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TEORIE

JANINE HOLC*
Loyola University, Baltimore

Holocaust Testimony, Autobiography, and the Effaced Self

Summary

Autobiography is often writing about how a “self” forms over time as it is affected by the conditions it encounters. This definition can be problematic for Holocaust autobiography, because hiding one’s self from others and repressing one’s desires and impulses became crucial to survival. This essay traces the processes by which a “self” emerges for one Holocaust writer and survivor, Helen S., through archival documents, testimonies and memoirs over time. Helen S.’s example demonstrates how an effaced self can have a textual presence before the writer can allow herself to fully inhabit a traumatic personal history.

Keywords

Holocaust, autobiography, testimony, trauma, slave labor

Can we view the testimony of a Holocaust survivor as a type of autobiography? “Autobiography” suggests a strong, consistent, unitary voice looking back in time, in control of a narrative that exists in a single material formation, usually a book or essay. The conditions and purposes of Holocaust *testimony*, as a particular narrative form, would at first glance limit the possibility of its role in this conventional understanding of “autobiography.” However, if we expand the notion of the “autobiographical” to include a collection of instances in which

* Contact with the author: jholc@loyola.edu.

a writer and speaker at times creates narrative space for her own desires and recognizes the impact of her own choices within a specific historical context, but also at times *refuses* such space and recognition, we can see that testimony can function as a particularly revealing type of autobiography. This article traces the presence of one Holocaust survivor, Helen Sendyk, over a series of appearances in various archives and texts, some authored by her alone, some emerging from an interaction with an interviewer, and some dictated by local authorities collecting information. In considering these assembled fragments side-by-side, it becomes clear that Helen Sendyk's remembered "experience" of Holocaust violence, as it has been recorded, narrated, and re-narrated after the events, cannot be separated from her need to keep her memory of her own desires obscured. Moreover, her willingness to represent her own agency and self-awareness in past historical moments changes over time, not chronologically or developmentally, but through interruptions and detours in the processes of testimony-giving.

The testimony of a Holocaust survivor is a type of story that travels its own path, carrying with it the remnants of wartime imperatives to stay silent, among others. The requirements of survival often included evasion, repression, pretending, hiding and lying. Perhaps most important for the project of autobiography, survival required being someone whom you were not. Living day to day inside the Nazi-created reality of the Holocaust meant that the expression of your own desires was often your enemy. Those who survived and shared their stories through the many recorded oral history projects in the postwar years tell of making mental bargains to trick themselves into not giving in to hunger or despair, of creating imagined pasts and futures and false hopes, and of forging overly-intense bonds with others out of desperation and fear.

These demands can render the experience fragmented, inconsistent or contradictory. A resistance to telling may assert itself alongside a powerful urgency to tell. Formalized Holocaust testimony often involves an interviewer, a heightened consciousness of audience, and presumptions about what aspects of past experience are understandable across time and space and most valuable. Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* continues to be one of the most powerful and sensitive treatments of the contradictory impulses at work when a former victim of the Holocaust offers testimony.¹ Langer argues for a capacious response to these narratives, in which the reader or listener suspends the need to impose a moral framework to survival. The nature of the atrocity of the Holocaust made any choice "choiceless." He goes further to state:

¹ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

Oral testimony is a living commentary on the limits of autobiographical narrative, when the theme is such unprecedented atrocity. It also reveals the limits of memory's ability to recreate that past. The issue is not merely the unshareability of the experience but also the witness's exasperated sense (not uniformly borne out, as we have seen, by the effects of his or her testimony) of a failure in communication.²

By "exasperated sense" Langer sees in the person testifying a desire to explain colliding with the inadequacy of agent-centered, moral language. The outcome is a "self" that exists but is split or damaged; so-called "choices" were made that are unbearable. Indeed, Langer organized his book into chapters that track this collision: "the divided self," "the besieged self," and so on. Without a "self" guiding the narrative, testimony is outside of "autobiography," for Langer.

Langer's demand that readers honor the reality of the Holocaust's unbearability for a survivor has led to other scholarship on testimony as an historicized form, technological mediations of testimony, and the reception of testimony. For example, Noah Shenker notes the importance of archival protocols in structuring the form of testimony-giving while finding that at times "poetic" expressions evade these same protocols.³ Jeffrey Shandler documents the impact of digitization on both the testimony archive and the act of testimony.⁴ Hannah Pollin-Galay, in her book *Ecologies of Witnessing*, documents instances of "bad testimony," that is, moments in which the particular context of testimony-making leads away from direct truth-telling, toward a negotiation with the interviewer or a refusal to proceed.⁵ And of course Dori Laub pointed out the possibility of re-traumatization in the testimony process, arguing for a specific sensitivity to trauma as a precondition for interviewing and listening.⁶

These works, including Langer's, value narrative continuity either implicitly or explicitly. Silences, breakdowns and interviewer missteps are treated as obstacles or signs of failure (as in Langer's "exasperated" speaker), albeit understandable ones. They do not contain creative possibility for these scholars. Yet as those who do research with testimonies know, one form of coping with the possibility of re-traumatization during the narrative process is to avoid

² Ibidem, 61.

³ Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 4.

⁴ Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁶ Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York–London: Routledge, 1992).

presenting oneself as a distinct individual, focusing on material about people other than the survivor herself.⁷ Different from the survivor who cannot speak of what happened at all, the person who omits her own desires and choices – or cannot remember them – often speaks quite a bit. In fact, the testimony can be quite rich with historical detail, documentation of specific events, and the emotional state of family members and others. But this richly woven material, while helpful to the researcher, keeps the speaker’s distinct, personal losses buried and inaccessible, either to herself or the listener. For Langer, we must accept that some aspects of the Holocaust remain inaccessible.

But are unacknowledged desires truly absent? If they are not absent but inaccessible, does that mean they have no function in the testimony process? Langer’s precise analyses of the emotions of the survivors he interviewed indicate that he sees that a desiring self able to live with what occurred existed at one time, but that the speaker cannot bring it to the surface; that part of her is lost. He writes, “(...) in their videotaped testimonies witnesses pay equal homage to what they have ‘died through,’ or what has died in and through them, and what they have lived through...”⁸ Building on Langer but at the same time challenging his assumptions about how a remembered aspect of self lives or dies, it may be that effaced desires manifest in ways he had not considered. It may be that by identifying ruptures in the fabric of the narrative and noticing what happens there, we can mark out the space that would otherwise be taken up by a “self” with defensible desires and with agency, even in the context of the Holocaust. In this light, the survivor may describe “herself” using “I” directly only at carefully circumscribed moments. Most of the time she instead may substitute historical reporting, strategies for coping, or abstract (yet deeply felt) demands to “never forget.”

In this way an account with an effaced self – meaning a temporarily displaced and negated acknowledgement of one’s own significance as an historical subject – can be an autobiography. This type of autobiography requires certain things from the reader, however. First, multiple testimonial formations and texts should be considered, not to compare their accuracy but to allow an ongoing revision of the survivor’s own position to her history to unfold. And second, interruption and failure are potentially productive in that they signal a refusal to accept the story “as is.” Thus, this essay traces the emergence of one woman’s recognition of herself as a central actor in her own history through a series of juxtaposed testimonial forms. In each she does not permit a transparent, direct representation of her interior conscious “self” at

⁷ For an overview of coping strategies in the face of the threat of engulfment by trauma, see: Dori Laub, Andreas Hamburger, eds., *Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Testimony: Unwanted Memories of Social Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸ Langer, *Holocaust*, 171.

the time of the events she recalls; she is rarely distinct from people around her. A form of her agency is signaled indirectly, however, and its effaced presence can be seen when the carefully woven narrative breaks down.

Like most survivors from Poland, Helen Sendyk was born with a different name and enjoyed a family nickname as well. In 1939 she was Helcia Stapler, a ten-year-old, the youngest in a large Jewish family in Chrzanów, which Germany would annex to the Reich in 1940 and exploit for Jewish property and labor. The Holocaust survivor Helen S. is a lively and engaging speaker and writer, producing two memoirs as well as participating in at least two formal testimony projects. Her extraordinary postwar confidence and articulateness in speaking and writing create vibrant pictures of the world of Jewish Chrzanów, the Nazi occupation, slave labor and migration to Palestine. It can be difficult to notice that Helen S. omits her own inner feelings and that her material is carefully scripted because she presents the dramatic story of her family members so vividly.

Helcia Stapler's name appears on a number of archival lists, along with her sister's name, Nachcia, who was eight years older. For two years after September 1939 they evaded labor call-ups and deportations in Chrzanów while witnessing the German authorities subject their family and community to increasing brutality. (Nachcia did spend time in a labor camp but returned home.) Since Chrzanów was in Polish Silesia at the time of the German occupation, Helcia and Nachcia were swept up in 1942 in the massive Jewish slave labor project known initially as Operation Schmelt, and after 1943 known as an extension of the Auschwitz slave labor system.⁹ The first list that survives is a 1944 document cataloguing the Jewish female laborers imprisoned in the Langenbielau concentration camp, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen. Helcia is listed as Hela Stapler and her birthdate is given as 1923 instead of 1928. Her name sits amidst hundreds of other girls and women imprisoned along with her, recorded by prisoner number, birthdate and place of birth, identified by the descriptor "Jude-Polin."¹⁰

⁹ For an analysis of how the occupation affected the small Jewish towns in Silesia and in particular Operation Schmelt, see: Sybille Steinbacher, *"Musterstadt" Auschwitz: Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien* (München: K.G. Saur, 2000).

