perpetrator and victim (both individuals and groups) and to provide an authoritative account of the crimes committed at Jasenovac. In that context, any acknowledgment of the psychological vulnerability of survivors would only have undermined their credibility as dispassionate and trustworthy "eyewitnesses."

Also, questions in the interviews tended to be posed in a way that invited short, "factual" answers, often invoking topics that went beyond the survivor's own experience. These included the development of the Independent State of Croatia, the ideology of the Ustasha movement or the overall number of victims of genocide in Croatia. This can be explained by the fact that, as he later acknowledged, Almuli viewed the testimonies as a way of setting the record straight regarding Jasenovac, or, as he put it, leaving the "slate clean after us."⁴⁶ This had much to do with the fact that interviewing began in December 1989, only a few months after the publication of the book *Horrors of War* by the future Croatian president Franjo Tuđman.⁴⁷ In this work, which provoked outrage both in Yugoslavia and internationally, Tuđman presented Jasenovac as a "labor camp," reduced the number of victims to 40,000, and blamed Jewish kapos for the

killings.⁴⁸ Amid the controversy, survivor testimonies presented themselves as a useful instrument for “combating revisionism of the history of the Independent State of Croatia”—especially for the benefit of Western public opinion which many in Serbia at that time (Almuli included) believed had succumbed to Croatian revisionist propaganda.⁴⁹ This is why, even though each survivor’s personal life history provides the framework for the testimonial narrative, personal revelations, intimate details, and private reflections are scarce in the recordings. Instead, in all the interviews, the conversation is steered in the direction of the tropes and images of atrocity, the psychopathy of the Ustashe, and the collective suffering of Serbs, Jews, and Roma; with the rise of Serbian nationalism in the 1980s, that collective experience acquired new political relevance.⁵⁰ These motifs were made all the more salient at the time by the mass publication of books, pamphlets, and edited collections on Jasenovac. By reproducing graphic stories and images of Ustasha crimes, these works set the standard against which the survivors’ credibility (and relevance) as witnesses, and the truth-value of their accounts, were measured.⁵¹

It is unsurprising, therefore, that, at an international conference on Holocaust survivor testimony in 1994, Almuli asserted that survivors “confirm”—as if such a confirmation were needed —“that the Ustashe were the killers and that Jasenovac was the place of the most terrible death.” He stressed that survivors provide vivid accounts of “incredible bestialities and atrocities” and offer revealing “portraits” of the perpetrators.⁵² Similarly, in his final report for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Almuli summarized the testimonies pertaining to Jasenovac mainly in terms of which killings the survivors had described, or how well they explained the psychopathological intent of the Ustasha guards.⁵³ These summaries are revealing not only because they confirm that the tone of “juridical accusation” that permeates the Jasenovac testimonies was central to Almuli’s project, and something that he explicitly sought to capture, but also because they expose the extent to which he was oblivious to the demands of the US-based projects, with their emphasis on the more subtle voice of the survivor’s personal experience.⁵⁴ The outcome of his efforts, therefore, was a set of testimonies that, while reflecting the complex interplay between the local memory culture, established traditions of bearing witness, and the demands of the specific historical and political moment in which they were recorded, offered a perspective on the Holocaust very different from that which the US-based institutions sought to preserve for posterity.

“The man who saw his brother’s brain”: The Testimony of Edo Šajer

The differences between the atrocity-focused undercurrents of the Jasenovac testimonies and the broader assumptions about the survivor as witness inherent in the US-based projects can be illustrated by contrasting a specific episode from one of the Jasenovac testimonies with an account of a comparable experience found in an interview recorded in the US. The following detailed analysis of extracts from just two testimonies is, of course, limited in terms of generalizability. Nevertheless, in the study of cultural and ideological phenomena, careful examination of selected case studies and individual examples can be useful in illuminating trends and patterns that have wider significance.⁵⁵ Specifically, in the context of the present study, such examples can shed light on the ways in which the different culturally contingent approaches to witnessing, and other relevant contextual factors, play out in accounts by individual survivors.

The example from the Serbian collection comes from the testimony of Edo (Eduard) Šajer. Born in Avtovac, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1922, Šajer was arrested in Sarajevo in November 1941 and later deported to Jasenovac. He remained there for almost three and a half years. He took part in the mass breakout on April 22, 1945, after which the camp was disbanded. He was interned at Jasenovac with his two brothers Moric and Albert, and was the only one to survive. Šajer was interviewed for the Fortunoff Collection in 1995, and later by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Shoah Foundation (in 1997 and 1998 respectively).⁵⁶

In Edo Šajer’s testimony there is an especially dramatic moment when he describes the slaying of his younger brother, Albert. Šajer recalls that in February or March 1942, during a particularly brutal period of mass executions at the camp, he was selected for grave digging duty and taken to the area of the Jasenovac complex called Bročice. At the end of the day, among the last group of inmates brought there to be executed, he spotted his younger brother. Like countless other inmates of Jasenovac, Albert Šajer was murdered with a single blow to the head with a mallet. In the testimony for the Fortunoff Archive, Edo Šajer recounts the story as follows:

One day, they selected me to go with the group of gravediggers, and we went to Bročice. We dug pits and among the last prisoners brought there was my younger brother, who

was killed with a mallet in front of me. ... We would usually tie a belt around the corpse's leg and drag it to the pit, because it was muddy [and] we didn't have the strength to carry them.... We would drag them to the pit. But I carried my brother, I don't know where I got the strength from—although he was not heavy, he weighed no more than 30 kilos—and I buried him.⁵⁷

The episode ends with Šajer explaining how he later returned to the barracks, where he found his older brother Moric, who by that time had already learned of Albert's fate. Neither of them said anything to each other, except to verify that they were both aware of what had happened. Then they embraced and cried.

