

WOUNDING SENSIBILITIES:  
HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS THROUGH THE SCREEN OF ADAPTATION

by

Jeffrey Eric Wolfson



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*I dedicate this work to three individuals, and may their memories be for a blessing:  
my grandmother, Sadie Finkelstein Wolfson;  
her friend, Holocaust survivor Esther Herz;  
and my friend, Holocaust survivor Walter Kase.*

תהיינה נפשותם צורות בצרור החיים

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by

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the USC Shoah Foundation, the Association of Holocaust Organizations, and The Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches.

I thank my parents, Linda and Howard, who paved my way for this journey, and whose love is appreciated and returned. Even from across the country, they make me feel lucky. Rabbi Daniel Millner taught me and cared about my progress inside and outside of shul. Other relatives and friends, as well as colleagues and students, supported me by bringing laughter. To their everlasting credit, I still have hair that is not torn out, even if they could not prevent its graying.

I thank the survivors who chose to present firsthand accounts of the Shoah to people who were not always eager to receive them. Controversies surrounding Fania Fénelon's memoir and its telefilm adaptation planted the seeds of my interest in Holocaust memoir adaptation. Several survivors wrote memoirs that comprise the starting point of this study and are named therein. Gerda Weissmann Klein, Nechama Tec, and other survivor-memoirists were encouraging when I met them. And then there were survivors who carried testimonies that never appeared in memoirs. My grandmother's friend, Esther Herz of New Jersey, was the first person I knew to be a survivor. Her story includes the betrayal by neighbors who had hidden her, the desperate escape on a bicycle through guarded city streets while holding her baby daughter, and the loss of her husband and only son to the murderers. Maybe she would have recorded her experiences, were it not for the Alzheimer's that afflicted her later years. Her live-in nurse had little success in calming the confused and tearful woman whenever frequent panic attacks convinced her that the Nazis were coming for all of us. Decades after "liberation" and up until her death, the scenario of Nazis still on the hunt became her only surviving perception of reality. By contrast, Walter Kase

of Texas always remained lucid in proclaiming his mission to testify. As a friend of his daughter and son-in-law, and as his grandson's teacher, I was truly fortunate to get to know him. Among the nightmares he revealed are the final cries of his little sister, Rysia, who was executed in front of him and their parents, and the horror of being in a camp, where the SS singled him out for his youth and small stature to assist in hangings of his fellow inmates. Audiences were moved by his tears, elocution, style, and charisma until, to our great sadness, we lost him in 2015.

Holocaust survivors' wounding accounts still matter. In this light, I also thank a select number of adapters for their daring and imaginative efforts to use filmic language to tell us so.

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This dissertation looks at what is gained and what is lost, especially on an ethical level, when literary memoirs about the Holocaust are adapted into films. It asserts that the key features of Holocaust memoirs inevitably complicate the process of adaptation by imposing ethical limitations on what filmmakers should cut from or add to their source material. Yet, for a variety of reasons, primarily commercial and aesthetic, most adapters have sought to soften, thwart, or altogether eliminate essential elements of the memoirs. That is, most film adaptations find ways to avoid transmitting the parts of the books that most graphically and directly speak to the cruelty of the Nazi assault on the ethical imperative and what was thereby annihilated. By making changes to avoid the wounding of audience sensibilities, adapters effectively minimize and deny the evil of the Nazis' systematic torture and mass murder of Jews, and sometimes even blame the victims for their own suffering and that of others. Such a displacement of the survivors' expressed points of view gives Nazism a convenient cover—and a voice—in our time and amounts to no less than Holocaust denial.

Drawing on the scholarship of Elie Wiesel, Alvin Rosenfeld, Lawrence Langer, David Patterson, adaptation theorists, and others, this dissertation examines three source memoirs and their



respective film adaptations side-by-side. The case studies include Agnieszka Holland's 1991 theatrical release, *Europa Europa*, based on a memoir by Solomon Perel; Francesco Rosi's 1997 theatrical release, *The Truce*, based on a memoir by Primo Levi; and Joseph Sargent's 2003 cable network telefilm, *Out of the Ashes*, based on a memoir by Gisella Perl. Some of these adaptations display disturbing patterns regarding an ongoing, subversive promotion of the Nazi vision at the expense of survivor testimony. However, they also demonstrate that audiovisual media have a potential, though seldom fulfilled, to translate aspects of the Holocaust memoir into a cinematic or televisual language that respects the ethical parameters of the subject. At a time when few survivors are still alive to reveal their wounds, this dissertation contends that it still matters how their stories are told.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER 1 THE HOLOCAUST AND ADAPTATION: A CASE FOR WOUNDING SENSIBILITIES .....	1
CHAPTER 2 HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS: THE TERRIBLE PARADOX OF LIFE WRITING AFTER ONE’S OWN DEATH .....	39
CHAPTER 3 THE JEW UNCUT: CIRCUMCISING THE SURVIVOR’S MEMORY IN <i>EUROPA, EUROPA</i> (1990).....	69
CHAPTER 4 THE JEW UNSPOKEN: COMPROMISING THE SURVIVOR’S CHARACTER IN <i>THE TRUCE</i> (1997) .....	109
CHAPTER 5 THE JEW UNDEFENDED: INDICTING THE SURVIVOR’S SURVIVAL IN <i>OUT OF THE ASHES</i> (2003) .....	154
CHAPTER 6 THE JEWS UNHEEDED: SCORNING SURVIVORS’ SENSIBILITIES IN THE POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD.....	197
WORKS CITED .....	214
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	223
CURRICULUM VITAE .....	

*These prophets prophesy falsehood in My Name! I did not send them nor command them nor speak to them. A false vision, divination, emptiness, and the deception of their heart are they prophesying to you.*

Jeremiah 14:14

*Newcomers to this history appoint themselves experts, the ignorant become critics. They give the impression of knowing better than the victims or the survivors.... Listen to the survivors and respect their wounded sensibility.*

Elie Wiesel, 1989

**CHAPTER 1**  
**THE HOLOCAUST AND ADAPTATION:**  
**A CASE FOR WOUNDING SENSIBILITIES**

*Who would have believed what we have heard!*

Isaiah 53:1<sup>1</sup>

*Do not say they cannot hear us  
they hear us  
they want to understand...  
do they withdraw and fall back  
because they hurt  
where we no longer hurt...*

Charlotte Delbo<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the Shoah, David Patterson observes that “every survivor’s soul has been wounded” (195), a shared experience that largely accounts for the evident purpose, direction, tone, and other narrative elements that are characteristic of survivor memoirs. The wounded soul to which he refers is a key marker on those whose indefensible crime in the eyes of the perpetrators was merely being alive; whose bodies and psyches suffered systematically torturous, multifaceted assaults; whose homes and loved ones were reduced to ash; whose identities were

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are cited to *The Artscroll Tanach* (Stone Edition) in the Works Cited.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Delbo “The Measure of Our Days,” *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 269.

stripped from within and from without; whose civilized preconceptions about God and human progress were deliberately and cruelly refuted; whose paths were made devoid of free choice; whose survival has meant their outliving their own deaths; whose place has seemed far removed from the conventional course of time's progression; and whose curse has demanded that they bear both the terrible burden of giving testimony and the fruitless hope of returning to the feeling of belonging to an ordinary world. Moreover, the words survivors have found for this testimony do not encompass all they feel compelled to tell, and the ordinary world does not harbor any fitting frame of reference for their stories, or listen, or want to believe.

When survivors are known to have agonized over their inability to craft memoirs that sufficiently convey the complexity and depths of what the Shoah inflicted, how can others hope to find the means of doing justice to its representation? And why make the attempt?

Lawrence Langer recommends that a certain "role of Holocaust literature is to ease us into a position where we can imagine a struggle for those daily immersed in" what he calls "a catastrophic past" (*Preempting the Holocaust* 129). But it is curious that Langer also claims to be "convinced that all efforts to enter the dismal universe of the Holocaust must start with an unbuffered collision with its starkest crimes" (2). There exists an intriguing juxtaposition between the two statements by Langer: the very notion of the writer being able to "ease" an audience into an "unbuffered collision" seems confusing, even paradoxical, and certainly daunting. By its definition, an unbuffered collision would seem to preclude the very possibility of an easing into, particularly when the "starkest crimes" of the Shoah are by their nature so profoundly disconcerting.

Just as Langer's seemingly contradictory calls to action confront writers of Holocaust literature, they no doubt also accost artists seeking to adapt it to another medium. The spirit of wounding that arguably comprises the heart and the message of firsthand literary accounts of the Shoah has proved especially difficult to assimilate into more commercially dependent media, such as mainstream cinema and American television, whose proponents understandably feel nervous about presenting overwhelmingly disturbing themes and images to the audiences they mean to attract. Audiovisual representations of the Shoah that have achieved popularity have therefore almost always done so by managing to dilute or altogether avoid transmitting the survivor's transgressive message of a pain that never heals, redeems, or transcends.

However, not everyone is content with this evident reluctance in the film industry. Holocaust film scholar Annette Insdorf reveals in an interview with Stephen Lewis that she is "interested in films that make you feel uncomfortable, because one of the goals of [the Holocaust] film is to make you come to grips with something that you would not have seen otherwise, not to divert you and send you home smiling" (Lewis 122). An unbuffered collision, indeed.

If Patterson differs from Langer and Insdorf by electing to use the particular term, "wounded," in his exploration of survivor memoirs, it is still striking that all three scholars highlight this same *sense* of wounded-ness as an essential mode for authentic communication about the Shoah. This dissertation begins with the premise that because of the nature of its subject and the expressed mission of its firsthand sources, art about the Shoah is constructed from a wounding and attempts to transfer some grasp of the victims' suffering to an audience. This attempt to transfer is not made merely to convey empathy for the victims or the wisdom of

understanding what the Shoah was like, but rather to shake the audience from the slumber of apathy that made the Shoah possible.

To be sure, the English language has not afforded us a vocabulary that can fully express the scope and complexities of what I choose to call, in the absence of a more precise lexicon, a “wounding.” Patterson and I are not alone in using this term in referring to the Nazis’ deliberate assault on the Jewish body and soul. Survivor-memoirist Solomon Perel pointedly refers to bearing a “wounded soul” (83), later clarifying that the Nazis “caused me deep psychological wounds that have not healed to this day, and probably never will” (107). Even so, survivor-memoirist Gisella Perl observes that “the great writer who could describe” what the Shoah wrought on its victims “has yet to be born” (38). But if the term, “wounding,” is fundamentally inadequate to describe the Shoah’s effect, it remains, I suggest, the best of the choices at our disposal.

Compared to “suffering,” “pain,” “trauma,” “affliction,” and other options, “wounding” seems most conducive to multiple interpretations that illuminate our perspective on the historical experience. It can be expressed or read as an adjective, verb, or noun, and conveys a sense of continuity across time, which is certainly evocative of survivors’ ongoing pain. Also, “wounding” relates to the term, “wounded,” which not only Patterson, but also Elie Wiesel applies in reference to survivors (“Art and the Holocaust” B1). While the Holocaust refers to specific, real events that occurred in the past, I would suggest that “wounding,” rather than the past tense form of “wounded,” is even more effective at conveying a sense of unabated suffering across time, which is certainly evocative of the survivors’ paradigm. “Wounding” is also a better

word for communicating that survivor testimonies continue to have a great capacity for disturbing us today: a wounding can be passive or active, or both.

My dissertation, *Wounding Sensibilities: Holocaust Memoirs through the Screen of Adaptation*, takes to heart Patterson's, Langer's, and Insdorf's words, as it regards written texts that are transformed to audiovisual media in an attempt to render the Shoah for popular consumption. As an exploration of literature, cinema, and television, the present study will necessarily explore their similarities, differences, and points of intersection, particularly by way of adaptation from the literary medium to its filmic byproducts. Film adaptation theorists Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh write that "adaptation studies seeks to understand not individual texts, but rather the relationship that exists between texts" (xii), a theme that invites us to investigate what happens when firsthand accounts of the Shoah are bridled to additional modes of authorship that cross national and ethnic identities, time periods, and motivations.

As we shall see, such a pairing of literary and filmic materials will ultimately help dispute some of the most widely held assumptions about the responsibilities of the adapter, at least where the Shoah is concerned. In particular, I do not hesitate to interrogate the oft-maligned concept of fidelity, which Timothy Corrigan defines as "a notion that asks to what extent an adaptation is true or faithful to the original text" (20), and which, as Natalie Jones Loper observes, "remains deeply entrenched in popular culture" as a key expectation for any adaptation (47). There can be no avoidance of fidelity as a point of examination for any serious study of adaptation, though I do not mean to suggest that fidelity to a source text alone must ultimately be the greatest measure of any particular adaptation's achievement.



That is, from the outset, I do not propose that a film adaptation's very success as an aesthetic work should depend on its ability to match its source text, point for point. Such an endeavor, surely impossible, would furthermore deny the adapter's creative purpose. As Alan Mintz writes, "All art... involves some artifice and rearrangement of the facts in the imaginative reworking of reality" (42), and this is no less true for a film adaptation than for any other creative product. Neither writers nor filmmakers can do their jobs without engaging in seemingly countless instances of the "artifice" and "rearrangement" that Mintz and others describe.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is the present study a function of the pervasive attitude in our society that a film adaptation should pursue fidelity to the best of its ability for the chief purpose of satisfying an audience's emotional anticipation regarding how the printed text should be transformed into recognizably matching sounds and images. More aligned to that outlook are the words of Robin Swicord, who exclaims, "Some adaptations make me gasp, 'My God, what happened? Did they not read the book?' We have all felt this.... It is disappointing when a book we love is not translated well into film" (12). In other words, this dissertation goes further than to object to adapters' decisions on purely aesthetic or sentimental grounds. Critically engaging an adaptation of a firsthand account of the Shoah is not a simple matter of defending the attributes of "a book we love" merely because we love it, or merely because we deem it aesthetically pleasing and worthy of imitation.

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<sup>3</sup> In a September 2018 article, Alan Dershowitz writes: "Deliberately distorting the history of the Holocaust—whether by denial, minimization, unfair comparisons or false characterizations of the perpetrators—is a moral and literary sin" ("New Eichmann Film"). While Dershowitz is correct to call for ethical parameters around representing the Shoah, he is mistaken to imply that artistic representation of any subject, including the Shoah, may ever avoid deliberate distortion.

Rather, I will argue that, despite the existence of fundamental differences between the two types of media, and despite the overwhelming failure of most films to convey the wounding that lies at the heart of literary source material about the Shoah, the cinema is indeed perfectly capable of accomplishing the task. Moreover, if it *can* convey something of this wounding, then it *should* attempt to do so. Any effort to offer less must amount to an ethical if not an aesthetic or commercial failure. Minimizing or cutting the survivor's suffering is not merely intellectually dishonest, but also potentially dangerous, for by failing to indict fully the Nazi assault on European Jewry in front of an audience, an artistic representation will function to mimic some of the Nazis' cruelest deceptions. It is no accident that Hitler's War against the Jews, as Lucy Davidowicz famously names it, frequently aimed to remove its own worst aspects from the historical record and thereby deny posterity the knowledge that Jews were victimized in enormous numbers and in previously unimaginable ways. Like other artistic products, films portraying the Shoah have a duty to resist mirroring that Nazi goal, especially when marketing themselves as "true stories" of Jewish survivors who are named.

A Holocaust film, to be sure, is not to be mistaken for its ostensible source text. There can be no denying the tension that exists between the single-voice Holocaust memoir, which is primarily a genre that means to testify to an ethical crime, and film and television, which are industries that have largely shaped the genre of the Holocaust biopic by prioritizing the goal of entertaining an audience. Some individuals—as we shall observe, Wiesel is one of them—who have argued that the distance between the two artistic genres is therefore too great for the filmmaker to bridge with authenticity, we shall also see that this is not necessarily the case. While recognizing the differences between the media and between the genres, I contend that a

film adaptation still bears an ethical responsibility at least to try to transmit a commensurate sense of wounding from that source, particularly when employing a survivor author's real name and reputation, while probably reaching a far larger audience than her book ever did. Problems arise, at least in terms of ethics, when the gap between survivor and adapter increases not for reasons of the features of each genre, but because the artist elevates a vision that conflicts with the survivor's. As Langer writes, "Our entry into the world of the Holocaust thus depends on who tells the tale – and how" (*Versions of Survival* 5). No matter "who tells the tale," the ethical responsibility is paramount to the authenticity of the telling. Like the Holocaust memoir, the Holocaust film adaptation is first and foremost a response to the Nazi assault on the ethical, as such. To illustrate these points, I will closely analyze several Holocaust memoirs and their respective film adaptations.

To be clear, I emphasize that this dissertation is not intended to be a general examination of the aesthetics of Holocaust films as a genre, whose features and issues have been explored in several publications; some, such as Wiesel's and Insdorf's, are already cited in this chapter. Because we live in the era of the last remaining survivor eyewitnesses, and because survivors' inherently disturbing testimonies have been difficult for us to receive even during their lifetimes, my focus is on the voice of the witness that is found in the memoir and the ethical challenges the voice poses to audiovisual representation. I believe wholeheartedly that survivor testimonies have something important, even indispensable, to teach us about the value of human life and the costs to us when we ignore that value. Of more timely significance than aesthetic considerations, then, are the ethical implications found in changes to survivor testimonies through the process of adaptation.

The choice of adaptation as a topic is particularly fitting for any study of how to approach the Shoah. By cutting and otherwise altering material, the process of adaptation depends on and signifies acts of violence on a source text. As Millicent Marcus writes in apparent celebration of this practice, “Death of old forms and rebirth into new ones is, of course, a way of talking about adaptations, especially the transgressive adaptations that destroy as they create, challenging and subverting the authority of their textual models” (301-302). Yet these words must resonate differently for a treatment of a memoir written by a survivor of the Shoah, which explicitly and implicitly speaks to acts of violence committed against not only the Jewish body, but also the Jewish voice. Holocaust survivor accounts, virtually without exception, intend to use their voices to deny any message of ultimate rebirth or palliative transformation. This sort of denial already transgresses against artistic norms and audience expectations in American culture. By “challenging and subverting the authority of their textual models” in the manner Marcus lauds of other examples of adaptation, and thereby assaulting the memoirist’s testimony, adapters run the risk of aiding the Nazi goal of silencing the already brutalized voice of the Jewish victim/witness. In this respect, the violence of adaptation becomes an act of violation.

The study of adaptations naturally takes into account visual aspects of representation, which is also of paramount importance for the study of the Shoah. Unlike literary memoirs, film adaptations necessarily employ imagery, a feature that also has strong repercussions for the shaping and preservation of Holocaust memory. Transformation from word to image has always fueled debate in adaptation studies (Leitch 178) and is even more hotly contested when the subject is the Shoah. No less a figure than the Auschwitz survivor, author, and scholar, Elie Wiesel, states that, although literary works about the Holocaust make him “wary,” he remains

“[e]ven more [so] of the image. Of the filmed image, of course. One does not imagine the unimaginable. And in particular, one does not show it on screen” (“Foreword” xi). For Wiesel, “the unimaginable” refers to Auschwitz and the other death camps. His apprehension is understandable. To help us grasp the magnitude of this issue for Holocaust memorialization, we may turn to Ruth Wisse, who writes that “the destruction of the image of the Jews has always been the necessary precondition for physical attacks upon them” (129). The Nazis’ infamous reliance on antisemitic propaganda films, such as Fritz Hippler’s *Der Ewige Jude* (1940) and Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß* (1940), as a precursor to mass murder, attest to the reasonability that contemporary Jews would remain suspicious of the potential of the cinema to function as an instrument towards their destruction.

Hence, in necessarily departing from literary source texts by offering visual depictions of the Nazis’ intended destruction of Jewish bodies, films would do well to find ways to be clear that such actions comprise a true crime, an evil of extraordinary proportions. And for films to make such a statement, they will need to adopt a manner that is highly unusual in popular filmmaking: that is, they must avoid sensationalizing the crime as a sordid, wholly entertaining spectacle. It is a difficult, if not impossible, route for the adapter to navigate. This is not to say that, because of the peculiar nature of the Shoah, filmmakers must be forbidden from utilizing imagery in their medium. However, when confronted with any image on the screen, we are certainly justified to inquire whose point of view it supports. And when the image supports the Nazi point of view, which is inherently at odds with the survivor’s, the present study is also justified to refute it. An audience should not leave the theater under the false impression that the voices of Hitler and the Jewish survivor are interchangeable. The film adaptation should not

operate as a means of supporting the sort of antisemitism that Hitler espoused, and that the Holocaust memoir source text unquestionably means to dispute.

In this light, the process of adapting a Holocaust text inevitably reveals a choice between two binaries regarding how to approach the ethical imperative. The prohibition against murder and the belief that every life matters and reflects the divine are essential and of paramount significance to Judaism. By contrast, that worldview is not merely alien to Nazism, but completely contrary to it. Nazism means to eliminate through violence the Jewish presence in the world. This means eliminating both the physical Jew and the Jewish recognition of every life's inherent value to God's greater purpose for all of humankind. Perhaps part of the response to the Holocaust entails a restoration of the ethical, which came under assault in an undoing of the absolute, "Thou shalt not murder." As a response to the Shoah, the Holocaust memoir is not ambiguous about defining this contrast between extremes. The Holocaust memoirist seeks to create a text that testifies to the torture and murder of European Jewry as an expression of evil in absolute terms. The film adaptation's treatment of the ethical imperative must be just as unambiguous, or it fails to translate not merely the source text's very purpose, but also what should be the purpose of any ethical response to the Shoah in the arts.

The wider academic context for this dissertation demonstrates that the years since the fall of the Third Reich have seen several observers grow increasingly wary of how artists elect to portray the Shoah to the wider public. The loudest criticisms are frequently voiced in the United States, which might seem strange in light of the fact that the worst Nazi atrocities occurred far from its borders. Yet American interest in the Holocaust at both scholarly and popular levels is as strong as ever, fueled in no small part by the public's continued attention to the arts as a

legitimate means of both entertainment and education on the subject. Judith Doneson writes: “The Holocaust is indeed the source of much of American Jewish ethnic identification” (*The Holocaust in American Film* 145). This is apparently true even for many Jews who did not directly experience or lose family members in the Shoah. But the subject of the Shoah continues to command the attention of not just the Jewish community.

In contemporary American society, and to an increasing extent in the rest of the world, the arts play a key role in disseminating any proper understanding, or potentially dangerous misunderstanding, of the historical Holocaust, especially for people whose own lives have been far removed from its events. As the American scholar, Alvin Rosenfeld, observes, “For most people, in fact, the event is simply not accessible apart from its representations. Because the latter have become so numerous and so varied, it is important that one attend to how the story of the Holocaust has been conveyed” (*The End of the Holocaust* 3). At issue are how suitably the Shoah lends itself to artistic adaptation, and what, if any, ethical parameters should limit such an endeavor by the artist.

Those are matters that Rosenfeld, Langer, Wiesel, and others have sought to resolve, typically by calling on the artist to engage the Holocaust with greater caution than one might administer to most other historical subjects. The stakes are high. Artistic depictions of the Shoah in a variety of media continue to make a profit, win prestigious awards and enviable accolades, and attract large, mainstream audiences that cannot but be influenced by what they see, hear, or read. Dormant antisemitism is potentially aroused when many of the most widely received and financially lucrative artistic products readily distort the historical narrative in ways that constitute subtle minimization, if not outright denial, of past atrocities against the Jews. In a pattern

reminiscent of Nazi tactics, some films even imply that Jews' behavior during the Shoah was more reprehensible than that of the real murderers. Swicord's exasperated cry of "Did they not read the book?" indeed reverberates through such disturbing moments of abusive adaptation.

Fortunately, Rosenfeld is not alone among scholars in seeking to safeguard the transmission of Holocaust memory through the arts. Patterson, Insdorf, Langer, Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, Martha Satz, Cynthia Ozick, and Berel Lang are among the many who have in recent decades also addressed this theme at length in the scholarly discourse. Of special note are Langer's pointed questions regarding who among us might possess the right to claim the highest degrees of authenticity when engaging the subject of the Shoah. In one publication, he inquires, "Whose voice shall we listen to, and whose shall we trust?" (*Versions of Survival* 16), a theme he continues elsewhere: "To whom shall we entrust the custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? The critic? The poet, novelist, or dramatist? To the surviving victim?" (*Holocaust Testimonies* 39) To be sure, Langer does not mean to suggest that only one group should serve as sole custodian, but rather that great controversy exists over which avenues can best allow us to approach with sensitivity and wisdom a period in history that is complex and horrific. Even so, among the options Langer lists, what he labels "the surviving victim" has come to occupy in many circles an especially privileged, and some would say authoritative, place in any discussion of historical memory of the Shoah.

In acknowledging survivors' place of privilege in much of the discourse on the Shoah, I do not suggest it inevitably follows that survivors must always have the final word on what the rest of us should believe about every aspect of the atrocities and their aftermath. Survivors do not even all speak with one voice, and some disagreements are well known still to exist between



them.<sup>4</sup> As Langer writes, “To accept any single voice as authoritative is to betray the complexity of the event and to risk diminishing the full horror of the doom of its victims—and the world that destroyed them” (*Versions of Survival* 8). But it seems prudent, fair-minded, and even necessary, that survivors must be part of the conversation when adapters bring their lives to the screen and name their memoirs as principal source texts.

In the unenviable position of carrying firsthand knowledge of virtually indescribable horrors that nonetheless demand description, many Holocaust survivors have done their best to make their testimonies known. Moreover, such survivors bear a vested interest in finding effective methods to impart their burden to often reluctant audiences, most of whom have shown a marked preference instead to hear more sanitized and fundamentally dishonest retellings of the past. As Mintz writes, “The truth about the Holocaust is a horror that few can abide without some palliative” (39), a sentiment echoed by Langer, who states, “The need to make the Holocaust appear more harmless than it was has many roots, and hence many branches, leaves, and blossoms” (*Admitting the Holocaust* 184). In such a light, we must acknowledge the disparity between events, as they truly occurred, and the same events, as we are able or willing to perceive them after they undergo the process of mediation through texts, such as written narratives or films. As Langer also calls to our attention, “Certainly it is consoling for most of us to make inhuman conditions (and, often, less than ‘human’ responses to them) appear more

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<sup>4</sup> A famous recent example involves Eva Kor, a child survivor of Dr. Josef Mengele’s so-called “twin experiments” at Auschwitz. At the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the camp’s liberation, Kor held a press conference, where she pronounced all Nazis forgiven for the crimes against her, other survivors, and the murdered. Many of her fellow survivors, including others who suffered at the hands of Mengele, publicly accosted her for that statement. The 2006 documentary film by Bob Hercules and Cheri Pugh, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, focuses on the controversy.

human; but that is an expression of our needs, not of the conditions we recoil from” (Admitting the Holocaust 152). In other words, we must not confuse the nature of actual events with the later circumstances of their representation. If adaptations mean to reach contemporary audiences, they must speak to the demands of their own times, not just to the past they claim to portray. The past is filtered through the needs of the present day, guiding the artist towards some distortions and away from others.

It is therefore no wonder that so many remaining survivors have used their voices to echo the concerns of scholars like Rosenfeld and Langer about how the terrible nature of Hitler’s efforts towards mass torture and extermination should impose limits on the artist’s hand. In this context, Daniel Anker’s 2004 documentary film, *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust*, proves insightful when it concludes with the words of survivor Branko Lustig, who served as producer of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993). After recounting how he declared his moral revulsion to the famous director for the popular film’s conspicuous avoidance of Nazi brutality, Lustig then expresses apprehension that when he is gone, nobody will be left on movie sets to make sure that audiovisual depictions of the Holocaust will sufficiently maintain the standards of historical accuracy that eyewitnesses to the actual event have worked so tirelessly to communicate.

If we may acknowledge in fairness that the mass media, and especially the cinema, have become the largest teachers of history in contemporary society, at least in breadth of audience, it should then come as no surprise that Lustig is in good company in his implication that among all the arts, film adaptation deserves special attention for its ongoing propensity to shape popular understandings of the Shoah. Perhaps more than any other survivor, Wiesel has publicly striven

to prevent misuse and abuse of survivors in instances where their accounts of real-life Holocaust atrocities are aggressively reduced to freely malleable fodder for cinematic entertainment. Wiesel labels our time a “period of general de-sanctification of the Holocaust,” lamenting that filmmakers, by egregiously distorting the event, have effectively complied with the Nazi goal of Jewish victimization, albeit for commercial rather than genocidal purposes. As he writes,

The Holocaust has become a fashionable subject, so film... producers and television networks have set out to exploit it, often in the most vulgar sense of the word.... Let kitsch rule in the land of kitsch, where at the expense of truth, what counts is ratings and facile success.... Who could have imagined it? There are still living survivors, and already their past has been turned into a kind of no man’s land where false certainties and true arrogance rule. Newcomers to this history appoint themselves experts, the ignorant become critics. They give the impression of knowing better than the victims or the survivors.... Listen to the survivors and respect their wounded sensibility. (“Art and the Holocaust” B1)

Wiesel’s words of survivors’ “wounded sensibility” speak passionately to a great ethical dilemma in contemporary thought that is conspicuously made manifest in discussions of film. By angrily calling for stronger restraints on the artist, he challenges conventional notions of authorship, popular ideals of artistic freedom, and the common dismissal of historical and literary fidelity as a worthy standard for pursuing and evaluating film adaptations.

Indeed, among survivors, Lustig and Wiesel are not alone in decrying the longstanding cinematic practice of permitting filmmakers’ creative visions to supersede firsthand accounts of the Shoah. In the final years of her life, French survivor Fania Fénelon famously campaigned

against Daniel Mann and Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time* (1980), the widely watched and critically lauded television film adaptation of her memoir about her experiences in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz. The survivor's objections prompted at least one Jewish organization to call for a boycott of the telecast, and far more people, in turn, to speak out on behalf of the adapters' rights to artistic freedom.<sup>5</sup> That more recent film adaptations of survivor accounts have elicited less noticeable controversy does not indicate any marked increase in filmmakers' fidelity to those testimonies, or that the two sides have been satisfactorily reconciled. Rather, it must be noted that most other survivor authors, including Primo Levi and Gisella Perl, simply did not live long enough to have the opportunity to object to how filmmakers have treated their written memoirs. Especially now, with only a handful of aged survivors still living, the transformation of firsthand accounts as they are passed along to new audiences continues to raise ethical problems. Artistic innovations and even clichés might suit the desires of mass audiences and the demands of the box office, but they also have the potential to feed dangerous trends in public attitudes, particularly with regard to notions of historical truth, moral relativity, and even revivals of Nazi antisemitism.

Unquestionably, a wide chasm is apparent between any Holocaust memoirist's words on a page and a film adapter's audiovisual renderings on the screen. It can be stated with confidence that no fair-minded person may expect a film adaptation to replicate a written account. The different functions and features of each medium preclude absolute replication, and there would in any event be little point to such an endeavor. Yet arguably the most significant and meaningful changes an adapter makes are fundamentally a matter of choice, not necessity, and therefore

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 3 for a more detailed examination of this film adaptation.

warrant close scrutiny. As Linda Costanza Cahir asks, “To what, then, should the translator be *most* faithful? The issue is not that of the translation’s faithfulness, but of its *faithfulness to what?*” (199, italics hers) Her line of inquiry is prudent, given that any adaptation that is based on a book also borrows from multiple other sources. Furthermore, even the most talented and conscientious adapter cannot possibly translate everything in just one book to the screen.

How, then, should we account for and evaluate the ways that artistic visions conflict with or complement eyewitness accounts? To what extent does a survivor hold a proprietary claim to her story? Are certain texts more readily adaptable or even more worthy of adaptation than others? How has an evolving sense of audience needs and expectations affected the paths adapters have chosen to take? Is the cinema, as a visual medium, inherently incapable of doing justice to survivor testimony, or can the artist’s creative license function in a manner that may fairly be deemed suitable to the gravity of the historical subject? If the adaptation process necessitates change, what kind of sensitivity must the adapter demonstrate? What exactly is the “wounded sensibility” that Wiesel instructs the filmmaker to heed, and can it even be disseminated on the screen? These are the questions at the heart of this study of Holocaust memoirs and their respective film adaptations.

In this dissertation, I suggest that the pronounced tension between artistic license and historical and textual fidelities is especially apparent in how literary memoirs by Holocaust survivors have been adapted into film since the late 1970s, when CBS Television in the United States began its treatment of F  nelon’s account. I begin with the premise that the Holocaust memoir is essentially different from other literary texts, and thus poses special problems for the adapter. It demands a special sensitivity, for what might prove fit for adapting works by

playwrights like Shakespeare, classical novelists like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, or popular novelists like Steven King or Anne Rice, as well as biographies of historical figures like Joan of Arc or Abraham Lincoln, is surely less so for the treatment of memoirs by Levi, Perl, Fénelon and other Holocaust survivors. The Shoah, and more particularly, the testimonial aspects of the Holocaust memoir, challenges several of the most broadly accepted interpretations and conventions of adaptation.

When Barbara Foley states, “Surely the Holocaust testifies to the tragic consequences of historical submission to a lie” (358), she reflects the pervasive attitude among Holocaust scholars that there are dangers in misappropriating this subject. Compared to most other academics in the humanities, Holocaust scholars more readily submit to the idea that factuality as an ideal is both firmly rooted in reality and worth protecting, even to the exclusion of certain choices for the artist’s imagination. Such scholars do not shirk from using factuality as an evaluative measure in their reception of Holocaust depictions, so that in their eyes one of the key features of the most successful representations of the Shoah is a reasonably clear alignment with certain details of real-life events. As Barbie Zelizer writes of portraying the Holocaust on film, “Ground Zero of historical representation is, and must be, the event itself” (21). In the same academic tradition, Langer writes: “When the Holocaust is the theme, history imposes limits on the supposed flexibility of artistic license. We are confronted by the perplexing challenge of the reversal of normal creative procedure: instead of Holocaust fictions liberating the facts and expanding the range of their implications, Holocaust facts enclose the fictions” (*Admitting the Holocaust* 12). Rosenfeld adds that “lines that separate fact from fiction need to be scrupulously observed... lest the tendency to reject the Holocaust, already strong, be encouraged by reducing it altogether to

the realm of the fictive” (*A Double Dying* 161). Insdorf states in an interview that what “is more factually correct,” rather than simply imaginative, should guide filmmakers to create better representations of the Holocaust (Lewis 126). If Holocaust scholars tend to demand greater degrees of historical accuracy and textual fidelity in films that depict the event, they place themselves at odds with most traditions in filmmaking and film studies discourse.