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), International Tracing Service Digital Archive (ITS), Fragment einer Häftlingsliste mit Namen von weiblichen jüdischen Häftlingen des KL Gross-Rosen/Kdo. Langenbielau, document numbers 150683 (cover page) and 150688, access 10.01.2020.

188.	Juda-Pella	49643	Stapler	Hela	1.4.23	Kreman
189.	"	49644	Steinfeld	Ruth	14.1.24	Leipzig
187.	"	49645	Steinberger	Lea	25.12.23	Trzebiń
188.	"	49646	Stein	Pela	14.12.16	Auschwitz
189.	"	49647	Stein	Nachela	27.6.28	Auschwitz
190.	"	49648	Spiegelmann	Zesl	16.6.24	Schlesenschutz
191.	"	49649	Silbiger	Quata	27.11.24	Kreman
192.	"	49650	Sejka	Anna	17.7.24	Zarki
193.	"	49651	Skep	Scheidla	14.11.27	Madrow
194.	"	49652	Spokajna	Quata	20.6.26	Madrow

A fragment of a list of female prisoners at Langenbielau, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen. It notes Hela's birthdate and birthplace (USHMM, ITS, document numbers 150683 (cover page) and 150688, access 10.01.2020)

Helcia S. then appears as Hela on three other lists: a registration effort by an organized group of Jewish survivors in Poland in mid-May 1945;¹¹ a 1946 list of Jewish refugees in Italy waiting for transfer elsewhere;¹² and a list of people on board a ship sailing to Palestine in 1946.¹³ Now using her adult name Hela, she is with her sister Nachcia, now Nacha, on each list. She is again one of hundreds.

In 1985 at age 57 Hela became Helen and moved from Israel to the United States. At one of the first annual meetings of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors Helen S. arranged to give an "oral history" with a volunteer from the organization. The interview is audio only.¹⁴ The interviewer introduces Helen and states that the oral history will proceed in an atypical fashion. Instead of an interview, Helen S. will read a prepared script. She then delivers a moving, detailed description of the gradual curtailment of Jewish life in Chrzanów and the Nazi murder of seven randomly selected Jewish men by public hanging. She does not mention herself and speaks as an outside observer, but with emphatic denunciation for the perpetrators. Her delivery is formal and in a consistent tone and rhythm, but not emotionless. An excerpt:

Now they opened the doors of the truck and let out seven men. Hushed lamenting was heard among the Jews when they recognized the men coming out of the truck. There

¹¹ USHMM, ITS, Wykaz osób zarejestrowanych w dniu 13.05.1945 r., document numbers 78785144 (first page) and 78785159, access 10.01.2020.

¹² USHMM, ITS, Jewish Refugees in Italy compiled by the Organization for Jewish Refugees in Italy, document numbers 87438645 (cover page) and 78817509, access 10.01.2020.

¹³ USHMM, ITS, Nominative Roll of Jews for Repatriation to Palestine on May 8th, 1946, document numbers 78781421 (cover sheet) and 78781438, access 10.01.2020.

¹⁴ USHMM, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection/Gratz Collection, Oral History Interview with Helen Sendyk.

was Israel Gers, the baker, with two sons, who had been picked up just several days ago when a Polak reported them to the police for supposedly selling bread illegally. There was Szpangele, who lived right there on Krzyska Street. Szpangele looked up to the windows of his house and saw the tree that grew in front of it. Everyone's gaze followed his, to discover the morbid seven nooses that were ready on the tree. Helpless and forsaken they stood on the road, trembling and watching the seven solitary figures. Their anguish indescribable, they bowed their heads low and turned their heads away. Mothers covered their children's eyes, not to see the cruel carnage. Men prayed silently. Women whimpered. A total state of shock engulfed them. Mercilessly the seven men were made to climb up onto the stools beneath the tree. Their pale unshaven faces looked around searchingly. Maybe they were awaiting a miracle to happen.¹⁵

Helen S.'s specificity and care to indicate victim names reminds us of other instances of witnessing in testimony to record and honor the dead; indeed, her slow and precise intonation has a funereal tone. She speaks for the murdered. Helen S. was likely 12 years old at this time (she states later that it occurred two years into the occupation), but she omits her specific emotional response to watching a murder. "Mothers covered their children's eyes," but surely Helcia was such a child. Yet Helen speaks with the authority of an adult direct observer. As the narration continues, there is no "I" in the story.