Šajer recounts this event in each subsequent interview, and does so in a remarkably consistent way. He regularly mentions that he *carried* his brother's body and *buried* him, rather than “dragged him into the pit” as he had done with other prisoners, who were “stacked like logs.”⁵⁸ Also, in each version he expresses surprise over his ability to muster the physical strength required to carry the body despite exhaustion and malnourishment (“and to the present day I ask myself where I got the strength from” or “I still ask myself where I got the strength”).⁵⁹ The carrying and the burial of his brother is the pivotal scene in the story, presented as one of those small miracles that testify to the power of fraternal love in a moment of tragedy. Its intimate, personal nature is, no doubt, the main reason why the Fortunoff Archive included it in a publicly available half-hour montage of extracts from the Yugoslav collection, titled “Yugoslav voices from the Holocaust.”⁶⁰

The subtle variations across the different versions are as striking as the uniformity in Edo Šajer's account of this event. These variations hint at a dimension of this story that is particularly important—and troubling—to Šajer. In the Fortunoff interview, he makes no reference to, nor is he asked to comment on, the emotional experience of witnessing his brother's death. He does not reflect on how he felt when he realized that his brother was among those selected for execution, what went through his mind as his brother was being executed, or how he feels about it now.

Although the interviewers never pursue this line of questioning, with subsequent retelling Šajer begins to address these issues. In effect, he gradually sets up the story as a “dilemma of choice,” or what Lawrence Langer calls an “anguished memory”—that is, remembrance at the heart of which lies a “conflict between preconceived culturally nourished moral expectations”—

in this case about norms of fraternal care, and the deviation from them in the camps.⁶¹

Specifically, Šajer appears to recognize that he might be held accountable for his reaction to his brother's brutal murder, and seems to anticipate challenges along the lines of: "What were you doing as your brother was being slaughtered?" "How could you just stand there and watch?"

In the next available account, the testimony for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Šajer states that, upon hearing Albert call out his name, he was "terrified," but he stepped forward, only to be "dragged back" by the other gravediggers who asked him, "Where do you think you are going?" In the Shoah Foundation interview recorded a year later, he recounts the verbal exchange with the other gravediggers more vividly, once again using reported speech ("Down, where are you going.... My brother is calling me.... And how are *you* going to help him?").⁶² Therefore, the decision to not intervene - an example of what Lawrence Langer called the "choiceless choices" that define the Holocaust experience -, is in later accounts presented as a choice that was made for him *by others*.⁶³

Within the brief segment from Šajer's testimony, one may discern what appear to be traces of guilt, remorse and self-recrimination—a struggle to make sense, to oneself as well as to others, of the powerlessness to help a loved one in the moment of greatest need. These are important aspects of the narrative because they hint at the reason why the fact that he carried his brother's body to its final resting place appears so important to Šajer. The burial, described as an almost miraculous deed, seems to function as an act of posthumous "reparation." And yet, the issues of grief and remorse were never elaborated on by the survivor or pursued by the interviewer. In fact, only in the testimony recorded for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, does the interviewer, Almuli, pose a follow-up question. As Šajer explains that he buried his brother, Almuli interrupts with the following interjection: "Now tell me," he asks, "when they struck [the victims] with the mallet, was their skull fractured? What did your brother look like? I am sorry to be asking you all this." Šajer calmly explains that "everything was broken"; the "brain was visible" and some of the victims' muscles were still twitching as they lay in the pit. Later in the testimony, the interviewer returns to this event and requests further elaboration. He asks: "When your brother was killed, you say that his whole head was smashed. Wasn't the Ustasha sprayed with blood, with brain matter?" Šajer replies that the killers were wearing "rubber garments."⁶⁴

It might be tempting to attribute these interventions to the quality of Almuli's interviewing skills or the degree of sensitivity he exercised, or to wonder about political perspectives that may reflect the Serbian nationalist agenda of the 1990s. And yet, it could also be argued that a broader dynamic is at play, one that reflects the specificity of the culturally rooted assumptions about the role of the survivor, about the value of bearing witness, and about Jasenovac as a place of suffering—assumptions that have a longer history. Images of the human brain exposed by the strike of a mallet, just like those of decapitated or disembowelled victims of Ustasha terror, have shaped the memory of Jasenovac ever since the end of the war. Black-and-white atrocity photographs, originally collected and published in the 1940s by the Yugoslav War Crimes Commission, have been used somewhat gratuitously, appearing in virtually every book on Jasenovac, as well as in museum exhibitions and television documentaries. The reopening of the "Jasenovac question" in Serbia in the 1980s, which brought on a flood of Jasenovac-related publications and the widespread use of atrocity images, was merely building on this longer tradition of Jasenovac memory. When posing the follow-up question, Almuli was in all probability making a connection to this distinct, established aesthetic of memory. He sought, it seems, to assimilate Šajer's unique personal tragedy into a broader, pre-existing interpretative framework, or the culturally specific "memory milieu." He appears to have expected the survivor as a witness to "authenticate" the photographs, provide a running commentary for the familiar imagery, add color by commenting on the abundance of blood, and reaffirm time-honored assumptions about what is memorable about Jasenovac.