In fact, most film adaptation scholars recommend that any film deserves to be evaluated as an independent work, rather than as a mere derivative of another medium or specific text, whether that original source material is a novel, a play, a comic book, or even a “true story” about a real historical event. This contention appears to stem from film scholars’ defensive posture against those who would judge the cinema inherently inferior to the written word.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, most adaptation theorists’ publications have focused on treatments of classic novels and plays: in other words, works that more comfortably fit traditional models of fiction writing. However, even Pierre Sorlin, whose work acknowledges actual historical events, rather than any literary works, as the main source texts for certain films, similarly rejects any call for adapters to strive for fidelity. He contends that analysis of a film’s historical accuracy is a “meaningless” pursuit on the grounds that because films do not set out to be history textbooks, they do not warrant the same level of scrutiny (*The Film in History* 210). All the same, despite this widespread sentiment against the championing of fidelity as a goal of the artist’s process or the scholar’s analysis, the theme of fidelity has still dominated adaptation discourse at virtually every turn since the earliest publications in the field.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples abound. See McFarlane, 8; Sinyard, 117; and Corrigan, 2 and 64.

As Thomas Leitch explains, it remains evident that “adaptation theorists from George Bluestone to Brian McFarlane alternate between generalizing about what a bad thing fidelity discourse is and then turning around and doing it themselves” (2005). Along these lines, Peter Clandfield writes that “fidelity is like intentionality: avoiding all mention of it in critical discourse is just as artificial as prioritizing it” (151). Leitch, in turn, has quite a lot to say about fidelity, which he readily dismisses as “always a fetish” (*Film Adaptation and its Discontents* 153) and a “chimerical quest” (258). In fairness, Leitch is correct to assert that absolute fidelity is an impossible goal for the artist, but this does not mean that some level of fidelity should not be demanded, at least in some instances, and at least by some ethical measures.

Of course, fidelity, as a concept, is not limited to the academic arena, but also extends to the practice of filmmaking in the United States, wherein attitudes towards the subject have varied over time. Leitch observes that silent filmmakers did not prioritize fidelity” (*Film Adaptation and its Discontents* 43). But within a few years of the arrival of sound, no less a figure than David O. Selznick, the force behind landmark popular film adaptations like *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940), held the “governing precept that when adapting a successful novel, fidelity to the original was essential” (Schatz 278). By the mid-1970s, however, the cinema saw commercially lucrative blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Star Wars* that were also based on popular novels, but whose alluring special effects displaced textual authenticity as the films’ main draws. Financial profit, rather than fidelity, emerged as a chief priority (Corrigan 68), and arguably remains so for most film productions, including those about the Shoah.

Biopics, too, have seen fluctuating attitudes towards fidelity. As Neil Sinyard writes, “The bio-pic is an awkward hybrid form that falls somewhere between fiction and documentary,



and it is hard to avoid a predictability of structure which sees the subject's life as a connecting string of major or minor failures and successes" (144). That grey space between fiction and documentary necessarily complicates any approach towards historical fidelity. Early biopics in the United States, according to George F. Custen, are characterized by their conservative content, so fashioned to suit audience tastes and the Hays Production Code, which went into effect in 1934. Custen writes that these films "were often sold to the public as accessible versions of history" (34), and that studios explicitly marketed them as factually sound and guided by teams of professional researchers (38, 44, and 112). In an era when the cinema was still widely scorned as a lower art form than literature, this pedagogical function of biopics lent studios an air of respectability and prestige (Schatz 210). For the Holocaust film adaptation, these motives are typically conflated. Holocaust biopics, whether theatrical releases like *Schindler's List* or made-for-television broadcast airings like *Playing for Time*, have proved profitable while also serving to elevate their respective media by winning respectable awards, impressing most critics, and claiming to teach the public something important about the past.

Even as the Shoah has gained momentum as a chosen subject for adaptation through the biopic, the study of how filmmakers treat their subjects has also risen to prominence in academia. Although scholars have for decades frequently made much of the fact that at least half of all films adapt material from other media, adaptation studies as a scholarly discipline is relatively young. The publication of George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* in 1957 is recognized as seminal to a field that has seen tremendous growth. Today, there are college courses, professional organizations, journals, and conferences exclusively devoted to the subject of film adaptation. But notwithstanding the field's rapid growth, scholars still seem reticent to accept

common standards for what a filmmaker should accomplish when adapting an older work. There remains a tendency to view adaptation very broadly and fluidly, and to try to refrain from imposing restrictions around the artist. In fact, even as a discipline, adaptation studies is markedly resistant to clear definition. Dudley Andrew writes that “discourse about film adaptation is potentially as far-reaching as you like” (96), Thomas Leitch observes that “no normative mode of adaptation” has been commonly accepted (*Film Adaptation and its Discontents* 126), and David Monaghan falls in line by proclaiming “that there is no single approach to the problem of adapting a written text to the visual medium of film” (224-225). As we have seen, that would include the rejection of any notion that fidelity must be observed to any source text.

Surely, one of the primary reasons that film adaptation scholars can claim to eschew fidelity can be found in the nature of their research subjects. That is, most adaptation scholars have focused on works by Shakespeare, Austen, or Dickens, with Sergei Eisenstein celebrating the latter’s work as a paramount influence on the use of montage in filmmaking, for example (214-224). It is important to take note that when Bluestone seeks to present the literary source text as “less a norm than a point of departure” (x), he refers to the novel, not to the memoir, and certainly not to the Holocaust memoir. To view a source text as a point of departure, is to see it fundamentally as worth leaving behind, an assessment that should ring false for a treatment of a survivor account. Compared to adapting Holocaust memoirs, there is less at stake in mistreating classic works of fiction. This is true on an ethical level, if not an aesthetic one. Ozsvath and Martha Satz write that “it is clear that different kinds of literature, by their nature, invoke different aesthetic standards.... [and] one can distinguish Holocaust literature from other

literature.... The unparalleled nature of the event dictates the degree to which ethical standards pertain. Thus, if moral issues are ever to be invoked in the evaluation of literature, then they should be in the case of Holocaust literature” (200-201). By focusing on Holocaust memoirs, rather than on novels, plays, or more traditional life writings, my dissertation locates the fidelity issue in a different context, that of testimony. A short essay by Cosetta M. Veronese attempts a similar endeavor, but on a far smaller scale.<sup>7</sup> Veronese cites adaptation theorists, not just Holocaust scholars, to defend one film adaptation against the charge of being inauthentic. Her essay, whose conclusions I find suspect, still demonstrates that scholarship can benefit from the intersection of the two fields, and that the question of fidelity has a rightful place in any examination of adapting the Holocaust memoir.

In the context of the Shoah, the theme of testimony goes to the heart of what it means to own one’s experience in front of the public, even across generations. As James Young writes, “One of the most frustrating and agonizing insights of all for the eyewitness narrators was the realization that as visitors in the ghettos and camps, they were at the mercy of their persecutors in *all* ways – even in their attempts to testify against them” (33). The Nazi obsession with permanently silencing the Jewish voice in history is reflected in many ways, with the most telling examples to be found in the camps, such as their official bans on film cameras and on Jewish diary writing.<sup>8</sup> As Patterson explains at length in *Sun Turned to Darkness*, an examination of the

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<sup>7</sup> Veronese’s essay looks at a 1997 adaptation of a memoir by Primo Levi, which will be more closely explored in Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> As we shall see in Chapter 2, Fania Fénelon was one of the very few Auschwitz inmates to have success in circumventing the system by keeping a diary, which was later allegedly smuggled out by a Christian friend and fellow prisoner.

special features of the Holocaust memoir, the written publication of one's own experience of the Shoah is an act of resistance to personal and communal extermination insofar as it signifies an effort to recover the murdered Jewish voice (2, 16, 18, and 22-24). Thus, protecting the integrity of testimony is ethically paramount in adapting the Holocaust for the screen, and I believe it can be accomplished, whatever the necessities of change when moving from one artistic medium to another.

This study shines the spotlight on three memoirs that have been adapted as biopics, meaning their respective film adaptations conspicuously point back to the memoirs as primary source material, and each survivor memoirist is rendered as a film character that serves as the principal locus of attention on the screen. In this fashion, the movies use the survivors' real names, placing some semblance of them in the spotlight, albeit via the visages and audible voices of paid actors. Fortunately, the selection of works for this dissertation offers a wide scope, for the group of authors at hand spans lines of gender, nationality, educational level, and religious observance. One is a memoir of hiding, one recounts experiences in Auschwitz, and one describes an attempt to return home following "liberation" from the killing center. Two are by females, and one is by a male. The earliest of the three memoirs was published almost immediately after the war; the latest, over four decades later. The ages of the authors during the war range from teenager to thirtysomething. Two of the film adaptations were theatrical releases, and one was made for cable television. Lastly, the three adaptations received varying degrees of critical acclaim and commercial success.

My methodology involves the side-by-side pairing of each literary text and its adaptation, which has been standard practice in adaptation studies since the publication of Bluestone's book.

David L. Kranz notes that this permits the scholar “to see what the similarities and differences are, what patterns emerge from the variety of these contrasts, and what these patterns might say about the consciously or unconsciously intended meanings in both source and adaptation” (203). In the interest of clarity, each chapter focuses on one pairing. Chapters are sequenced chronologically, according to the release dates of the films, to highlight the progression of trends and the detection of anomalies.

I approach this study with the recognition that, in their treatment of any subject, including the ethical, both the Holocaust memoir and the adaptation are representations, shaped by individual vantage points of a real historical event. In terms of potential for aligning with facts, neither medium necessarily emerges as the obvious choice for producing the superior version of history. If an authoritative truth may be found within the Holocaust memoir – and I believe it may be – then surely, it is found at least in part in the book’s position as firsthand testimony, though that testimony pertains to the Nazi assault on the ethical, not to a historian’s archival research. That is, we do not rely on only the memoir to vet facts, which is the responsibility of the professional historian. As Charlotte Delbo famously introduces her *Auschwitz and After* trilogy, “Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful” (n. pag.). Even in their vital role as eyewitnesses, most Holocaust survivor memoirists are not trained historians when they record their testimonies in book form. Susan Figge and Jenifer Ward write that “history consists of actual past events *and* the necessarily subjective representation of those events through the memory of witnesses. In other words, it is impossible to access the events without memory, and memory is always mediated through the interested lens of whatever witness is recording it. ‘Geschichte’ [history] and ‘Geschichte’ [story] are inseparable” (92). This

is not to dismiss the clearly stated desire of survivor-memoirists to bear witness to what actually happened, of course. I mean to suggest that both the memoir and the film are not history, but rather paths that, when paved with the appropriate attention, can lead us to a better understanding of history.

Just like the filmmaker-as-mediator, the memoirist-as-mediator faces serious challenges when trying to communicate the horrors that occurred in the Shoah. First among these challenges is “the idea that normative language is simply inadequate to express the extreme abnormalities suffered by victims of the Holocaust” (Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* 229); that “words no longer match the reality of things, curbing the simplest efforts to understand” (Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust* 132); and that “Words not only describe the essence of the Holocaust for those who planned, endured, or survived it; they also manipulate, alter, and revise it” (Langer *Admitting the Holocaust* 26). But memoirists, like filmmakers, struggle to use words to turn aberrant historical events into a sensible account. James Young’s writes that “once written, events assume the mantle of coherence that narrative necessarily imposes on them, and the trauma of their unassimability is relieved” (16). That seems accurate in most contexts, but even the written word struggles to prove coherent and intelligible when undergoing translation from the Holocaust anti-world to our more familiar one.

For example, Langer refers to Primo Levi’s term, “useless cruelty,” as a key feature of the historical event (*Preempting the Holocaust* 37), which is somewhat echoed in Charlotte Delbo’s titular term, *Useless Knowledge*, from her memoir trilogy. In the Western tradition of storytelling, characters do things that make some sort of sense, even when the reader disagrees with the actions. By the end of a story, a character learns something or at least teaches the reader

something worth knowing. I suggest that a narrative arc is difficult, perhaps impossible, to locate in the Shoah, at least where the camps are concerned. Traditional storytelling relies on the notion that characters have a choice, a right intentionally denied to Jewish inmates. Without choice, the familiar logic of cause and effect becomes foreign. Memoirists have tried various techniques to adjust to this absence of a narrative arc, with perhaps the most lauded involving a scattered rather than sequential presentation of time. Thus we find in Isabella Leitner's aptly named *Fragments of Isabella* very short chapters, many of which seem to present no obvious sequential order. Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* at times seems to move forward in time, only suddenly to break into poetry that speaks to a world at some distance from a logical sequence of events.

Even in facing the obstacles to representing the reality of the Shoah, the memoir, at least as eyewitness testimony, still provides certain insights to that event. The cinema is often said to possess other strengths, such as its greater capacity to resemble reality, though this, too, bespeaks certain difficulties. As Insdorf states in the *Imaginary Witness* documentary, "Of all the art forms, film is the one that gives the greatest illusion of authenticity, of truth. A motion picture takes a viewer inside, where real people are supposedly doing real things. We assume that there is a certain verisimilitude, a certain authenticity, but there is always some degree of manipulation, some degree of distortion." To be sure, verisimilitude must remain especially elusive in visual recreations of the death camps, whose character seems in many ways unprecedented in human history, and thus difficult to make relatable to contemporary audiences. By contrast, the reader's perception of verisimilitude is to be understood as a different sort in Holocaust memoirs, most of which do not include images. The issue for memoirs becomes a question of, *How fully and memorably do the printed words render an image in the reader's*

*mind, particularly with regard to the Nazis' assault on ethics that is found at the core of the Shoah?*

One line of inquiry I will therefore pursue involves the question of how both types of texts try to proclaim their historical authenticity. For example, an early Holocaust memoirist begins with a declaration that his book is entirely factual, while a certain adapter employs archival footage – filmed by the Nazis themselves – of the transport of boxcars filled with prisoners en route to the camps. It is also no coincidence that all six films stake at least some claim to historical authenticity by asserting connections to their respective source memoirs. In this context, it becomes prudent to interrogate how notions of authenticity and authorship are blurred whenever the adaptations choose to venture far from their sources' narratives, characterizations, or tones. If, as Christine Geraghty writes, adaptations “complicate questions of authorship” (196), this is all the more pertinent when a written testimony about the Shoah changes hands. In terms of marketing a film that makes changes to its source material, an adapter still depends on the eyewitness memoirist to lend authenticity to the role of co-author.

A second and larger thread running through the dissertation examines what is lost and gained when particular changes are made. The inevitability that the adaptation process cuts and adds to a source text begs the question of what an adapter should try to keep. As Bluestone, Sinyard, Brian McFarlane, and other scholars have shown, not all elements of a written text are readily transferable to the screen. By now it is well established in adaptation discourse that film cannot hope to transfer every aspect of the letter of a source text, but might very effectively capture that essential if intangible quality known as the spirit, even though it may sometimes prove difficult to identify. Based on my readings of several Holocaust memoirs and secondary



sources, I locate this spirit in the memoirists' evocation of a rupture from the sensibilities of Western civilization. While acknowledging that the shrewdest efforts must be made to allow for certain changes to a source text, I will argue that the most effective adaptations of these memoirs will find filmic ways to signal this message of rupture as a wounding rather than as a positively transformative rebirth, and that adaptations are guilty of the worst distortions when they avoid this responsibility.

As a testimonial to the annihilation of European Jewry, the Holocaust memoir may be largely defined by its capacity to wound, rather than to beautify. It seems to strive to shake the reader from the slumber of complacency, at least insofar as it implicates humanity, both then and now, in portrayals of those individuals and collectives that perpetrated or stood by during acts of unspeakable torture and mass murder. This unsettling accusation, this wounding spirit distinguishes the Holocaust memoir from most classical novels and plays, and from more traditional life writings, and presents special challenges to the adapter. Foley observes that "we ordinarily approach the narrative of a past phase in a person's life with the expectation that the writer will explore the specificity of his/her fate, discover in it a pattern of growth that will be significant for the reader, and achieve some sense of resolution" (337). However, Holocaust memoirs do not support such a reading, and are instead marked by transgressive, potentially subversive features. These include graphic portrayals of sexual perversity, torture, and mass murder; the failure of religion, philosophy, government, or art to keep evil in check; a narrative voice that attempts to speak for the silent dead, rather than for the recovering self; a struggle for expression within a paradigm where language is disconnected from meaning; a struggle for survival within a paradigm where heroism dooms rather than redeems; and the absence of any

recognizable sense of justice, resolution, transcendence, or redemption. These peculiar qualities of the Holocaust memoir testify to the systematic, murderous assault on the Jew under the Third Reich. They transgress the boundaries of popular storytelling, and threaten to subvert widespread, deeply entrenched assumptions about progress, education, civilization, and human nature. In effect, Holocaust memoirs leave in their wake a sense of rupture and readily demonstrate a capacity to wound the sensibilities of their readers.

I submit that at the most basic level, fidelity to any Holocaust memoir must entail an explicit acknowledgment that Nazis set out to victimize innocent people, with Jews being the only group singled out for total extermination. The War on the Jews systematically attacked on all fronts: the body, the intellect, the soul; the individual, the family, the community; and, not inconsequentially, the Jewish faith itself. A “faithful” adaptation of the Holocaust memoir will attempt to communicate at least this dynamic at play in the murderous hierarchy of power, with the great majority of European Jews effectively desperate and helpless – in fact, left without free agency because of their situation at the bottom rung. Any avoidance or reversal of this dynamic – for example, the very suggestion that Jews were simply part of a power struggle with Nazis, and able to determine their own fates – might be readily comprehensible and comforting to viewers, but is also morally suspect for attempting to build dishonest bridges over agonizing ruptures at the expense of both the historical record and the victims. However, this has become the norm for depictions of the Holocaust in the cinema and on television.

For a variety of reasons, primarily commercial and aesthetic, most adapters have sought to soften, thwart, or altogether eliminate the most wounding elements of Holocaust memoirs that shed light on the pathetically helpless nature of Jewish suffering during the Shoah. By making

changes to avoid the wounding of audience sensibilities, adapters effectively minimize and deny the evil of Nazism, which is primarily defined by its deliberately torturous and annihilationist targeting of Jews. In many films, a violent brute like the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele is rendered as a playfully mischievous gentleman, with the presumably intended effect that viewers will be less bothered when desperate acts of resistance by Jewish inmates ultimately fail. Worse still, in the most troubling instances, the Nazi evil is displaced by invented depictions of Jewish inmates as the real perpetrators, which provide the films with a familiarly sensible if historically fraudulent narrative arc. When Jews are responsible for their own deaths, there is no need to investigate the complexities of the Nazi character within a two-hour frame, and little call to mourn. Rather than testifying to Jewish victimization, these depictions fall in line with Nazi smear campaigns and older tropes like the blood libel. And they do so by pretending to be situated within the rubric of the “true story” of the survivor author, a practice which, even by the customary standards of multi-authored filmmaking, cannot but complicate conventional paradigms of authorship in the most unsettling of ways.

By now it is well documented that most viewers expect adapted films to embrace at least the most crucial aspects of a source text, notwithstanding that identification of such elements arguably depends on some proportion of subjectivity, as Imelda Whelehan observes (“Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas” 3). Since the days of the Hollywood studio system, historical films in particular have been actively marketed to audiences as authentic works precisely for filmmakers’ alleged dedication to maintain fidelity to a “true story,” even when the artistic products in significant ways played loosely with the facts. Thus, an issue of paramount importance is not merely that adapters have tended to offer a different version of history than

Holocaust source memoirs, but that any newly contrived antisemitic content in a film adaptation will more than likely be perceived to have originated in a survivor's own account. In this respect, the pattern of many adaptations' offenses has sometimes exceeded even Wiesel's angry charge, as quoted earlier: the most damning instances are not merely where a filmmaker demonstrates "true arrogance" by purporting to "know better" than a survivor, but where the latter's own testimony is usurped and twisted *against* her for the entertainment and profit of others. In the crassest terms, adaptation too often becomes a process of shielding audience sensibilities by slandering the Nazis' main victims, beginning with those who wanted their stories told, and who now are not alive to defend their stories or themselves.

To hold particular adaptations accountable for such spurious content is not to say that adapting the Holocaust memoir must be a doomed enterprise, that the cinema is necessarily a more flawed artistic medium than the memoir, or that an adaptation can or should ever be identical to its source text. Successful adaptation is always a matter of implementing suitable changes, and adaptation scholars would do well to find guidance from their counterparts in Holocaust Studies in identifying them. While I find several films to be guilty of some of the grossest offenses with regard to depicting the Shoah, I cite scholars like Ozsvath, Satz, Wiesel, and Langer to argue that at least one film is not only morally and aesthetically defensible in its own right, but actually surpasses its source text on both levels.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of traditional life writings and explains how Holocaust survivor memoirs, including those that are presented in this dissertation as adaptation case studies, challenge conventional approaches. Most traditional memoirs follow a pattern of employing familiar language to map an individual life course through challenges and towards

redemption, or at least meaningful lessons. By contrast, however, Holocaust memoirs are often compelled to use language that was torn from meaning in the camps and to chart narratives that never convey to the reader any recognizable sense of aesthetic or moral resolution. Moreover, unlike the conventional memoir, the Holocaust memoir never sets out to celebrate the self in the person of the memoirist, but rather attempts to speak on behalf of the murdered millions. It means to present testimony on ethical violations that represent the systematic breaking down of human bodies, traditions, identities, and relations. These fundamental differences between the two types of life writing cannot help but affect how each should be approached for by the adapter.

Chapter 3 focuses on Agnieszka Holland's 1990 German-French theatrical release, *Europa Europa*, which adapts Solomon Perel's 1990 memoir of hiding, *Europa, Europa*. Some Holocaust scholars are dismissive of this film's achievements, and I hope to offer a different, more favorable reading of the work. As an adaptation, *Europa Europa* will not satisfy everybody who demands fidelity, at least insofar as Holland sets out to capture the spirit, if not the letter, of the survivor-memoirist's account. By greatly changing the source material's characters and plot points, Holland's film would appear to mark an enormous departure, but it still masterfully conveys the written testimony's tone of desperation. With a keen instinct for employing the right cinematic aesthetics to transmit testimony, the adapter wisely eliminates the memoir's flash-forwards, which would not work as effectively on the screen. Notably, a minor passage about circumcision in the memoir becomes the principal motif for the film. Holland's daring choices, which include a shocking close-up of infected genitalia, speak to the horrors of the Shoah and thus foster a wounding of audience sensibilities. Additionally, the real Perel's presence on the

screen in the final scene affirms a teaming of survivor and filmmaker and suggests a shared pursuit of authenticity. This chapter also suggests reasons for why this film was more warmly received in the United States than in Germany, its country of origin.

Chapter 4 looks at Francesco Rosi's little known *The Truce* (1997), which is an adaptation of Primo Levi's 1963 memoir, *The Reawakening* (*La Tregua*), about the survivor's physical departure from Auschwitz in 1945 and return home. Of all the adapted memoirs, Levi's works are probably the most widely read and lauded, which presents additional challenges to the adapter. Although Veronese strongly defends Rosi's decisions, I am in this instance less favorably inclined. For one thing, he minimizes the physical ailments of the Jew and strangely sexualizes him. Moreover, the filmmaker invents one scene where a German begs forgiveness from the protagonist, and another scene, where an anti-Nazi German is cruelly robbed by a Jew she helps. Presumably to indicate fidelity to the memoirist's voice, the film ends with a direct address employing his poem; however, its most unsettlingly accusatory and wounding lines are cut.

Chapter 5 analyzes Joseph Sargent's 2003 American cable television movie, *Out of the Ashes*, which is adapted from Gisela Perl's 1948 memoir, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*. Perl's ongoing rage at the Nazis is immediately evident in the memoir, but the film becomes an indictment of the Jew herself. Sargent frames the narrative as a courtroom drama—a popular convention for biopics—in the postwar United States, where the filmic Perl recounts her experiences in flashback. Her character is accused of being a killer of Jews, and the script introduces several elements to support the charge. In a marked change from the Perl in the memoir, the onscreen character tearfully confesses her crimes in a Jewish setting and finally

receives mercy from the American judicial system. This is a comforting, rather than a wounding message to most audiences, even as it assaults the historical survivor. The adapter's decision to spotlight the Jewish doctor's killing of Jewish babies in the death camp shifts focus from the loss of her own child directly at the hands of the SS, an event which assumes a more prominent place in her memoir. Although *Out of the Ashes* in many ways adopts the familiar structure of the women's television biopic, its real protagonist and hero is postwar America, whose stock characters may readily serve as stand-ins for the contemporary American viewer. In effect, the harrowing written account is reduced to a feel-good melodrama that audiences can watch comfortably in their homes. This might be the story many viewers want to see, but it is most assuredly not the one to which the real Perl would have wanted to attach her name. The Nazis orchestrated mass murders that by design would never allow Jewish victims to rest comfortably in a grave, and *Out of the Ashes* proves ethically problematic by crassly if not willfully carrying on the attack.

Chapter 6 presents concluding thoughts on the dangers embodied in the ethical failure of most artists who have sought to adapt firsthand accounts of the Shoah. The chapter examines the implications of a world that permits flagrant distortions of history for the sake of entertainment, profit, easy answers, and even comfort. Whereas decades ago the Nazis sought to remove the Jewish presence from history, now artists in the free world seek to usurp the surviving Jewish remnant's right to testify in their own name to their own victimization. Jewish survivors' public identities as moral authorities and even as true victims of the Nazis have too often been called into question by the way they have been portrayed to the masses. If the effect is Holocaust denial, it is predicated on what is surely the supersession of Holocaust memory. In theology

supersessionism refers to the controversial notion that God has brought to the world the Truth of Christianity or Islam as a means of wholly replacing His allegedly now-antiquated covenant with the Jewish people. As a principle, it is certainly anti-Jewish and arguably antisemitic. In similar terms, the tendency of filmmakers to displace Holocaust survivor's voices from the telling of their stories—in fact, the intentional thwarting of what survivors have felt committed to reveal—is based on the same cruel, twisted supposition that the Jewish voice in history needs to be altered or silenced on the dubious grounds that it is useless, misguided, and simply less worthy of addressing the world in moral terms. But what is ultimately gained or lost when the world loses the Jewish voice? Holocaust survivors have important lessons to reveal in their accusatory testimonies. As their memoirs teach us, the actions of the Third Reich attest to what can happen when art is permitted to depart so far from the historical record that it becomes a potent weapon against innocent parties, particularly in reshaping public opinion against them. Of course, this chapter will also return to Holland's model for adaptation, as seen in *Europa, Europa*, to justify the position that an adaptation is capable of simultaneously satisfying an audience, allowing an adapter a certain creative license, and respecting the survivor's message. But ultimately, this presents an important question: Why is it that if this model works, subsequent films have not adopted it?

At a time when few survivors are still alive to reveal their wounds, this study asserts that it still matters how their stories are told, especially through mass media. As Michael Berenbaum of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum states in *Imaginary Witness*, "Part of its attraction to filmmakers, part of its attraction to audiences, is you're touching the [negative] absolute as you come closer to the truth of the Holocaust. And part of the failure of film, if it



fails, is not to touch that absolute, not to go to the extreme.” Berenbaum, like Insdorf before him, is correct to assert that filmmakers should try to confront their audiences with “the extreme,” however subjectively that might be defined within a culture and a time period. The most effective films about the Shoah dare to employ historical and textual fidelities at least to disturb, unsettle, and even shock viewers: to be sure, not in the titillating, exploitative manner of horror slasher cinema or of pornography, but rather with deeper messages, especially regarding the value of lost Jewish lives and voices, and the reality of innocent victims’ suffering. A film adaptation, like the Holocaust memoir before it, should seek to guide audiences towards the previously unimaginable barbarity of Hitler’s War and risk—or, where appropriate, engender—the wounding of their sensibilities.

Inasmuch as the Holocaust memoir is a form of testimony, it transmits a certain message that has deep, ethical ramifications. One valid measure of the adaptation, then, is how it treats that message. My investigation of adapted Holocaust memoirs takes the issue of fidelity to an ethical level that has yet to be thoroughly explored.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS:**  
**THE TERRIBLE PARADOX OF LIFE WRITING AFTER ONE’S OWN DEATH**

*He has placed me in darkness like the eternally dead.  
He has walled me in so I cannot escape; He has weighted down my chain.*

Lamentations 3:6-7

*I came back from the dead  
and believed  
this gave me the right  
to speak to others  
but when I found myself face to face with them  
I had nothing to say  
because I learned  
over there  
that you cannot speak to others.*

Charlotte Delbo<sup>9</sup>

Honoré de Balzac’s 1832 novella, *Le Colonel Chabert*, depicts its titular character as a tragic figure whose sorrows begin after he digs his severely wounded body out of a mass grave in wartime. On foreign soil, he hovers between life and death during a lengthy recovery, even while his comrades, neighbors, and wife take him for dead and move on with their lives. Upon his return, he is surprised to be treated like an unwelcome apparition who is out of place in the

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Delbo “Useless Knowledge,” *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 228.

home he once knew. He fights to reclaim his money from his socially ambitious, sexually promiscuous, and largely unsympathetic “widow,” and he also seeks to restore his name among the living. The novella ends with a flashforward, revealing that Chabert suddenly abandoned his pursuits, walked away from his old life, and chose to pass his final years in an asylum, deliberately removed from the cruel trappings of civil society.

Yet the experience of Holocaust survivors—the real people who sought to return from a mass grave whose horrors could never have been anticipated by Balzac, nor by anyone in 1832—is fundamentally different in every important way, and so is the message found in their written testimonies. Unlike the fictional character of Chabert, Holocaust survivors are not random casualties of a war over a land-grab, but rather intended victims of hatred, systematic torture, and an attempted annihilation that was meant to serve as an end in itself, and that the world did little to stop. While it can be fairly claimed that Holocaust survivors have sought to recover a sense of normalcy in their lives, the most common purpose they give for writing memoirs has been a profound desire to testify to atrocities committed against the silenced millions.

As Auschwitz survivor Gisella Perl writes in her memoir’s foreword, dated July 1946, “The dead are speaking to you here. The dead, who do not ask you to avenge them but only to be watchful that no more victims of German inhumanity ever swell their ranks...” (12) Similarly, survivor Primo Levi prefaces his first memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, by cautioning the reader against embracing the conception of the world that is built on treating innocent human beings as the “enemy.” As he writes, “Here is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion; so long as the conception subsists, the conclusion remains to threaten us. The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal.”

This expressed mission of guarding against the pervasive Nazi “infection,” as Levi calls it (9), places the Holocaust survivor at enormous distance from authors who would seek to portray a return from death in other historical contexts. For the survivor of the Shoah, the call to witness must continue as long as the murderous call of the Nazi mindset may still be heard in our time.

If we return for a moment to Balzac’s example, we see a markedly different context not just in terms of history, but also of ethics. After all, what is truly lost when Chabert gives up his rightful claim to his home and retreats from the world? To what was he even bearing witness? – not even the horrors or futility of war, we can be sure. Balzac does not depict the character as one who has returned to tell others his story, much less the stories of fellow soldiers who suffered and were killed. A heightened sense of tension in the narrative emerges only when Chabert returns with an intention of living out his life and an expectation of a return to normalcy. His suffering, while certainly underserved, falls into the familiar literary conventions of emotional and economic betrayal by family and old friends who are all alive and free to make choices. The theme of betrayal is sad, but hardly likely to transgress against readers’ expectations of how the world works.

The Holocaust memoir, however, operates within a very different ethical paradigm. The Holocaust survivor-memoirist presses the reader to wrestle with an account of a different sort of survival, as well as a different sort of death. Nazism’s systematic assault on Judaism and the Jew meant reducing both to ash, and not merely physically. The soul was at stake, and the same soul that the Holocaust survivor means to recover by compelling the reader into a confrontation with the most revolting aspects of the past.

In the previous chapter I suggest that a certain sense of wounding is a key feature that pervades the Holocaust memoir and proves most difficult to render through adaptation in the popular and visual arts. This chapter will explore more deeply the nature of that wounding and how it sets the Holocaust memoir apart from the conventions of most other types of writing, even other life writings. To be sure, the very term, “life writing,” would seem to be a contradiction in terms when the subject is the Shoah.

Life writing, and more particularly the rendering of memoirs, has traditionally presented scholars with material by which to examine the structure and communication of important events in an individual’s life. While scholars widely acknowledge certain elements, such as the use of first-person narration, to be practically universal among memoirs, other properties are deemed more ubiquitous to (or, by turn, absent from) certain types of texts. As Barbara Foley affirms, “Traditional bourgeois autobiography aims at the elaboration of a unique individuality” (338), but the 20th century saw the emergence of prominent memoirs that defy this and other norms of the genre. In a concise formulation of some of the other commonalities between texts, Foley writes that “we ordinarily approach the narrative of a past phase in a person’s life with the expectation that the writer will explore the specificity of his/her fate, discover in it a pattern of growth that will be significant for the reader, and achieve some sense of resolution” (337). She suggests that the “advantage” of this writing genre “is that it highlights material that has emerged as essential and draws the particulars of experience under the rubric of an informing teleology” (335). In Western tradition, this teleology has typically involved a revelation of personal growth, even redemption, across events that might help inspire the reader towards a better understanding and appreciation of life’s valuable lessons. In this manner, the traditional memoir has operated

not only as a source of entertainment, but also as a sort of narrative map for surviving life's obstacles, learning from past errors, and realizing a dream—or at least for taking pride that one has suffered and ultimately failed to reach the dream, but has sacrificed for others and may now die with the pride in accomplishment of knowing one has lived with meaning and purpose. It would seem likely that the satisfaction most readers have experienced when reading traditional memoirs has at least partly stemmed from, even depended on, the closeness readers feel to the authorial voice, their recognition of resolution in the narrative, and the assumption that the resolution might be in some way instructive for their own lives.

Organized primarily by theme rather than by chronology, this chapter will present various, though by no means all, types of memoirs. It draws on the scholarship of Foley and other to support the assertion that, while the characteristics Foley describes remain evident in most memoirs, the truly defining traits of Holocaust memoirs represent a break from many of those traditions. That break helps contribute to the immense difficulty of adapting these memoirs to the screen.