After completing the description, Helen moves to a second section of her narrative. Here she allows an "I," although she also reads this fragment formally and with a practiced articulation. An excerpt:

I have survived, an orphan in history, an orphan in my family. Emaciated in body, broken in spirit, a human skeleton, a shadow of man. I survived six years of German occupation, three years of a German concentration camp. At the chronological age of sixteen I came out of concentration camp. At the age 5000 of Jewish suffering. My body broken came out from behind the barbed wire. My spirit and my soul remained trapped inside. They died together with my family and with my parents. Now I am only an empty living shell, suffering my pain, reliving in torturous nightmares the six years that have been my end and the end of European Jewry. It is only the sacred mission, the holy duty to tell the world, to keep reminding them and never let them forget, that pushes me to go on.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibidem, excerpt at 6:30.

¹⁶ Ibidem, excerpt at 11:51.

She speaks with passion and sincerity, admitting to a living death and a sense of an inner emptiness. Yet these “I” statements are protected in a scripted monologue that cannot be interrogated or questioned. They are sweeping moral statements, poetic and commonly found in Holocaust material created for a general public. Helen asserts emotions but her priority is not self-expression. She chooses the words that she thinks will honor her experience and give it meaning, but she refuses to actually inhabit those words.

This becomes clearer when both interviewer and interviewee are thrown off script by a disruption in the testimony setting. As noted above, Helen S. and her interviewer found themselves at a large national gathering of Holocaust survivors and their families. Although the testimony is audio only, the hubbub in the background makes it obvious they were in a large room with many other people. After Helen has concluded her presentation, the interviewer ventures a few questions.

Interviewer: Mrs. S., your husband was a survivor, too.

Helen: Yes, he is. But he survived in a totally different way. He was in hiding, he traveled through Europe under the occupation of the Nazis and under the Russians, and that’s how he survived.¹⁷

As the interviewer begins a new line of questioning, a woman in the background begins to shout at some other attendees and pound a table. She begins to scream, losing control: “MY FATHER DID NOT DIE JUST SO THAT...” This interruption forces both Helen and the interviewer into stunned silence. After a minute, the tape is stopped. They try again, and the woman begins to shout again, pounding a wall or table in anguish, and again the tape is stopped. Then the interviewer tries again, in a more direct manner:

Interviewer: Would you like to describe more about life in the ghetto?

H: [Silence]

Interviewer: No. You don’t want to talk about that. The only thing you are comfortable talking about is your postwar experience.

H: No. But I uh [pause].

H: I will not talk unprepared because my memory is not so good.

I: I can jog it for you!

H: No. You don’t have to. I can read things. I will not talk about it.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibidem, excerpt at 14:16.

¹⁸ Ibidem, excerpt at 17:20.

Three types of “testimony talking” coexist in this artifact. Helen S. delivers a careful presentation of suffering that omits her own personal inner experience. Helen and the interviewer engage in some question-and-answer about her husband. And an unscripted expression of pain enters into their shared testimony space. It is almost as if the anonymous woman in the background was expressing, in an undisciplined and unlimited manner, what Helen was holding back with discipline and limits: rage and pain. The shouting migrates into the taped “oral history” and cannot be edited out. There is no resolution. When the interviewer attempts to proceed as if no interruption occurred, Helen initially keeps the silence intact; she then uses a memory lapse to ward off responding. Finally, Helen can only say: “I will not talk about it.” Yet in forcing this admission, the testimony scenario creates an opening for an “I” different from the scripted “I,” albeit one that “will not talk.”

Helen S. spent part of the years following this event writing a memoir, *The End of Days*.¹⁹ This book is an extended presentation of the material she shared in the 1985 testimony referenced above. It is a moving, detailed, evocative description of her immediate and extended family, their close bonds, and how they were embedded in the daily life of Chrzanów, running a confection and gift store in the town’s main municipal building. It also carefully documents each family member’s reaction to the occupation; Helen’s eventual selection for slave labor in several camps near Reichenbach; coping in the camp setting; and evading the threats of rape by the Soviet troops at liberation. Throughout she skillfully communicates a sense of immediacy while remaining historically accurate and avoiding delving into her own interiority. Instead of “I” statements she chooses “we,” “the family,” “the Jews” or “we Jews” as protagonists in the scenes that unfold; most often she transfers what might be her own emotion onto the motives of another person in her family.