This interpretation is supported by the way in which Šajer's story was later disseminated in Serbia. In 2009 Almuli published *Jews and Serbs in Jasenovac*, a collection of transcripts of his interviews with Jasenovac survivors. At the beginning of the book Almuli sets the scene for the survivors' memories by offering a "where, when, and how" of the genocide in Croatia. In the section outlining the brutality of the Ustashe, he points the reader to the testimony of Edo Šajer, who recounts that "as a gravedigger he watched as his younger brother's skull was crushed with a mallet before his body was thrown into a mass grave, and how he saw his brain."⁶⁵ What is striking about this description is the seemingly selective nature of Almuli's recollection, which points directly to what he apparently deemed to be the most significant aspect of Šajer's account. According to the testimony, Albert Šajer's body was not "thrown into a mass grave." On the contrary, it was carried there and laid into the ground, or "buried," by his brother. This personal,

intimate and psychologically complex aspect of the story seems to escape Almuli's attention (and in all likelihood that of most of his readers), in favor of an image that focuses on the brutality of the execution. Moreover, Almuli's editing of the transcript for publication has the effect of transforming Šajer's point about finding the strength to *carry* his brother's body into a reference to the strength needed to *watch* his brother's brutal execution.⁶⁶ That way, Edo Šajer is seen, once again, not as a grief-stricken survivor, but as a material witness to Ustasha cruelty: the man who *saw* his brother's shattered skull and exposed brain.

Witnessing Emotion and Silence: The Testimony of Leon S.

This episode from Edo Šajer's testimony stands in stark contrast to the account of a similar experience described in the testimony of the Polish-born survivor Leon S., one of the first survivors to be interviewed by the Fortunoff Archive (April 1980).⁶⁷ In 1983, the Fortunoff Archive released a 40-minute edited version of the testimony as an educational video, while selected extracts feature also in a 30-minute video composite entitled "Bystander and Two Survivors" released two years later.⁶⁸ The segment analysed here features in both films. In this emotionally laden testimony—Dominic LaCapra describes Leon S. as "a gaunt, spectral presence" who speaks "in an excruciating, halting manner, in which each word, like a fragile moment, is separated by a gap from the following word"—there is an extract in which the survivor recounts how, at age 12 or 13, he witnessed the murder of his grandmother.⁶⁹

And at that time we had our ... my grandmother living with us.... She was in her early sixties but she broke her leg several years before which never completely healed and therefore ... she was limping. And when we had to enter the wagons, the transportation to a collection place, she asked my ... cousin in Polish to help her get on that wagon. And one of the German soldiers who apparently understood Polish said "Yes, I will help you" and he took out ... his gun from his holster ... and he killed her.

Leon S. ends the account with the utterance "I have seen it." This is followed by a lengthy, 50-second silence, during which the survivor is clearly distressed, on the verge of tears. As he then tries to move on, the interviewer interrupts and, speaking in a gentle voice that resembles a whisper, poses the following questions: "May I ask you.... I understand that you are in emotional

upheaval remembering, but what especially you are moved now by? The memory of then? Could you tell us [about your reaction then]?” As tears roll down his cheeks, Leon S. comments on the “inhumanity” of the crime: “somebody asking for help, and the help was expressed as a killing action.” The interviewer then asks if he “cried” at the time, to which Leon S. answers that he can’t remember, but that he doesn’t think so, because he was “too petrified.”⁷⁰

The dissimilarity to the example from the testimony of Edo Šajer is evident. The follow-up question is posed in a gentle and sympathetic voice, in a way that focuses on emotional experience. The resonance with a psychotherapeutic encounter is perhaps unsurprising, given that the interviewer was Dori Laub. A professional psychiatrist and one of the founders of the Fortunoff Archive, Laub helped develop the psychologically inflected interview protocol. More important, the question generated an answer that diverted attention away from the detail of what was actually *seen*, i.e. atrocity and death, towards a broader point about the inhumanity of the execution and the emotional numbness induced by fear (which stands in stark contrast to the tears on the survivor’s face as he retrieves and “works through” the traumatic memory forty years later).