One effective strategy for distinguishing between memoirs involves determining the authors' primary motivations for sharing their stories, and then searching for patterns between texts. In some cases, this task is relatively simple, even when authors do not explicitly state their reasons to readers. For example, one can have some confidence that, based on their content, memoirs by the famous Frenchwoman, Marie-Jeanne Phlippon Roland (first published in 1793), and the less widely known American women, K. White (1809) and Elizabeth Fisher (1810), were mainly written to defend their respective authors' reputations as middle-class women. All three memoirists faced criminal charges, and the Girondinist Roland, writing in prison, would soon be

guillotined during the Terror. All three use their memoirs to denounce their accusers in explicit terms, and at least two of the authors protest their innocence. Whatever the differences between these authors and their individual circumstances, they all attempted in their lives to break free from traditional expectations of women. All three memoirs contain several passages that convey a certain righteous indignation to the reader, which is clearly the authors' goal.

Other memoirists seek to convey nostalgia for a lost past. A classic example of nostalgia is evident in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (in *Remembrance of Things Past*) from the early 20th century. After lengthy descriptions of events from his childhood and youth, Proust offers the following words in the final passage: "But now, even though they had led to nothing, those moments struck me as having been charming enough in themselves. I wanted to find them again as I remembered them.... Alas!.... The reality that I had known no longer existed.... The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years" (461-462). In his study of memoirs, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, David Patterson distinguishes between two types of encounters with memory: "reminiscence" and "remembrance." Despite the use of *remembrance* in Proust's title, Patterson would no doubt associate this book with reminiscence, which by his definition "is a nostalgic musing for days gone by" (Patterson 13). Proust's lingering pain stems from his inability to recapture a past as it once existed, which is a universal theme inasmuch as it speaks to a familiar part of what it means to be human. Proust's loss might be painful, but it remains within the rubric of a typical life's progression, at least as the Western literary tradition has come to understand it in modern times.

Some memoirs depict terrible ordeals that end relatively happily because of the authors' decision to fight, suggesting that the authors earned a right to speak with pride in having

overcome a terrible past, whatever shape it took. These books try to portray their subjects as rightfully proud of their victories. Rachel Calof's memoir, *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, which was published posthumously in 1995 by her elderly grandson, presents one case study. Calof, a poor, abused Jew in Russia in the late 19th century, leaves her beloved siblings when she earns her ticket to the United States through an arranged marriage that takes her to a physically and emotionally challenging life as a homesteader on the frontier in South Dakota. The text veers back and forth between the author's griping and bragging. By turn, each accomplishment helps prop her up as the envy of her relatives and neighbors (and, implicitly, readers). She concludes her memoir with words of personal satisfaction: "Laughter came easier now, and the memories of past bitter experiences had softened with age.... I had traveled a long and often tortuous way from the little *shtetl* [town or Jewish community]. It wasn't an easy road by any means, but if you love the living of life you must know the journey was well worth it" (Calof 91). A similar bent is found in the American sports star, Alice Marble's memoir, *Courting Danger*, which was published in 1990, shortly after her death. Marble recounts a life that perhaps seems too full of dramatic leaps and crashes (and name-dropping) to be believed. At the end of her prideful if dizzying account, she concludes that she remains "grateful for the wonderful mosaic of memories – of tennis, of being famous, of serving my country, of loving and being loved" (250). Calof and Marble are obviously more dramatic and self-promotional than Proust in their respective memoirs, for the latter seems far less inclined to position himself as a great hero. Even so, motivations as disparate as nostalgia and pride may be seen in these cases to help prompt writers toward the construction of conclusions that are similarly bittersweet in tone. Moreover, Calof's overwhelming presentation



of pathos (probably governed by the dominant 19th-century American literary style) and Marble's dramatic flourishes (arguably guided by a desire to climb the bestseller lists) similarly end with a sense of final redemption for the authors, which fits the teleological model that Foley describes above. In other words, as outdated or far-fetched as each respective narrative might seem, at their foundation both books still follow the same map of how a life story in the Western tradition should unfold.

Another chief motivation for writing a memoir is an author's desire to embark on a voyage of self-discovery, or to describe one that has already taken place. The Vietnamese-American, Duong Van Mae Elliott's memoir, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (1999), depicts the circumstances surrounding the author's family's suffering during the Vietnam War, and her eventual immigration to the United States. Her writing reaches back several generations to reveal an assortment of personalities and struggles. Compared to Calof's and Marble's memoirs, Elliott's is not as inclined to brag. Perhaps owing to her cultural upbringing, which, as she writes, traditionally restricts upper-class females (81), she positions herself more as an observer than as a hero in the thick of the action. As with the other memoirs, by the end of Elliott's book, the reader confronts "some sense of resolution," just as Foley describes above. Even in the wake of the atrocities of the Vietnam War, Elliott writes that she "felt a sense of peace and closure. I had renewed family bonds unbroken by time and war, and I had reconnected with my roots and my native soil. I had seen my relatives put the past behind them and move on, stirred once again by hope rather than by fear of bullets and bombs. I had seen Vietnam, the land of two million war dead, become once again the land of the living" (474). Whether this sense of hope is the product of South Asian culture is beside the point. What

is important to observe, however, is that such optimism at the end of the narrative is perfectly situated within the Western tradition of life writing, and especially for an American readership.

The celebrated Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy's description of having made a journey of self-discovery in *A Confession*. Set in Russia at a time when the nation was itself experiencing something of an identity crisis, this memoir recounts how the author struggled through personal depression to reconcile matters of reason and faith. Although he cannot embrace a full return to the orthodoxy of the Church whose tenets he eschews, he still finds comfort in the notion that God's presence stands compatible with, if not wholly within grasp of, reason. Tolstoy's final passage demonstrates his internal shift from terror to peace: "My heart contracts and I feel terrified.... I look further and further into the infinity above me and feel myself growing calmer.... I ask myself how I am being supported.... the mechanism by which I am supported seems to be a very natural, comprehensible and sure thing, although when awake it makes no sense at all" (79). In the context of a 19th-century Russian novelist writing of his own existential crisis, that conclusion reads as an almost cheery affirmation of life, and once more supports Foley's claim that resolution marks the end-point of traditional life writing narratives.

Yet another intended purpose for a memoir can be to provide inspiration and instruction to readers facing illness. Gilda Radner and Arthur Ashe seek to do just that in their life writings, which are presented in the context of battles with terminal diseases. Radner, a Jewish-American comedian and actress, describes her battle with cancer in *It's Always Something*, which was first published shortly following her death in 1989. Her message endeavors to praise mind over matter. One notes her words on the redemptive power of the human spirit: "How I made it through those days, I don't even know. The amazing thing about the human spirit is that when

you feel well again, you don't remember those awful things" (106). Indubitably, Radner means to reassure other patients that they can afford to hope that bad memories will fade to oblivion. The optimistic Radner presents a paradigm which reveals that the cancer patient who can never give birth to a real newborn may still serve as platform for the miracle of new life emerging: "Then I realized at the Wellness Community that I was the baby who came out of this. Even in this form – no hair, kinda puffed out – this little person gets born again. I decided that I had nausea [from chemotherapy] because I was giving birth to myself" (132). The dying memoirist repeatedly asserts to the reader her right to make choices, beginning with how she molds her attitude toward life and its travails: "I started to regain control in my life, to take charge and not be a victim of my situation" (135); "Cancer, I decided, needed a comedienne to come in there and lighten it up" (154); "I learned once again that cancer is what you make of it. If you make it a horrible situation, so will everyone around you" (192). The final passage of the memoir, which arguably constitutes Radner's last words to her fans, consist of a humorous story about a diseased dog that can barely walk, but survives to have puppies that learn through imitation to walk happily in the same deformed manner (254-255). Radner's message seems to be that readers should learn from her and walk in her footsteps, much like the puppies following the sick mutt. Again, I suggest that the main purpose of Radner's text is to provide instruction that everyday people should employ to improve the quality of their own lives.

To be sure, one can find some indisputable evidence that Radner wants to convey her pride, much in the manner of Calof or Marble. At one point, Radner recalls throwing a dinner party with her husband: "I walked in and they all knew how proud I was of myself. I had a big smile on my face" (170). However, I suggest that pride is a far less important theme than

offering useful life lessons in the book. Providing such guidance, of course, may have been as beneficial to the author as to the reader; it is entirely possible that helping others through her writing gave Radner (and other memoirists of this type) a purpose for surviving in her final months of life. It is also telling that additional materials seem perfectly in place in the 20th anniversary reprint edition from 2009. Therein, Radner's friend and former *Saturday Night Live* colleague, Alan Zweibel, offers a new foreword that attests to her unbreakable spirit and will to survive: "When it was correctly diagnosed as ovarian cancer, a heroic Gilda emerged.... She looked it straight in the eye and dared it to get the better of her" (xii-xiii). The final 30 pages of this edition consist of a psychotherapist's reflection on "Living with Cancer" and a "Resource Guide" for patients. The fact that Radner lost her battle with ovarian cancer has not stopped her book from appealing to readers; it was a bestseller and remains in print. The text's popularity extends beyond cancer patients looking for guidance, but to judge from the text's content and format, this group would seem to be the author's (and publisher's) main target.

Arthur Ashe's *Days of Grace* is another memoir by a terminally ill celebrity; the book was published and became a bestseller shortly after Ashe's death from AIDS in 1992. The author came to prominence as the first black champion in men's tennis, and later as an international human rights activist. Like Radner, Ashe means to instruct his reader, but his focus is almost never on his battle with disease. The book offers virtually no explicit advice on how to cope or survive, and instead looks at broader issues of living a life with dignity. Where AIDS does emerge in the narrative, Ashe presents a less sunny depiction than Radner's portrayal of life with cancer, but there still remains the familiar theme of resolution, just as Foley describes: "I am a fortunate, blessed man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems" (328).

However, Ashe's style, if not his overall intention, shifts in the next and final chapter, which functions like a microcosm of the whole book. This section entirely consists of a letter of unambiguous life instructions for his young daughter, whose role in relation to the text is to serve as stand-in for the general readership of the other chapters, so that the cool-headed author may address his loved one, and by proxy the world, in more personal terms. Ashe concludes with moving words, which are read by persons who are meant to know from the book's cover that he is already dead: "Although it is natural for memories to fade, I am writing this letter in the hope that your recollection of me will never fade completely. I would like to remain a part of your life, Camera, for as long as you live" (329). The sentiment of a dead man being remembered, and thereby assuming an emotional connection with his reader, is but one level at which these words resonate. Ashe's message, like Radner's, appears to be that he wants to be not merely remembered as an individual, but also for what he stood for and taught. The memoir in the reader's hands is intended to be an everlasting signifier for the real man, who is gone. In theory, great novels may have the same effect, but life writing is especially inclined to do so, given its intimately personal nature, first-person narration, and ostensible (but sometimes unverifiable or questionable) truthfulness of content.

Whatever the purposes for the various memoirs I have cited, and however those motivations helped shape the writings' ability to connect with readers, each of those books demonstrates great consistency with Foley's description of what Western culture has come to expect in a traditional memoir. With the Holocaust memoir, however, comes stark contrast to much of that tradition. Although scholars like David Roskies and Alan Mintz dispute the notion that the Holocaust demanded a new kind of writing from what Jewish and other literary

traditions had previously offered in response to antisemitic assaults across history, I side with scholars like Foley, Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, and David Patterson, who vehemently contend that the Holocaust memoir functions differently from other writings at many levels. In the interest of clarity, I readily acknowledge that Holocaust memoirs themselves typically fall into three main types: memoirs of hiding, memoirs of the camps, and memoirs of post-“liberation”<sup>10</sup> endurance. Of the three types, Holocaust memoirs about the camps surely depart the farthest from the longstanding tendencies that have come to characterize more traditional memoirs. Even so, I will also occasionally cite memoirs of hiding and post-liberation, which may offer more points of intersection with other kinds of memoirs, but still present other strong points of contrast.

Foley writes that “the typical... memoir of the Holocaust contradicts its conventional structure and undermines our expectations” (335). As she also describes above, and as my examples have illustrated, resolution almost always appears at the end of the traditional memoir; it is part of what readers expect. Even memoirs of war, like Elliott’s, or of terminal illness, like Radner’s, tend to sound a chord of optimism to reassure the reader that these texts, like the world, remain in balance. However, virtually no Holocaust memoirs convey any commensurate sense of resolution, let alone optimism.

The impossibility of resolving lives in writings about the Holocaust is predicated on several factors. First of all, as Langer and Patterson write, Holocaust memoirists write about their experiences as though they have survived their own deaths (*Preempting* 3 and *Sun* 17). It is as

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<sup>10</sup> I place this term in quotation marks because it is widely used, but as several scholars have argued, and as this paper should convey, the very notion of liberation for camp inmates is a misnomer.

though the vibrant, living self that animates the voice behind the traditional memoir has been erased. According to many scholars, most Holocaust survivors have a different primary motivation for writing than other memoirists. Most Holocaust survivors compose their memoirs with a goal of giving voice to those who were murdered rather than of communicating the “elaboration of a unique personality” of their own, as Foley writes above. If any “personality” is “unique” to the material presented by the survivor-writer, it is that of the Nazi evil itself, most powerfully manifested in descriptions of the death camp; giving voice to the murder victims offers the promise of sufficient “elaboration” to the memoirist.

This is not to say that every Holocaust memoirist discernibly expresses her need to write for that reason, or that Holocaust writers, like other authors we have examined, cannot write for several reasons at the same time. Yet bearing witness to the dead emerges as a recurring theme in countless survivor memoirs. In fact, one might even refer to it as an urge, an obsession, or a calling, which also helps feed the impossibility of reaching narrative resolution for these writers: at least in Judaism, even one murder, let alone 6 million, is an unforgivable sin. Thus the motivation for writing these memoirs presents an unavoidable tension. On one hand, memoirists want to achieve resolution so that readers can more easily follow the narrative, but resolution can never occur when memoirists retain the memories of so many innocent victims who cried in the hope of being heard, and whose own life narratives were never allowed fully to unfold. Patterson writes that “the one who emerges from the antiworld bears the voices and silences of more than himself” (159), and that survivors have “been entrusted with the memory not only of a terrible event but of a great treasure whose burial site they alone know” (198). Patterson’s use of the

term, “treasure,” does not denote any sort of rich reward, but rather a priceless value that amounts to a huge burden for the carrier.

One survivor, who published under his prisoner “name” of Ka-Tzetnik 135633, provides several scenarios depicting this urge to testify on behalf of the dead: “I vowed to them in Auschwitz, as I stood near their ashes behind the crematorium, that I would be their voice, that I wouldn’t stop telling their story till my last breath. This I must do now, while I still can” (17-18); “How could I explain that I didn’t write the book; those who went to the crematorium nameless, they wrote it” (19); “Over their ashes I vowed to be a voice to them, and when I left Auschwitz, they walked with me, they and the soundless Auschwitz blocks” (20); “But I shiver. What of my obligation to Them in Auschwitz? My vow? What of my vow?” (86). In a similar vein, survivor author Olga Lengyel writes: “In setting down this personal record I have tried to carry out the mandate given to me by the many fellow internees at Auschwitz who perished so horribly. This is my memorial to them.... Even as I pen my last words, figures rise before me and mutely plea that I tell their stories, too” (225). These words appear late in her memoir, probably at the point in the text where a memoirist on a more traditional subject would present a resolution for the reader to recognize. It is evident that it is not merely the horrific nature of the experiences, but also this goal of speaking on behalf of the dead, that helps set Holocaust memoirists apart from the authors I cite above. Radner and Ashe never suggest that they bear witness to those who already died of cancer or AIDS. Even Elliott, who witnessed atrocities during the Vietnam War, and who writes about her dead ancestors, never makes it her purpose to bring justice to those who died unjustly before her time.



The drive to give voice to the dead is further complicated by another ubiquitous trait shared by Holocaust memoirs, which is that the authors are afraid of being disbelieved by their own readers. This fear, too, works against any possibility of finding resolution through the act of writing: if one is driven to write, but remains tormented that the writing product will forever incur doubt in the readers, no honest resolution can appear on the final page. As Rosenfeld writes, “To overcome this unbelievability by telling their stories and, thereby, to convince others that the incredible actually occurred is a large part of the task of Holocaust testimony” (189). Auschwitz was a place where inmates frequently could not believe what they themselves witnessed and knew to have occurred. Lengyel writes that, despite what mothers in the death camp saw and heard, they “still could not believe that most of the children had been exterminated as soon as they arrived” (125). The eyewitness who cannot believe her eyes will always have doubts about convincing an outside audience.

Along the lines of that credibility factor, the first words of Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* trilogy are pertinent, even if they read like a riddle: “Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful” (1). Such an assertion immediately signals the reader that this is a text that must be read closely to be believed, though perhaps still not fully comprehended. In a related if less complicated message, Lengyel introduces her description of one terrible scenario with these words: “I know that this incident will appear preposterous and incredible to the reader. But it is absolutely true, word for word” (202). We find similar statements in many Holocaust memoirs. Solomon Perel, who survived in hiding, introduces his memoir by stating, “My Holocaust experiences reported here are true. These events actually happened to me.... I promised myself, and I promise you, the reader, to stick to the truth from

beginning to end” (xi-xii). By contrast, a writer like Marble, who allegedly worked as a spy in an evening dress on the same continent during the war, never feels the need defend the accuracy of her account, no matter how far-fetched and overly dramatic it sounds. For that matter, neither does White, whose tales of 19<sup>th</sup>-century cross-dressing and outsmarting her elders are similarly fantastic.

Patterson writes that the figure of Moishe the Beadle, who appears like a prophetic ghoul on the first pages of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, represents “a paradigm for the condition” of the survivor (Patterson 182). Moishe has seen the murders in the east and returns home to Sighet in a desperate condition to warn his community, but nobody will take seriously his testimony. With perfect irony in hindsight, Wiesel recalls asking the reputed madman, “Why do you want people to believe you so much? In your place I would not care whether they believed me or not” (7). By the time he sets those very words down in his memoir, Wiesel has already stepped into the frustrated madman’s shoes; it is a role he has never escaped.

An interesting twist on this Moishe/survivor paradigm occurs in Zsuzsanna Ozsvath’s memoir of hiding, *When the Danube Ran Red*. The book’s first chapter, “Hanna”, draws its name from Ozsvath’s childhood friend, a refugee from the East who recently arrived in Hungary. Situated at the start of Ozsvath’s narrative, much like Moishe the Beadle in *Night*, Hanna ruins a party by describing the massacres she has witnessed. But in this instance, Ozsvath, unlike Wiesel, believes the herald’s news. However, the young Ozsvath is powerless to do anything other than fret about it, knowing that the adults she depends on for safety would only insist that Hanna “was lying” (5). After being instructed by her father to dream “of the wide blue sky,” Ozsvath instead has a nightmare of her family being murdered like the others, but together (9).

The inability of the prudent child to convince the adults around her of the impending danger is mirrored in the memoir's purpose of persuading the reader to believe that unimaginable events in fact ensued.

Additionally, for virtually every Holocaust memoirist, nostalgia like Proust's or pride like Calof's seem entirely supplanted by guilt for having outlived fellow inmates who did not deserve to die. As Patterson writes, "Almost without exception, the 'Why me?' that resounds throughout the Holocaust memoir is the 'Why me?' not of a victim but of a survivor indebted to the victims: they, rather than I, should have lived, they were better than I, more deserving than I" (146).

Along the same line, Langer adds that "in the history of the Holocaust the fact of one person's staying alive cannot be isolated from the death of others less lucky" (*Preempting* 127). Roland, Radner, and Ashe, who all know when writing their memoirs that their deaths are imminent, are still prepared to fight for their lives. There is never a sense that survival must come at a terrible cost to another innocent, that in their place another victim will necessarily fall prey to the guillotine or to terminal disease. However, this is the norm in the Nazi death camp, where food is fought over and a certain number of inmates are listed to face the gas. If an inmate eats, another starves; if an inmate evades the gas chamber, someone else is compelled to go in her place.

Sometimes the memoirs convey a guilt of a more personal nature, particularly when survivors grasp that they have outlived not just virtually the entirety of European Jewry, but also their own loved ones. The first words to the reader in Lengyel's memoir are: "*Mea culpa*, my fault, *mea maxima culpa*! I cannot acquit myself of the charge that I am, in part, responsible for the destruction of my own parents and my two young sons. The world understands that I could not have known, but in my heart the terrible feeling persists that I could have, I might have,

saved them” (11). A more famous and vivid description appears in *Night*, in which the teenaged Eliezer must abandon his beloved father to save his own life. Acting on the advice of a senior inmate, and fearing a beating from the S.S., Wiesel ignores his dying father’s calls (111-112). From Wiesel, who comes from a religious upbringing, this scenario is especially powerful, for he knows full well that when his father calls out his name for help, it echoes God’s calling out to the murderer Cain in Genesis. Jewish teaching proscribes that the proper response is *hineini* (*Here I am*), but this answer is an impossibility for one who wants to survive the death camp. By the Nazis’ design, Auschwitz is meant to convince the devout Jew that he has sinned even when he has no real choice in the matter, just like Lengyel with her parents and sons. Again, the contrast with other types of memoirs is evident. Calof describes a terrible accident that burned and permanently deformed her newborn daughter (64-65). Calof’s two attendants, including her horrible mother-in-law, were equally at fault for the incident, so it makes sense that Calof felt only pity, not guilt. All the same, the fact that emotions were not consistent with logic in the death camp shows how far removed it was from the real (albeit oppressive) world of South Dakota homesteading.

Such misplaced guilt is not the last of the factors that contribute to an absence of resolution at the end of virtually every Holocaust memoir. The theme of religious faith, or lack thereof, is another quality that marks a gap between most Holocaust memoirs and memoirs of other types. As Patterson writes, “The terrible cry of ‘Where is God?’ resounds from the margins of every imprint on the pages of these memoirs” (13). The religiously Orthodox teenager Wiesel arrives in Auschwitz to see babies burned alive in ditches, eliciting this famously moving passage in *Night*: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into

one long night seven times sealed.... Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.... Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dream to ashes” (34). Later, the author and other inmates are forced to witness the hanging of a Jewish child on the gallows. When a neighbor asks where God is, Wiesel relates to the reader: “And from within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where – hanging from this gallows” (65). In a far different historical context, books on philosophy and reasoning provided Tolstoy with sufficient tools to find reconciliation with a God who too often seemed absent from human life, but the same tools, and even intensive religious training, could not have the same effect on Wiesel and other camp survivors. Doomed memoirists like Roland frequently affirm their faith in God in print before dying; Ashe even does so by quoting a poem by Howard Thurman: “One thread is a strange thread—it is my steadying thread. God’s hand holds the other hand” (328). By contrast, Patterson writes: “If the Holocaust memoir bears the marks of prayer, it is often a prayer filled with anger” (80). With longstanding teachings about God’s merciful presence seemingly disproved by what they experienced and witnessed, survivor-writers who witnessed no act of Providence to deliver them thus face another insurmountable obstacle to providing resolution at the end of their memoirs for readers.

Most memoirs follow a chronology of one event after another, usually tied together by cause and effect. However, problems of time complicate the path to resolution. Several scholars highlight the Nazi assault on Jewish time, so that the survivor is left feeling out of place, as if never to return to the pace of normal living. As Patterson writes, “In the Holocaust memoir, then, the freezing of time and the loss of the past are often expressed as a collapse of the future” (131). Indeed, Delbo, calls the first book in her *Auschwitz and After* trilogy, *None of Us Shall Return*,

even though large portions of the trilogy consist of conversations with fellow inmates who did survive past “liberation” to go home. Her point is that they, like herself, remain forever trapped in a place where time is frozen, so healing is not possible.

One finds that same sentiment of entrapment in time or exile from time in Fania Fénelon’s *Playing for Time*, where the Auschwitz survivor recounts that decades after liberation, she to some degree remains in the Lager: “It’s not that I want to. But particularly at night, I can’t help it, I find myself back in the block at Birkenau, and *it* all happens, without any help from me.... I spend every night there – every night!” (ix) And again, as survivor Primo Levi writes near the conclusion of *The Reawakening*, his memoir about being ostensibly rescued from Auschwitz: “Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause” (207). In observing the gap between more traditional memoirs and those that attempt to describe the fractured human relation to time and memory after the death camp, Foley writes: “The majority of Holocaust memoirists may not proclaim that History is chaos, but their personal renderings of the historical moment are characterized by an anguished fragmentation and discontinuity” (343). With regard to literary aesthetics, Foley’s point is perhaps best reflected in the writing style of another memoir of Auschwitz, the suitably titled *Fragments of Isabella*, whose chapters are brief and abrupt and give the impression of being almost randomly assembled rather than sequenced with any thoughtful regard to chronological events.

The problem of employing a literary aesthetic to reveal the Nazi assault on cause and effect, and even on logical thinking, is a profound one for the Jewish survivor-author. Since

ancient times, the most highly acclaimed and widely taught stories in Western civilization have contained a narrative arc: a beginning, a middle, and an end; or, in terms most students would easily recognize, an introduction of a conflict, a climax, and a resolution. These components have a logical relationship to one another, so that an author cannot make a big change to one without affecting the final outcome in the story.

But even compared to most other historical events, the Shoah does not provide an intellectually or emotionally accessible narrative arc, at least not in firsthand accounts by survivors. Character motivations are mysterious, as are cause and effect relationships. It is hard to tell a satisfying, sensible story in which the hero is deprived of choice about his fate, and in which the antagonists are wholly unsympathetic and obey an apparently twisted logic that has been orchestrated to confuse the victim or eyewitness. In this regard, one thinks of Levi, who in *Survival in Auschwitz* tells of breaking an icicle to quench his desperate thirst in the camp. When an S.S. guard suddenly smashes the ice from his grip, Levi asks, “*Warum?*” The guard responds: “*Hier ist kein warum*” (29).<sup>11</sup> Other instances of cruelty by the Nazis are even more perplexing, such as the many accounts that show how Jewish hospital patients were taken to the camps to be immediately murdered rather than simply killed in the beds where they had been found. The very impracticability of Levi the chemist’s guidelines for survival calls to mind another title from Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* trilogy: *Useless Knowledge*.

Yet camp lessons are not merely useless, as Delbo’s title suggests. Her memoir’s prose and poetry illustrate how camp lessons thwart proper thinking and serve as counterproductive forces to normal modes of civilized behavior. Camp life was never supposed to make sense to

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<sup>11</sup> “Why?” “There is no ‘why’ here.”

the Jews, who might then master it, survive, return, and bear witness. By confusing conventional modes of thought that civilization had instilled over many generations, the Nazis helped guarantee that for the Jew there could never be a full psychological or spiritual return, even in the rare cases where a physical one would be possible.

This notion of failing to return – not merely in the physical sense, but in the human relation sense, recurs in the literature. As Langer writes, “The survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. The two worlds haunt each other” (*Versions* 88). This metaphysical concept of incompatible worlds unnaturally meeting within the human experience helps highlight the problem of time never moving toward resolution for these survivors. The issue is that the clock of the living world cannot move past death, but as Patterson notes, the antiworld blurred distinctions between life and death. Death filled the camps in horrifying, newly invented ways, so that living persons were made to appear and to feel as though they were already dead. There, human beings looked and took breaths, but saw and inhaled corpses. Several memoirists describe not only the sights and smells of burning flesh, but also the ever-present need for inmates to wipe airborne soot and oil from the choking crematory ovens off their skin. In this light, the physical manifestation of death formed a tangible presence on the body of the living Jew. Death was present not as an end or as an escape, but as a principal type of physical dehumanization and psychological torture; death was on the body and on the mind.

Every Jew in the camps or in hiding was at one time marked for death and knew to expect it at any moment. New arrivals learned their lessons quickly or were murdered immediately.



However, these lessons did not aid but rather hindered the survivor after liberation. If the knowledge “gained” in the camp experience proved useless to the survivor, it was similarly unhelpful to the reader of the Holocaust memoir. As Foley writes, “In the hands of the Holocaust writer, the autobiography frequently furnishes an inadvertent parody of the conventional journey toward self-definition and knowledge” (333). The two arguably most famous Holocaust memoirs, *Night* and *Survival in Auschwitz*, are shocking not only for their gruesome depictions, but also for depicting the survivor as far worse off, not only physically but also spiritually, than at the beginning of their narratives. Whatever knowledge Wiesel and Levi gained cannot prove instructive to human beings in their day-to-day lives in the outside world. In *Night*’s jolting final passage the survivor sees his altered, post-“liberation” self for the first time: “One day when I was able to get up, I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (Wiesel 115). The notion of a skeleton, much like the archetypal symbol of Death itself, gazing out of a mirror defies the traditions of progress and personal improvement that pervade most memoirs.

Along a similar vein, Langer writes that Levi’s strategy in *Survival in Auschwitz* “duplicates the experience of a novice entering an unfamiliar milieu whose rules he has not yet understood. He offers us the ‘lessons’ as he learns them himself” (*Preempting* 27-28). Of course, Langer uses the term *lessons* facetiously, for Levi’s memoir can offer nothing of practical use for everyday survival in the world beyond the Lager. This is a crucial point of virtually any Holocaust memoir: despite having been written by a survivor, it remains paradoxically the antithesis of an instruction manual for survival. One would be hard-pressed to find a Holocaust

survivor memoir whose author claims to have figured out the key that would have permitted the murdered to have ultimately survived. This places the Holocaust memoir in stark contrast to the traditional model for life writing about facing death, as demonstrated by Radner's memoir of positive affirmations for those battling terminal cancer in the civilized world. "There is nothing to be learned from a baby torn in two or a woman burned alive," as Langer pointedly writes of death camp accounts (*Preempting* 10). Even Levi, an experienced scientist and a student of classical literature, can in the end make little rational sense of the atrocities he has experienced. But if, unlike traditional life writing, the Holocaust memoir has no useful wisdom to recommend it to the reader, what is its purpose? Perhaps it is to testify that the wisdom gathered in all of the other books was not enough to prevent the breakdown of an entire civilization and the mass murder and torture of a people.

In a concentrationary universe where heroism condemns rather than saves, where generosity of spirit usually dooms, and where survival appears random and ultimately tenuous, the Jew emerges with a memory that needs to be assembled, arguably repackaged, before others can begin to understand. And in the assembling and repackaging, in the return to the language and narrative form of the conventional world, at least some sense of the cruelty of camp chaos is inevitably lost.

As terrible and random as cancer or war may appear to be, we know to perceive them as part of a natural order. We sense that there are always connections between causes and effects, even if science or history has not yet enabled us to see what they are. The same cannot be said for the death camps, where human beings tortured and murdered innocent victims and then somehow returned to normal, productive lives after the war. This absence of logic, of any

recognizable and consistent cause and effect, plagues the survivor and makes difficult any rendering of the camp experience for those who were never there to experience it firsthand. There is no doubt that Holocaust memoirs, like others, are conscious constructions by authors who may evoke, but never fully capture or convey the historical events they are attempting to recount. For one thing, memory is always limited by an individual's scope of vision at both the moment of witnessing and the moment of recalling. For another, any author will adjust the telling of a story to suit her audience.

Such limitations of the memoir are widely acknowledged in scholarly discourse. Langer writes that "the story you tell cannot be precisely the story as it happened" (*Testimonies* 61) and that "Words inevitably distort the event, which is why any version of survival is just that – a version, limited by memory, insight, and vocabulary" (*Versions* 187). He is even more explicit in that line of criticism when he asserts that "every survivor memoir must be read, at least partially, as a work of the imagination, which selects some details and blocks out others for the purpose of shaping the reader's response—indeed, for the purpose of organizing the author's own response too.... An axiom of the narrative mode, from which survivor memoirs are not exempt, is that all telling modifies what is being told" (xii). Langer is by no means alone in his assessment that the memoir, no matter how truthful its author seeks to be, is unavoidably a creative endeavor. James Young adds that, "unlike the diarist, the survivor-memoirist begins his testimony with full knowledge of the end, which inevitably contextualizes early experiences in terms of later ones.... The survivor necessarily unifies his vision in the knowledge of its outcome" (30). Despite Young's repeated reference to the survivor, this phenomenon occurs in the writing of any sort of memoir. Similarly, Mintz readily concedes that any piece of art "involves some artifice and

rearrangement of the facts in the imaginative reworking of reality” (42). These assessments of the common features and limitations of Holocaust memoirs are fair.

However, with regard to other aspects of Holocaust memoirs, Mintz’s claims are sometimes more dubious. He writes that another problem of the subgenre is how “The long suppression of survivors’ voices had affected the ability to retrieve, articulate, and shape the internal narrative” (13). When one considers that most Jewish survivors in not only Europe, but also North America and even Israel, were in many ways discouraged from sharing their stories especially in the immediate post-war years, Mintz’s assessment seems fair at least for those memoirs that were published several years after the historical events. However, other texts, like Gisella Perl’s and Lengyel’s, were published within a few years of the events, and thus prove harder to reconcile with Mintz’s words. If Perl, Lengyel, and other early Holocaust memoirists were in fact “suppressed,” it surely did not prevent them from publishing their accounts. In this matter, Mintz is only guilty of losing sight of the full history and scope of Holocaust memoir publications. More problematic is his contention that *Night* “early on... established a norm for what a Holocaust memoir should be” (73) so that only certain Holocaust memoirs which followed that mold came to dominate the subgenre to the complete exclusion of other memoirs that are supposedly less aggressive in depicting the Holocaust as a great rupture in Jewish and world history (75). Mintz’s ally in arguing against the rupture perspective, Roskies, goes even further when he asserts that active and conscious “self-censorship” is what distinguishes the Holocaust memoir from previous attempts by Jews to document encounters with catastrophe. He writes:

But the burden of memory weighed heavier in the wake of the Holocaust than it ever had in the past... To build a sense of collective self after the Holocaust, it was not enough to fashion a myth of destruction and rebellion; the Holocaust would yield meaning only if certain of its specifics were thoroughly censored.... The more the gray was eliminated, the more the Holocaust as archetype could take on its specific contours. The Jewish dead were absolutely good, and the Nazis and their collaborators were absolutely evil.... The thrust of this self-censorship on the part of writer-survivors was the very opposite of the intellectuals' revolt against the traditions of Jewish response to catastrophe after World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. (251-253)

While it is proper for the scholar to try to examine Holocaust memoirs in the context of older writings by Jews that responded to previous historical catastrophes, Roskies's claim that Holocaust memoirists intentionally oversimplified the roles of perpetrator and victim is proved untrue by even several of the earliest Holocaust memoirs. For example, we can find balanced descriptions of Nazis and Jews in Gisella Perl's *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, first published in 1948, and Gerda Weissman Klein's *All But My Life*, first published in 1957.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the prominence of those same memoirs in scholarly discourse and classrooms also makes suspect Mintz's notion that Wiesel's later memoir established the dominant model "early on."