Now they were taking my sister away. Who would care for her? How could she withstand the ravages of long days of hard labor? Mama was distraught. Nachcia tried to allay Mama’s fears, even though she was scared to death herself. But Nachcia, like all of us, knew she had no alternative. She had to go... We wondered when we would hear from her again.²⁰

With the words, “Now they were taking my sister away,” it seems that Helen the writer might linger on her own remembered fears as the youngest child who has been taken care of by her older sister for much of her life. “My sister” places Helcia, the child who desires her sister to stay with her, at the forefront. But Helen quickly revises Helcia’s desire into first

¹⁹ Helen Sendyk, *The End of Days: A Memoir of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 94.

concern for her sister's well-being and then her mother's. "We wondered when we would hear from her again" also substitutes hearing from a sister for any possible traumatic rupture.

This strategy is difficult to sustain in the section in which Helcia is a slave laborer (Hela) and herself undergoes unremitting deprivation, fear and physical violence. Through some negotiation Nachcia as well as their cousin, Hania, were able to join Helcia at the same camp. At first Helen the writer presents her girlhood self as simply one of the many girls and women trapped in the Silesian concentration camps; the experience was collective:

Here in the labor camp of Faulbruck, our spirits were broken. There was no time to think or to grieve over our severed families. The hourly fight for life was all-consuming. Those who were able to mechanically carry on were the lucky ones...²¹

This theme of survival through the suppression of needs and desires is a common one in Holocaust literature and testimony. The memoir's suppression of Helcia's own distinct desires and fears are, in a sense, a continuation of the coping strategy, to ward off being engulfed by the enormity of despair. Helen the writer is able to use the presence of her sister and cousin, as well as the many other young women at the camp, as a way to keep the "we" in place of the "I." However, in a revealing moment late in the book, this strategy breaks down for a brief moment and Helen admits to the existence of her private, internal world as a child, but one that she characterizes as almost organically connected with her persecution. She writes, "My hands mechanically worked as my mind milled my tragedy into verse... I repeated and memorized, weaving, spinning my pain into parachutes of poetry."²² The repetitive motions of the textile work are reproduced as cadences in her mind. The resort to careful words, the consistent tone, the commitment to evocative narration, the importance of the script were forged there, at the textile factory in Langenbielau (where she was moved after Faulbruck) as a substitute for the reality that she could not assimilate.

Later in the narrative the text breaks through the staunch commitment to obscuring Helcia as a multidimensional person with her own sense of self via a single anecdote. The factory staff arranged for her to visit a dentist to have an infected tooth pulled. After a horrific experience of the dentist removing her tooth unskillfully and through brute force, Helen writes that she returned to her barracks to finally go to sleep.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 178.

²² *Ibidem*, 183.

I woke up feeling that I was choking. In the total dark I crawled out of my cot fighting for my breath. Groggy with exhaustion, I touched my hands to my mouth, suddenly becoming aware of a solid substance filling my mouth. Had someone stuffed something into my mouth to choke me? In the dim light of the bathroom I saw that my hands were covered with blood. I stood over the toilet bowl ripping out piece after piece of coagulated blood that filled the whole cavity of my mouth.²³

In this passage Helen fully inhabits the story as herself for the first time. She offers a fully physical yet simultaneously emotional depiction of a confusing, fearful, disorienting experience that holds within it extraordinary meaning. She authoritatively recalls her teenage self “fighting for her breath,” unconditionally, with no one else present; her battle was to survive and it was her own, physically and emotionally. The threat is unfamiliar; it is no one else’s; it is unprecedented and only happening to her. She relates this part of the story as if she was still in the dim bathroom in the middle of the night, “ripping out piece after piece” of the penetrating substance that “filled the whole cavity of my mouth.” Helen confronts what is choking her and preventing her from surviving as Helcia, as herself. She chooses not to call for her sister – she writes, “I decided not to wake poor Nachcia...”²⁴ She removes the pieces by herself.

The role of the anecdote in literary work can be seen as a device to create an immediacy that is also a small, contained history in and of itself. This view of the anecdote, theorized most prominently by Joel Fineman, recognizes its power to interrupt the historical world being created by the writer. Fineman finds the anecdote a “new narration” in the text, “formally small” yet “seductive” and in this way creating a “separable” history.²⁵ In other words, inserting a compelling anecdote such as Helcia’s blood-filled mouth sets this particular event on another timeline, in another reality; it creates its own historical context, the dental visit and the barracks, and in doing so undermines the bigger, over-arching story.