In an interview conducted in 2000, Geoffrey Hartman invoked this particular exchange from Leon S.’s testimony as a poignant example of the way in which even an intrusive question from the interviewer can generate a “beautiful” answer—one that is at the same time “precise,” “affecting,” and “eloquent.”⁷¹ The “beauty” of the answer undoubtedly lay in its interpretative, reflective nature and the fact that it *did not* focus, literally, on what was observed. After all, as Hartman suggests, the value of testimonies lies precisely in the fact that they “do not subject us to atrocity photos or to the bare, intolerable, and repetitious detail of killing orgies.” On the contrary, they shift the emphasis “from the perpetrator’s inhuman behavior to the humanity of the victim.”⁷² Equally, Leon S.’s utterance “I have seen it” was neither intended nor interpreted as a marker of his credentials as the eyewitness who can provide a detailed and vivid description of the “crime scene”; rather, it accounted for the tears and the emotional turmoil that were to follow and for the silence through which the “unrepresentable excess of extreme events” was signified.⁷³ The importance of this affective dimension of experience was further denoted through the zooming action of the camera which, during the lengthy silence, focuses, somewhat insensitively, on the raw emotion of the survivor’s anguished face. Although the indulgent camera work and the “Bergmanesque close-ups,” as Geoffrey Hartman calls them, were

abandoned in later Fortunoff interviews as “irritating” and “excessive,” they nevertheless expose the overwhelming preoccupation with emotional experience and embodied memory as the key features of the audio-visual genre.⁷⁴

In the context of the present discussion, the camera movement and the visual emphasis on emotion and trauma apparent in Leon S.’s testimony become even more revealing when compared with a scene from a contemporaneous forty-minute documentary “Blood and Ashes of Jasenovac” by the Croatian filmmaker Lordan Zafranović.⁷⁵ Part of the 1985 documentary features a montage of Jasenovac survivors who recount specific atrocities committed by the Ustasha guards at the camp. Among them is an unnamed survivor who describes how he witnessed a soldier smash a child’s head against a brick wall. As in Leon S.’s testimony, the description of the murder is followed by a lengthy silence as the witness appears to relive the experience. In the Yugoslav documentary, however, the camera actually zooms *out* at this point, and woven into the footage of the survivor’s tormented expression are two black and white archival images of children’s corpses with their skulls broken. Only then does the camera slowly zoom in again, and against the background of a monotonous, harrowing sound effect akin to the soundtrack from a horror movie, shows a close-up of the mutilated children, specifically their shattered skulls.⁷⁶ As in Edo Šajer’s testimony, the survivor’s pain is eclipsed by the overwhelming concern with the gruesome details of the atrocities, represented here through disturbing images taken after the liberation of Jasenovac. Foregrounded once again is the external world and visual experience—what the witness *saw*—rather than the internal universe of affect, traumatic memory, and the “concreteness of despair and death” manifested in the silences, hesitations, grimaces, and tears that signify the impossibility of registering narratively the horrors of the Holocaust.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The peculiarities of the Jasenovac interviews collected by the affiliate project in Belgrade did not pass unnoticed by the parent institutions in the United States. In the records of both the Fortunoff Archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, there are annotated transcripts of the testimonies and handwritten notes from the 1990s. In those records, representatives of these institutions comment on the style of the interviews, stating that they need to be “more intimate,” with a clearer focus on the survivors’ experiences.⁷⁸ It is also revealing that in the Fortunoff

Archive's 30-minute video compilation entitled "Yugoslav Voices from the Holocaust," which includes extracts from three of the nine Jasenovac testimonies, there is no trace of the detailed descriptions of "incredible bestialities and atrocities" or speculation about the mind-set of the Ustashe. Aspects of the Jasenovac experience that Jaša Almulji, and many others in Serbia, apparently deemed to represent an important quality of the audio-visual project ended up on the cutting room floor. Included instead were segments considered to be more "memorable" and noteworthy from the perspective of the American audience, namely accounts of the breakout from the camp (which complemented the narrative of Jewish resistance), Edo Šajcer's account of the burial of his brother (framed as a story of loss and brotherly love rather than one of atrocity), and a rare instance in which a survivor (Josip E.) mentions in passing that he was prescribed medications after the war to deal with the psychological consequences of his camp experience.

Cultural differences between Holocaust survivor testimonies and their reception are, of course, not unique to Serbia. In his reflections on accounts collected on behalf of the USHMM in Ukraine in the early 1990s, Nathan Beyrak notes that these interviews "lack that special dimension that makes oral history such an inspired medium." The missing ingredient, just as in the Serbian collection, is the intimacy of personal experience. Beyrak's explanation for the "reticence" shown by Ukrainian interviewees is that, in post-Soviet societies, "testifying is perceived as a formal, ritual, [a] 'proper' occasion, where it is not the done thing to draw attention to anything personal."⁷⁹ It would be interesting, however, to probe more deeply into the nature and the ideological and cultural origins of these "rituals" of witnessing and the absence of the personal. To what extent are they a legacy of the status of survivors throughout the Soviet period, and the treatment of the Holocaust within the memorialization of the Second World War? How were the local practices of witnessing affected by Ukraine's development after the break-up of the Soviet Union? Questions such as these, not just in the case of Ukraine but also in other cultural and political contexts, call for the kind of comparative analysis that remains overshadowed by the overwhelming focus, in the available literature, on testimonies collected in the United States.