To refute Mintz's charge that only oversimplified Holocaust memoirs have been permitted entry to the canon, I again point to Perl's memoir, which undoubtedly makes the "gray" an important theme. For example, she discusses her role in saving the life of a fellow

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<sup>12</sup> See Klein's descriptions of the Jewish Merin (90-92) and the Nazi Frau Kügler (132-133) for two noteworthy examples.

inmate who attempted suicide in the camp (50). Although the S.S. provided electrified fences and other opportunities for inmates to kill themselves, some accounts claim that guards prevented them from ending their own lives. Such prevention would help reassert Nazi dominance over prisoners' lives and deaths. Thus, by making the choice to prevent an inmate's suicide, Perl might be seen as unnecessarily supporting S.S. power over an inmate who, statistically speaking, was likely to suffer a bit longer and then still be killed at Nazi hands anyway. Perl also writes in defense of women inmates who prostituted themselves for food and other necessities (79), which must surely have been seen as a gray area by readers in the 1940s. And finally, there are the several pages on her choice to kill newborn Jewish babies in Auschwitz and thereby save the mothers, who would otherwise have been sent with the infants to the crematory or even to Mengele's laboratory table. These accounts are often corroborated in Lengyel's memoir, which it should be said, also does not shy away from the gray areas.

It would seem, then, that yet another significant aspect that separates Holocaust memoirs from those on other subjects is the nature of the discourse surrounding it. Few people expect other types of memoirs to be so historically accurate or all-encompassing. Certainly, nobody criticized the success of Radner's book by complaining that other illnesses were not well represented on the bestsellers' list, or that the author did not provide a complete picture of everyone's experience with cancer. It was simply enough that the writer seemed true to her vision without grossly distorting the necessary facts and reached her audience. Some of the most prominent Holocaust memoirs, such as Wiesel's, Levi's and Delbo's first works, have already achieved widespread acclaim as great literature. They have entered the canon as much for their

aesthetic qualities, most notably their use of language, as for their historical content. Perhaps their newfound high status helps invite close scrutiny and unfair demands.

Still, it seems probable that the greater difficulty with grasping the relatively young subgenre of the Holocaust memoir is its inherent distance from other types of memoirs. Because the Holocaust memoir offers no comfort or resolution, while also implicitly commanding us all to help take up the unbearable burden of the witness, it represents a subversive new presence in the wider genre of life writing, constantly challenging assumptions about how a life is meant to be lived, expressed, read, and evaluated.

The next three chapters each present a different case study to highlight several challenges facing film adapters of Holocaust memoirs. My examination of how effectively these adaptations react to the challenges can offer a better understanding of both the Shoah and our readiness to confront its transgressive nature with sufficient fidelity.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE JEW UNCUT:

#### CIRCUMCISING THE SURVIVOR'S MEMORY IN *EUROPA, EUROPA* (1990)

*It was on the way, in the lodging, that HASHEM encountered him and sought to kill him.  
So Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched it to his feet;  
and she said, "You caused my bridegroom's bloodshed!" So he released him; then she said, "A  
bridegroom's bloodshed was because of circumcision."*

Exodus 4:24-26

*Years keep turning;  
years I've lived like this, distress  
every year my heart tormenting,  
pure as Crusoe in his wilderness,  
getting by, but gradually learning  
this: that nothing will protect him  
when the hunters come to fell his treehouse,  
loose the clamorous dogs against him;  
hunters steeped in beastliness,  
blood shed by the bleeding sunset,  
eavesdrop on his simple blamelessness.*

Miklós Radnóti<sup>13</sup>

"Can the artist, especially one who was not there, stumble upon some essential truth [about the Shoah] that even the survivor may have missed?" asks Steven F. Feinstein (152). This question invites us to ponder the very nature of adaptation's role as a means to approach the Shoah, an issue of timely significance as survivors pass away. Director Agnieszka Holland

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<sup>13</sup> Miklos Radnoti, "Twenty-Nine Years," *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklos Radnoti*, trans. Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Frederick Turner (Budapest: Cornia Books, 2002), 77.



substantiates the potential of adaptation in her daring 1991 film, *Europa Europa*, which adapts a 1990 memoir by Holocaust survivor Solomon Perel. Like the source memoir, the film adaptation depicts the experiences of a Jewish adolescent as he desperately attempts to avoid capture by the Nazis. There is no denying that Holland's adaptation oftentimes departs from the narrative details and aesthetic elements of its source material. By altering aspects of Perel's life events and calling greater attention to a scenario described in one short passage from his memoir, *Europa Europa* manages to illuminate its subject in ways that exceed the scope of the printed word. But this is not to say that the survivor "missed" an "essential truth," as Feinstein calls it.

As we shall see, the roots of the film's themes are surely present in the memoir, and Holland masterfully crafts cinematic language to let them grow before the viewer's eyes. In this manner, *Europa Europa* epitomizes an ethically sound model for adapting the survivor memoir to the screen. It transmits what we might call the spirit, if not every precise detail, of the survivor's testimony. This spirit warrants close examination, especially when we weigh the different forms that fidelity may assume.

Perel's memoir was originally published in French as *Europa, Europa*<sup>14</sup> in 1990. It tells the extraordinary story of a Jewish teenager's fight for survival in the heart of the Third Reich. Born in Germany in 1925, Solomon<sup>15</sup> enjoys his childhood with his his parents, older brothers,

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<sup>14</sup> The reader will note the subtle difference between the titles of the memoir and the adaptation. The former includes a comma, while the latter does not. Even so, many of the secondary sources that refer to the book and film use the titles interchangeably. To avoid confusing the reader, I will typically avoid referring to the memoir by name.

<sup>15</sup> To avoid confusion, I will refer to the survivor-memoirist as "Perel," the protagonist in the book as "Solomon," and the protagonist in the film as "Solly." These seems to be the simplest options, when we consider that the book and film narratives include multiple disguises, nicknames, and fake identities.

and older sister. Rising antisemitism in the 1930s compels the family to move to Minsk. When the Germans and Soviets launch their invasions of Poland in 1939, Solomon is directed by his fearful parents to accompany his brother, Isaak, on a journey East, away from the Nazis. Isaak goes off to wed his girlfriend, and Solomon is placed in a Soviet orphanage, where he becomes a *Komsomol*. There, he flourishes as a student and stays in contact with his parents, whose situation deteriorates. Once the Germans attack the Soviets, chaos erupts in and around the school, and Solomon is eventually captured by *Wehrmacht* troops. Telling them that he is an ethnic German orphan, he wins them over with his German fluency and joins their unit as a translator and unofficial mascot. He is increasingly disturbed by his awareness that his new friends will murder him in cold blood, should they learn that he is circumcised. For over a year, he fights alongside the Germans, during which time an officer even offers to adopt him. Due to his age, Solomon is sent to a Hitler Youth school in Germany, where he spends three years and again thrives academically and socially. Although he goes to great lengths to hide his Jewish background from his viciously antisemitic schoolmates and girlfriend, he reveals his secret to her mother. Missing his loved ones to the point where he is willing to risk his life to see them, he decides to visit his own mother, father, and sister in the Lodz ghetto. However, once nearby, he is prohibited from entering, though he thinks he catches a glimpse of his mother. Solomon returns to the school and survives additional close calls in which the Germans almost discover his identity. At war's end, he visits his hometown neighbors and concentration camps in an attempt to find his family. Eventually, he learns that his father starved to death in the ghetto, his sister was shot on a death march, and his mother was gassed in a truck near Chelmno and

dumped into a mass grave. After finding his brothers, Solomon finally moves to the British Mandate of Palestine.

It is striking that both Perel and Holland have insisted that *Europa Europa* is faithful to the memoir. As Holland states in an interview, “I tried not to invent things too much. Ninety percent of what you see is what Solly said happened” (Tibbetts 137). And yet, we must wonder if she means to be disingenuous by making this claim. A simple comparison of the characters and events between the book and the film reveals that Holland’s estimation of her fidelity to Perel’s account is far too high. We may easily observe that she deliberately introduces numerous changes, amounting to far more than 10% of the film’s content, to the details of the memoir’s narrative.

Perel similarly downplays the number of changes that Holland makes, telling an interviewer that only “a few of the scenes in *Europa Europa* amount to ‘poetic freedom.’” Just as remarkable is that he also “passionately defends the Polish director, Agnieszka Holland, for producing a movie that is true to the spirit of his wartime experiences” (Engelberg “A Life Stranger Than the Movie”). Regarding the key issue of fidelity, I suggest that it is mainly if paradoxically through the alterations Holland makes to the source material that the film stays true to the Jewish spirit of the memoir. By Jewish spirit, I mean to suggest that the adapter intends to give voice to the Jew, not the Nazi, and sets out to employ specifically Jewish markers throughout the narrative. Only by introducing changes can Holland hope to transmit with authenticity and emotional power the survivor’s main themes, particularly regarding the Jew’s torturous choice between exile and death.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Linda Costanza Cahir queried, to what “should the translator be *most* faithful? The issue is not that of the translation’s faithfulness, but of its *faithfulness to what?*” (199, italics hers). No Holocaust scholar may reasonably advocate for the abandonment of all historical facts in the name of artistic freedom, no matter the artist’s motivation or the art’s aesthetic promise. Certain historical points are to remain unaltered, or the ethical integrity of the product is compromised. Important dates, events, and well-known historical figures typically fall into this category.

Edward Isser helps us to map an acceptable standard for theatrical works, and it is prudent to suggest that the same measure should be applied for cinematic ones. As he writes,

Historical dramas, such as Shakespeare’s Richard III or Schiller’s Maria Stuart, deal with events so far in the past they have lost their political point.... Plays about recent events, that use specific historic figures and incidents, require a stricter historical accounting. Plays that address contentious social, ethical, and philosophical topics have an obligation to the documented evidence.... an author cannot manipulate the record by changing dates, altering numbers, or falsely attributing statements and actions to historical figures. Such alterations undermine the philosophical and political conclusions of the work. The introduction of dramatic artifice does not abrogate moral and social responsibility. (20)

I agree with Isser’s argument that the artist bears a moral and social responsibility to the subject of the Shoah; we seeing a similar argument made by Berel Lang (74). There is also wisdom when scholars urge that representations of the Shoah must never ignore that it was at its core a War Against the Jews.

As Ilan Avisar puts it, “Whatever treatment the Holocaust has, its artistic treatment requires an indispensable allegiance to the basic historical facts. These facts concern the unequivocal identification of the victims as Jews.... [and should foster an understanding of the Holocaust’s] monumental injustice to the Jewish people” (181-182). Avisar is hardly alone in voicing this sentiment. “The complexity of the artist’s obligation to Holocaust material begins from the moment that material is engaged,” writes Robert Skloot (19). He continues: “Two historical events inform all discussion of Holocaust drama. First, the destruction of six million Jews... is an incontrovertible fact. Second, these victims were killed by the German nation under Hitler” (71). Any art that includes a narrative of events in the Shoah should maintain fidelity to the victimization of the Jewish people and culture by the Nazis and their accomplices.

To those basic, unalterable facts I will add one more point, which specifically concerns art that would portray survival against the Nazi assault. Such a work should never deny the terrible imbalance of power between the Nazi and the Jew, which prevented the latter from orchestrating any type of master plan for survival. In the comparatively rare situations where a Jew was able to survive, many factors were involved. Most significant among these is chance or luck, which by nature was outside of the Jew’s control. Moreover, actions facilitating survival are not to be interpreted as sources of relief or pride for the survivor; they actually amount to quite the opposite, in that survival requires its own sacrifices, confusion, and shame. Because they both consistently privilege this short list of essential truths through their portrayals, Perel’s memoir and Holland’s adaptation maintain an ethical alignment. In referring to an ethical alignment, I mean that both works focus on similar themes and succeed in transmitting them in a manner that does not degrade them or the victims.

To be sure, not everyone is as favorably impressed by *Europa Europa*. It is well documented that the film fared better with audiences and critics in the United States than in Germany (Doneson *The Holocaust in American Film* 199-200 and Baron 88), which refused to submit it for consideration in the Academy Awards Best Foreign Film category. (The adaptation did, however, win the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.) Judith Doneson scoffs at the film's popularity in the United States. She posits that American filmgoers embraced the work for "its sanitary quality—it shows nothing of the Holocaust. Rather it depicts the adventures of a young Jewish Indiana Jones who survives persecution in various guises, including that of a Nazi, only because he has a lovely face" (*The Holocaust in American Film* 200). Doneson's assessment is inaccurate and unduly harsh. For one thing, the protagonist's good looks are but one of many reasons accounting for his ultimate survival in the film, just as in the memoir; bravery, cleverness, and especially chance are at least as vital to his endurance against the Nazi onslaught.

Perhaps more problematic is Doneson's dismissal of the film as an Indiana Jones knockoff that never "shows" anything of the Shoah. It seems likely that she charges the film with sanitization due to its refusal to depict Jews struggling to survive the Nazi camps, which are commonly and rightly acknowledged to be the epicenter of the Final Solution. However, I would counter that the absence of a camp setting is part of what makes Perel's memoir more suitable than most for audiovisual representation. That is, sanitization is inevitably the result whenever a film attempts to portray a Nazi camp, as no director has ever achieved a level of authenticity that approximates the horrors of the real Lager. By avoiding the camp setting, *Europa Europa* does not fall into the common pitfall of films that necessarily minimize its horrors.

Moreover, it is foolish to dismiss the harrowing experiences of a survivor who hid in the Reich. As we know, about half of the Jews murdered in the Shoah never set foot in a camp. Of course, Holland's film, like Perel's memoir, is unavoidably different from accounts that are written by camp survivors. For example, in both works Perel is never directly a victim of physical torture at the hands of Nazis. His survival is not an issue of overcoming the sort of assaults on Jewish physicality, such as beatings and starvation, that we are used to seeing in films that attempt to depict the Shoah. Holland's brilliance is to elevate the mutilation of the Jew's genitalia, mentioned only briefly in the memoir, so it becomes in the adaptation a central motif in the narrative and a memorable, shocking signifier of the Nazi assault on the Jewish body and soul. There is nothing sanitized in the way she accomplishes this. For these reasons, we may also reject Yosefa Loshitzky's claim that *Europa Europa* "is a film about survival rather than death, redemption instead of annihilation" (3). It is a gross misreading to suggest that Holland's film avoids themes of suffering, doom, and death, even if stacks of naked corpses are never shown. Although Solly is alive at film's end, he is hardly redeemed or relived of all his suffering.

If sanitization of the Shoah is not the main reason that *Europa Europa* proved more successful with American audiences than with their European counterparts, Alvin Rosenfeld perhaps helps us account for the vast difference in reception. He writes: "While Americans, on the whole, may know less about the history of the Holocaust than Europeans, they have been far less resistant than people in Europe to recognize the Holocaust as a catastrophe that specifically targeted Jews" (*The End of the Holocaust* 221). In watching Holland's adaptation, we are consistently reminded that the Shoah targets the Jews for no reason but their Jewishness.

This chapter will use *Europa Europa* to show what an *un-sanitized*, Jewish-specific portrayal of the Shoah can look like on the screen. It will furthermore explore Holland's aesthetic talents for drawing in the viewer so that the film may transmit its ethical testimony. My investigation will highlight certain key changes that Holland makes to the details of the survivor's written narrative and how these alterations mean to shape a better understanding of the crimes against the Jew, not the Everyman. As an artistic genre, Holocaust cinema has often rightly been accused of universalizing the Shoah by de-Judaizing it—the textbook example is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959), though there are many, many others—but *Europa Europa* boldly defies this tradition. To de-Judaize a Holocaust narrative is another way to exile the Jewish survivor from his own identity, which was part of the formula employed as the Nazis' Final Solution to "the Jewish Problem." Like its source memoir, Holland's film means to depict the War Against the Jews, and this shared purpose is exactly what instructs the adaptation to impose certain important changes to the biographical narrative. The case can almost be made that Holland's film succeeds in further Judaizing the story that appears in the source text, though a more accurate reading is that the adaptation merely finds different and more effective ways to express the survivor's wounding Jewish sensibility.

What form does this wounding take in the paradigm of the memoir and film? The Jewish teenager is turned into an exile, with all that the word implies, simply because he is Jewish and wanting to obey his mother's final command that he must live. I will analyze examples of changes that Holland makes to the narrative to show how the memoir and the film each show us the terrible implications of Jewish exile at Nazi hands. Because the Shoah is overwhelmingly an



account of murders, not of survival, I will give special attention to what Holland does with the subject of Jewish death.

As we shall see, the assault on the Jew is always about more than the murder of the body. It occurs on at least three other fronts: the Jew's identity, the Jew's family and home, and the Jew's Covenant with the Eternal, as embodied by circumcision. These components of the War Against the Jews are so intertwined and overlapped that it would prove futile to try to treat each one separately. An attack on one is an attack on all three, and whenever we look at one, we necessarily look at all three. Although the book and the film both depict these same three themes, they do so by often using different characters and events, and by employing varying degrees of emphasis.

No doubt, some readers and viewers will immediately be tempted to dismiss the very notion that a shared spirit should be superior to matching the details of an "original" text. They will claim that the book is more accurate, and thus more truthful, than the adaptation. This is faulty thinking, even if Perel, unlike Holland, plainly expresses his commitment to truth telling in his account. As he clearly states at the start of the memoir's Preface, "My Holocaust experiences reported here are true. These events actually happened to me." He revisits this message soon afterwards in the Prologue, writing, "I promised myself, and I promise you, the reader, to stick to the truth from beginning to end. The barriers are down... and I'm ready to awaken painful memories, the memories of my *Shoah*" (xii). Are we to assume, then, that Perel does not hold Holland to the same standard of accuracy? After all, the adaptation alters some of the events that "actually happened" to the survivor. Nonetheless, neither work is wrong. As long as her depiction supports the essential points that Avisar, Skloot, and I have pinpointed, Holland

is free to alter Perel's biography for the ethically greater purpose of prompting viewers to approach the Shoah.

Holland's role in prompting viewers to sit through the Holocaust film should not be underestimated. Virtually every year, new films claiming to depict the topic manage to win over audiences and critics and win awards. Few such films, however, attain much popularity without willfully sacrificing fidelity to the historical subject. By contrast, *Europa Europa* masterfully combines aesthetic and ethical achievement. It manages to win over viewers, even while transmitting the survivor's transgressive message, including unpleasant details. This is no small feat. While I contend that ethics, not aesthetics, should be the most important priority for any representation of the Shoah, I also take satisfaction in seeing a film that meets ethical standards and still entertains its audience. There is little point in making a Holocaust film that nobody watches, especially when we want survivor testimonies to be known. The transmission of the ethical message in large measure depends on the adapter's aesthetic talents.

Therefore, it is important to note the connection between aesthetic and ethical concerns when Holland introduces changes to the source material. One example is how Holland employs Solly's voiceover in the film, but only sparingly. As an experienced director, she is surely aware that a number of adaptation theorists strongly condemn the use of voiceover in film as "uncinematic" (Kluge 238) and "as an aid for the cinematically challenged" (Mosier 249); one scholar laments that "nothing reveals the staginess of a film more than the presence of someone off stage talking to us" (Schor 154). While the reader of a memoir expects first person narration, the filmgoer typically does not, and likely prefers to be shown instead of told. Too much narration in the movie can bore or annoy an audience to the point of distraction. Another

example is how *Europa Europa* eliminates the memoir's employment of flash forwards and other references to post-Holocaust events in the survivor's life. The references to the future often involve a jump in time to several years after the war, when the Jewish survivor reveals his Jewish identity to a German who had been unaware. These and other references to the future appear with some frequency throughout the book: pages 13,14, 19, 23, 59-60, 69-72, 74, twice on 75, 81, 90, 96, 118-119, 126, 132, 134-135, 139, 163, 167, 171-172, 172, 199, and 211. The lengthier flash forwards are italicized and thus stand out from the rest of the writer's prose. Adding to the disruptive nature of these incursions into the narrative is that the author sometimes punctuates a flash forward with a phrase, such as, "But to get back to my story" (60). Of course, these scenarios are not merely abrupt pauses in the narrative. They also serve as a near-constant reminder to the reader that Perel will eventually survive whatever else he describes on the page.

There is no ethical problem to be found in Perel's use of flash forwards; they do not support the Nazi voice, nor do they diminish his testimony of survival in any way. All the same, what is appropriate in book form does not necessarily function as effectively on a screen. We must acknowledge that the film depends on different aesthetic sensibilities to sell its ethical message to its audience. The reminders of Solly's ultimate survival would undoubtedly detract from the film's ability to entertain. By excising the memoir's flash forwards from the film, Holland is then able to establish tones of suspense, irony, and even humor in many scenes. With these tones, *Europa Europa* sustains the viewer's interest, which will be necessary for the film to find open ears for its more disturbing moments of Jewish suffering.

An example of suspense, irony, and humor being employed to convey not just entertainment, but also darker themes in the survivor's story, appears in a scene depicting Solly's

time in the *Wehrmacht*. As in the memoir, the Jew knows that his fellow troops will murder him should they discover his Jewish identity. In the film, Holland adds several minutes where Solly sets out to defect to the Soviet side across the battlefield. Through secret communications with the Russian trenches, he makes plans to arrive there at night with his rifle over his head. When executing this plan for escape, though, he (and by extension, the viewer) is surprised to see a Russian unit suddenly surrendering to him. The Jew is then celebrated as a war hero by his German comrades, and this ironically earned reputation helps protect him later, when he hides his true identity at a Hitler Youth school in the Reich. The scenario of Russian surrender appears nowhere in Perel's memoir. However, the addition of this scene not only amuses audiences, but also communicates several themes that are highly evident in the book: the Jew's desperation to escape, the sense that he has no viable escape from German clutches, and the fact that events typically unfold beyond his orchestration, no matter how hard he tries.

While the film adaptation includes no flash forwards, it does include a small number of narrative disruptions that take the form of strange dream sequences. For example, in one dream, Solly envisions Stalin and Hitler happily waltzing together, while a Polish schoolmate is inflicted with stigmata. This sequence wryly and sometimes laughingly communicates Solly's recognition that Poland has been betrayed by the two dictators. Another dream shows Solly walking into a Seder where his family members are killed before his eyes. Running for cover, he hides in a closet, only to find Hitler alongside him. The terrified Nazi leader nervously confesses to the Jewish boy that he, too, must hide his circumcision. These dreams, then, serve the purpose of offering insights to the Jew's feelings of betrayal and fear, but they do not give the viewer a picture of what will happen later.

According to Perel's Prologue, Holland helped shape the title of both the book and the film. Supposedly, their shared vision is inspired by Voltaire's fiction:

You may well recall the famous director Elia Kazan's renowned 1960s book entitled *America, America*. In them he recounts Voltaire's classic story of *Candide*, a sailor who finds himself cast ashore among cannibals in South America. After many dangerous adventures he survives healthy and intact.

In my book you will see that I also perceived myself as having been cast among cannibals for whom I would have been any easy victim. Agnieszka Holland, the director of the film based upon my experiences, viewed me as the *Candide* of the twentieth century. But my adventures had been in Europe, not America; hence the title *Europa, Europa*. (xii)

We must wonder, though, if *Candide* is truly the model that is followed by the author or adapter. No scholar in Holocaust Studies will be comfortable with what seems to be the equation of Nazis with South American cannibals. Nazis killed Jews for the purpose of annihilation, not sustenance or territorial defense. Similarly, Perel's use of words like "adventures" and "healthy and intact" imply a serious misreading of what surviving the Shoah entailed. As we will see, though, Perel's rendering of his experiences in the subsequent chapters will subvert these unsuitable word choices in the Prologue. By the end of the book, the reader does not have the sense of having accompanied Perel on any adventure. Furthermore, the survivor's body may survive intact, but this is by no means the status of his soul. Whatever may be the vision that Perel and Holland share, it goes much deeper than *Candide's* adventures.

As well, we learn from Perel's Prologue that Holland exercised a hand in selecting the titles. Interestingly, Holland originally wanted to call the film, *European Education*, but this title had already been used elsewhere. Her settling on *Europa Europa* reveals a more profound understanding of the Shoah than Perel provides in his Prologue. As she explains to an interviewer, "Actually, I think *Europa, Europa* works because it hints at a duality in Europe, of the old Europe of rich culture and tradition and the newer Europe responsible for two of the most terrible totalitarian regimes in history. It also describes the identity confusion of the boy Solly" (Tibbetts 138). The survivor's identity confusion is what has commanded the attention of much of the discourse surrounding the memoir and the film. Because the protagonist assumes disguises and often comments on being confused about who he really is, the assault on identity is hard to miss. From the start of the memoir, details of Perel's identity, and then the Nazi assault on it, occupy much of the spotlight. The film, too, finds way to express these themes.

The reader of the memoir is immediately made aware of Perel's Jewish identity, and soon after, of the Nazis' views and policies regarding this identity. Very early on, he defines "the *Shoah*... [as] the systematically planned murder of the European Jews, [which] would profoundly convulse our history" (2). The reader will be explicitly and frequently reminded that the Holocaust was specifically the Nazis' War Against the Jews (99-100, 133, 146, 165, 190-191). Perel marks his Jewish identity with references to the Passover Seder (38), the holiday of Simchas Torah (69), sabbath observance (148), the *Shema* (190), *Hatikvah* (195 and 203-204), and the Hebrew language (209 and 216). Like its author, the book is steeped in Jewish religious observance and culture. The adaptation, too, takes care to remind us of Solly's heritage. Holland inserts scenes depicting a *brit milah*, a bar mitzvah and sabbath preparation, a Passover Seder, a

Star of David being drawn on a fogged window, a Jewish cemetery, and a traditional Hebrew song. Although different from the Jewish markers that the memoir includes, Holland's additions serve the same purpose of helping the viewer to remember the scope of the Nazi attack beyond the physical Jewish body.

Holland goes to some lengths to show how the sudden shifts in identity become a mental and emotional torture for Solly, who can never truly escape the fact that he is a Jew. It is as though the Final Solution wages war on the Jewish mind, not just on the body, and indeed it did. As Lawrence Langer writes, "The unresolvable conflict between shifting identities is one of the legacies recorded by humiliated memory" (*Testimonies* 111). The destruction of identity is an assault on memory, for we are nothing without our history. "One could escape the Nazis," writes David Patterson, "but the Jew could scarcely escape the annihilation of the name by which the Nazis sought to annihilate every trace of Jewish being. For the Jewish name had to be exchanged for a Christian name, for a name that would make the Jew, if only provisionally, into one of those who for centuries had been the murderers of the Jews and were now, to a large extent, the accomplices of the Nazis" (166). Even more disturbingly, Perel does not merely assume a gentile name, but a Nazi one.

It should then come as no surprise that in the memoir, Perel very frequently refers to a divided sense of self, which consists of the "Shloimele" of the Jewish home who must depend on the Aryan disguise of "Jupp" to avoid being murdered. Just a few of the numerous examples include when he refers to: "my identity problem...Hitler Youth Jupp and Solomon the Jew got along like fire and water. Still, they existed side by side in the same body, in the same mind" (77); "I had fused the two selves into a new personality that was not vulnerable to external

provocations and inner conflicts.... The secret workings of a shattered soul are sometimes unfathomable” (83); “I counted on my ability to adapt in all situations... Whatever my primary role might turn out to be, I was certain of one thing: Jupp would never forget his primary commandment—to protect Solomon. The spark of Solomon’s Jewish origins would continue to grow, never to be extinguished” (112); “My life was like a clock with a pendulum that swung to two extremes. At one end was the temporary, false life that had been forced on me. At the other, my genuine, deeply rooted but concealed life. The pendulum swung irregularly. Most of the time it hung in Jupp’s world. Then, for a time, it would move to the other end. Returning from Solomon’s world, it would first undergo a brainwashing before swinging all the way over to Jupp’s” (178); and, “Six years had passed since I started this lunatic existence. For four of these years I had been robbed of my identity, I had become someone else” (182). What we gather from these passages is that the Jew survives, but during the act of surviving, he cannot act or think Jewishly: he must sacrifice this most precious aspect of the self in order to maintain its survival. As Langer describes, this tension is an extension of the systematic Nazi assault on Jewish identity: “It is indeed a kind of annihilation, a totally paradoxical killing of the self by the self in order to keep the self alive” (*Testimonies* 131). How does the Jewish teenager come to possess this fractured psyche?

The assault on identity is often first predicated on the assault on the family and home. Patterson offers insight regarding how and why the Nazis set these, and not just the Jewish body, as targets. As he writes,

It was not enough to kill the Jews. Waging an ontological war, the Nazis had to annihilate their homes and their concept of home; they had to drive them from their homes and,



thus, render them homeless before killing them because the ontological onslaught was aimed directly at the destruction of all being that inheres in dwelling....

If the concentrationary universe has been deemed an anti-world, it is because, among other reasons, it is antithetical to the home. (52-54)

As we have noted, *Europa Europa* does not portray the concentrationary universe, but it does have the obligation of translating that the assault on the home and family was by no means confined to spaces denoted by barbed wire. Jewish tradition holds the home, not the synagogue, as its epicenter, so the Nazi assault on the household is no random accident. Of course, part of being exiled from the home is one's separation from family members one knows are doomed. As Langer writes, "Personal survival lives in the permanent shadow of family loss" (*Testimonies* 157). As the story of a survivor, *Europa Europa* must depict exile from home and family, as well as the Jew's ongoing longing for both.

Now, we may more closely examine prominent examples of how the filmmaker changes the memoir's details in order to transmit the survivor's wounding message. *Europa Europa* opens with three brief moments of foreshadowing. In the first, teenaged Solomon "Solly" Perel (Marco Hofschneider) is shown underwater while wearing a Nazi uniform and struggling against an unnamed male who evidently means to kill him. Next, a brief voiceover by Solly states that he shares a birthday with his nation's chancellor, Adolph Hitler. Third, we see baby Solly's circumcision ceremony and hear the traditional Jewish song, *Hinei Mah Tov*. Solly's voiceover states, "You won't believe this, but I remember my circumcision." Since Jewish law mandates that the covenant of circumcision, or *brit milah*, be performed when a son is eight days old, the

audience cannot be expected to view Solly's claim as credible. Furthermore, Perel's memoir includes nothing of this bizarre claim; in fact, there is no mention at all of the *brit*.

The reason behind Holland's addition cannot be ascribed to her desire to entertain an audience: there are more effective ways to excite viewers, particularly when attempting to bring the Holocaust to the big screen. Nor can her motivation be understood as a need to fit a complex narrative into the time constraints of a two-hour movie: if this were her reasoning, she could simply start with Solly's teen years, as the memoirist does. Clearly, other factors account for the change. With Solly's mysterious struggle and absurd words as the film's introduction, Holland harnesses the Holocaust survivor's voice to demand from the very start that the audience view him as a Jew—as we know, a son of Israel is literally one who struggles with God—and that we recognize that circumcision will be the defining factor in his life story. As Hal Hinson writes, “This is both an actual and a metaphorical occasion, a branding, and it reverberates throughout the entire film, washing it with blood” (D1). Circumcision is to be remembered.

The film next depicts the eve of Solly's bar mitzvah. We see Solly's religiously observant family, including his bearded father, who runs a shoe store with Solly's older brothers. Solly's doting mother playfully readies the sabbath meal with the aid of his older sister, Bertha (Marta Sandrowicz). Preparing his bath, Solly looks out the window and exchanges nasty looks with a boy marching in a Hitler Youth procession. Solly relaxes in the bathtub with a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* until *Kristallnacht*, the huge pogrom that tore through synagogues and Jewish-owned homes and businesses throughout the Reich, brings crashing glass destruction to the Perel sabbath.

That scenario is nowhere to be found in Perel's memoir, which offers no description of *Kristallnacht* or Solly's bar mitzvah. Moreover, *Europa Europa* adjusts Solly's bar mitzvah to coincide with the great pogrom. *Kristallnacht* occurred in November of 1938. As we have seen, Solly already stated that he shares Hitler's April 20 birthday. However, the memoir's first line reads, "I was born on April 21, 1925, in Peine, a town near Brunswick in Germany" (1). Later, the book repeats that Hitler's birthday is a day before the memoirist's (182). Even more curious is that there is a greater discrepancy than this change of one day.

Orthodox Jews, following the letter of Jewish law, mark a son's bar mitzvah only on the near the very day that he turns thirteen, with few exceptions. In other words, he cannot have been born in April (whether on the 20 or 21) and now have his bar mitzvah in November. Given that few in the audience are Talmudic scholars, this inconsistency is inconsequential, except to show that Holland places higher priority on the overall depiction of the Holocaust experience than on fidelity to the details of Perel's life. The adaptation's change to Perel's story serves to spotlight the Holocaust's disruption to Jewish life, both personal and communal. Bar mitzvah signifies the designation of the Jewish male to adulthood, wherein he is obligated to follow the traditional precepts of the faith. It is a joyous occasion that has come to mark the male's coming of age. But for Solly, just as for all Jews confronted with the Nazi assault, familiar patterns of life must stop. After all, on the eve of the destruction of European Jewry, the bar mitzvah can no longer signify an initiation to holiness or an entrance to manhood.

Solly's situation in the bath at the launching of *Kristallnacht* is a meaningful addition. As Patterson writes, "In the ritual of bathing the body, then, one finds an affirmation of the life of the soul" (173). It can be no accident that Holland's camera now captures Solly's nude body for

the second time in the film; the first was at his *brit*. The Jew's body, though evidently healthy, is exposed and vulnerable. When a brick flies through the same window through which only moments earlier he had stuck out his tongue at the young Nazi, Solly jumps up in panic, torn from the locus of "affirmation of the life of the sole." In his sudden movement, Solly flashes his genitalia before the camera. Holland uses the exposed, circumcised penis to herald the arrival of Nazi attackers. Hearing the shouts of intruders in the house, Solly jumps out the window. Still naked and now physically removed from his family and home, he he hides alone until nightfall in a barrel in the alley behind his house.

In another departure from the memoir, Solly emerges from the barrel at night to beg for help from a sympathetic, young gentile neighbor, whose family is hosting a party for Nazis. She brings him a jacket, complete with the Nazi armband. It is the first of many disguises the boy is will wear. After gingerly donning it, Solly returns to a home that is in disarray. Standing amidst broken objects and overturned furniture, his mother anxiously greets him. Meanwhile, his father bangs his own head repeatedly against the dining room table, the same table that we last saw laden for a festive Jewish meal in honor of Solly's impending maturation. However, in the pogrom's aftermath, Bertha's lifeless body lies atop it, a huge gash in her head.