Yet this anecdote spills out of Helen’s writing in an undisciplined manner. The imagery evoked by Helcia “ripping out piece after piece” stands out in the book not only because it is a story in and of itself, but because Helcia had not yet, in her text, ripped anything in anger. The blood-filled mouth does not tell us anything new *about* Helcia, at that time sixteen. But Helen’s presentation of the incident in the memoir interrupts not just the over-arching

²³ Ibidem, 186.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in: Harold Veesser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 65–92.

history she had up until then composed, but Helcia's own position in that history. This world defined Helcia by her place inside collective suffering. That place had been one of following the lead of older siblings and observing even her own pain at an arm's length or via the rhythm of her labor. In the post-dentist event Helcia's pain comes to claim her, filling her whole cavity. Her distinct, personal response to the atrocity of her situation pushed through.

The End of Days continues for three more chapters. In these Helen depicts Helcia together with Nachcia and at times with her cousin Hania surviving the ending months of brutal slave labor. In this section of the memoir Helcia rejoins the collective "we" in her narrative until she meets Lily, a Hungarian Jew the Nazis assigned to the labor camp after deporting her to Auschwitz and killing her family there. Lily stands tall although she has a shaved head; she speaks German and addresses the non-Jewish German workers with confidence, as an equal. Lily's behavior is transformative for Helcia.

I was immensely impressed. That is exactly how I would have wanted to act if I had the courage. I always feared them punishing me or taking me away from my sister Nachcia. But oh, how I yearned to defy them, to stand up to them like Lily.²⁶

Lily allows Hela to imagine herself acting differently and more importantly, Helcia immediately admits this to herself and to her readers. She knows "exactly how I would have wanted to act," although she is not able to summon "the courage." Her writing is more personal – "oh, how I yearned" – and she allows the narrative to admit a potential personal, perhaps even selfish, choice: "to stand up to them like Lily."

In the penultimate chapter Helen describes the constant threat of sexual assault brought to the camp by the Soviet Army soldiers as they liberated the small labor camps in Sudetenland and Upper Silesia. There is no period of relief after May 8th when her camp was liberated. Once the German guards disappeared the several hundred girls and women rushed to the local shops in Langenbielau for food, which they then hoarded, and coped with protecting themselves at night from rape. The Soviet military transferred a group including Helcia to another holding area (giving them food and medical care) but would not allow them to leave, ostensibly because they were to be quarantined. Helen describes herself, just turned seventeen, as devising a plan to distract the guards at the front gate to allow her group of girls to escape. Helcia herself implements this plan:

²⁶ Sendyk, *The End*, 197.

To Nachcia's distress I stood at the gate talking to my soldier "friends," averting their attention while motioning to our friends to disappear behind my back. And so Golda, Tila, Hania, and finally Nachcia slipped past me and the guardhouse and into the night. It then occurred to me that I was now utterly alone with several Russian soldiers at the gate. I could not perceive how in the world I was going to get away without being shot at. I waited until their attention was drawn from me: an altercation developed between them, and I acted in a split second. I abruptly turned and slipped into a shadow behind the gate...²⁷

Helen portrays her younger self, Helcia, as directly intervening with the military to violate their rules and free her friends. Helcia offers the guards her companionship, which easily distracts them because the implication here is that she is offering her body. Helen does not need to explicitly state that this act is flirting or negotiating a sexual favor; the seventeen-year-old Helcia depicted here knows this and knows that all she has to do is talk. Furthermore, she realizes she is "utterly alone" but is able to act "in a split second" to survive possibly "being shot at." Helen presents this strategy as a courageous and confidently executed act, a personal risk to save others.

Helen Sendyk next appears in the archives via a testimony she delivers in 1995 through the Shoah Foundation's initiative.²⁸ This interview is video-taped. The interview shows Helen in the living room of a private home, carefully dressed, in a setting with no outsiders. The Shoah Foundation gives interviewees a questionnaire to prepare in the weeks prior to the interview; Helen is completely prepared with dates, places and details and seems at ease in front of the camera. She is expressive, direct, friendly and perfectly poised. Her answers follow what she wrote in *The End of Days* for the first half of the interview, although there are a few additional evocative details. Helen's love and admiration for the oldest sister, Blimcia, which was evident in her memoir, is also prominent in this interview. She recalls the moment the local Gestapo selected out Blimcia and her child and placed them in a truck to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center – a moment also described in the memoir – and begins to cry. The interviewer, out of camera range, remains quiet, allowing Helen to recover on her own terms.

After this moment Helen continues to follow the outlines of her prepared answers. But she also tells of three incidents, two of which appeared in *The End of Days*, in a more spontaneous and unscripted voice. Through various anecdotes she gradually moves off script and re-narrates herself into her own story. In the first anecdote the Gestapo have forcibly placed

²⁷ Ibidem, 219–220.

²⁸ USHMM, USC Shoah Foundation Collection, Interview with Helen Sendyk, interview code 8745, access 1.11.2019.