Furthermore, what is interesting and revealing about Beyrak's comment is the intimation that testimonies collected in Ukraine were in some sense deficient because they lacked the universal quality that makes audio-visual testimonies special. This, like the reception of the Jasenovac interviews, suggests that, although both the Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM

generally granted autonomy to their partners overseas (in acknowledgment of the “temporal and cultural imprint” to which testimonies are necessarily susceptible), certain aspects of the testimonies, namely affect, intimacy, and embodied experience, were seen as transcending the notion of cultural diversity, and as necessary to the fulfilment of audio-visual testimonies’ cultural and commemorative potential.⁸⁰

Several related factors might explain why, within the US-based projects, the personal and the intimate are seen as universally relevant aspects of testimony. The Holocaust is today part of an emerging “cosmopolitan memory” that transcends national and ethnic boundaries and forms the cultural foundation for global human rights politics.⁸¹ Although many observers acknowledge that the understanding of the Holocaust in any given context will reflect the interplay between “global interpretations and local sensibilities,” the very idea that the Holocaust represents a source of shared historical values and practices and moral and political obligations implies that the event—to which survivors bear witness—holds universal meaning.⁸² By extension, the voice of the survivors, the “eyewitness generation,” must also be accessed, transmitted, and understood universally.⁸³ This is where the notion of intimacy comes in. As we have seen, audio-visual testimonies since their inception have been viewed and theorized through the prism of established psychological constructs such as trauma, repression, affect, and embodied memory—all of which have universal rather than culturally specific connotations. Embedded in this approach is the assumption that survivors’ communicated personal experience, *because* of its ability to work on a psychological level and transmit affectively the unspeakable essence of human suffering, offers an unmediated access to the Holocaust—access that is unaffected by varying ideological agendas or cultural influences.⁸⁴ As Geoffrey Hartman put it, testimonies, due to their deeply personal nature, “touch the heart as well as [the] mind” and appeal to a universal “human commonality.”⁸⁵

And yet, the “affective turn” within the public perception of the Holocaust, initiated and sustained by the rise of the genre of audio-visual testimony in the 1980s, and the related notion about the unspeakability and unrepresentability of the Holocaust, are both socially and culturally contingent. They are as contingent and culturally specific as the idea, apparent in the discourses surrounding Jasenovac, that the value of the survivor as witness lies in his or her ability and willingness to articulate, describe, and narrate the atrocities and the suffering they observed in a manner that provokes outrage rather than sympathy. Put differently, in a culture pervaded by the

discourse of emotions, the importance attributed to intimacy and personal experience helps to *create*, rather than just capture, the survivor as a self-reflective, inward-looking, psychological subject. In the same way, a memory culture defined by the motif of sadistic violence and the aesthetic of death positions the Jasenovac survivor as, first and foremost, a material witness and an accuser.

Over the past decade, testimony collection projects initiated in the 1980s and the 1990s have been, by and large, brought to a close, due mainly to the diminishing number of witnesses. Attention is shifting to the children of survivors and the phenomenon of the “post-memory” of the Holocaust, or to witnesses to other genocides whose testimonies are also being recorded in audio-visual format.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Holocaust survivor testimonies, quite rightly, remain an important category of Holocaust representation and a prominent *lieu de memoire*. In this article, what I have suggested is that, as we continue to engage with accounts of Holocaust survivors, whether as scholars or consumers of memory, and regardless of whether we treat them as a historiographic source or a commemorative form, it is essential that we devote sufficient attention to the cultural aspects of bearing witness. This applies also to future international testimony collection projects, which inevitably will involve further encounters between and clashes of memory cultures. Bearing witness should be approached above all as a culturally and historically situated social practice, involving the collaborative construction of a narrative that is recognizable, within a specific interactional, cultural, institutional, and political context—and as relevant, reliable, and valuable. This means that the study of any testimony or collection of testimonies must also involve an examination of the ways in which specific (and evolving) social, cultural, historical, and material factors help to establish the survivor as a source of epistemic authority. This process determines the way in which the experience is organized, interpreted, structured, and transmitted through testimony, and later represented in books, documentaries, feature films, or the press. This awareness is important not just in relation specifically to Holocaust memory in its international, cross-cultural context, but more generally because it results in the recognition that established cultures of memory, collective identities, and ideological agendas are always reflected in, and at the same time sustained by, the inevitable interplay between individual, collected, and collective memories.

Jovan Byford is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the Open University, UK. He is the author of four books including *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (2011); *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja*,

zaborava i sporenja (Staro Sajmište: A Site Remembered, Forgotten, Contested, 2011); and *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism: Post-Communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović* (2008); as well as numerous articles and book chapters on conspiracy theories, antisemitism, and Holocaust remembrance. Most recently he co-edited, with Cristian Tileaga, the volume *Psychology and History: Interdisciplinary Explorations* (2014).

Notes

Research presented in this article was made possible by a 2010–2011 Charles H. Revson Foundation Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The statements made and views expressed, however, are solely my own. I would like to thank Paul Stenner and Stephanie Taylor for their comments on an earlier draft of the article.

¹ Tony Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 275.

² Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006); Zoe V. Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony,” 275–95.

³ See Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2010); Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁴ Geoffrey Hartman, Ian Balfour, and Rebecca Comay, “The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman,” in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Toronto: Alphabet City Media, 2002), 494.

⁵ Joanne Rudof, “Research Use of Holocaust Testimonies,” *Poetics Today* 27 no. 3, 2006: 451–61; Josette Zarka, “Comparaison entre les témoignages recueillis en France et aux Etats-Unis,” *Bulletin trimestriel de la Fondation Auschwitz* 49 (1995): 7–15.