Bertha's corpse atop the sabbath table beside her bereaved father's weeping head is an outstanding example of what Rosenfeld calls the "brilliant images" that lend power to Holocaust art (*A Double Dying* 80), and it is purely Holland's creation. As Perel relates in the memoir, Bertha does is killed by a bullet while on a death march near the end of the war (206). In departing from the historical account to portray the Bertha's brutal death at this moment, the film calls attention to the sudden destruction of the Jewish family and home. Bertha's biography may

be changed for the movie, but the resulting depiction captures a bigger reality. Death on the dining room table, on the eve of a bar mitzvah, testifies to the impending total destruction of Jewish households across Europe, often beginning with the murder of children.

Solly's family flees to Poland, where there is a huge Jewish population and greater distance from Hitler. It is evident that Solly's life has for the moment resumed a semblance of normalcy, particularly when he provocatively rubs up against an older female with a hunchback at the local cinema; this is another of Holland's additions. When World War II starts with the German and the Soviet invasions of Poland, Solly's parents send him and his older brother, Isaac, to the hope of safety in the East. With the return of the Nazi threat, Solly's Jewish identity again directs his fortunes. Holland adds a short, poignant scene that portrays Solly and his brother as they leave home. The woman from the cinema clings to Solly in the street, provocatively kissing him and tearfully pleading that he stay. With almost anything other than the Holocaust as the film's backdrop, their relationship might have played out as something romantic, or at least fun. However, because of the encroaching Nazi danger to the Jew's body, the circumcised penis must now signify a dangerous, irrevocable marker of identity. Like the memoirist, Holland recognizes that a movie about the Shoah has no place for any depiction of a Jew as a typical adolescent once the Nazi threat encroaches.

During their flight, Solly and Isaac jockey for places on crowded rowboats and are separated. Isaac calls out that his younger brother should wait for him on the other side. While the source memoir also has an escape scene, it has none of the ominous mystery that the film establishes. The cinematography lends the scene a surreal quality, with boats passing slowly through fog, as though on the River Styx. But it is no peaceful afterlife to which Solly floats

along. By depicting Solly's separation from his entire family, the film highlights that the Holocaust was a solitary nightmare for the Jew, destroying families in its wake. As with the bath scene, Holland employs the water motif to denote a major transition in the young Jew's life.

From another boat, someone calls out a warning to turn around, for the Russian army is on the other side. To survive, Solly must think like a Jew, rather than like a Pole. The Catholic Poles see fit to reverse the boat's course back to Hitler's shore, but the Jews swim to the Russian army. Poles and Jews understandably disagree on whether Stalin or Hitler is the greater threat. Saved by a Russian officer when he nearly drowns, Solly waits in vain for his brother and is eventually brought to a Soviet orphanage. By contrast, in the memoir, the brother arrives to find Solly the very next day, and only later are they separated. Holland's depiction is more efficient in communicating that, as Josey G. Fisher writes of Jewish youths in the Holocaust, "Separation [from family] and individuation, for some of them, was not only an internal development [as with a typical teen]; it was thrust upon them" (xiii). Solly's heartbreak at being separated from his brother is more pronounced in the film than in the memoir, where Isaak leaves to get married.

Two years later, Solly is a loyal communist who sings the praises of Josef Stalin and disparages "popes, priests, and rabbis," who conspire to use religion to confuse the masses. Solly seems to fit in neatly with the other communists, though he experiences verbal antisemitism from one of the Poles, who scorns him as a "dirty Jew" who killed Christ. When Solly applies to become a *komsomol*, the communists do not care about his Jewish background; however, some are concerned that he is bourgeois, since his father is a businessman. Solly's obvious devotion to the communist cause wins out, and he joins the Party, just as in the memoir.

On Soviet soil, circumcision does not present the same danger as in the Reich. As if to prove this point, Holland has him scale a wall at night to spy on his beautiful teacher while she undresses. Life away from Hitler's clutches has once again returned the boy to something of a normal adolescence. This is not to say that Holland paints an entirely flattering portrait of life under the Russians. Holland adds a memorable scene that depicts the depths to which Soviet propaganda will sink; the teachers execute a lesson in which they "prove" that Stalin, and not God, showers candy upon the children. None of these vehemently anti-Soviet scenarios appear in the memoir, where Perel writes that he had friends in the Bund, though he was a Zionist. Holland obviously has a score to settle with the Russians, no doubt owing to the facts that he father was put in a gulag and was later allegedly killed by secret police (Tibbetts 133). However, because *Europa Europa* never draws a moral equivalence between Nazism and Stalinism, Holland's anti-Stalinist additions to the narrative do not detract from Perel's testimony.

Solly's father writes from the ghetto, where the family has moved. He wants Solly to keep kosher, observe the Sabbath, and, above all: "Remember who you are." Even if Solly is willing to shed his Jewishness in favor of the communist ideal, historical forces will soon bring his father's counsel to mind. When Hitler breaks his pact with Stalin by invading Soviet territory, the orphanage evacuates. Under enemy aircraft fire, Solly hides beneath a truck and is left behind by his school family. The Nazis find him asleep under a tree by the side of the road and believe the lie that he is a German whom the Bolsheviks orphaned and then forced into a communist school. Standing with other prisoners, he watches in fear as the Germans separate Jewish and political prisoners from the others. Solly, as both a Jew and a *komsomol*, is twice guilty in Nazi eyes if the truth is discovered, and once guilty is enough to warrant execution. Thus, he hides his

identity papers in the front of his underwear and claims to have lost them. The placement of these papers against Solly's circumcised penis can be no fluke, since it never happens in Perel's memoir. As Perel writes, "With the heel of my shoe I dug a little hole in the soft soil, shoved the telltale papers into it, and tamped the earth back down. All this under the guard's nose" (19). However, the film director's placement of identity papers against the Jew's genitals can only mean to remind us that circumcision, signifying the Covenant with the Eternal, is the basis of the Jew's identity. Moreover, the filmmaker wants to remind us that circumcision represents a death sentence if discovered by the Nazis. As if to reinforce our awareness of this danger, in the next moment, the Germans drop a man's pants and then execute him. Again, one can see little of survival or redemption in this scenario, helping put the lie to Loshitzky's claim that they are the themes of *Europa Europa*.

Impressed by his German fluency and sympathetic to his fictitious plight as an orphan, the soldiers rally around Solly. In yet another of Holland's additions, when one of them gives him non-kosher sausage, Solly only pretends to eat it and then spits it out. Holland's use of close-ups and camera angles encourages us to identify with the Jew. In this scene, he faces the audience, with his back to the others. Only we can see the torment of his facial expression. From behind him, the hostile, Polish orphan from the Bolshevik school denounces him as a Jew, but the Nazis, convinced by Solly's cool demeanor and their misplaced confidence that they can "sniff out" Jews, do not believe the accusation. In fact, they even declare that he is their "good luck charm." Holland uses scenarios like this one to illustrate the inanity of Nazi racial theory. Such "science" helped persuade a civilized people that genocide was the best solution to the perceived Jewish problem. The Polish orphan never appears in the memoir.



Surrounded by German troops, Solly adopts the false identity of Josef “Jupp” Peters. For the male Jew hiding out in the open, a mundane task such as urinating becomes a matter of life or death. As Hinson writes, “Solly must be forever on his guard; even a casual pause to relieve himself in the woods becomes charged with danger, for no matter how deeply he immerses himself in his role, the evidence of his true identity is always lurking there to betray him” (D1). The natural, mundane act of urination becomes a life-threatening venture in the context of Nazi-occupied Europe; it will be revisited near the end of the film.

Solly must deal with the mental turmoil that is inherent in these shifts in identity. In one of the dream sequences that Holland inserts, Hitler and Stalin waltz together before the confused boy. B. Amarillis Lugo de Fabritz writes that this dream “further points to another stylistic innovation that separates *Europa, Europa* from other Holocaust narratives...the insanity of the Holocaust can be presented in terms of a Bakhtinian carnivalesque model” (105). This ridiculous spectacle is undoubtedly intended to elicit laughter from the audience, which is something that Perel’s memoir never achieves. Adrienne Kertzer calls attention to the challenges and ethics of attempting humor in anything related to the Shoah when she writes of the “dilemma of how to dramatize the Holocaust, the question of what kind of laughter is the right laughter” (xii), Holland never crosses the line into mining actual atrocity for laughs, and again, were the film set in the Lager, any attempt at humor would be deeply problematic. As Skloot notes, “One of the traditional functions of comedy, certainly of Jewish comedy, is to alleviate the pain of existence by finding laughter in the most hurtful situations” (48), but the worst atrocities of the Holocaust have no rightful place in Jewish comic tradition. A carefully choreographed dance between the two fascist leaders, on the other hand, makes its point without insulting the film’s claim to a

moral foundation. It bears noting, too, that even in his own dream, the Jew is not the one who dances.

Holland frequently tries to remind the audience that he is an endangered Jew, no matter what disguise he puts on to survive. Two scenes with the German army illustrate her intention, since neither one is in the memoir. Standing before a proud Nazi officer who plans to adopt him, Solly is instructed that the war is not really against the Russians, or the English, or the French, but against the Jews. “It’s our holy war, not *Lebensraum*. Do you understand?” the imposing man proclaims to the Jew in hiding. Solly asks if the Jews will be killed, and the captain advises that they might be moved to Siberia or Madagascar. “The Fuhrer will find the solution.” But in the very next scene, Solly comes across children hanging from nooses in front of a farmhouse. A soldier tells him to learn to hate these animals. Solly reacts in rage, destroying a barn. His narration confides to the audience: “That’s when I was first confused about identity. Who were my friends and enemies? How could they be nice to me and kill others? What set us apart? A simple foreskin?” Not the foreskin itself, but what it signifies, is what sets the Jew apart from the Nazi.

Holland’s film likewise makes changes to Solly’s interaction with a homosexual German soldier, who does appear in the memoir. Upon hearing the German, who had been an actor, quote poetry to him, Solly points the viewer’s attention to a tragic irony: “Germany is not a nation of illiterates.” Later, when the soldier surprises the poser in a bath, Solly’s circumcised penis is once again exposed to the camera. The unusually sympathetic German promises to be a brother to him, even to the point where he helps Solly build a secret *sukkah* in the woods for the Jewish holiday; this is not in the memoir. The significance of the *sukkah* is that it symbolizes the

Jewish home. By sharing his secret and connecting with someone at a human level, Solly may build this inherently fragile home in the wilderness, if only for a time. Just as the sukkah is temporary, so, too, is Solly's newfound bond with this "brother," who is shot in battle. While the two outsiders share a special bond, Holland does not make the mistake of implying that Jews and homosexuals had the same experience in the Holocaust. She makes clear that while both characters live in disguise, circumcision makes the Jew's situation far more precarious. *Europa Europa* never suggests that there is a war of annihilation against homosexuals.

Because of his youth, Solly is finally sent away from the trenches to the most elite Hitler Youth school in the Reich. Holland again manages the difficult task of creating a scene that is humorous without belittling those suffering in the Shoah. On a train, "Jupp" loses his virginity to an older woman, who compares his dark hair to Hitler's. During intercourse she cries out, "My Führer!" By contrast, Perel describes only kissing the older woman on the train. This momentary return to the survivor's sexual awakening draws laughs from the audience by mocking Germans' devotion to Hitler, not the suffering of Jews.

*Europa Europa* mainly stays faithful to the memoir in depicting a scene at the school where the same Hitler Youth who salute the newly arrived Solly immediately break out into song: "Sharpen the long knives on the pavement stone! Sink the knives into Jewish flesh and bone. Let the blood flow freely!" Solly recognizes the increased danger, compared to when he was with Wehrmacht, that he must now share a bathroom with classmates who might easily discover his circumcision. As in the memoir, Solly's disguise proves almost completely effective. He wins races, dates the prettiest German girl, and is even summoned before his class

so the teacher can demonstrate how his features prove him to be “an authentic Aryan,” and not a Jew.

However, the danger of exposure remains, so he uses thread to create a foreskin. His physical anguish from the attempt is apparent, and he can barely walk for the next several days. As Omer Bartov writes, “Thus Solly’s circumcision becomes his last barrier to his desire to merge; or seen differently, it serves precisely the role for which it was intended by protecting his Jewish identity even when he is entirely willing to give it up” (139). Holland makes it clear that Solly does not mutilate his penis to reject Judaism. He simply wants to live. She inserts a brief scene where Solly draws a Star of David on a window, but wipes it off. He is still a Jew at heart, just one doing all he can to survive. Solly’s private drawing calls to mind Gay’s claim that “living there I had developed strategies for survival designed to keep me as sane as possible in the madhouse into which the accident of birth and the perversity of history had thrown me” (93-4).

In the memoir, Solly’s attempt to reverse his circumcision is a failure, resulting in a temporary infection. Holland turns this briefly described scenario into a longer, more detailed illustration of an explicitly Jewish suffering and desperation. Perhaps no person in all of history has ever been in such a predicament, save for the male Jew during the Holocaust. In the film, the doctor arrives to provide the students with their annual check-up. For the German boys, it amounts to merely the slight discomfort of having their testicles squeezed. But for the Jew, it will mean death. Faking a toothache as an alibi, Solly sits in a chair without painkillers while a dentist wrests the healthy tooth from his mouth. At night, he awakens to find he has wet his bed. He limps to the restroom to remove the threads on his penis. In a closeup that is surely meant to

shock the viewer, Holland daringly points the camera to the bound and discolored penis. The Jew's terror in exile now culminates in a willingness to abuse the body from which he cannot be exiled, except through death. Through the memorable image of the mutilated Jewish penis, *Europa Europa* shakes the viewer from his slumber and leaves behind barely any memory of the humor of previous scenes.

As in the memoir, Solly's penis heals. Notwithstanding Solly's sexual intercourse while in transit to the Hitler Youth school, his penis cannot be a source of pleasure, even after having healed. When his antisemitic, Aryan girlfriend, Leni (Julie Delpy) attempts to seduce him, he cannot risk exposing his penis. In a return to voiceover narration, Solly tells the audience, "Intimacy with Leni was impossible. I couldn't love Leni." Fisher refers to the struggle over sexuality as commonplace for young Jews facing the Nazification of Europe: "One of the most frequently described delays was serious romantic involvement.... It was later that energy was freed to respond to emotional and sexual needs, and for some, the realization of the delay was painful" (xiii-iv). Similarly, Peter Gay, a contemporary of Perel's who managed to flee Nazi Germany in time to save his life, writes:

I cannot tell how representative I was, but I shared the life history of thousands of Jewish adolescents in Nazi Germany who somehow had to come to terms with their hormones amid massive slanders of their "race" and mounting threats to their survival, threats which were in themselves, not so subtly, offenses to their manhood or conviction of desirability. The regime, with the sufferings and humiliations it imposed on young German Jews, must have delayed our sexual development in troubling ways. (90)

For the Jew in exile, death and the threat of death punctuate the moments where signs of life, such as sexual pleasure and intimacy, try to take root.

That pattern is made evident when Holland deftly brings the two teenagers into a setting that is not found in Perel's account, and that evokes something more terrible than Solly's sexual abstinence. Steps away from where they just kissed in the woods, Solly and Leni come across piles of Jewish headstones in a cemetery that is being dismantled by Jewish slave laborers. In this scene, widespread atrocity finds poignant expression on the screen, with no need for blood, gore, or naked bodies in stacks. In silence, the camera slowly pans across the stones, reminding the audience that the Nazi assault on the Jew does not end with death. In Jewish tradition, cemeteries, as sites of memory and commemoration, are held in special esteem. They are established before synagogues and schools in new Jewish communities. Bearing direct witness to the systematic dismantling of consecrated Jewish burial spaces sets the Jew further into the unnatural state of exile, separating him in yet another way from his ancestors and community.

Holland understands the huge difference between filming just the stones and filming Solly seeing the stones. The latter is a more powerful visual. The cemetery scene restores the solitary Jew to the context of his broken community, showing that all Jews, not just the living are under attack. As Judith Miller adds, "Abstraction is memory's most ardent enemy. It kills because it encourages distance, and often indifference. We must remind ourselves that the Holocaust was not six million. It was one, plus one, plus one" (287). With that in mind, it matters little that this scene in the woods never appears in Perel's memoir; we will remember the one stone plus the one stone plus the one stone.

Holland adds still more to the scene. Leni brazenly tells Solly that she will kill any Jew she ever meets, as she blames her father's death on "the war against those vermin." Solly slaps her. Shocked and furious that he would ever strike a German woman just "to defend the Jews," she calls him a "limp-dick" and storms off. Upon hearing the reference to his genitalia, Solly again connects to his Jewish identity. Glancing down at a headstone, he sees an engraved depiction of the ancient priestly benediction. In an unmistakably Jewish gesture, he raises his hands in emulation, affirming his Jewish identity and re-sanctifying the space as best he can. In doing so, he performs an act of profound resistance against the Nazi worldview that celebrates the profane, degrades life, and destroys memory.

Shortly thereafter, *Europa Europa* depicts a frightening dream sequence, which is more intellectually sophisticated and visually compelling than what Perel writes. In the memoir, Perel dreams that he is accused by Nazis of being a Jew. As he elaborates, "The worst that could have happened happened: Screaming wildly, they pounced on me with unbridled frenzy, tore me limb from limb, and impaled my head on a flagpole" (107). The nightmare rendered by Holland is more complex. Solly is back in his family's house in Germany, wearing the same Nazi jacket as he did after *Kristallnacht*. The family, including his Bertha, dines on hard-boiled eggs dipped in salt water, which is traditional for the Seder. Ignoring his return, they all leave the room, except for Solly's heavily bandaged brother, who bleeds from the mouth. Bertha invites Solly to hide with her in the closet, tells him to visit a street in the Lodz Ghetto, and then leaves. In another ironic twist, a terrified Hitler hides in the closet as well, begging that Solly not expose him as a Jew. The curious scenario of Jewish family members silently abandoning the Seder table is every bit as strange as finding Hitler in the closet of a Jewish home. Passover is a festive holiday, not a

silent or solemn one. Furthermore, in Jewish tradition, speech is what God uses to create the universe and is part of what makes us human. In the dream, the only family member who speaks to Solly is Bertha, who is the only one he knows to be deceased. Just as we saw when the Jewish cemetery was upended, the family behavior at the holiday table represents a Jewish world turned upside-down.

Heeding dreamland Bertha's invitation, Solly travels to Lodz in hopes of reuniting with his family. However, the ghetto is not a place where the Jew may a path to return from exile, for the Nazis established it as a station on the road to annihilation. In his black Hitler Youth uniform, Solly is refused entry through the main gates of the ghetto and may only pass through by riding the streetcar. Once more, Holland uses the camera to make a powerful statement about the crimes against the Jews in a way that the memoir cannot. Through the painted windows of the trolley, Solly sees fleeting images of the ghetto's horrors, as though he is in a movie house. Dead Jews are loaded onto carts and starved elderly Jews wear yellow stars on filthy streets. In effect, Solly can get no closer to these victims than we, the audience, can.

Joshua Hirsch notes the cinematically inspired undertones of Holland's depiction of the ghetto through the streetcar window. As he writes, "Perhaps the moving images one glimpses through the frames of train windows resemble nothing so much as cinematic flashbacks" (187 Note 38). For all appearances, the windows indeed serve as a sort of film screen. By categorizing the images as "flashbacks," meaning renderings that momentarily transport us to the past, Hirsch implies that *Europa Europa* presents the ghetto figures as phantom remnants of a Yiddish civilization that was wiped out long before the movie was made. This is one more way that they remain out of reach to the filmgoer, just as they are to the character of Solly.



When Solly thinks he recognizes his mother through the glass, he struggles to open the window. Scolded by the conductor, he quickly explains that he needs some fresh air, prompting everybody else on the train to laugh at the ridiculous idea that the ghetto could have anything but filth. Exiting the train, Solly invites curious stares from the Nazi guards as he walks along the barbed wire, gazing longingly at the children and women pressed against it from the other side. These are his people, even while he wears this uniform and stands on the side of the divider that offers the only chance at survival.

Back in Germany, Solly maintains his disguise. As part of Hitler Youth training, he attacks an effigy of a stereotypical Jew. However, the close calls continue for Solly. Leni, eager to give a child to the Fuhrer, becomes pregnant by Solly's roommate. Her mother privately laments to Solly, "Children nowadays – they're so different." The woman then confronts Solly with the question that has been on her mind since their first meeting, when he stumbled over a discussion about his biological parents: "Are you really a German?" Solly breaks down and reveals his true identity, and in a moment that is evocative of his earlier encounter with the German army soldier, she holds him and promises never to tell his secret. In the memoir, this confession occurs earlier in their relationship, but Holland builds suspense by juxtaposing it against the scene that follows.

Upon his return to school, Solly is summoned to police headquarters to explain why there is no Certificate of German Ancestry in his file. The officer accepts Solly's promise to send for it. As Solly leaves the building, his voiceover narrates, "Only a miracle could save me now." Suddenly, a siren sounds, and a plane bombs the building. Papers fly everywhere, and with their dispersal, chance has once more afforded Solly an opportunity to elude exposure. The reference

to a miracle must not be taken as some grand statement about God's role in the Shoah. Just as Solly begins to grin in silent appreciation of the miracle bombing, he comes across the bloodied corpse of his best friend, who was killed by the same bomb.

As the war closes in on the Germans, Solly joins the defense against the Russians. However, he refuses to fire his weapon, and on his first opportunity he runs to join them. In a scene that marks yet another of Holland's breaks from the original account, Solly is brought to a camp where he tells the Russian officers that he is a *komsomol*. In the memoir, Perel is captured by the Americans and almost executed on his birthday, but "The next day our brief stint as prisoners ended. We went off in all directions, each going his own way.... So far I had not told anyone that I was Jewish" (186). Holland, though, depicts his capture by Russian soldiers, who beat him on suspicion that he is an enemy spy. He cries out almost immediately that he is a Jew. "If you were a Jew," a Russian says, pointing to photographs of death camp victims, "you'd look like this." This is as close as *Europa Europa* comes to sharing images of the camps, and the viewer is mostly left to imagine what Solly is seeing. Upon Solly's stunned, stuttering reaction, the Russian quips, "Another one who didn't know." Apparently, Solly is too shocked by the images to remember that if he merely drops his pants, he can prove that he is a Jew. The Russian leads Solly to a line of recently liberated Jewish camp inmates, instantly recognizable in their striped uniforms. Handing one of them a gun, the soldier says of Solly, "He is yours; do with him what you want." In a sense, Solly is indeed theirs, for he, too, is a Jew. Ironically, he has been returned to his people, but only to be executed.

Before Solly can be shot at point-blank range, a familiar voice calls his name. His brother, Isaac, is revealed to be one of the prisoners in uniform. Face to face, the two brothers

embrace, laugh, and cry. One wears the stripes of the concentration camp universe, the other the uniform of the German army, but both have suffered as Jews. Not equally, to be sure; there can be no equation between Solly's experience and that of the camp inmate. Still, it is fair for Holland to suggest that both brothers faced ordeals simply for being Jews.

In the next scene, Holland's camera captures the brothers' silhouettes while a large fire rages in the background. As narrator, Solly discloses the news that only two weeks after his trolley rides through the Lodz ghetto, his parents and all their neighbors had been killed. "While I was shouting 'Heil Hitler!' and courting Leni, my family was already dead," Solly says through voiceover. His survival, including his reunion with his brother, must be seen in the wider context of the annihilation of European Jewry and the personal context of the destruction of the Jewish family. There can be no celebratory ending or talk of miracles. Tim Cole rightly observes that "it is surely questionable whether a 'happy' ending—be it George Stevens's ending to the film of Anne Frank's diary or Steven Spielberg's [to *Schindler's List*]—is an appropriate way to conclude any telling of the 'Holocaust'" (85), and Holland is correct to avoid a happy, tidy resolution, which is alien to survivor accounts like Perel's.

*Europa Europa* completely omits any description of the memoir's comparatively lengthy passages that describe Perel's search for his family in towns and at camps, such as Dachau. It might be argued that excising this search, and especially the camp visits, is a way to sanitize the survivor's suffering, but I disagree. Had Holland portrayed these details from the book, she probably would also have included other details, which would work against the transmission of the Jew's wounding message. For example, late in the memoir, Perel reunites not just with one brother, but two. Both survived, married, and had children. Including such a detail would

reinforce the false impression to viewers that most Jewish men survived the Shoah. Additionally, it would also likely diminish the filmgoer's appreciation that Jewish suffering continued after "liberation."

Once reunited with Solly in *Europa Europa*, Isaac clandestinely secures a concentration camp uniform for his brother, so that they may have an easier time fleeing to the American zone. (Again, this scenario marks a departure from the memoir, in which Solly leaves the American zone to search for his family in the Soviet zone.) A powerful image created by the adapter recalls an earlier scene of Solly's dangerous predicament of needing to urinate in private, just to protect his life. By contrast, the two brothers now stand together to urinate in the rain. The adapter's meaning is clear: Solly no longer has cause to fear being discovered as a Jew. He can finally urinate in peace. However, it is wishful thinking to suppose that the newfound safety to urinate amounts to a redemptive ending to the survivor's story. At least in Jewish terms, redemption and safety are not the same; redemption cannot occur without justice, nor without the total abrogation of exile.

As we recall, the end of the memoir relates that Perel moves to the British Mandate of Palestine. The conclusion of the film, as well, informs via Solly's voiceover that the brothers move to Palestine. In his final words to the audience, Solly states: "From that moment on, I decided to be only a Jew.... And when I had sons, I barely hesitated to circumcise them." The survivor's words end as they began the film, with reference to the specifically Jewish Covenant of circumcision. The mention of Solly's sons in this context is important, though wholly absent from the memoir. As Howard Eilber-Schwartz explains,

In the priestly understanding, circumcision is not an arbitrary sign of the covenant, as many interpreters construe it, but a symbol that alludes directly to the substance of God's promise to Abraham, namely to multiply Abraham's seed. It is no accident that the symbol of the covenant is impressed on the penis. The penis is the male organ through which the genealogy of Israel is perpetuated. The removal of the foreskin has the effect of giving the penis the appearance it has when erect.... circumcision symbolically readies the stem [as in a tree] for producing fruit. (23)

With the continuation of the rite of circumcision across the generations, Holland asserts that the Covenant between the Jew and God survives, or at least that the Jewish survivor chooses to invest in resuscitating it for his progeny.

The film ends with a surprising revelation, as the camera discloses the real-life Perel to the viewer. George F. Custen writes that historically, several biopics have featured their subjects (58), but the appearance of a Holocaust survivor surely resonates on a different level. The elderly Perel is shown next to Israel's Jordan River, a body of water that prominently features in biblical accounts of exiles and crossings, where he sings *Hinei Mah Tov*. This is the same Jewish song that played at the beginning of the movie, during the depiction of Solly's *brit*. The lyrics translate as, "How sweet it is to sit surrounded by your brothers." The song assumes new meaning—or perhaps it uncovers an ancient one—at the end of this particular survivor narrative, which charts the horrific ordeal of exile from family, home, community, self, and Covenant. The presence of the real-life Perel at film's end shows not only that the survivor himself lives on, but also that he means to validate the non-survivor Holland's creatively licensed portrayal of his experiences.

His willingness to be pictured puts to rest any lingering doubts that the adaptation's vision is truthful and authentic in the ways that matter most.

Especially considering Holland's treatment of Perel's written account, I have reservations when Feinstein observes, "Survivors share a special vision of having been victims during the Holocaust. Nonsurvivors cannot possess the same vision. Survivors possess memories which others can comprehend only indirectly. In some respects, the only 'authentic' Holocaust art may be said to be the art of survivors" (159). Were Feinstein's verdict correct, authentic artistic representation after survivors are gone will be an impossibility. Adaptation by non-survivors will be pointless, except for the crass and ethically dubious purpose of cheap, inauthentic entertainment. Feinstein is right, though, to treat the survivor's voice as something that should matter to the artist and to us. I would go so far as to say that Holocaust art by the non-survivor needs to find ethical alignment with the survivor's testimony, particularly when purporting to speak in the survivor's name. *Europa Europa* demonstrates that this is a reachable and worthwhile goal.

Like the memoir upon which it is based, Holland's film sets out to transmit a deeper understanding of the War Against the Jews by focusing on one highly unusual story of survival. It thoughtfully depicts many of the costs of survival, especially the multiple burdens of exile. The film matches the spirit of the memoir by resisting sanitization, exploitation, and denial of the Shoah; in other words, the Jewish voice prevails against the Nazi's. At least some of the survivor's burden, having been picked up by the adapter, is ably transmitted to the filmgoer. In the next chapter, we will visit an adaptation that attempts to tell another story of survival and

exile. Because it lacks Holland's appreciation of the survivor's word, and because it similarly fails to embrace any ethically valid notion of "essential truth" in the Shoah, it rings false.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**THE JEW UNSPOKEN:**  
**COMPROMISING THE SURVIVOR'S VOICE IN *THE TRUCE* (1997)**

*Joseph dreamt a dream which he told to his brothers, and they hated him even more.  
He said to them, "Hear, if you please, this dream that I dreamt:"*

Genesis 37:5-6

*Dreams used to come in the brutal nights,  
Dreams crowding and violent  
Dreamt with body and soul,  
Of going home, of eating, of telling our story.  
Until, quickly and quietly, came  
The dawn reveille:  
Wstawàch.  
And the heart cracked in the breast.*

*Now we have found our home again,  
Our hunger is quenched,  
All the stories have been told.  
It is time. Soon we shall hear again  
The alien command:  
Wstawàch.*

Primo Levi, 11 January 1946<sup>16</sup>

"Who Owns Anne Frank?" is the title of a 1997 essay by Cynthia Ozark, who calls into question the many ways that people have distorted the life and diary of one murdered child as a

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<sup>16</sup> Primo Levi. *The Reawakening*. 1965. Simon and Schuster, 1995, p. 11. This is the introductory poem to the memoir, and it is conspicuously absent from Francesco Rosi's 1997 film adaptation.



means of making the Shoah more palatable. Early in the essay, Ozick admonishes the sort of creative thinking that “tampers with history, with reality, with deadly truth” (77). Like Anne Frank, a handful of Holocaust survivors have achieved a measure of celebrity and its accompanying mystique, if on a somewhat smaller scale. There is a commonly held belief in our culture that celebrities belong to all of us, and that we should therefore be free to say whatever we want about them; such is the price of fame, it is alleged. We are right to ask, then, how ethical boundaries are tested when a film adaptation attempts to use the name of a particularly famous survivor-memoirist for the dual purposes of entertainment and Holocaust denial.

The figure of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi has for a long time loomed large over production and reception of written works about Auschwitz – indeed, over the broader arena of popular reverence for Holocaust memory. Levi’s much-lauded talents as an author include his distinct ability to rely on, without being constrained by, classical literary models for thoughtfully rendered descriptions of the concentrationary universe and its aftermath; his knack for striking a powerful balance between words and silence, the latter in the form of strategically placed narrative omissions and thematic pauses; his conspicuous maintenance of an even-tempered rather than vengeful voice, perhaps in part owing to his training as a scientist; and his propensity towards effectively juxtaposing beautiful, almost lyrical language and sometimes even wry humor against shocking descriptions of atrocities, without ever letting his use of language unnecessarily minimize the human suffering that was systematically inflicted by the Nazis.

There can be little doubt that Levi’s writings, especially his memoirs, continue to make a strong impression on an array of readers. Marla Stone calls him “Italy’s most well-known Holocaust survivor” (Stone 135), and he is surely its most celebrated and frequently cited author

of Holocaust literature, with his fame enduring far beyond that nation's borders. As Roberta S. Kremer observes, Levi's earliest memoirs remain internationally esteemed as "masterpieces" of Western literature, and

are taught in high schools, as well as graduate studies and in fields as diverse as psychology, philosophy, history, literary criticism, Italian studies, and Holocaust studies. His books continue to be among the most widely read Holocaust memoirs, despite an explosion of new material in this genre. It is Levi that the public and scholars alike return to in their attempt to find meaning and 'strenuous clarity' in the events and experiences that have come to be subsumed under the rubric of the 'Holocaust,' precisely because he is one of the rare survivor-writers whose literary devices assure the greatest 'communicability' of his text without compromising the intimate nature of his memoir.

(X)

If we may now refer to such a thing as canonical literature about the Shoah, then few would dispute that several of Levi's writings have earned a rightful place there. A look at recent titles on the bestsellers list sufficiently demonstrates that a dominant trend for most other popular writers on the Shoah depends on engaging in oversimplifications and platitudes.

By contrast, Levi adopts a very different approach. In Stone's words, "Levi remains a complex and challenging writer who offers no simple solutions, 'no feel good' resolutions to the drama of the twentieth century. His work forces the reader to face moral ambiguity and 'the gray zone' of the human experience" (Stone 140). Rather than resorting to cheap sentimentality or ultimately pointless comparisons of suffering, Levi instead somehow finds innovative ways to communicate the Jewish experience in the Shoah to audiences far removed from that time and

place. In so doing, he helps readers enter the dreaded realm of emotionally disturbing testimony leaving them with a better understanding of the suffering and a greater compassion for the victims.

The task of adapting Levi's written publications for the screen is obviously, then, a daunting task, one that has not often been attempted.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in 1997, merely a decade after Levi's suicide shocked the world, the well-known Italian director, Francesco Rosi, brought to the screen *The Truce*, a controversial adaptation of Levi's second memoir, which was first published in Italian as *La tregua* in 1963, and in English as *The Reawakening* in 1965.<sup>18</sup> In the wake of the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, both editions of the book almost immediately met widespread critical acclaim.<sup>19</sup> Rosi's 1997 film treatment, however, was far less warmly received by most parties. It is easy to suppose that adapting the work of such a beloved and esteemed author seemed a safe bet at the time, though Rosi did struggle for years to find sufficient financial backing for treating what is essentially a slow-paced source text.

Due to the adaptation's failure to gain much of an audience despite the survivor's ongoing popularity, several scholars have attempted to address what went wrong. To be fair, we

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<sup>17</sup> One of the very few attempts is the recent one-man play, *Primo*, which was filmed and released in 2010. Its subject is Levi's experience in the camp, and it has reached only a small viewership.

<sup>18</sup> Despite my personal preference for the Italian title of the memoir, in the interest of clarity, I will refer to the book as *The Reawakening* and to the film as *The Truce*. Additionally, I will refer to the survivor-memoirist and to the narrator of the memoir as "Levi," and to the character in the film, as portrayed by the American actor, John Turturro, as "Primo."