Helcia, Nachcia and Hania in the main transit camp for Operation Schmelz, the Sosnowiec Durchgangslager. This occurs in early 1943. From here the Schmelz system allocated the Jews of Silesia to private companies in exchange for payments, which the Gestapo kept after distributing a small percentage to the Nazi-designated Jewish Community Council. Helen speaks:

Because Sosnowiec had a... a... Durchgangslager. What they call it – a transit camp. Where more selections are being made. These are already all the young people who are taken for work. But there are still selections, because even from there I suppose some were sent to Auschwitz but then people are sent to different labor camps. Even there... I am at that time 13 years old. The only person that I have next to me is my sister Nachcia and my cousin Hania... so there are the three of us. And my biggest fear is to be separated from them.²⁹

The search for the right word in English and the pauses are typical in survivor testimony, but not typical for Helen. She attempts to remain in the past tense but moves to the present tense by the time she explains her “biggest fear.” Helcia has already seen the Gestapo brutalize, arrest and abduct her parents and siblings (as well as many Jews in the community) by this point in her life. She sustains the hope that they are alive somewhere, but in this telling Helen states that the “only person that I have next to me is my sister Nachcia.” She seems to admit to herself that they are gone. She continues:

And in some of the selections they take Nachcia and Hania and they leave me downstairs. They march them away and I am left. And I see a building, a big building, and they marched them away and I am here alone and this was the hardest – [she pauses and looks up] – day in my life – that here I am alone separated from Nachcia. As young as I was, I was obviously stupid because I didn’t know I could get killed for that. Or I had courage. Because never minding all the Germans with all their rifles and all their bayonets, I just ran. I ran toward the building all by myself. To be with Nachcia. And I succeeded. At that time, I succeeded.³⁰

Helen first reasserts Helcia’s fears and calls her “stupid.” Then she uncharacteristically relays her story out of order. “I didn’t know I could get killed for that.” The listener does not know yet what Helcia is doing, but she has already done it and is reflecting on the potential consequences. The interviewer remains silent. Helen then admits that she “had courage.”

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

This out-of-order telling also creates space for Helen to claim she ran “all by myself” and “I succeeded.”

In the second anecdote Helen uses the same process of labeling herself as simultaneously stupid and courageous but uses reversed order of the story’s logic to defend her choice:

I was very daring or maybe very stupid. Because I was very young. And I couldn’t walk. And – we were walked in the gutter. And I would walk over to a sidewalk and kick my foot against this sidewalk. To dislodge that snow that had accumulated on clogs. And each time I would get hit for that. But I did it nevertheless.³¹

Here Helcia’s courage takes the form of resistance more directly. The Helcia overwhelmed by fear in *The End of Days* here accepts blows just to get snow off of her clogs. With “I did it nevertheless,” Helen acknowledges her choices, limited as they were, in terms of her own, personal desire.

The third excerpt is a re-telling of the escape from the Soviet troops in May 1945. Helcia’s group allies with a male prisoner to find a house abandoned by fleeing Germans.

Helen: We are caught by the Russians... And, uh again, me being the daring one. I, uh... manipulate [she moves her head back and forth] and I uh... manage for us... I, I was talking to a Russian, *fardeyem him dem kop*.

Interviewer: [Laughs gently, in camaraderie at the Yiddish]

Helen: [Also half laughing] So... they... so that my sister and my cousin and some other girls could escape behind his back. But then I’m left with the Russian standing there [raises her eyebrows] but eventually I managed to run away, too.³² [Smiling]

In this version Helen states without hesitation that she is “the daring one,” the unique girl in the group who has more inventiveness and courage than the others. This self-description is not conditioned by possible stupidity, youth or fearfulness. Helen has left her prepared notes and allows herself to pause, gesture and inhabit the seventeen-year-old approaching a group of armed men to “manipulate” them. She even allows herself to inhabit her original language to express herself.

The role of the interviewer might have been important to this process. The interviewer does not probe, correct or question throughout (although some Shoah Foundation interviewers do

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem.

so). At a crucial moment, the interviewer indicates her understanding of the Yiddish phrase with non-verbal cues. She does not challenge Helen's position as speaker or her authority to tell the story. This space of shared understanding functions to support Helen as she continues to allow a desiring version of her youthful self, complete with a touch of braggadocio, to emerge. She indulges in a moment of humor the teenager has at the expense of the armed men in charge, themselves embodying sexualized threat.