⁶ One of the USHMM interviews was a group recording with three sisters.

⁷ The Shoah Foundation conducted interviews in four other successor states: Croatia (329), Bosnia-Herzegovina (58), Slovenia (11), and Macedonia (9).

⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, “The Archive in the 1990s,” *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies Newsletter*, Spring 1990.

⁹ During the two-year break in 1993 and 1994, Almuli conducted thirty-six interviews for the Fortunoff Archive in Greece, specifically in Thessaloniki and Athens.

¹⁰ In 1996, the USHMM looked into the possibility of recording additional interviews in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in recognition that the project had been limited to Serbia. In the end, no additional

interviews were recorded. See Joan Ringelheim, letter to Jaša Almuli, October 8, 1996, from the active correspondence files of the Oral History Branch, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹¹ See Ivo Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2001); Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941–1945: Logor smrti i radni logor* (Jasenovac: Javna ustanova Spomen-područje Jasenovac, 2003).

¹² See Jovan Byford, “When I say ‘the Holocaust,’ I mean ‘Jasenovac’: Remembrance of the Holocaust in contemporary Serbia,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2007): 51–74. The manipulation of Jasenovac as a symbol also involved a gross inflation of the number of Serbian victims, with estimates reaching one million.

¹³ Edo Šajer, whose testimony is examined in more detail later in the article, was the last Jasenovac survivor to be interviewed, in the summer of 1995. He was not interviewed for the earlier projects primarily because his health did not allow it.

¹⁴ The Jasenovac survivors are Zlatko V. (Fortunoff Video Archive [FVA]/Yale Library Holocaust video testimony [HVT]-1305), Shalom M. (HVT-1306), Božo S. (HVT-1323), Josip E. (HVT-1324), recorded in 1989; Ado K. (HVT-2193), Samuel G. (HVT-2196), Misa D. (HVT-2211), recorded in 1991; Cadik-Braca D. (HVT-2217), recorded in 1992; and Edo S. (HVT-3557), recorded in 1995. These testimonies run approximately an hour long, which is not uncommon for FVA’s interviews from that period.

¹⁵ Almuli re-interviewed four survivors who were still alive in 1997: Božo Švarc, Josip Erlich, Ado Kabiljo, and Edo Šajer (Jasenovac Oral History Project, USHMM, RG-50.468). Cadik Braca Danon’s testimony is also in the USHMM collection but it is archived under the Holocaust Survivors—Former Yugoslav Republics Project (USHMM, RG-50.459). The creation of the separate Jasenovac Oral History Project, comprising testimonies from both Serbian and Jewish survivors, was Almuli’s idea. In July 1997 he wrote to Joan Ringelheim, then director of the USHMM’s Oral History branch, that it was “high time that Jasenovac survivors, both Jews and gentiles, say what was Jasenovac,” and that survivors had already agreed to have their testimonies recorded. See Jaša Almuli, letter to Joan Ringelheim, July 2, 1997, from the active correspondence files of the Oral History Branch, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In addition to the interviews conducted in Serbia, the two US-based collections contain also the testimonies recorded in Israel of two Jasenovac survivors. Otto Lingfelder was interviewed as part of a joint FVA- USHMM project in Israel in 1991/1992 (Otto L., HVT-3313 in the Fortunoff collection; RG-50.120*0093 in the USHMM). The USHMM collection contains also the testimony of Yosef Morgenshtern, whose testimony was recorded in 1992 (RG-50.120*0108). Because there are only two interviews from Israel, the forthcoming analysis will not attempt to make a comparison with Jasenovac testimonies collected in Serbia.

¹⁶ Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*; Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*.

- ¹⁷ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 163.
- ¹⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 138.
- ¹⁹ Geoffrey Hartman, "Preserving the Personal Story: The Role of Video Documentation," in *The Holocaust Forty Years After*, ed. Marcia Littell, Richard Libowitz, and Evelyn Bodek Rosen (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 55.
- ²⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Oral History Interview Guidelines*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2007), 39–40. See also Joan Ringelheim, "Oral History: A Sketch about Questions," in *Ces visages qui nous parlent*, ed. Maurice Cling and Yannis Thanassekos (Brussels: Foundation Auschwitz, 1995), 213–21.
- ²¹ Nathan Beyrak, "To Rescue the Individual Out of the Mass Numbers: Intimacy as a Central Concept in Oral History," in Cling and Thanassekos, *Ces visages qui nous parlent*, 139. For a more general discussion of the way in which the emphasis on "experience" has been used to challenge conventional historical writing and its claims to objectivity, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.
- ²² Nathan Beyrak, "Helping Witnesses Tell Their Story," in *A Global Perspective on Working with Holocaust Survivors and the Second Generation*, ed. John Lemberger (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale Institute of Gerontology and Human Development in cooperation with the World Council of Jewish Communal Service), 121–34; see also Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 57–74.
- ²³ Nathan Beyrak, "Helping Witnesses Tell Their Story," 125.
- ²⁴ Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 96. See Hartman, Balfour, and Comay, "The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman," 497.
- ²⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, "The Humanity of Testimony: An Introduction," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 249–60; Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 109.
- ²⁶ See Joan Ringelheim's contribution to the discussion at the First International Audiovisual Meeting on the Testimony of Survivors of the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps, held in December 1994, cited in Cling and Thanassekos, *Ces visages qui nous parlent*, 293. For a discussion of the notion of "recovered memories" in the context of survivor testimony, see Pamela Ballinger, "The Culture of Survivors: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Memory," *History and Memory* 10, no. 1, 99–132.