<sup>19</sup> Levi writes in "Afterword: Primo Levi Answers his Readers' Questions" that *The Reawakening*, unlike *Survival in Auschwitz*, "immediately met with an excellent reception from the public and critics" (*The Reawakening* 209).

should note that a minority, including Lawrence Baron, Annette Insdorf, and Cosetta Veronese, have gone against the grain by defending at least certain aspects of the film. This is not to say that the three scholars' particular arguments are identical in details or scope. Baron devotes only brief space to the film in his book, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, but he assesses it kindly in terms of how it treats the survivor's image (Baron 217). Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows* includes an entry on the film in the book's Annotated Filmography (Third Edition). Although the entry is only a few sentences long, Insdorf shares her interesting if brief assessment that the filmic Primo late in the narrative is finally able to break free from the constraints of his "passivity" (Insdorf 341). This theme of passivity in the survivor's story will be worth exploring. Veronese's article, "Paying the Price of Perpetuating Memory: Francesco Rosi's Interpretation of Primo Levi's *The Truce*," is by far the most in-depth defense of the film. However, the scholar assumes first, that Levi would have liked the movie, and second, that this must mean that the film's critics are mistaken in their dismissal of its content.

While there is much to be admired in some of the reasoning that the three writers employ in defending the film, I still remain unconvinced that it has very much to recommend it in terms of aesthetics, and, more importantly, of ethics; nor do I feel that most other scholars who have readily dismissed the film as a failure have gone far enough to explain how and why it is so, except with regard to overall box office performance in the era of the colossal success of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). That is, they focus on how a film about the Shoah could have flopped when the success of Spielberg's film serves as evidence of popular interest in the subject.

My purpose, however, is not to attack the specific film or, more generally, the medium of filmmaking, but rather to identify what is gained when so much is lost in the process of adapting what many scholars have designated a canonical Holocaust memoir. This chapter seeks to explore some of the specific changes that Rosi chose to make to the Holocaust testimony that is originally found in Levi's memoir, and to discuss the possible ramifications of those changes in terms of an ethical imperative. Matters of aesthetics will also be considered, but chiefly to highlight their evident effects on the ethics the film supports or assaults. If survivor testimony is at its core a call to awaken the post-Holocaust world from the slumber of indifference, then for ethical reasons any representation of such testimony should echo that same call. Anything less must be read as alien to the motivation behind the survivor's message, and to the message itself, particularly when Levi is the survivor in question. To borrow a term from *The Reawakening's* introductory poem, we must receive such an adaptation as no less than an "alien command" (Levi n. pag.). While aesthetic evaluations might pertain to a work's artistic quality and ability to entertain or emotionally move an audience, ethical evaluations pertain to something more central to the survivor's mission. To be sure, we can agree that the survivor, through his sublime eloquence, seeks to reach his readers, but his purpose in doing so is not simply to entertain them or to move them to tears, at least not as ends in themselves. Instead, the survivor means to issue a call to action, an ethical reckoning with the past that would ensure its sins are recognized and never repeated.

Just as Levi pointedly refers to the powerful and damaging "alien command" of the death camp's reveille, *Wstawać*, at the beginning and again at the conclusion of *The Reawakening*, so, too, do I seek to identify in Rosi's film that which appears to resonate as "alien" to Levi's

mission. In other words, for reasons of ethical parameters surrounding the Holocaust survivor's legacy, I am choosing to highlight those aspects of the film that seem most contradictory or antithetical to Levi's written memoir, i.e., in terms of character details, plot points, tone, dialogue, and overall impressions. As Alvin Rosenfeld writes, "It is typical of Levi's genius as a writer... to reveal the large offense in the ostensibly small act" (Rosenfeld *A Double Dying* 196). In that light, my attention will at times necessarily seek out seemingly small acts as they are revealed on the page and on the screen. In the hands of less deft authors, such remembrances of small events might not amount to much, but when Levi depicts them, they can prove instructive and informative on a grand scale.

I will argue that several of the film adaptation's intentional omissions from and additions to the source text – including the film's elimination of key components of Levi's memoir, the invention of a scene depicting a Nazi's public act of contrition towards Primo, and the peculiar and misplaced attention to sexuality in Primo's character and journey – all contribute to the film's ultimate failure to render the written memoir's essential theme of unmitigated despair, which recurs throughout the book, and which is clearly revealed in its final paragraph.

I submit that it can be no fluke or oversight that the book's introductory poem, to which that final paragraph in the book unmistakably alludes, is conspicuously omitted from the film adaptation, which instead chooses to conclude with the lead actor's recitation of only a portion of another poem by Levi, "Shema," which is found in a different memoir set within the barbed wire of Auschwitz, and thus in a different literary and historical context. As we shall see, when the film replaces the poem in such a fashion, it shifts emphasis away from the distinct pain revealed in *The Reawakening*, and towards the more redemptive message that the film's viewer has nobly

born witness just by watching a movie. This shift in emphasis represents an ethical transgression, akin to ignoring the survivor's outcry.

I further contend that the adaptation's tendency to highlight the survivor's struggle as one against passivity, as Insdorf correctly identifies, is inherently problematic on several levels. For years, survivors have publicly disputed the popular impression that Jews made a choice to go like sheep to the slaughter. Of course, that canard fit the stereotype since long before the Shoah that European Jews were unlikely ever to fight in their own defense. (Fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising sought through their brave action to destroy this stereotype, and shocked the Nazis in the process.) While it is true that most camp victims offered little visible resistance, at least in Auschwitz and other death camps (notwithstanding the important exceptions when real revolts played out), it is equally true that the Nazi apparatus by design robbed Jews of the ability to fight back in most instances. A film that elects to highlight the lingering passivity of a Holocaust survivor bears an ethical responsibility to convey to viewers that this must be an effect of that Nazi design, and not of the Jew's choice.

Additionally, I suggest that the film's apparent reaction to certain extra-textual elements, including Levi's 1987 suicide and the 1993 release of Spielberg's blockbuster film, *Schindler's List*, helped move the film director's path away from Levi's. That is, Rosi's adaptation seems to have been necessarily colored by the author's suicide, in ways that the book obviously could not have been. Levi's suicide occurred two decades after the publication of the memoir, and one decade before the release of the film adaptation. This event marks a seismic shift in the world's understanding (or supposed understanding) of the man. Because news of the suicide received enormous coverage in the media, it is no stretch to suppose that it has affected how audiences

have been likely to interpret Levi, and how artists have been inclined to render him. By making a concerted effort to convince his audience that receiving testimony from an Auschwitz survivor is a duty, as “Shema” insists, the director apparently loses sight of shaping that testimony into something that might resemble what Levi actually wrote about perpetual suffering in the survivor experience.

Furthermore, it is possible that Rosi was so distracted by the media’s, the public’s, and academia’s enormous attention to *Schindler’s List*, which was rendered as a larger-than-life epic, that Rosi, who was operating on a far smaller budget, intentionally scaled down *The Truce* to a level that could simply not match Levi’s message of larger-than-life suffering. The overall effect of the adaptation, then, has been to render Levi’s testimony as something fundamentally alien to the source text’s unifying theme that for the Auschwitz survivor, liberation and recovery will always be elusive and illusory. Such a distortion is deeply troubling in ways that extend beyond the reception to this one film, at least inasmuch as Levi was already well known when the film adaptation was released. This distortion serves to obscure the message from the witness who would transform us into messengers. In so doing, it mitigates our responsibility as witnesses, thereby permitting us to rest undisturbed. There is something ethically troubling in this mitigation, which obscures the message from the witness-survivor who would turn us into messengers. That message brings purpose to the survivor’s survival and also arguably constitutes the survivor’s main purpose for writing the memoir. The adaptation seeks to have it both ways by compromising the survivor’s message while also relying on his fame and image.

Precisely because of Levi’s fame and image, the adaptation’s problematic representation of his testimony poses challenges to our more general understanding of Holocaust survivors, and



by extension, the Holocaust itself. To be sure, I do not mean to suggest that Levi was capable of uniformly speaking on behalf of all Holocaust survivors, and he himself would never have made such an ambitious and unfair claim. However, in terms of widespread reception, Levi's reputation for literary brilliance has kept him positioned as one of the most influential and beloved Holocaust survivors. He is more than a gifted writer; he is also recognized as a gentle soul who unfairly suffered and selflessly devoted his life to Holocaust remembrance. Veronese goes even further to say that Levi is the archetypal survivor of the Holocaust in the public mind (Veronese 57), meaning that when many people think of survivors, they first think of Levi. Because the tone of his writing was typically less angry than that of his fellow survivor-memoirists, including Wiesel, Levi was arguably better positioned than his peers to draw reluctant readers to the subject.

Therefore, any attempt to represent Levi as a bearer of firsthand testimony and as a film character is bound to hold significant implications for how Holocaust survivors are popularly imagined, at least by those who see the film, or who encounter other works that are later influenced by it. While Baron explicitly defends *The Truce* as an example of films that "hardly demean the image of survivors" (Baron 217), I contend that the more important issue is how it still fits the pattern of films that work to subvert survivors' testimonies that are still marketed as true stories.

At least on the surface, Rosi's film on the whole is respectful, even reverential towards Levi as an individual, but it still actively works against what Levi tries to say in his writing. It hardly seems to be the case that survivors, including Levi, would care more about respect for their personal images than for their Holocaust testimonies to be heard and believed. As

Rosenfeld writes, Levi bore an “anxious concern that the history that he and so many others suffered would end in a slide toward simplification and stereotype” (Rosenfeld *The End* 147). In such a light, any treatment of Levi’s writing should be judged by its ability to serve as not mere entertainment, but also as a means of combating that “slide,” which would otherwise free us from the ethical implication.

Safeguarding the legacy of Levi, the survivor-writer, means that his death is indeed an important strand to unravel with regard to our understanding of *The Reawakening*’s transformation into *The Truce*. When Levi committed suicide at the height of his professional success, the public’s interest in learning about the Shoah was surely higher than it had ever been. His suicide had a strong impact on his readers, and not merely because a favorite cultural figure was now suddenly gone too soon. Despite past suicides by several other writers and poets who had survived and engaged the Holocaust, including Tadeusz Borowski and Paul Celan, most observers were surprised that this particular individual would choose to commit such an act, and wondered about what warning signs they must have missed. As Myriam Anissimov writes, “At least in his public statements, Levi gave the impression that he had come to terms with the experience of Auschwitz” (Anissimov 1). The widespread surprise at the suicide was profound enough to inspire a comedic parody by the American writer-director, Woody Allen, in his 1989 film release, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.<sup>20</sup> It seems evident that Levi’s suicide, which occurred

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<sup>20</sup> In the film, Allen’s character is a filmmaker shooting a documentary about an elderly European Jewish intellectual (played by Martin S. Bergmann) who, in the middle of filming, abruptly and mysteriously jumps out the window, leaving behind a brief note reading simply: “Out the window.” *Crimes and Misdemeanors* ends with voiceover narration by the character, who muses, “Future generations might understand more.” Allen leaves little doubt as to whom the character, aptly named Professor *Levy*, is based on.

decades after the “liberation” of Auschwitz by the Soviets, is a wound with which the public has struggled to cope, for it gives lie to the popular, reassuring assumption that bearing witness about the death camp over the course of many books could ever be healing, cathartic, or redemptive to the survivor-writer. Unlike most other widely esteemed memoirists of the death camp, including Elie Wiesel, Levi always seemed as though he aimed to communicate sadness and confusion, rather than rage or bitterness, in his writings about the camps. When Levi threw himself down the stairwell of the apartment building that had been his home before and after Auschwitz, he shattered, or at least placed a hurdle in front of, the so-called “Americanization” of the Holocaust, the tendency in popular thinking to attach a happy ending to life after the Shoah. If, so many decades after the “liberation” of Auschwitz, even the gentle and thoughtful Levi could still lack resolution to his life’s central dilemma, then perhaps the world, too, had never truly gotten over the Nazi crime; maybe there could be no getting over the offense.

As Alexander Stille writes in reference to the suicide, “Even Levi’s son, Renzo was quoted as saying, ‘Read the conclusion of *The Truce* and you will understand’” (Alexander Stille “The Biographical Fallacy” in Pugliese 209). In such a light, the adaptation’s treatment of the book’s ending will warrant our careful consideration. Should the film distract us from a meaningful confrontation with the suicide and its possible motives, and try to convince us that Levi offers us words of comfort on the screen from beyond the grave, then it will not help us to approach the Holocaust with the authenticity that Levi’s testimony in *The Reawakening* deserves. Forcing the audience to confront the survivor’s impossible position in the aftermath of the death camp is undoubtedly the dominant theme of *The Reawakening* and many of Levi’s later writings.

Levi was born and raised in a mostly secular Jewish family in Turin, Italy, and trained to be a chemist. He was in his twenties when he was sent to Auschwitz, where at the rubber factory laboratories at Buna his skills as a scientist, along with random luck, helped save his life. These details are eloquently described in his first memoir, which was published in Italian as *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) in 1947, and in English as *Survival in Auschwitz* in 1959. As many scholars have pointed out, *The Reawakening* almost seamlessly picks up where the first memoir leaves off, at the Allied liberation of the camp, though in significant ways the two books are also quite different. Because *Survival in Auschwitz* is Levi's most famous and widely read publication, we should take into consideration how the two books are related. It seems more than likely that most readers of the second memoir will have already read the first, and of course, if Levi had thought the first book had said everything he wanted us to know, then he would not have bothered with its sequel.

The two books are roughly the same length, with exactly the same number of chapters, and both give considerable space to descriptions of various camp inmates; the writer typically calls attention to one character, then moves on to another, and then another. Levi occasionally breaks from that pattern in both books by examining in greater depth his closest friends, such as the saintly Lorenzo in *Survival in Auschwitz* and the more complex Cesare and "the Greek" in *The Reawakening*.

However, the differences between the texts are just as apparent. Because the second book begins with the arrival of Soviet troops, when the liberation of the tiny Jewish remnant at Auschwitz is ostensibly at hand, it is bound to be a very different read. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi relates his futile attempts to make sense of a world that was by Nazi design turned upside-

down in the camp, a world where there was no “why.” In other words, he attempts to make sense of a world that was designed to destroy the Jewish soul by disrupting the traditional understanding of God’s natural order. One way the Nazis did this was by breaking cause from effect, at least in appearance, so that Levi’s scientific paradigm is challenged by an SS almost immediately upon arrival with the revelatory statement “*Hier ist kein warum.*” Many of the passages in the book are heartbreaking or grotesque, and distinguished by unimaginable human cruelty, until Levi barely survives in the largely abandoned camp by crawling through mud and human feces in a desperate search for food for himself and his similarly diseased and dying companions (158-173).

By contrast, *The Reawakening* is about a return to the natural order, or rather a search for whether such a return can be possible. Because the first page presents the arrival of a liberating army, permitting the narrator to leave the death camp after the first few chapters, the narrative in this memoir is not as likely to astound the reader with the sort of shocking details that descriptions of Nazi atrocities afford in *Survival in Auschwitz*. In some ways, *The Reawakening* is about a journey that crosses distances that are not merely mental and spiritual, but also physical, as the protagonist makes his painstaking trek across eastern and southern Europe. Berel Lang writes of how the changes of scenery affect the differences between the two memoirs: “In retrospect, Levi presents his return journey as a setting for comic events and local color.... It is as if in *The Truce* he left behind the deliberate and deliberated figure whom readers encountered in *If This Is a Man*” (*Primo Levi* 41). But while Lang is correct to assess the second memoir’s narrator as less frequently tormented than his counterpart in the first, he is mistaken, in my opinion, to conclude that the “deliberate and deliberated figure” is “left behind.” For example, as

Levi writes of the road home in *The Reawakening*, “It was more than a sack: it was the genius of destruction, of anti-creation, here as at Auschwitz; it was the mystique of barrenness” (123).

Indeed, we must be careful to avoid the oversimplification that one book is about death, and the other about life. While Levi employs different classical models for these writings, he does not let them limit the vision of Holocaust testimony that he is trying to shape for his reader. Lang is correct to observe that on the surface the two memoirs feed the impression that they describe wholly different characters facing mostly different problems. But still, the overall theme of nonredemptive, meaningless suffering, unhealed by time or physical distance, and fundamentally ill-fitted to traditional literary models, forms a common strand across both of the publications.

Several scholars have made a point to note how Levi adopts a picaresque model for his journey, highlighting many of the stops and the vibrant people he encounters. Mentions of the picaresque aspects are ubiquitous to the discourse on the memoir (Lang 40, Magavern 98, Pugliese 4, Stone 140, and Biasin 6). Examination of the picaresque helps explain what Robert S. C. Gordon might mean when he writes, “In conventional descriptions of Levi’s *The Reawakening*, a feature commonly used to distinguish it from its predecessor is its markedly more writerly, narratively inventive – in short, ‘fictional’ – quality” (48). In the second memoir, the writer’s attention is typically focused outward at what seems novel and exciting, rather than inward at the victim’s reaction to constant torture. The picaresque is a model that could never be applied to the story told in *Survival in Auschwitz*, and not only because the inmates suffered confinement; the picaresque model is meant to showcase far more than a succession of settings and characters, at least insofar as it also presents a distinct tone and worldview. As Lang observes, the picaresque presumes that a future is possible, which is an attitude that never

pervaded the death camp for Levi (40). The result, according to Sam Magavern, is that the two books portray worlds that appear to be opposites (98). However, that analysis exaggerates the differences in terms of plot, characterization, and tone. In fact, Levi creates a tension in adopting a patina that suggests the picaresque model, in that it is never his intention to leave the reader feeling reassured and hopeful about life “after” Auschwitz. If the picaresque tradition is alien to *Survival in Auschwitz*, it is similarly inapplicable to any careful reading of *The Reawakening*.

Over the course of the memoir, Levi in fact subverts the picaresque tradition, effectively demonstrating how the shadow of Auschwitz, even after liberation, cannot be contained within previous modes of expression. For brief moments, *The Reawakening* comes off as a lighthearted and breezy read, such as in the scenario where Primo describes having to break the language barrier to bargain for a chicken by theatrically pantomiming as though he were one in front of a family. Another example is when he and “the Greek,” his companion for much of the journey, fill a fish with water to make it seem like a more attractive purchase to a reluctant buyer. But while the ploys outside the camp might succeed in bringing food (or money for food), the lighthearted tone is undercut by the end of the book, when the survivor returns home, describes virtually nothing of what he finds, and instead closes the book by writing about his feeling that he is still trapped in the camp. Indeed, the camp is now the only thing that can ever feel real to the survivor, for whom liberation and normalcy are alien and out of reach, even at home in a soft bed. Thus, if the adaptation of this memoir were to present Levi’s journey as unquestionably adhering to the picaresque model, it will have sacrificed a key tension that Levi worked to render. That tension is crucial to Levi’s message because it helps remove his journey as a survivor from literary conventions and the reader’s expectations.

It has been alleged that Levi relies on another literary model for *The Reawakening*, one that again places the book at still greater distance from *Survival in Auschwitz*. While the first book has been said to look to Dante's *Inferno*, a sort of hell on earth, the second allegedly turns to the tradition of Homer's *Odyssey* (Biasin 7). Magavern writes that Homer's depiction is an "epic not about hell but about earth, with all its hellish and heavenly aspects" (99). However, scholars who would base their analysis of *The Reawakening* on comparisons of Levi to Odysseus are, at best, missing the survivor-memoirist's point, and at worst, playing into the Nazi strategy of minimizing the public's recognition of Jewish suffering in the Shoah.

To be sure, we can readily acknowledge that, like Levi, the character of Odysseus is repeatedly and unfairly frustrated in his search for home, and meets assorted, colorful characters. Some are helpful, and others prove to be momentary obstacles. But that is as far as the comparison should be taken. Levi employs the model only to subvert it by the memoir's final pages. As Magavern explains, "Odysseus faces a trial – a bloody battle with the suitors – when he returns home, but his world has remained sane and comprehensible to him, and he does not feel poisoned by the carnage he has endured and wreaked in the intervening twenty years" (Magavern 113). Homer's epic presents a thrilling climax in which the Trojan War veteran gets his violent revenge on those who have attempted to supplant him in his own home. By comparison, while it is well documented by biographers that Levi, unlike most European Jews after WWII, returned home to his family and apartment, he pointedly neglects to include much description of his actual homecoming in *The Reawakening*. The brevity of his description is worthy of consideration:



I reached Turin on 19 October, after thirty-five days of travel; my house was still standing, all my family was alive, no one was expecting me. I was swollen, bearded and in rags, and had difficulty in making myself recognized. I found my friends full of life, the warmth of secure meals, the solidity of daily work, the liberating joy of recounting my story. I found a large clean bed, which in the evening (a moment of terror) yielded softly under my weight. (Levi *The Reawakening* 207)

This means that, over the course of the narrative, the author takes the reader along with him on his arduous journey, and then, completely against all expectations, he denies the reader the aesthetic satisfaction of witnessing the final resolution to having been physically and emotionally lost in post-war Europe. For Levi, the ethical implication – that is, the call from the survivor that the reader must bear witness – demands that he remove us from an expected literary aesthetic that would provide easy or conventional resolutions. The survivor-memoirist means to wake us from the slumber of apathy that continues to exist despite, or rather because of, Auschwitz.

Levi's brief summary of getting home is considerably less detailed or moving than what follows in the book, which is a lengthier description of his recurring nightmare that he has never really left the death camp. In this context, it thus reads as ironic that Levi would refer to the "liberating joy of recounting my story" in the above passage. And it cannot go unnoticed that Levi spends as much space describing his "large clean bed" as he does on his elation at seeing his loved ones; referring to this passage, the attentive reader will have an easier time envisioning the furniture than picturing the human beings. This unanticipated imbalance portrays a world that remains out of sorts, so that even a genius visionary cannot reassemble it to any recognizable degree. Levi's memoirs, with their rich portrayals of individual human beings, always insisted

that human life has intrinsic value. So what does the survivor-author hope to convey by refusing to describe the living – that is, those who never knew Auschwitz, even if they did suffer in certain ways during the war – with comparative depth?

The conspicuous omission of Levi's homecoming scenario from the final pages of his so-called "memoir of return" has garnered attention from scholars, who offer insight into what he means to tell us about the Shoah. As Lang writes of the peculiar ending, "Arguably still more notable in *The Truce* is the absence of any but a single reference to Levi's own condition or emotion related to the return itself, the apprehension that would have seemed inevitable after what he had endured, and of any expression of anxiety over what he might find or not find 'at home' when he did arrive there; after all, he had no way of knowing whether his mother or sister were even alive" (Lang 41). The absence of the expected family reunion description defies the norm set by most Holocaust memoirs: even when there is no surviving family with whom the survivor can reunite, the author will usually describe the pain of learning that fact, as well as the details of what exactly befell individual family members, if they are known.<sup>21</sup> Many written accounts describe frantic daily searches through public postings of lists that displayed survivor names. Regarding Levi, as Lang continues, "Perhaps we are meant to conclude that when he reentered the apartment at Coro Re Umberto for the first time in more than two years, the weight of the moment was too heavy for words. And that it remained so even years later, when he found himself able to write about (almost) everything else. One thing we should not suppose is that when he stepped over the threshold, Primo Levi felt that his war had ended" (Lang 45).

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<sup>21</sup> A famous example of this pattern may be seen in Gerda Weismann Klein's *All But My Life*, many of whose last passages are about the joy at marrying the man who liberated her, and the pain of not knowing the exact circumstances of her beloved older brother's death.

This argument that Levi's Holocaust never truly reached an "aftermath" is echoed by Magavern, who writes, "As *The Truce* draws to a close, Levi makes it clear that while many small reversals of Auschwitz are possible, no complete erasure can ever take place" (Magavern 112). The denial of erasure is in evidence in the way Levi concludes the memoir:

... a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me, at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals...

I am sitting... in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction... And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means; and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, "*Wstawàch.*" (Levi *The Reawakening* 207-208)

One thinks of comparably themed if less eloquently expressed sentiments in other survivor accounts, such as Fania Fénelon's: describing her own experiences, she admits that even decades after liberation, there is no escaping Auschwitz, which still "thinks *for* me.... It's not that I want to. But particularly at night, I can't help it, I find myself back in the block at Birkenau, and *it* all

happens, without any help from me.... I spend every night there – every night!” (Routier ix). If the two passages confront a similar theme, their delivery and positioning remain different. That is, Fénelon’s comment is quoted in the preface to her memoir, and might be forgotten by the time a reader arrives on the final page. On the other hand, Levi’s placement of such an eloquent passage at the conclusion of the book expresses his intention that we recognize its significance as a final message, especially when we consider that the *Wstawaùch* poem also introduces the book.

Moreover, whether he means it or not, Levi’s description of the nightmare is not just lyrical in its eloquence: its visual aspects make it also fittingly cinematic, certainly more than Fénelon’s less image-ridden description of a similar experience. For example, we may easily (if not eagerly) imagine a filmmaker using the cinematic special effects that were readily available in 1997 to portray how “everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people...” It is true that the same filmmaker is likely to be more greatly challenged to depict the sensation of being “alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing,” as Levi writes, but film undoubtedly has the tools to make the attempt. Therefore, the director’s decision to neglect the book’s conclusion in the adaptation is wholly a matter of choice.

I would add that another possible marker of delineation between *Survival and Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening* concerns the treatment of space. Set in Auschwitz, the first memoir is about the shrinking of Jewish space, until the only place for the vast majorities of Jewish bodies is up through the chimney, and the only space for the rare survivor is clutching at the earth, literally crawling on the ground through mud and human feces. By contrast, *The Reawakening* over the course of multiple chapters sets up a vision of Jewish space once again opening up after the war, but ultimately the book dismisses this vision as illusory. If the path back to normalcy

comes off as frustratingly circuitous for the Jewish survivor depicted in the book, in the end it takes him only to the circular nightmare of never actually having left the camp: the escape to freedom and survival itself are not the stuff of reality when only the Lager is “true.” Perhaps *The Reawakening* means to serve as an affirmation of *Survival in Auschwitz*, where the memoirist writes, “the Lager is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger” (74). If the liberation experience can never truly succeed in freeing the survivor from the Lager, then the Lager remains his only reality; if the Lager is “true,” and the Lager is where he has been reduced not merely to matter, but to “living hunger,” then reality itself has become his enemy. This is a reality where the Nazis have succeeded in obliterating Jewish space, so that all that can now exist in the survivor is “living hunger” that no amount of food can sate. Part of the challenge for the adapter thus becomes conveying a sense of Auschwitz existing not merely as a physical space within barbed wire, but also as a metaphysical space existing within the protagonist that is even more confining.

Like other films about the Shoah, *The Truce* faces the challenge of verisimilitude. No film can ever do justice to portraying Auschwitz, and this is more than an issue of budgetary constraints. Even audiences for artistic rather than commercial films are disinclined to see realistic portrayals of the camp; this is perhaps even more pronounced in audiences of ethically demanding films. Rosi’s solution to the issue of verisimilitude is to forgo any attempt at depicting most parts of *The Reawakening*’s first chapters, which are set in Auschwitz, albeit after the evacuation of the SS. For example, the film begins with the visually stunning arrival of four Soviet soldiers on horseback on a field of snow, much like Levi describes on the first page of the memoir. In fairness, this is an important moment in the book: as Magavern writes, “They are the

Four Horsemen, not of the Apocalypse but of a reverse Apocalypse, a new beginning” (Magavern 100). Also like the book, an early scene in the film also shows the character of Primo (John Turturro) interacting with his comrade, Cesare (Massimo Ghini), while under the care of the Red Cross. Moreover, in that same scene, the film subtly draws our attention to the fact that Primo is tying his shoelaces when he locks eyes with his friend; this seems to be the director’s nod to the importance Levi ascribes to having shoes, which he describes in both *Survival in Auschwitz* and in *The Reawakening*. However, the many character descriptions that comprise the bulk of the first few chapters are absent from the film. Beyond aesthetic concerns regarding the loss of Levi’s beautiful prose, this omission poses an ethical dilemma, for it is clearly Levi’s purpose to testify to the unique sufferings of each individual he takes time to remember in his account.

Probably most notable is the omission of Hurbinek, a character who only briefly appears on a couple of pages in *The Reawakening*, but whose rich characterization and symbolism masterfully demonstrate so much of what Levi has to say about Auschwitz’s effect on human beings, including the burden of testimony that is placed on the few survivors. Hurbinek embodies the essence of Nazism and its assault on Jewry, beginning with the child. As Levi writes in the memoir’s second chapter, Hurbinek is a person shrouded in mystery, beginning with his origins. Nobody knows his real name or age, where he has come from, how he has ended up in Auschwitz, or how he has managed to survive this long. In an environment notorious for murdering the handicapped, he possesses legs that are shriveled to the point that he is incapable of walking. Most amazingly, he seems to be about three years old, while virtually every child arriving in Auschwitz, even those far older and healthier, has immediately been sent to the

flames. His alert eyes are desperate to communicate something, but he is completely without speech. With profound compassion, an extraordinary teenager, Henek, helps take care of Hurbinek, and in time he announces that the child has repeatedly attempted to pronounce a word. However, neither Henek nor anyone else can figure out what the word means, and soon thereafter Hurbinek dies without ever having been understood. Levi concludes the moving passage by writing of the murdered child, “Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine” (Levi *The Reawakening* 26).

Libby Saxton observes that Levi’s values demand that “communication with others is at once a perpetual possibility and a personal responsibility” (Saxton 8). That is a theme that is also explored by Magavern, who writes: “As Levi explained in interviews, the failure of communication was a central feature of Auschwitz.... Levi cannot conceive of a meaningful life without communication. Thus, the passion with which, in *The Truce*, he portrays the struggle of Hurbinek, the three-year-old boy from Auschwitz struggling to say a word” (Magavern 182). Levi’s assessment of the importance of communication to human dignity, as well as his recognition that the Lager represented an assault on meaningful communication, lend special import to the passage on Hurbinek. In the virtually angelic character of Henek, we are reminded of Lorenzo, who in *Survival in Auschwitz* goes out of his way to care for a broken Levi. And it is hardly a stretch to suppose that as a survivor struggling to find appropriate words to convey the unimaginable, Levi means for us to see his own post-war predicament in Hurbinek’s failed effort to talk or even survive. Undoubtedly, something great, even indispensable, to Levi’s testimony is lost when the film omits the character, and instead jumps ahead to Primo’s physical journey from the camp. Hurbinek is the archetypal Jewish child, representing the heart of Judaism and the

cruel erasure of its next generation. Eighty to 90 per cent of Europe's Jewish children were brutally murdered, and the rest were orphaned, and we are justified to question the ethical measure of an adaptation that conveniently avoids reminding its viewers.

I do not mean to imply that there might be a practical, effective, or realistic way to represent a character like Hurbinek on the screen – especially in 1997, before more recent advancements in computer-generated imagery (CGI), which even today might not be sufficient to maintain verisimilitude. And even if such technology were enough to impress the viewer as realistic, any portrayal of such a grotesque physique and of a three-year-old's murder is surely more than an audience would want to watch. Rather, I contend that the impossibility of fairly rendering Hurbinek means that something of tremendous importance in Levi's testimony is wholly lost to viewers of the film adaptation, which never finds a way to convey any part of that which the Hurbinek parable signifies. Without Hurbinek, we cannot fully appreciate the Nazi offense, or the survivor burdened with endlessly bearing witness while trying to return home. Indeed, without Hurbinek, we cannot recognize why it is so important that the survivor should make it home to bear witness. Hurbinek's brief story testifies to the multifaceted Nazi assault on the name, the child, and the word, so that all three facets effectively culminate in the assault on the survivor's soul, rendering it forever a prisoner of the Lager.

If the adaptation is adversely affected by the removal of Hurbinek from Levi's story, it is no better off for a scene that it adds much later in the storyline. The memoir describes Levi seeing a Nazi officer on a train platform, now a prisoner. Rosi adds a twist to the scenario. In the film version, the same scenario plays out, but the German now becomes overwhelmed by emotion at seeing Primo, tattooed arm in evidence. As the two men make eye contact from



across the station platform, not a word is said, but the German drops to his knees and sobs, presenting an obviously sincere plea for forgiveness.

Stone offers some insight as to what inspired Rosi to add such a controversial scene:

Rosi added several scenes that betray the mood of the book. Most disturbing is the addition of an atonement scene: in the film's penultimate chapter, the train taking Levi and other Italian survivors home stops in Munich. One of the German prisoners repairing the tracks sees Levi's camp jacket with the yellow and red star and falls to his knees, with hand on heart. Rosi appropriated this act of atonement from German chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling before the Warsaw ghetto monument in 1970." (Stone 141)

While the film does not make clear that Primo accepts the gesture of apology, it also never closes the door on that possibility.

It is nothing short of absurd and offensive to suggest that the experiences of Levi at Munich in 1945 and of Brandt in Warsaw 1970 are in any way interchangeable – not in terms of history, and not in terms of ethics. Levi may have never demanded revenge against his German tormentors, but he also never made the case, especially in *The Reawakening*, for cheap forgiveness of the perpetrators. To ascribe to him such an encounter is not just dishonest; it is morally repugnant, for it minimizes the Jew's suffering so soon after the war. Levi meant to use his testimony to shake the world from its slumber of indifference, not to lull the masses into thinking that a healing moment could be so readily obtained.

Surely one of the reasons that Levi and other survivors could never experience a true sense of liberation after the Holocaust is that most of the world remained indifferent to their testimonies. Perhaps worse still, most perpetrators of the Holocaust returned home and were

presumably able to lead happy, productive lives in a way that the survivors never could. For Levi and the others, no tearful gesture of apology with hand over heart was ever offered. The other issue with the contrition scene is that a viewer of the film could hardly be blamed for wondering why on earth this Nazi or any other has reason to beg forgiveness from the Jew; it is not as though the film ever really shows Germans taking pleasure at committing terrible moral crimes against Jews, and with details like the murder of Hurbinek cleansed from the screen version, the Nazi offense is conveniently sanitized. It must be sanitized in order to be made forgivable. Because the moment of contrition comes so late in the movie, it is implicitly the instance of climax for the protagonist's struggle. Only after that point is he able to make it home. If the contrition scene can be counted as an ethical violation, it likely gives most audience members exactly what they want to see in a Holocaust movie: the satisfaction of witnessing catharsis, reconciliation, and resolution. Moreover, the scene relieves the audience from any responsibility for bearing witness to the real survivor's testimony.