Helen described rapes committed by the Soviet soldiers in very general terms in *The End of Days* as well as in the Shoah Foundation testimony. She chose to omit detailed descriptions of the individual assaults she must surely have witnessed, heard, or heard about from witnesses and victims. This type of fear must have been as all-encompassing as the fear of the Gestapo in Chrzanów – in both cases the “authorities” had unlimited power over Jewish bodies. For a teenage girl to approach a group of men on their own turf and offer herself as a “manipulation,” distraction, flirtation, to allow others to escape is almost unimaginable. Helcia seems to know how to “manage” the soldiers’ attentions. She knows it is daytime, in public, with no alcohol at hand, and they are officially on duty, giving her a bit of an edge. She has witnessed their behavior over the past days and has fashioned a strategy. She expresses no fear and seems to take joy in the victory. Was this Helen, the person who not only had desires but felt confident to manipulate the desires of others, always present? Was she there at the 1985 conference at which she gave her first testimony, honoring the dead in her community? Was she present while Helen remembered her younger self repetitively creating poetry to cope with working the textile machinery in the labor camp? These questions generate insights into the processes by which telling and re-telling work in tandem with a shifting demarcated space for an effaced self. When it seems as if any sense of agency has been lost and cannot be recovered without re-traumatization, Langer is helpful in reminding us not to demand it. Not demanding it, however, is not the same as closing down the possibility of its recovery.

In 2002, Helen Sendyk wrote a second book, *New Dawn: The Triumph of Life After the Holocaust*.³³ It repeats the events of liberation and then presents the story of Hela's and Nacha's travel to Palestine, the experience of the war of independence, and then travel to the U.S. with her husband. Like *The End of Days*, *New Dawn* is skillfully written. It offers details of how activists inside the occupying armies smuggled Jewish refugees from Poland across Austria and Italy to ships waiting to illegally take them to Palestine (before the creation of the state of Israel). These unnamed activists taught Hela and her co-travelers Hebrew and

³³ Helen Sendyk, *New Dawn: The Triumph of Life After the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

the principles of Zionism under the guise of delivering education and social services. Hela, Nachcia and Hania lived through a hunger strike on the ship as it sat in port when the British prevented them from disembarking; kibbutz life in pre-independence Israel; social divisions between newly arrived refugees and longer-term settlers; the economic hardships of temporary employment; and the war of independence. Helen S. vividly brings the people in her book to life: friends in agricultural school, romantic prospects called up for military service; despondent Holocaust survivors searching for lost relatives. This beautiful chronicle of young people struggling to create new families in Israel captures the complexity of that time. Helen gives herself a role in this drama, but not the leading one.

The violence of the Holocaust exceeded the ability of any individual to fully assimilate it. This is, in one sense, the definition of trauma. In parallel, the experiences of the Holocaust exceed the ability of a survivor to fully remember, inhabit and narrate them.³⁴ All post-traumatic narration is a matter of selecting what to represent while keeping engulfment at bay.³⁵ What happens when the impulse to tell the truth to the world as it was experienced threaten to further obscure the self at the center of the autobiographical project? Is such effacement of self a type of post-Holocaust coping, something we should attend to as we move toward relying on testimonies more and more often for insight about the Holocaust? Should there be intentional efforts by readers and researchers to recuperate the full person in the story?

We cannot ask survivors for more than they can give us, but we should notice the ruptures in their coping strategies that allow the emergence – gradually, tentatively, conditionally at times – of the effaced aspects of agency. The process of autobiography in post-traumatic histories will likely take an indirect path. An effaced self might be best interpreted not as a refusal to tell about oneself, but as a reminder that the afterlife of the Holocaust is the condition for Holocaust autobiography.

³⁴ This is Henry Greenspan's argument in *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998).

³⁵ For an overview of approaches to the representation, narrative and Holocaust testimony, see: Beate Müller, "Trauma, Historiography and Polyphony: Adult Voices in the CJHC's Early Postwar Child Holocaust Testimonies," *History & Memory* 24 (2012), 2: 157–195.

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Świadectwo Holokaustu, autobiografia i jaźń wyniszczona

Streszczenie

W artykule rozważymy przypadek pojedynczej ocalałej z Holokaustu i prześledzimy, w jaki sposób jej poczucie siebie wyłania się z fragmentów archiwalnych oraz poprzez własne, skonstruowane archiwum świadectw. Cztery autobiograficzne teksty – dwa nagrane zeznania i dwa wspomnienia – tworzone w różnym czasie kontrastują w sposobie przedstawiania narracji oraz jej wyborów i działań pod groźbą przemocy. Zestawiając obok siebie archiwa i teksty, można dostrzec zarówno ograniczenia, jak i możliwości świadectwa Holokaustu jako rodzaju autobiografii.

Słowa kluczowe

Holokaust, świadectwo, autobiografia, praca niewolnicza

PROSIMY O CYTOWANIE TEGO ARTYKUŁU JAKO:

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