- ²⁷ Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, 149n30; see also Hartman, Balfour, and Comay, “The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman,” 497.
- ²⁸ Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, 142.
- ²⁹ Dan Stone, *History, Memory and Mass Atrocity: Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2006), 236; Aleida Assmann, *Duga senka prošlosti: Kultura sećanja i politika povesti* (translation of *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*) (Belgrade: XX Vek, 2011), 110.
- ³⁰ Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 81.
- ³¹ Elie Wiesel cited in Hilene Flanzbaum, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no.1 (1999): 91–104. On the contradiction between the necessity and the impossibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust, see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 151–70.
- ³² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). For an exploration of the way in which figures of speech perform a rhetorical function of managing intimacy and distance between survivors and their audience, see Patricia Yaeger, “Testimony without Intimacy,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 399–423; See also HVT-179, Serena N. (1982), HVT- 8039, Edith P. (1985), HVT-206, Bessie and Jacob K. (1983).
- ³³ See Cathy Gelbin and Eva Lezzi, “‘Archive of Memory’: Videographic Testimonies of Survivors of the Shoah in Germany,” in *Du Témoignage audiovisuel/From the Audiovisual Testimony*, ed. Yannis Thanassekos and Anne van Landschoot (Brussels: La Fondation Auschwitz, 1996), 103–108; see also Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*; and Nathan Beyrak, “Helping Witnesses Tell Their Story.”
- ³⁴ Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, 63–68.
- ³⁵ Kenneth McLaughlin, *Surviving Identity: Vulnerability and the Psychology of Recognition* (London: Routledge, 2011), 59.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 53. See also Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*; and Ballinger, “The Culture of Survivors.”
- ³⁷ See Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness*; and Luc Boltansky, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ³⁸ Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 159.
- ³⁹ See Jovan Byford, *Staro Sajmište: Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja* (Belgrade: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2012), 55–65.
- ⁴⁰ Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, *Zločini u logoru Jasenovac* (Zagreb: Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača,

1946). Evidence collected from these survivors also featured prominently in the indictments of Ustasha officials. This practice stands in sharp contrast to that adopted in the West at the time, including at Nuremberg, where survivor testimony tended to be dismissed as inherently untrustworthy and largely irrelevant. See Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Patricia Heberer and Jürgen Matthäus, eds. *Atrocities on Trial: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Prosecuting War Crimes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008).

⁴¹ See Jovan Byford, “‘Shortly afterwards, we heard the sound of the gas van!’: Survivor Testimony and the Writing of History in Socialist Yugoslavia,” *History and Memory* 22, no. 1 (2010): 5–47. This work examines this issue using as an example testimonies from survivors of the Banjica camp in Belgrade.

⁴² See Jovan Mirković, *Objavljeni izvori i literatura o jasenovačkim logorima* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2000). Between 1973 and 1989, the Jasenovac Memorial Site collected and published a series of edited volumes of testimonies: *Riječi koje nisu zaklane: Svjedočanstva preživjelih zatočenika logora Jasenovac*, vols. 1–5 (Jasenovac: Spomen-područje, 1973–1989).

⁴³ Byford, “‘Shortly afterwards, we heard the sound of the gas van!’”

⁴⁴ For example, *Jasenovac*, directed by Gustav Gavrin (Filmsko poduzeće Demokratske federativne Jugoslavije, 1945); and *Pred narodnim sudom*, directed by D. Zudnić (Jadran Film, 1948). In March–April 1946, the War Crimes Commission organized a large conference in Belgrade, with over 1,000 exhibits—mainly photographs and documents. Later that year the exhibition toured the country’s major cities. See “Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, Izveštaj Dr Nedeljkovića o radu D. komisije za period 1943–1948,” Archive of Serbia and Montenegro, Fond 110, k-1, d. 132, p. 83.

⁴⁵ Jaša Almulj, “Report on Testimonies of 64 Survivors of Yugoslavia and Greece, 1990–93: Oral History Helps Fighting Revisionism,” in Cling and Thanassekos *Ces visages qui nous parlent*, 183–95; “Subcontract agreement between Yale University (Yale and The Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade [recipient] under Yale’s Revson Foundation Grant #88052,” April 11, 1989. Archives of the Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, file “Snimanje sećanja- Oral History-Jaša Almulj.”

⁴⁶ Jaša Almulj, letter to Joan Ringelheim, May 27, 1997.

⁴⁷ Franjo Tuđman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti: Rasprava o povijesti i filozofiji zločinja* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1989). An edited version of the book was later published in English as *Horrors of War: Historical Reality and Philosophy* (New York: M. Evans, 1996).

⁴⁸ For more on the controversy surrounding Tuđman's book see Tomislav Dulić, "Mapping Out the 'Wasteland': Testimonies from the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees in the Service of Tuđman's Revisionism," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23, no. 2 (2009): 263–84.