This raises an important question: how can it be that the film flopped at the box office if moments like the contrition scene gave most viewers what they wanted to see? To be clear, I do not suggest that the problem is that many viewers were disappointed by the film's changes to the source memoir; as well-known as Levi is, it remains true that most people have not read *The Reawakening*. Nor do I think that Insdorf's criticism that the film's music score is "intrusive" (Insdorf 341) can account for the adaptation's unpopularity. Rather, I think that the film's attempt to "go small" on the screen probably bored most of its audience. As a character on the screen, Primo comes off as dull. Not enough of his past is revealed to make his timid nature interesting or to make viewers sympathize with him.

Stone writes that Rosi struggled for 10 years to bring the adaptation to the screen. Potential financial investors were reluctant to offer funding because they found the source memoir dull. Rosi struggled to raise the necessary funds until Martin Scorsese helped him obtain \$13 million, “a huge budget for an Italian film” (Stone 140). But that amount was not nearly enough to render a film of epic proportions in the era of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, which came out in 1993. For this reason, Rosi seems justified to have wanted to depict the story within a more intimate framework. Moreover, the historical Levi possessed an unassuming demeanor, not the sort of larger-than-life personality that can fill the screen in the manner of Liam Neeson’s Oskar Schindler or Roberto Benigni’s Guido Orefice. (*Life Is Beautiful*, another Italian film, came out right after *The Truce* and proved far more popular.) Playing Primo under Rosi’s direction, John Turturro’s performance is best described as subtle. As Stone writes, “Turturro plays Levi nearly silently with only his piercing gaze to represent the catastrophe. When he does speak, it is with constraint and deliberation. He labors toward understatement, something rare in contemporary cinema.... The film opens with the Soviet soldiers’ discovery of Auschwitz and remains silent for almost nine minutes” (Stone 142-143). By design, then, the film holds the viewer at a distance, even while it means to achieve a sense of intimacy.

However, that sort of portrayal presents its own problems: A film must struggle to achieve intimacy with its audience when the action is slow, and when the main character hardly speaks. And an audience can hardly hope to identify with a character who barely communicates, especially when that character has just had the extraordinary experience of surviving a death camp. This situation is particularly, if not exclusively, filmic. By its nature, a written memoir does not face the same set of obstacles. The memoirist speaks directly to the reader, chapter after

chapter, without coming off as chatty, and in so doing, can even heighten a book's sense of intimacy to the reader. Words are what move a memoir forward. I suggest that in this light, fidelity to the book, and to the historical figure of this particular survivor, work against the film. Levi was not a larger-than-life figure; rather he was a gifted thinker and writer who had a larger-than-life experience. Trying to match the actor's performance to the real, soft-spoken Levi hinders the film's ability to deliver testimony to an audience that might otherwise have more deeply cared about the character's fate.

If there is a character in the film who jubilantly fills the screen, it is the Greek (Rade Serbedzija). However, he is not on the screen for the entire movie, and he is too much of a caricature for most viewers to identify with. Rather than anything revelatory about Levi's memoir, what is most striking about the actor's portrayal is how much his facial features, physique, wardrobe (down to the brown cap!), and mannerisms resemble Topol's Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, 1971). Up until and perhaps even including the moment when the Greek becomes a pimp, we can easily envision him singing "If I Were a Rich Man" from the beloved musical. As in the memoir, the Greek serves as a foil character for Primo, and also adds some comic relief. However, because the cinema, unlike the written memoir, is a visual medium, the Greek's physicality must be taken into account. The majority of Jewish Holocaust victims were from Eastern Europe, so the actor's resemblance to Tevye, the pre-Holocaust milkman from Ukraine, seems likely to feed the false impression that Jewish life in the Old Country continued unabated after Auschwitz. After all, for most Americans the fictional character of the musical's Tevye arguably represents the face of the real, pre-Holocaust Jew of

the *shtetl*. Moreover, in *The Truce*, the Greek's evident success and satisfaction in his life as a pimp more than hints that sexual pleasure is the remedy to an Auschwitz survivor's ailments.

Indeed, the film's elevation of sexuality as a principal element in the survivor's life and identity is a theme that is conspicuously absent from Levi's memoir. Rosenfeld can readily point to *The Reawakening* when he writes that "one of the characteristics of Holocaust writings at their most authentic is that they are peculiarly and predominantly sexless. This is doubtless one reason why latter-day authors who have no direct, firsthand experience of the camps have such a hard time writing about them: the contemporary imagination, inflamed as it is by hyped-up sexual fantasies, can hardly understand an order of experience where eros is so deprived and the sexual drive so stunted" (Rosenfeld *A Double Dying* 164). To be sure, Rosenfeld means to refer to the concentrationary universe, and most of *The Reawakening*, like most of *The Truce*, takes place outside the established parameters of Auschwitz. But as we have seen, for Levi that universe knows no boundaries of time or space for the survivor. We can assert with confidence that Levi's writing, and certainly his depiction of himself in that writing, is mostly sexless. To be fair, we should note that sex does come up in the book, such as when Levi describes how a Polish nurse in the camp wants the attention of any man, or when he describes a couple of sisters who become prostitutes in the woods, or when he reveals that the Greek has gleefully become a pimp. But these moments hardly preoccupy Levi's mind, and he never describes lustful situations about his personal situation. That is, while he makes a few fleeting references to the sex lives of others, he does not concern himself with exploring their details or implications; nor does he make any reference to his own sexual circumstance. Whatever he means for us to grasp as essential to his

predicament, it is not sex. Sexuality is a part of a certain normalcy in life from which Auschwitz has forever removed the survivor.

However, over the course of some lengthy sequences in the film, Primo compassionately rescues a Jewish woman who was forced into prostitution in the camp, and who has now been scorned for that reason by her fellow survivors. Later in the film, he leers at a naked gentile woman, his colleague, while she showers, though he never acts on his apparently intense lust. It is difficult to imagine a similar scenario being described in the memoir, where the Greek is by far the more sexually active Jewish male character. Certainly, we may fairly read Primo's rescue of the former sex slave as a heroic act. The notion that Primo possesses an extraordinary, heroic character when measured against his fellow Jewish survivors is implied early in the film. Upon witnessing the arrival of the four Soviet horsemen, dozens of survivors happily run towards them, only to reverse direction in a panic when other soldiers and tanks come towards them. Only Primo, however, resists the urge to run, and instead smiles at the rescuers. This represents a departure from the source memoir, in which the writer characteristically directs the reader's attention away from his reaction and towards the expressions on the Russian soldiers' faces, seemingly as a way for the writer to condemn the Nazi crime:

They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences in another man's crime; the feeling

of guilt that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist....

Because, and this is the awful privilege of our generation and of my people, no one better than us has ever been able to grasp the incurable nature of the offence, that spreads like a contagion. It is foolish to think that human justice can eradicate it. It is an inexhaustible fount of evil. (*The Reawakening* 16)

It is telling that the survivor-memoirist does not use his prose to single himself out from the masses of other survivors and victims, but rather positions himself as part of the spectacle moving the Russian liberators to expressions of shame. Similarly, Levi refers not to what he has learned, but rather to the terrible knowledge that he shares with “our generation and my people,” presumably European Jewry. It is evident from his writings that he saw himself as special only for the accident of his survival, and nothing more.

Still more dubious is the notion later in the film that sexual restraint is the most significant quality to set Primo apart from his fellow survivors. Perhaps Rosi means to show that Primo is a hero because he is somehow above the temptations of the flesh. Whatever the filmmaker’s motivation, the result misses the mark on Levi’s sense of self in his testimony. One feature that ironically distinguishes the oft-lauded Levi from other survivor-authors is that, as Lawrence Langer writes, he “never insisted on unique personal strengths that distanced himself from others” (Langer 25). Perhaps Levi was just naturally modest, or perhaps he feared that any highlighting of his personal strengths might create a false impression that they made the difference in his survival, which he always respected as a matter of chance.

As Rosenfeld states, the norm in “authentic” Holocaust literature is for characters to demonstrate little if any interest in sexual relations. The problem is that this is hardly the norm in films, especially European cinema, where explicitly sexual scenarios frequently play out in real time. Because the film never really explains why most of Primo’s behaviors, if not his desires, are markedly asexual, the audience is left to its own devices to solve the mystery. Primo’s disinclination to consummate a relationship is effectively mirrored in his inability to find his way home. This means that the Greek’s words about shoes resonate in a different context on the screen than in the book: that of sexuality. When the Greek tells Levi in the memoir that a real man is able to find himself shoes, it can be excused as a moment of friendly ribbing or eccentricity. However, in the film, when the Greek speaks the same line, it now exists in a domain where Primo’s very manhood is called into question. Again, the Greek is overtly sexualized as a character in that when we last encounter him, he is a happy pimp with an evidently satisfied woman on each arm. Especially in the tradition of films, a real man finds his own shoes; a real man knows how to enjoy a woman. If a cowboy can show *How the West Was Won* and win Grace Kelly, it stands to reason that, at least in the world of normative cinema, the Holocaust survivor should be able to conquer the lingering aftereffects of the camp by sharing a fulfilling sexual relationship with the right woman.

Thus, according to our expectations of how a male protagonist on the screen is meant to behave, Primo can easily be read as a victim who is simply not man enough to help himself; in effect, the Jew after liberation is more a victim of his own weakness than of any evil that the Germans and their accomplices could have inflicted on him in the past. After all, if the Nazis took away Primo’s shoes, and he still could not get a new pair without the assistance of a “real”



man like the Greek, then it would also stand to reason that the Nazis similarly robbed the Jew of his masculine sexual identity and sexual relation to the other. The film's denial of the Nazi assault on Jewish sexuality is a form of Holocaust denial insofar as it normalizes the survivor's character.

As well, if that denial does not amount to a continued assault on the reputation of all Jewish male survivors, it at least aims at those who share Levi's reputedly gentle disposition. As Rosenfeld writes, "Hatred and vengeance are passions that simply do not appear in his writings, and even anger is rare" (*The End* 188). Elsewhere, Rosenfeld refers to the historical Levi as "A man of intellect and civilized manner" (*A Double Dying* 56), and the scholar is not alone in assessing Levi in this fashion. While surely not Rosenfeld's aim, those descriptions fit the popular stereotype about Jewish men as smart, but lacking sexual energy. In the context of the western cinema, the portrayal of a man as sexually impotent and passive means that he has been reduced to the level traditionally ascribed to a female character: that is, as an object, rather than an active force in his own life narrative.

It is prudent that our reading of the Jewish male film character should take into account the wider historical context. As Sander Gilman writes, according to longstanding popular assumptions, "The Jewish male is not quite a 'whole' male, he is different and his difference is what marks the category of the Jew" (155). That assumption resonates especially in film tradition, where, as many scholars have argued, Jewish men have typically been portrayed as emasculated, even "feminized" (Horowitz 131; Doneson *The Holocaust in American Film* 10 and 200-202, and "The Image Lingers" 140-152; Boyarin 81; Eilberg-Schwartz 265). What is more, if Primo's biggest problem is his inability to love a woman and to escape a permanent

sense of passivity, then that would suggest a different motive for Levi's suicide than simply Nazi Jew-hatred surviving in the world. It is far less threatening for most people to accept that Jewish survivors are victims of injured manhood rather than of the world's ongoing indifference to antisemitism.

It is therefore nothing short of bizarre that Rosi's film portrays Primo as something of a lecher, and then as something of a stud. We cannot overemphasize that the following examples exist only in the film, and not in the memoir. Clearly, Rosi thinks there is something to gain by elevating a journey of sexuality to such a prominent place in the survivor's story.

Early in the film, Primo leers at a blond prostitute, the voluptuous Galina, while she is naked in the shower; but even when she unabashedly returns his gaze, he does not act. Evidently, he is impotent. Much later in the narrative, after experiencing one annoying detour after another on his journey, he encounters a Jewish woman whom he recognizes as having been forced into prostitution by the Nazis back in Auschwitz. While his fellow Jewish survivors cruelly and unfairly scorn her for this past, he heroically intervenes to defend her honor and makes sure she is fed; it is this moment when, according to Insdorf, he finally overcomes his characteristic passivity.

But while Insdorf is correct to focus on the theme of passivity in the film, she is mistaken to say that this is when Primo conquers this constraint. As we see still later in the film, in a scene that is quite purposefully set in the woods, it is this former Auschwitz prostitute who pursues and then surprises him in a remote cabin. They embrace and kiss; the sudden cut to the next scene suggests they have just had sexual intercourse. Tellingly, the very next screen shot shows Primo finally making it home to Turin. The implication is that the survivor's journey from Auschwitz

was all a saga of sexual growth to the restoration of manhood that Auschwitz had only temporarily removed until the poor Jew finally realized that, like Dorothy in Oz, he always had the power within him to make it home. This reframing of Levi's story along sexual lines effectively normalizes the survivor's suffering by reducing it to something primal, maybe even romantic, and certainly relatable to anyone familiar with mainstream film narrative conventions of boy-gets-girl. Moreover, this sexual consummation as narrative climax and resolution fits the longstanding cinematic trope of framing Jewish men as too passive and emasculated, and thus in need of healing.

As we have noted, *The Reawakening* defies the conventions of Holocaust survivor memoirs by refraining from much description of the return home. Instead, Levi returns the reader to the nightmare of *Wstawaùch*, the Auschwitz reveille, which was earlier introduced on the book's first page. In the memoir's final sentences, just after referring to "the liberating joy of recounting my story," Levi writes that

a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me, at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals.

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the

centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, '*Wstawàch*'. (207-208)

It would seem that Levi means for us to understand that his journey over the course of the memoir has taken him nowhere. If this is so, then of course the omission of any meaningful description of his loved ones or his home makes perfect sense, and the many references to the picaresque are revealed to be nothing but a façade. Levi's knowledge that Auschwitz is the only truth does not represent a gain: he makes the explicit claim that he has always known that there is no leaving Auschwitz. The entire journey of survival, both within and without Auschwitz, has proved meaningless and fruitless, precisely because there can be no without Auschwitz for the survivor. We have been taught to associate the new day with hope, but in the Lager, dawn is the designated time for *Wstawàch*.

The film stands in stark contrast to the memoir in its treatment of *Wstawàch*. In the adaptation, the word appears briefly and early in the survivor's journey from the camp, when Primo and the Greek are bunking with Italian soldiers. Primo exclaims, "*Wstawàch!*" as he awakens from a nightmare that is never described to the audience; the film similarly neglects to define the word. It bears mention that the film never so much as hints that Primo's mysterious nightmare will ever recur. Moreover, at this singular instance of nightmare, Primo has a comrade

there to comfort him, which is an element that is absent from the memoir. Levi's sensitivity to the importance of interpersonal relationships is a fundamental feature in his writing; one of the more famous examples is in *Survival in Auschwitz*, when Steinlauf stresses to the Levi the importance of washing in the camp (40). Thus, it can be no accident that Levi never situates his recurring nightmare of the Lager as something that the comfort of his friends and family could dispel. But because the film tames the survivor's nightmare with little effort, its audience is likely to view the forgettable scenario of Primo having a nightmare as nothing more than the expected symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, the same as former prisoners throughout history and in the present day have experienced. In other words, there is nothing particular to the Shoah that the survivor is experiencing, just as there is nothing particular to the Shoah in the film's paradigm. In the memoir, the truce is a temporary arrangement between the survivor and life, thus allowing him to live for a while. However, the *Wstawàch* reawakens him, so this truce is no longer possible, and he can no longer live. By neglecting this central motif of the memoir, the adaptation repositions the survivor as a product of the more universalized (and therefore more widely recognizable) paradigm of trauma victim, which was never Levi's point. Of course, in terms of adaptation theory, it is not necessarily problematic for a film adaptation to look beyond the source's point. The problem emerges, however, when this addition works against what the survivor means to express, at least in terms of the specific ethical paradigm of the Holocaust.

Even with *Wstawàch* wholly removed from the ending of the narrative, the film still seems to want to lay claim to some semblance of fidelity to Levi's writing. Rosi's film ends with Primo, now apparently settled in at home after reuniting with loved ones. Alone, he leaves the

dining room table, sits down in his office, and places his camp uniform beside him. He then turns to the camera, breaking the fourth wall for the first time, and recites lines from “Shema,” the introductory poem to *Survival in Auschwitz*. In its full form, Levi’s “Shema” is harsh and accusatory, with the survivor adapting a central prayer in Judaism by usurping the traditional words of God to the Jewish people. In the Bible, God admonishes the people to follow his commandments so that they may flourish on the land. In Levi’s poem, the survivor instructs the reader to bear witness to his testimony. Levi’s adaptation of the Jewish prayer imparts to his words some aspects of prayer:

You who live safe

In your warm houses,

You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider if this is a man

Who works in the mud

Who does not know peace

Who fights for a scrap of bread

Who dies because of a yes or a no.

Consider if this is a woman,

Without hair and without name

With no more strength to remember,

Her eyes empty and her womb cold

Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about:

I commend these words to you.

Carve them in your hearts

At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,

Or may your house fall apart,

May illness impede you,

May your children turn their faces from you.

Levi's poem draws on many of the same phrases from the traditional prayer, but its intent is not necessarily to sanctify the reader. It would seem instead to signify the transference of the survivor's testimony to the reader of the memoir. The notion is not that receiving the testimony will make the reader a better person or make him prosper on the land; it is evident that bearing the testimony does neither of these things for the survivor. But by choosing to adapt the central Jewish prayer, Levi implies to us that reception of Holocaust testimony is of biblical importance in the post-Holocaust world. And by choosing to adapt the traditional prayer at the start of his memoir, Levi means to imbue his testimony with an aspect of prayer. His is not merely the story of a life, as we find in traditional life writing, but rather a testimony about a wholesale attack on the body and spirit of collective Jewry. In this light, there can be no sanctification of the human or the divine; instead, there exists only a desperate outcry that the offense took place, and this

outcry assumes the urgency of a prayer. The Shema prayer is fundamental to Jewish life, tradition, and death; for example, Jewish martyrs recite it before being executed.

It thus matters that Rosi chooses to borrow Levi's "Shema" poem from the earlier memoir as a substitute for the "*Wstawaàch*" poem. However, this switch poses problems, beginning with the lines now appearing in a very different narrative context. As we have seen, *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening* are necessarily fundamentally different texts in how they relate to the Lager: the first book is set within it, and the second book is set outside, but with the final revelation that there could be no escape or liberation. When Levi places "Shema" right before the start of his narrative in the first book, he means for the reader to understand the importance of his testimony in that book. Rosi, on the other hand, puts lines from "Shema" at the conclusion of his adaptation of the second book, as if to stress to the viewer that what was just shown on the screen was important to the real Levi. The filmmaker to some extent conveys the illusion of fidelity, at least insofar as he can claim that the words are Levi's. This strategy would seem to recall the adapters of Anne Frank's diary, who pulled from that text one line about people being good at heart, and placed it at the end of her life's journey, where it cannot ring true.

A second problem with switching the poems is that the filmic Primo does not recite the entire poem, "Shema." The film omits the following lines:

Consider if this is a woman,  
Without hair and without name  
With no more strength to remember,  
Her eyes empty and her womb cold



Like a frog in winter...

I commend these words to you.

Carve them in your hearts

At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,

Or may your house fall apart,

May illness impede you,

May your children turn their faces from you.

Even if the poem's length were prohibitive to a complete onscreen recitation because of time constraints, it can be no coincidence that these, the most disturbing visuals, and the harshest lines addressed to the audience, were cut. As a commercial medium, the cinema has tended to want to satisfy the anticipated desires of the filmgoer. Just as the film probably cannot afford to leave the viewer with the impression that *Wstawàch* keeps the survivor perpetually imprisoned, neither can it afford to end by cursing the viewer, as Levi's "Shema" demands. Of course, the irony is that the film presents Primo as noticeably weak and passive, when it is the real Levi who dares to write the harsher phrases.

As Primo looks into the camera, his gaze is steady, his voice unwavering. *The Truce* thus seeks to leave its audience relatively content in the belief that the survivor has tamed his past, and can thus control his future. By sleeping with a woman, he has freed his body; by telling us of his past misfortune, he has freed his spirit. This dynamic is even more dubious when we acknowledge that the film never really establishes to what we are bearing witness with regard to

the actual Shoah. In Rosi's paradigm, the annihilation of European Jewry – or even the showing of one Jew being murdered – need not be a central feature of a film that is ostensibly about the Holocaust. We must take care to stress that Levi's memoirs, like the other best examples in the genre, are essentially about the murdered, not the survivors and their hopes. The film, by contrast, suggests that the worst of the Nazi crimes was the sexual abuse of a Jewish woman in Auschwitz, a pain which is later compounded by shame when she faces rejection from other Jewish survivors for a past that is not her fault. It is likely that in the eyes of 1990s viewers, she is really no worse off than the seemingly countless women who sat on Oprah Winfrey's couch to tell tales of triumph over misogyny. The central character of Primo escapes his role of bystander observer and stands up for her, and in the process he finally gains the audience's admiration, grows, and saves himself from the affliction of being an Auschwitz survivor.

In the end, Rosi's adaptation is by design bound to the platitude that Levi can now rest in peace as long as we have paid attention to the film. I find it informative that Stone, who examines the adaptation in depth and is frequently profound in her critique, writes : "*La tregua* ends inconclusively at the beginning of the healing process, with Levi at his writing desk, his camp jacket beside him as a talisman" (Stone 144). I do not believe that I am nitpicking when I suggest that a term like "healing process" has no place as an authentic descriptor of Levi's journey; it is difficult to imagine him speaking of such a thing, except perhaps with bitter irony. Moreover the idea of a "start" to that healing process represents a misreading of Levi's assessment that there can be no true beginning after Auschwitz: every path returns the survivor to the camp. But I find it even more staggering that she goes no further in her statement than to

pronounce the jacket “a talisman” that sits “beside him” on the screen. While she is not wrong to say that the film concludes with this exact image, I think there is more to be said about it.

Levi’s testimony famously explores the gray zone of morality in the era of Auschwitz. If there is a unifying theme to the ethical testimony in *The Reawakening*, it is the harsh and unwelcome command of *Wstawać*, or *get up*, which torments and compels the survivor until his last breath. Even so, the command to get up is also a call to action to those of us who encounter the survivor’s testimony, imploring us to remember Auschwitz so we can reject its mission of destroying the human being. Rosi’s film delicately evades that command, even while on the surface seeming to treat the survivor himself with due reverence. But without expressing the unmistakable message of *Wstawać*, the film cannot convey what is essential to the survivor-writer’s testimony. Precisely because it works so hard to foster the impression that it rightly speaks in the survivor’s name, *The Truce* assumes an ethical responsibility to utilize filmic language in a manner that transmits his message that Auschwitz is too large an offense for any army, or even time and physical distance, to rescue the human being who has physically survived. Instead, the film utilizes its final moments of screen time to instruct its viewers that they must bear witness to another “alien command” that, unlike Levi’s depiction of *Wstawać*, offers us an easy, comforting lie: that the survivor of Auschwitz can ever truly sit beside his camp uniform rather than in it, and that we today have a duty to remember such a falsehood in Primo Levi’s name.

Over 70 years after Auschwitz, who owns Primo Levi? His self-proclaimed nightmare rendered the Nazis as his eternal master, and his writings and suicide remind us that his torment

could not be overcome. An adaptation worth its weight in authenticity must give voice to his fear and pain, lest the Nazi voice prevail on the screen.

In the next chapter, we will examine an adaptation that attacks the survivor and her word in a more direct manner. It thus takes us even further towards the insidious renaissance of the Nazi voice on the screen and perhaps also in our wider culture.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**THE JEW UNDEFENDED:**  
**INDICTING THE SURVIVOR'S SURVIVAL IN *OUT OF THE ASHES* (2003)**

*Justifying an evildoer and condemning a righteous person, both are abominations of HASHEM.*

Proverbs 17:15

*Mother, they suffer  
vileness to slander me.  
Mother, no one  
cuts off the murderer's word.*

Paul Celan<sup>22</sup>

“Ever since I became associated with adaptation studies,” writes one scholar in the field, “I have always been led to believe that ‘radical’ versions of a source-text are identified with something positive.... ‘Radical’ adaptations are good. They help viewers and critics to ‘rethink’ texts by offering new perspectives on familiar material” (Raw “Radical Adaptations”). But rethinking Holocaust memoirs in certain radical directions merely to offer “new perspectives” is not inevitably “good.” Granted, it can be. In Chapter 3, I argue that Agnieszka Holland’s *Europa Europa* works effectively as an adaptation of a Holocaust memoir, precisely because it illuminates the War Against the Jews by radically reimagining one survivor’s biographical

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Celan. “Wolfsbein.” Trans. John Felstiner. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. 1965. Norton, 2001, p. 385.

details. In this chapter, I will explore an adaptation that proves more ethically problematic, for it radically departs from its source memoir by denying a survivor's victimization, incriminating her in the needless suffering of her fellow Jews, and displacing her and other Jews from the role of hero in her narrative of survival.

One of the more radical types of film adaptation, I suggest, employs a narrative framework that is completely absent from and even contradictory to what is found in the film's written source material. In the context of Holocaust representation, the insertion of a conventional courtroom drama framework may rightfully be described as a particularly insidious option for radical adaptation, at least when it elects to build suspense through the placement of the Jewish survivor, not the Nazis, on the ethical defensive. There can surely be no greater form for radical adaptation of a Holocaust memoir than a film that indicts the Jewish survivor's morality in her fight to survive the death camp, claiming in her name that she has blood on her hands for her actions there.

We see this very dynamic at play in Joseph Sargent's 2003 American cable television production, *Out of the Ashes*, which adapts one of the earliest and most impassioned English-language Holocaust memoirs, Dr. Gisella Perl's 1948 publication, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*. While it is true that Perl was interrogated in the United States for her work as a doctor in Auschwitz, it is the adapter's choice to make this the lens through which her story is revealed, just as it is the adapter's choice to invent her confession that she is guilty of moral crimes. The adaptation's radical departure from Perl's survivor memoir injudiciously mires its subject in familiar telemovie tropes of female suffering, guilt, and redemption. Due to its dependence on such Hollywood narrative conventions, and more importantly, due to its denial of the Nazi

assault on the Jews, the telefilm cannot depict the Shoah with authenticity, especially in Perl's name.

Perl,<sup>23</sup> unlike approximately a half million of her fellow Hungarian Jews, lived to write about her experiences as a prisoner in the Sighet ghetto, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. During the immediate postwar period, when most survivors could find neither the words nor any audience for their recollections of the Shoah, Perl arrived in the United States and managed to publish her account. Having lost her family and her community, the author presents from her unique vantage point a documentation of the Nazi torture and mass murder of Europe's Jewry. Internment presented her, a trained gynecologist, with a special sort of what Lawrence Langer famously calls "choiceless choices" ("The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps" 54). Many of Perl's difficulties were linked to her role as a doctor assigned to the Auschwitz "hospital," for they time and again involved her usually futile attempts to preserve life in a setting that, unlike a true hospital, was designed to engineer only death.

As a doctor in the women's camp, Perl worked under the direct daily supervision of the most notorious of Nazi doctors, Josef Mengele.<sup>24</sup> However, her work did not involve the torture of living inmates under the guise of experimentation, for which Mengele is best known. Instead, Perl provided medical care to inmates without even the most basic materials, helped build a team

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<sup>23</sup> In the interest of clarity, throughout this chapter I will refer to the survivor-memoirist as "Perl" and to the film adaptation's on-screen character as "Gisella."

<sup>24</sup> Throughout her memoir, Perl makes many references to "Dr. Mengerle." She also refers to Irma Grese, another high-ranking Nazi in Auschwitz, as "Irma Greze." These misspellings may surely be credited to the German pronunciations and to the fact that Perl wrote her book before these names became ubiquitous in print. In 1948, she would not have had access to the correct spellings, as Holocaust memoirs numbered few and Holocaust history texts were not yet written.

of Jewish doctors and nurses to staff the hospital, fought her own despair after attempting suicide, lied to inmates to strengthen their hope for survival, tried to hide physically ill patients from deadly SS selections, shared her own meager rations to keep doomed women alive another day, and secretly performed abortions on Jewish inmates and on the extraordinarily sadistic Nazi guard, Irma Grese.

Throughout her memoir, Perl consistently demonstrates a straightforward writing style, and this includes how she takes care to identify explicitly the perpetrators and the victims of the Shoah. Perl's writing is not given to obscure literary references or metaphors. While her work lacks the literary sophistication of Primo Levi's, it achieves its power through the stark clarity in which it outlines the Nazis' crimes, the victims' suffering, and the survivor's fury. If Levi's writing style has been noted for its unemotional, scientifically observant manner, Perl's is unapologetically indignant at every turn, so that her unmistakable anger at the perpetrators is sustained on page after page, surpassing even Elie Wiesel's in *Night*. A conspicuous strand that runs through the memoir is the survivor's unapologetic rage against the injustices wrought by her SS tormentors.

From the very first page of its Foreword, the book leaves no room for misreading the distinction the author makes between German Nazis and Jews:

Hitler, this degenerate Faust, and his henchmen turned the German people into a willing instrument of conquest and massacre.

We shall never be able to understand how a people which produced Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, Bach, Dürer and many other incomparable geniuses could sink so deep in the



morass of depravity, crime and the enjoyment of torture that every human being who watched them felt ashamed of belonging to the same species.

I offer this book as a monument commemorating the events of the years 1940-1945, commemorating Nazi bestiality, Nazi sadism, Nazi inhumanity and the death of their six million innocent Jewish victims. (11-12)

The author's message regarding German criminality and Jewish victimization in the Shoah is not subtle. How, then, can the adapters of her story so blatantly confuse the Nazi and the Jew when accounting for the horrors of Auschwitz?

Their doing so can be no accident. In an unmistakable and deliberate departure from the memoir, *Out of the Ashes* puts the Jewish survivor on trial for the murder of her fellow Jews, including babies, in the death camp. Through its employment of flashback scenes and other plot devices, the telefilm finally instructs the audience that, despite an acquittal by the judges, the Jew is in fact guilty of murder. Such a radical departure from the survivor's written testimony disseminates the lies that Jews had free agency and greater power than the SS in the death camp and that they should be judged accordingly. In this manner, the adaptation placates the audience's worst inclinations towards rationalizing evil and arouses scorn for the survivor's claim that she and other Jews were mistreated and deserve to be heard.

That is to say, the telefilm's slanderous indictment of the survivor is more than just another instance of artists crassly misrepresenting certain historical details to intensify dramatic effect for commercial entertainment. Rather, *Out of the Ashes* also constructs a platform upon which the Nazi voice can prevail over the survivor's, amounting to an assault on truth-telling and on Jewish memory—even on the Jew's very right to survive—much in the tradition of Nazi

antisemitic filmmaking, if more understated in its presentation. While purporting to speak in the survivor's name, the adaptation denies what happened to her in order to testify on behalf of those who persecuted and sought to murder her. The antisemitism that defined the Nazis' project finds clear alignment and new life in the radical adaptation of Perl's book.

We are again reminded of Raw's words on radical adaptations offering "new perspectives" when we consider that Lawrence Baron places *Out of the Ashes* on an auspicious short list of films that he "particularly recommend[s]" for introducing "significant new topics to the corpus of Holocaust cinema" (viii). If we may allow that the topic of a Jewish doctor's alleged complicity in the crimes of the Holocaust is significant to the field of Holocaust filmmaking, I recommend that we must also insist that shifting the locus of blame for the Shoah away from the Nazi and onto the Jew is ethically objectionable. It calls to mind the dubious charges brought by anti-Semites who throughout history have gotten away with accusing Jews of murder, even after murdering them. And insomuch as it distracts from, and thus denies, the most basic reality of the terrible human relationship at the heart of the Shoah—that Nazis and their accomplices persecuted and murdered innocent Jewish victims—such a shift in blame certainly constitutes Holocaust denial. When depicting the Shoah, an adaptation worthy of commendation needs to do more than merely to present a "new" topic onscreen. The portrayals of the perpetrators and victims are of paramount importance to how the adaptation should be evaluated. The viewer should be given a sense of the survivor's wounding at the hands of the real perpetrators.

If Langer is correct to assert that a "crucial test of all Holocaust art" is how effectively it brings "insights into the Nazi mind, the victim, [and] the spectator" (*Admitting the Holocaust*

176), we do well to note when a piece of art largely absolves the Nazi mind, intentionally disparages the Jewish victim, and effectively directs the spectator's attention away from what was truly at stake in Jewish survival in the death camp. Ilan Avisar guides us in the right direction when he writes,

If we want to learn from the Holocaust and to draw some kind of lesson from it, we must first come to terms with its unsettling facts. The refusal to acknowledge that the perpetrators of the incomparable crime were Germans and the main victims were Jews means ignoring the crucial facts of history, thereby blocking any avenues toward the possibility of comprehending this monstrous tragedy.... It becomes even worse when authors seek to distort the identity of victims and victimizers in the name of an abstract vision of mankind which believes in interchangeability of the roles.... The scandalous interchangeability theory is an easy way to displace moral burden and guilt, adding offense to the enormous crime of the Holocaust. (91)

Avisar's words, written over 30 years ago, point to an ongoing trend towards interchangeability, also known as Holocaust inversion, in the arts. The Jewish inmate is therein depicted as guiltier, more monstrous, and more murderous than the actual perpetrators.

Like other forms of Holocaust denial, Holocaust inversion renders the Shoah more palatable to a greater number of viewers. This is because inversion serves to relieve the spectator of having to heed the survivor's desperate call to take up the burden of bearing witness to the annihilation of innocents. After all, why should any viewer feel ethically bound to the wishes of a survivor whose actions are portrayed as morally repulsive?

This chapter contends that *Out of the Ashes* has some outstanding source material from which to draw. However, the telefilm elects to pander to the baser desires of its viewing audience by attacking the profound notions at the core of the memoir: that Jews in the death camp were innocent victims of a pronounced imbalance of power, and that they are therefore not to be judged by those unschooled in the concentrationary universe. Due to its willingness to sacrifice indispensable fidelities to the survivor's account on the altar of entertainment, the telefilm ultimately fails as an authentic representation of the survivor, the death camp, and the Shoah. By couching its depiction of Auschwitz in familiar tropes of the woman's weepy telefilm, and by portraying its central Jewish character as the one who is responsible for the suffering and deaths of other Jews, the adaptation leads contemporary viewers to accept its narrative's far-fetched premise, which is that it is she who must be held accountable for the crimes of Auschwitz and they who have the ethical responsibility and sufficient knowledge and rights to judge her actions there.