⁴⁹ This was the topic of a series of articles that Almulj published in the Belgrade daily *Politika* in the winter of 1993/1994: "Stvaranje velikih laži o Srbiji i Srbima," *Politika* December 26, 1993–January 25, 1994.

⁵⁰ For an example of a similar emphasis on atrocity in testimonies of Jasenovac survivors, this time collected for a German oral history project in 2005, see Birgit Mair, "They Survived Two Wars: Bosnian Roma as Civil War Refugees in Germany," in *Hitler's Slaves: Life Stories of Forced Labourers in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, ed. Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, and Christoph Thonfeld (New York: Berghahn), 177–87.

⁵¹ See Aaron Beim and Gary Alan Fine, "Trust in Testimonies: The Institutional Embeddedness of Holocaust Survivor Testimonies," *European Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2007): 55–75.

⁵² Almulj, "Report on Testimonies of 64 Survivors of Yugoslavia and Greece, 1990–93," 184–85.

⁵³ Jaša Almulj, "Report on the Belgrade Taping Project, April/May 97," June 15, 1997. Active records of the Oral History Branch, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵⁴ Hartman makes the distinction between the cry of juridical accusation and the voice of experience in *Scars of the Spirit*, 95.

⁵⁵ See for example Michael Billig, *Ideology and Opinions* (London: Sage, 1991).

⁵⁶ Edo S. (HVT-3557) (recorded April 9, 1995); Oral history interview with Eduard Šajer, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-50.468*0003 (recorded June 28, 1997); Interview with Eduard Šajer, USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive (VHA), interview code 48709 (recorded June 27, 1998).

⁵⁷ Edo S. (HVT-3557). The interview with Šajer was the only one in the FVA's Yugoslav collection that was not conducted by Almulj. The interviewer was Cadik Braca Danon, a fellow survivor of Jasenovac.

⁵⁸ Interview with Eduard Šajer, VHA.

⁵⁹ Oral history interview with Eduard Šajer, USHMM RG-50.468*003; Interview with Eduard Šajer, VHA.

⁶⁰ "Yugoslav Voices from the Holocaust" (HVT-8081) (2006), available at <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/education/thematic.html> (accessed 11/18/13).

⁶¹ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 64–67. In his discussion of "anguished memories" Langer analyzes the testimony of Alex H.,

which describes an experience similar to that of Edo Šajer—namely witnessing the execution of a younger brother.

⁶² Interview with Eduard Šajer, VHA.

⁶³ Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.

⁶⁴ Oral history interview with Eduard Šajer, USHMM.

⁶⁵ Jaša Almulj, *Jevreji i Srbi u Jasenovcu* (Belgrade: Službeni Glasnik, 2009), 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁷ Interview with Leon S. (HVT-45), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library (recorded April 25, 1980).

⁶⁸ Leon S. (HVT-8025), edited testimony (1983); and “Testimony Excerpts—Bystander and Two Survivors” (HVT-8046, 1985), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library. Both are available at <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/education> (accessed 11/18/13).

⁶⁹ Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 111.

⁷⁰ Leon S. (HVT-8025), edited testimony.

⁷¹ Hartman, Balfour, and Comay, “The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman,” 497.

⁷² Hartman, “The Humanities of Testimony,” 257.

⁷³ LaCapra, *Writing History*, 9.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 74.

⁷⁵ *Krv i pepeo Jasenovca*, directed by Lordan Zafranović (FRZ Kino Dokument, 1985).

⁷⁶ The music in the documentary stands in stark contrast to the soft musical underscore of Steven Spielberg’s documentaries, where a violin melody emphasizes sentiment rather than horror. See Alejandro Baer, “Consuming History and Memory through Mass Media Products,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2001): 491–501.

⁷⁷ Saul Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working Through’ in Writing the History of the *Shoah*,” *History and Memory* 4, no. 1 (1992): 53. See also Beth Cohen, “From Case File to Testimony: Reconstructing Survivors’ First Years in America,” in *The Impact of the Holocaust in America (The Jewish Role in American Life*, vol. 6), eds. Bruce Zuckerman, Zev Garber, Jeremy Schoenberg, and Lisa Ansell (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 1–30.

⁷⁸ See for example the transcript accompanying Fortunoff Archive testimony by Shalom, M. (HVT-1306). See also notes on correspondence between Joan Ringelheim and Jaša Almulj, July 2, 1997, from the active correspondence files of the Oral History Branch, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁷⁹ Beyrak, “To Rescue the Individual out of the Mass Numbers,” 145.

⁸⁰ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 94.

⁸¹ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no.1 (2002): 87–106; Levy and Sznajder, “The Institutionalization of Cosmopolitan Morality: The Holocaust and Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 2 (2004): 143–57.

⁸² Levy and Sznajder, “Memory Unbound,” 92. See also Klas-Göran Karlsson, “The Holocaust as a Problem of Historical Culture: Theoretical and Analytical Challenges,” in *Echoes of the Holocaust: Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (Stockholm: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), 9–54.

⁸³ Geoffrey Hartman, “Toward a Fifteenth Anniversary,” *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies Newsletter*, Summer 1996.

⁸⁴ Hirsch and Spitzer, “The Witness in the Archive,” 158.

⁸⁵ Hartman, “The Humanity of Testimony,” 254.

⁸⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).