As is the pattern in the other case studies explored in this dissertation, the reasons for the telefilm's shortcomings mainly rest on the filmmakers' vision, rather than on any inherent limitations of the audiovisual medium. To be sure, Sargent's egregious positioning of the survivor, not as a victim, nor as an accuser, but as a guilty party who is wrongfully positioned as ethically on par with the SS, defines the telefilm in some ways as the most problematic of all the case studies. If *The Truce* dares to frame Primo Levi as a survivor in need of healing through a simple act of sexual intercourse, *Out of the Ashes* is arguably even more offensive and dangerous for its rendering of Perl as a survivor in need of healing through American forgiveness for her alleged sins in the camp.

So, how do the filmmakers of *Out of the Ashes* manage to put the Jew in Auschwitz in the position of having to defend her actions to a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century American audience?

To answer that question, I will first offer very brief synopses of the adaptation and the memoir. I will then refer to how the two artistic products differ in their approaches and content. Finally, I will draw conclusions regarding what, in terms of ethics, is gained or lost in the choices the adaptation makes. As we shall see, if the adaptation's primary sin is its invitation to contemporary viewers to judge and condemn the Jew's actions in Auschwitz, it builds its case against her by excising from the record the themes of justifiable survivor anger, Jewish innocence, Nazi crimes, Jewish suffering, and Jewish heroism.

Earlier, I stated that *Out of the Ashes* has some extraordinary source material from which to draw in the memoir. By this, I mean first, that Perl's book brings a clear and accurate portrayal of Jewish victimization at the hands of Nazi perpetrators, and second, that much of this content is readily adaptable to the screen. This is not to say that adapting the memoir is easy, but that the telefilm as a medium, even as a commercial medium, is capable of translating for its audience more of the memoir than it does.

In fairness to the adaptation, I must acknowledge a few points. As Chapter 2 of this dissertation explains, Holocaust memoirs are mainly written to document Nazi crimes and their real consequences, the annihilation of the Jews. The mission of the Holocaust memoirist, then, differs from that of a telefilmmaker, who primarily seeks to entertain and earn high ratings by gaining the audience's approval. Thus, it should be expected that certain differences between the artistic products will be apparent. Moreover, designing the film as a biopic for the medium of

American television must aggravate the difficult challenges that are inherent in any artistic depiction of the Shoah, which are discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Furthermore, in acknowledging the differences between Perl's memoir and Sargent's telefilm, we must note the lengthy gap between the former's publication in 1948 and the latter's airing on Showtime Television in 2003. It would be fair game for any filmmaker to take into consideration how audience expectations, tastes, and knowledge of the Holocaust had evolved over the course of 55 years, and in certain ways he should plan to adapt accordingly. For example, a typical American viewer in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century would likely already be aware that enslaved Jewish inmates in Auschwitz had their heads shaved and were tattooed; thus, there is no need to criticize the 2003 telefilm for portraying such details for only a few seconds during a montage as a reminder to the audience. Also, quite unlike most readers in 1948, viewers in 2003 would be accustomed to a more rapid pace of storytelling, especially in a telefilm.

In acknowledging the adaptation's confines and demands, we can accept that the telefilm cannot easily be rendered to match the survivor's expectations. However, once again, that reality does not let the adapters off the hook for their sins of selective omissions or unnecessary additions that work in tandem to impede transmission of the survivor's testimony and to revive Nazism's message against the Jew.

Because of the vast differences between the adaptation and the source memoir, a summary of each is in order, before we may appraise them in terms of ethics. Perl's entire memoir is set in Europe and unflinchingly describes Jewish suffering at the hands of Nazis. However, Sargent's telefilm shifts the setting to postwar New York City, where the newly arrived Jewish survivor, Gisella (Christine Lahti), assumes she will have an easy path to

American citizenship and then to the resumption of her esteemed prewar career as a gynecologist. Gisella dazzles American doctors with her medical prowess, scoffs that their methods are far behind those of their European counterparts, and repeatedly voices displeasure that she should be kept waiting to practice in the United States. Moreover, she appears largely unappreciative of frequent instances of American generosity. A new acquaintance buys her stylish shoes and is dismayed by her demeanor of entitlement, a fellow doctor pays for her to live in a beautiful apartment overlooking Central Park, and Eleanor Roosevelt is said to have seen fit personally to intervene in helping to expedite the processing of Gisella's citizenship application.

If Gisella comes off as haughty, superficial, and privileged in the telefilm's early scenes, viewers will easily appreciate her shock when she is suddenly brought before three Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials to be unsympathetically interrogated about her time in Auschwitz. The men charge that she worked there as a willing and opportunistic partner of Mengele (Jonathan Cake) in the abuse and murder of her own people. She must now contend with not only her pending citizenship application and medical license being in jeopardy, but also her reputations as a medical professional and as a Jewish survivor coming under assault.

Chiefly through scenes depicted as flashbacks of the Sighet ghetto and Auschwitz over the course of the telefilm, Gisella recounts her experiences to the tribunal, whose members skeptically receive the justifications she offers for certain of her past actions. The most shocking ones concern her performance of an estimated 1000 abortions on camp inmates without their knowledge or expressed consent. As she explains, any Jewish woman's pregnancy in Auschwitz that the SS discovered meant death to the mother and the child. The only way possibly to save

the mother in this environment was to deliver the baby in secret and smother it without telling the mother of its fate.

However, the Americans' charge of murder against Gisella extends beyond what happened to babies. One female Jewish camp survivor, Zozia (Ingrid Veninger), submits damning testimony that Gisella was only motivated by bribes to help those in need of medical assistance. Zozia's loved one, who could not pay, was callously left to die by Gisella. A flashback scene shown late in the telefilm leaves no doubt that this charge is true. Gisella is even confronted at an outdoor Jewish market in New York, where Zozia loudly and publicly accosts her for being a "Nazi" and a "murderer." Gisella, in turn, privately confesses out of earshot of anyone—which is to say, in her living room, sitting and weeping with her head covered in front of her father's Yahrzeit candle—that she is wholly guilty of the charges of murder that have been brought against her. Then, right before the INS men render their verdict, she tells them: "So, you are right. I have blood on my hands. And I can see it as clearly as you can see this tattoo on my arm." Even so, Gisella tempers this public confession by also stating that she was merely fighting for survival. At long last, she is mercifully acquitted by the INS and is thus finally permitted to become an American citizen and to hold an American medical license.

The telefilm ends with the survivor, clearly grateful to have been restored to her medical career, looking resplendent and joyful during a house call to the Lower East Side. It is the home of a woman who, like her, was taken to Auschwitz from Sighet and now has found a new life in New York City. In the telefilm's final screenshot, Gisella smilingly holds aloft the healthy baby she has just delivered from her fellow survivor. A caption on the screen informs the viewer that Gisella went on to have a thriving practice and to deliver many other babies.



Like the telefilm, Perl's memoir is relatively easy to follow. The book opens with its two-page Foreword, which is dated July 1946 and is plainly addressed to the American reader. As she writes in its final paragraph, "You, who have spent your lives under the protection of the Statue of Liberty, stop before this monument and read its inscriptions. Read them, engrave them in your souls and carry them with you as a memento! The dead are speaking to you here. The dead, who do not ask you to avenge them but only to remember them and to be watchful that no more innocent victims of German inhumanity ever swell their ranks" (12). These words bear a striking similarity to Primo Levi's "Shema" poem, which opens his memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz* (n. pag.), and which is employed at the end of the film, *The Truce* (Francesco Rosi 1995). This similarity is not surprising, as both Levi and Perl base their words on Judaism's Shema prayer, which affirms faith in God and threatens consequences for Jews who do not follow His commandments. Thus, it is no stretch to say that Perl attempts to lend her words to the American reader a sense of biblical importance. She also means to place her own testimony squarely within Jewish liturgical tradition.

It is not enough for Perl to express that she, a Jew, survived Auschwitz. She also wants her reader to recognize the Shoah as an attack on the survival of the Jewish tradition, not just on the survival of the individual or collective Jewish body. Just as the Nazis set out to destroy the Jewish biblical heritage, Perl's book seeks to have the final word by transmitting that tradition to us. Throughout her chapters, Perl emerges as a prophet who will give voice to the unspeakable and the unspeaking. By evoking the Shema, she makes the memoir not only a text about Jews, but also a Jewish text. The hope for a Jewish future, as well as the responsibility of remembering the terrible past, are deliberately imbued on her pages. While there may be universal lessons for

the reader to acquire by reading Perl's memoir, there can be little doubt that her chief concern is to illuminate for Americans the plight of the Jews, so that the people of her adopted nation can bear her testimony. If this is at least part of Perl's goal, it will be prudent to ask how well the telefilm likewise encourages its audience to engrave the monument's words and to acknowledge the voices of the dead.

A brief overview of each of the memoir's chapters will prove instructive. Following the Foreword (11-12), the chapters of *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* are: "Dr. Kapezius" (13-20), which describes Perl's gentile longtime family friend and fellow doctor who reveals his shifting allegiance towards Nazism, even when Perl and her family are sent to the ghetto; "I Want to Go With Them" (21-25), which describes Perl's rescue of a teenaged, gentile rape victim, who wants to stay with the Jewish family when they are deported; "Arrival at Auschwitz" (26-30), which describes Perl's immediate separation from her family and her being identified by the SS as a doctor; "Auschwitz—and a Day Within its Borders" (31-37), which describes the inmates' physical hardships that took the form of exhausting roll calls and complete absence of toilet paper; "Dinner at Auschwitz" (38-41), which describes inmates' hunger and how it affected their behavior; "The 'Beauty Parlor'" (42-47), which describes the physical abuse of women prisoners, such as being shaved and forced to wear rags; "Auschwitz Treasure-Trove Julika Farkas" (48-52), which describes the Nazis' psychological and physical torture of young Jewish children; "Charlotte Junger" (53-55), which describes the fate of a beautiful Jewish teenager, whose drug-induced insanity amuses Mengele until he has her killed; "The Value of a Piece of String..." (56-60), which describes Perl's desperation to obtain adequate footwear for her infected feet; "Irma Greze" (61-65), which describes how the physically attractive, sexually

perverted Nazi held Perl at gunpoint to make her secretly abort her pregnancy; “‘Concert’ in Auschwitz” (66-68), which describes how, on the Jewish holiday of Tisha b’Av, the SS compelled Jewish inmates to sit on the ashes of their loved ones and listen to live music while thousands of other Jews were burned; “Margarine” (69-72), which describes how Perl saved her rations to apply to inmates’ inflamed skin; “Block VII: The Latrine” (73-79), which describes the significance of that locale, which served as the black market and as the place where women inmates traded sexual favors for much-needed food; “Childbirth in Camp C” (80-86), which describes Perl’s efforts to rescue pregnant inmates by smothering their babies; “The Hospital Staff” (87-96), which names Perl’s medical team of Jewish doctors and nurses in the infirmary and describes their selfless actions to save other inmates’ lives, despite the lack of necessary tools and medicines; “The Story of the Fatal Handkerchief” (97-104), which describes Perl’s failed effort to save a Jewish actress who sought her help, but fell victim to Mengele; “One Woman’s Death” (105-111), which describes an inmate’s extraordinary attempts to evade the gas chamber, until hope is finally lost when Mengele beats her with his bare hands and sends her there; “The Bag of Diamonds” (112-115), which describes the arrival of a transport of wealthy Dutch Jews, one of whom buys three potatoes with his precious gems; “The Life-Saving Embryo” (116-123), which describes how Perl and her team were frequent victims of Mengele’s violent abuse and were once only saved from being killed by Perl’s thought to distract him with the presentation of a jarred human fetus; “The Story of Jeanette” (124-127), which describes an unattractive, unpopular Jewish inmate’s delivery of twins, whom Mengele experiments on and kills before throwing their mother into the crematorium; “Liquidation of Camp C” (128-130), which describes the mass murder of Hungarian Jewish women in the camp; “Farewell to

Auschwitz” (131-142), which describes Mengele’s mistreatment of little people, twins, and various other prisoners, and which documents the terrible situation of Jewish doctors and patients until Perl is told she is being sent elsewhere; “Trip to Hamburg” (143-151), which describes Perl’s journey through Berlin to a camp in northern Germany; “Hamburg—Dege-Werke” (152-164), which describes Perl being placed over 100 suffering hospital patients in the camp, receiving news of Auschwitz’s liberation, and being placed on a train out of Hamburg; “Belsen Bergen” (165-169), which describes Perl encountering the harsh conditions of the camp, discovering the corpses of some of her relatives, and experiencing the “liberation” of the camp by the British; “General Gleen Hughes” (170-175), which describes the unsanitary conditions in which inmates were still kept and Perl’s delivery of the first “free” Jewish baby in the camp; and “Abbé Brand” (176-189), which describes the titular priest who arrived to provide comfort to Jewish inmates and who helped restore Perl’s sense of her human identity.

I list these brief summaries to make more vivid Perl’s priorities as she testifies on behalf of the silenced victims. By far, the bulk of the book is devoted to two themes: how the Jews are grossly mistreated by the Nazis and how she and the other Jews working in the camp infirmary do their best to save innocent lives, even at great personal risk. Neither theme is as apparent in the adaptation, which instead highlights the more dubious notion of survivor guilt, especially regarding the abortions she knowingly performed on Jewish inmates.

The telefilm’s emphasis on abortion is curious. To be sure, Perl does devote several pages to relate to the reader why and how she aborted Jewish women’s pregnancies in Auschwitz. Given that an adaptation is under no obligation to match all of its source memoir’s content, we can allow that the adapters should have the freedom to emphasize a few key points beyond what

the author had intended. The ethical problem in the adaptation arises not because of the amount of time that the telefilm devotes to abortion, but because of the way it chooses to depict the subject. The adaptation uses abortions performed by Gisella to misdirect our attention away from the many atrocities that the Nazis perpetrated and to recommend that the Jewish survivor is most deserving of approbation in postwar America. Only in the Auschwitz of *Out of the Ashes* is one Jewish doctor's performance of abortions on inmates such a great crime that it warrants most of the audience's attention, even when the character of Mengele shares the stage.

In the memoir, one of the highest-ranking Nazi women in the camp, the beautiful Grese, demands that Perl perform an abortion on her, holding her at gunpoint during the procedure. The danger to Perl extends beyond the gun. Nazi policy expressly forbade Jewish doctors from treating Aryans, so this abortion places both of their lives at risk (63-65). The scenario of Gisella aborting Grese's pregnancy is included in *Out of the Ashes*, and at first glance, the translation seems generally faithful to Perl's writing. However, a closer look reveals that in the memoir, the abortion scene with Grese appears relatively early, while in the telefilm, it is much later. Perl's description of being held at gunpoint to perform the abortion is used to introduce lengthy descriptions of abortions she performs on Jewish inmates. By contrast, the telefilm introduces the ethical question of Perl's abortions on Jews long before it describes the procedure on Grese. Why is this so?

Perl clearly wants to link the two scenarios, while the adaptation does not. There can be little doubt that Perl means to demonstrate that every abortion she performed on women in Auschwitz, not just the one on Grese, was done under duress. She may not have had a gun on her

when she aborted the other pregnancies, but she still felt like she had little choice. She provides ample evidence to justify her reasoning.

David Patterson writes that “in Birkenau motherly love was eliminated from the order of being; in Birkenau motherly love was a capital crime” (48). He is of course specifically referring to Jewish motherly love. At many points, Perl writes of the violence against pregnant Jewish women in graphic detail in order to provide context for her decision to abort Jewish pregnancies. The memoir describes how Perl immediately felt suspicious when the Nazis tricked pregnant, Hungarian Jews to step forward from lineup. These women are torn by dogs, pulled by their hair, beaten and kicked in their pregnant bellies, and then thrown alive into the crematory (80). As though she means to give a defense against those who someday might question the ethics of her actions, Perl writes:

I had to remain alive. It was up to me to save all the pregnant women in Camp C from the infernal fate. It was up to me to save the lives of the mothers, if there was no other way, then by destroying the life of their unborn children....

No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy those babies....

Every time when kneeling down in the mud, dirt, and human excrement which covered the floor of the barracks to perform a delivery without instruments, without water, without the most elementary requirements of hygiene, I prayed to God to help me save the mother or I would never touch a pregnant woman again. And if I had not done it, both mother and child would have been cruelly murdered. God was good to me. By a miracle, which to every doctor must sound like a fairy tale, every one of these women recovered and was able to work, which, at least for a while, saved her life. (81-82)

The book next details Perl's first abortion; as the women in the barrack look at the mother with pity, Perl takes the baby away, smothers it, and leaves it on a huge pile of Jewish corpses ready to be cremated (82-84). There is no denying the anguish of this passage, for both the author and the reader. We must understand, though, that we are mistaken to take Perl's words as a confession. She means them to be an accusation. The accusation is not directed at herself or her fellow inmates. It is at the Nazis whose deliberate cruelties compelled her to act as she did. If she means for us to accuse anyone of being complicit, it is the world, not she or her fellow inmates.

To Perl's surprise, Mengele informs her of a new policy, where he will allow pregnancies if she agrees to kill the Jewish babies. Believing him, she stops hiding the pregnancies and cares for the women in the open as best she can. However, Mengele's ruse is revealed when he suddenly goes back on his word and sends the hundreds of women to the crematoria (84). A later chapter describes the plight of Jeanette, a Jewish mother who must watch as her twin babies are kept alive for Mengele's so-called experiments. Both babies die within two weeks. As Perl writes, Mengele "became furious and laughingly threw Jeanette into the crematory" upon learning that the babies had died (126-127). In this context, which allows the survivor to explain her actions in the camp, the reader may begin to grasp what Auschwitz entails and how, at least ethically, it is an anti-world set apart from the world we inhabit.

Paragraph by paragraph, the reader is led to understand why any abortions Perl performed in the killing center do not signify her own moral failing. This is exactly what Langer means when he refers to a "choiceless choice" in the camp, where, as a matter of spiritual torture, inmates were subjected to ostensible decision making without clear moral parameters. In truth, Jewish prisoners in the Lager had no attractive options, nor did they have free agency to make

real choices in the sense that we outside the camp can. The telefilm provides none of this context, and instead simply expresses that Gisella aborts Jewish pregnancies in the camp and later feels badly about it when she faces accusations in the United States. *Out of the Ashes* has no desire to walk its audience through the many dangers that pregnant Jewish inmates faced, and how this factored into Perl's "choice" to abort pregnancies. Had the adaptation provided the necessary historical context, there could be no suggestion that abortion was an ethical dilemma for the Jewish doctor that we may now judge.

Highlighting the abortion theme without providing appropriate context is only part of the adaptation's strategy to demonstrate that Gisella is complicit in the crimes of Auschwitz. Another part is to minimize or even excise the many examples of Nazi atrocities against Jewish inmates. A few examples will illustrate my point, but I must draw a distinction between two types of descriptions that appear in the memoir. In the first type, the reader is forced to confront suffering that is truly sickening to envision even in a slasher horror movie. It is reasonable to surmise that very few television viewers would be being willing to sit through portrayals of these passages, even with the distance between spectacle and spectator that television provides. The portrayals would be too grotesque, even by the standards of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century cable television. For these scenarios, we must be willing to forgive the adapters for their sin of omission; there is surely no point in bringing survivor testimony to the screen if nobody will be inclined to watch.

As George F. Custen writes, "Television... tames the text, as it were, so that it is safe to invite it into your home" (231). This might account for some of the Nazi crimes that appear in the memoir, but not in the telefilm. But even with those many omissions, *Out of the Ashes* cannot escape some of the tension that inevitably emerges from forcing the Shoah into the familiar



constraints of the television medium. Custen writes that television viewing comprises “our nightly interpersonal ritual of disengagement from interaction, its figures recognized almost as members of our inner circle of friends and near-friends.... It is comforting to be safely at home, watching these horrible things happen to my neighbors, and not to me... on TV” (232). Although this description of the viewing experience as “comforting” may fit most television content, adaptations confront a tougher time in attempting to tame the Shoah, and particularly the death camp. For *Out of the Ashes*, to make this attempt, it must delete the scenarios that would be most nauseating to people watching at home.

For example, Perl writes of how Grese made a habit of whipping Jewish women’s breasts, so that they would get infected. The Nazi sadist would then become sexually aroused while watching Perl operate on the infected breasts (61-62). To imagine this depicted on the television screen is difficult. The telefilm’s omission of the memoir’s gruesome scatological details is similarly understandable. As Perl writes, women inmates soiled themselves and one another, and used their own ragged shirts as toilet paper, all the while knowing that the SS would whip or kill them for doing so (32-34 and 101). Even decades after Americans cheered and applauded the sound of Archie Bunker flushing his toilet, more graphic scatological details would likely put off viewers. Of course, as Perl and other memoirists, Auschwitz was a place where the ghastly remains of the dead and the motley bodily fluids of the living comprised the physical terrain. They mean this literally, not metaphorically. Thus, in its use of flashback sequences that portray the killing center, the telefilm cannot entirely avoid moments of grotesque physicality.

In terms of approaching that level of physicality, we may observe that the camera in *Out of the Ashes* goes only so far as to capture a woman puking from her top bunk onto the floor of Gisella's Auschwitz bloc. Repugnant as this image may be, it pales in comparison to Perl's written description of the bloc:

[There were pregnant] women lying in cages along the walls, two in each. Their tremendous stomachs, swollen to a bursting point with child and hunger, did not permit them to move, and their moans, their screams, their helpless cursing filled the building with a constant deafening cacophony. Lice covered their bodies in thick layers – hungry, persistent, insufferable lice sparing nobody, not even the hands and faces of the doctors....

Everybody in the block had typhus and, as if the disease were bent upon faithfully serving the Nazis, it came to Bergen Belsen in its most violent, most painful, deadliest form. The diarrhea caused by it became uncontrollable. It flooded the bottom of the cages, dripped through the cracks into the faces of the women lying in the cages below, and mixed with blood, pus, and urine, formed a slimy, fetid mud on the floor of the barracks....

The air was so thick and humid that one could hardly breathe, the horrible smell of human excrement, blood, pus, and sweat invaded our nostrils in nauseating waves, until the desire for fresh air became just as torturing, just as unbearable as the desire for water, a bite of food. Our eyes hurt from the sight we couldn't escape, our eardrums hurt with the sounds we couldn't shut out. (171-2)

Any telefilm that offers as its most disturbing visual and aural representation of Auschwitz, an actress vomiting before the camera, can only be deemed a sanitized, even false depiction. Anything more, however, would risk repulsing the audience to the point of changing the channel. As Langer writes of the camp, “This is a world we do not like to recognize, because we do not want it to be established as a precedent for the one we inhabit now” (*Versions* 83). In such a light, we can appreciate the enormous tension inherent in translating the survivor’s agony to a commercial medium.

In the second type of descriptions in the memoir, however, we encounter powerful passages about the killing center that would be less gruesome to behold, should they find their way into the adaptation. Perl offers enough of these moments to make us ponder why all of them are left out of the telefilm. Again, I contend that the adapters could have included these passages that illuminate the Shoah without violating the conventions of network censorship. Compared to the examples I just described, these other passages are not as sexually perverse or as visually arresting. However, they are hugely powerful in a different manner, for they clarify for the audience many components of the Nazi assault on Jewish victims. And yet, none of these numerous examples are included in the adaptation, as they do not easily align with its effort to condemn the Jew’s actions in the camp.

One such example concerns Perl’s arrival at the camp. In the telefilm, Gisella naively trusts the newly introduced Mengele. At the Nazi doctor’s direction, she instructs some of her fellow women inmates to board a Red Cross vehicle. She has no idea that the passengers will be gassed. The memoir similarly expresses some sense of Perl’s initial ignorance of Mengele’s and Auschwitz’s true nature. Unlike the adaptation, however, the memoir provides context by

including a description of Perl being told by SS on arrival at the camp that she must have the inmates line up, or all of them will be shot. Perl then swallows morphine in a failed suicide attempt, which implies that she recognizes the Nazi intent to murder. Her writing makes clear that she feels badly for having encountered the choiceless choice of instructing doomed women to line up: "I was beyond caring. After my encouraging speech to the hysterical women I had swallowed the forty centigrams of morphine which I had hidden in a small bottle" (30). Perl's failed suicide attempt does not warrant much mention in the adaptation. Portraying these passages would not be too jarring for most viewers, at least in terms of gruesome imagery. The adaptation chooses to omit the passages because, to implicate and then condemn the survivor, her own suffering must be minimized, and her freedom to make moral decisions in the camp must be invented. Moreover, by minimizing the horrors Auschwitz inflicted on the Jews, the telefilm may absurdly imply that abortions on Jewish inmates to save their lives were among the vilest atrocities anyone ever committed in the camp.

As we have noted, the telefilm focuses much of our attention on Gisella's aborting of Jewish infants in the camp, as though she were knowingly and willingly complicit in the implementation of the Final Solution. However, if the welfare of Jewish youth in the Lager were truly the concern of *Out of the Ashes*, the adaptation would surely have included some portrayal of the fates of entire transports of Jewish children, which the memoir painstakingly details. For example, Perl describes finding a child's blue coat. Sewn into the lining was a label identifying its owner, five-year-old Julika Farkas, her father, and her hometown of Sighet. As Perl recounts, the child "was torn from her mother's arms, undressed and thrown into a ditch to be burned alive together with hundreds of little boys and girls," while her mother immediately went to the gas

without having a moment to mourn the loss of her daughter. “And now,” Perl continues, “this little blue coat waited to be sent to Germany to clothe another blue-eyed child—perhaps the daughter of her Nazi murderer” (50-51). *Out of the Ashes* includes no reference to the child, the burnings, the mother, or the coat. In fairness, we can acknowledge that few viewers would ever tune in to watch the mass burning of terrified, naked children. However, we can also be sure that the telefilm has other tools at its disposal for referring to this atrocity without turning it into a spectacle. We can easily make the connection to how Steven Spielberg employs shots of a red coat to signify the murder of one little girl in *Schindler’s List* (1993). But, while telling of Julika’s death was a priority for the memoir, this story does not suit the telefilm’s project of impugning the Jewish survivor.

Indeed, Perl’s attention to the plight of Jewish children in the camp is also evident on many of the other pages of her memoir whose content is never included in the telefilm. For another emotionally wrenching example, we can see Perl’s elegy to a large group of Jewish boys. Not yet grasping that all Jewish children were targeted for immediate murder, Perl and her peers initially feel hopeful when this particular group is surprisingly provided double rations and placed under the supervision of gymnastics teachers near the women’s camp. Every day, the boys are exercised to become stronger. This setup seems to be a sign that the boys will be used for slave labor, unlike the other children. Suddenly awakened by screams from outside, Perl and others in her bloc rush out to witness the boys stripped, beaten, and thrown onto trucks bound for the crematoria to be burned alive. Horrified and baffled at the Nazi logic of the having the boys eat and exercise for days before their murders, Perl finds in their barrack the only evidence that they ever lived: “There, on the thin plank walls they had written their names and the story of

their lives—with their own blood—and a last good-bye. They knew they were to die. They knew they were to be burned, young, innocent, the victims of a world whose conscience shall never rest for having permitted these Nazi crimes” (51-52). It is this conscience that the telefilm refuses to engage by making any reference to these boys. The survivor’s testimony, which in this instance is literally a testimony recounting the murdered boys’ own testimonies, implicates the Nazis for the murders and the television audience for the wounding obligation to bear witness. Unlike the memoir, though, the adaptation seeks to excuse us from this obligation.

A third example of child murder in Perl’s memoir actually finds a place in the adaptation, but it is a questionable one. Perl’s story of a girl from her hometown of Sighet, Charlotte Junger, occupies an entire (if short) chapter. Junger, a beautiful 15-year-old, is the daughter of a doctor whom Perl knew well. When the Gestapo comes to arrest the family, Junger’s father injects poison into Charlotte, his wife, and himself. Although her parents die instantly, Charlotte deteriorates gradually over many days, including eight days on a crowded cattle car following the roundup. Other prisoners somehow helped Charlotte pass selection upon arrival, and she is assigned to Perl’s bloc. Perl describes her frustration at being unable to assist the dying girl, whose symptoms intensified: “Without drugs, without instruments, there was nothing I could do for the child except to hold her in my arms at night and give her small comfort of love and tenderness” (54). Perl takes Junger to the hospital, but there the delirious girl jumped up to dance, calling to her father to watch. Mengele visits several times to watch for his own amusement, until he finally grows “bored” and sends her to the crematory (55). Charlotte’s fate illustrates Nazi cruelty not just to the girl, but to the Jews who were forced to witness her last days.

Perl was forced to watch this child of a friend become a plaything for the perpetrator before he makes her a murder victim. It was an essential component of the Nazi design for the camp that Jews be forced to bear witness to the torment of not just themselves, but also of their peers, neighbors, and loved ones. As Perl seeks to illustrate, crushing the Jewish soul before annihilating the Jewish body was part of the Nazi plan. Adding to the torture of Perl is her understanding that, as a doctor without sufficient means to provide treatment, her job is futile.

None of this comes across in the adaptation, where we encounter a different dancing girl. For one thing, this Charlotte is never given a backstory to explain her mad behavior. She is simply, inexplicably insane, for all appearances. Moreover, she is never placed in the camp infirmary, and Gisella is never given the opportunity to try to heal her. Instead, *Out of the Ashes* greatly alters the narrative. At Gisella's first lineup in the camp, Mengele comes to inspect, and more experienced inmates, including Zozia, gruffly school her in the ways of the Lager by speaking of how most new arrivals, including Gisella's family, have reached the crematoria. When a girl suddenly and mysteriously breaks out of line to dance, Gisella calls the name, "Charlotte Junger," and tries to go to her. Knowing the danger of breaking lineup, the women near Gisella restrain her. Mengele arrives and comes across the girl, for he immediately recognizes that she is a Jewish child undergoing hallucinations. He smilingly dances with her and holds her hand as he walks through the lineup and addresses the women. When Grese aims a pistol at Charlotte, Mengele even waves her off, as though he does not want her killed. Although Zozia mumbles to the other women her prediction that the girl will not last long in the camp, the viewer never sees anything to prove her correct. In other words, *Out of the Ashes* never shows Junger to be a murder victim, let alone one who, like other Jewish children, is put into the flames

by Mengele. This is a far cry from Perl's Junger because, unlike the memoir, the telefilm has no wish for us to bear witness to the Nazi crime of murdering Jewish children.

Junger's rendering brings up another pattern in the adaptation, which concerns its departure from the memoir in how individual Nazis are depicted. We have already noted that Perl's descriptions of Grese's sexually perverse and cruel behavior are understandably excised from the adaptation. Less justifiable, however, is the highly sanitized manner in which Mengele is portrayed. The Mengele of *Out of the Ashes* is at times cruel, but he is always calm, and only seldom is he willing to dirty his own hands. His most violent act in the telefilm is to shoot at point-blank range the Roma mother whose twins were just delivered and then subjected to experimentation. This mild characterization of Mengele is a trope in Hollywood Holocaust films, but shockingly departs from what eyewitnesses reveal about the historical man. It is possible that, of all the written accounts by survivors, Perl's memoir provides the strongest indictment of the man's cruelty. She was certainly positioned to witness it, as the memoir tells:

Every afternoon, Dr. Mengerle [sic] paid the hospital a short visit. We feared these visits more than anything else, because he always found a reason to vent his sadistic fury on us and we never knew whether we would be permitted to continue to live after it.

Once we were abused because there were too many sick in the hospital, once because there were too few....He was free to do whatever he pleased with us – beat us, whip us, kick us with heavy boots or simply dispatch us to the crematory....

[One night] the storm, when it broke, was all the more terrible. He ran around like a wild beast, smashing everything in his way. He kicked over the stove, stamped on our potatoes, overturned the operating table, screaming, shouting incessantly. (120-2)



In several other instances described in Perl's memoir, Mengele beats female inmates almost to the point of death, and then suddenly comes off as perfectly calm and unbothered by the mess he leaves behind. In the chapter, "One Woman's Death," Perl proves a very detailed account of how Mengele beats a beautiful woman named Ibi so that her attractive face is torn to shreds, and she finally dies. The author is unambiguous about his motives, as he exclaims: "You are going to croak, you dirty Jew." She is just as clear that he feels no guilt, as she writes: "Half an hour later, Dr. Mengerle [sic] returned to the hospital. He took a piece of perfumed soap out of his bag and whistling gaily, with a smile of deep satisfaction on his face, he began to wash his hands" (111). The portrait of the Nazi is shocking in its brutality, even within the context of the killing center.

By contrast, *Out of the Ashes* sanitizes Mengele by showing him only as a charming, white-gloved whistler of classical music, and never as the out-of-control psychopath whom Perl describes. Furthermore, the telefilm never even hints that antisemitism fuels the man's cruelty to Jews, which is simply chalked up as an enigma. Gisella instructs her inquisitors in New York City that Mengele's evil mind-games in the camp can never be understood. Thus, we are left with a Nazi doctor whose motive is left a mystery and whose habit of beating women to a pulp and burning children alive is conveniently removed from the biopic. Additionally, we find that the telefilm's flashbacks to Mengele's psychological cruelties are always tempered by his amusing and witty repartee with other characters. Quite unlike his profile in the memoir, the Mengele of *Out of the Ashes* is always charismatic, even when he demonstrates callous behavior. The casting of a dashing and suave actor in the role adds to the scoundrel's appeal. And because viewers enjoy seeing this enigmatic, scene-stealing character whenever he graces the screen, they might hardly take notice that there are almost no other Nazis in the film who ever do much that

could be labeled “evil.” Again, we see that softening the Nazi perpetrators by minimizing or excising their crimes is an effective, if dishonest, strategy to convince the viewer that differences between Nazis and Jews in the Lager is subtle, rather than pronounced. One might even gather from the telefilm that the only difference between the two sides is their position in the camp, rather than their entire world outlook and definition of what it means to be a human being.

Two other examples of unnecessary omission of the source content concern the adaptation’s treatment of Perl’s descriptions of the non-Jews who bookend the memoir. The first chapter of the memoir describes Perl’s old family friend, Dr. Kapezius, while the last chapter recounts the actions of Abbé Brand. As the first chapter relates, Perl is reunited with Kapezius in Auschwitz, where he now works with Mengele. Kapezius had already shocked Perl’s family by betraying them. In the camp, it is Kapezius who, knowing Perl’s work, appoints her to be camp gynecologist. It is also Kapezius who confiscates the medical tools she brings to the camp, though he knows full well that she cannot care for patients without them (16). He shows no loyalty to her. Having clearly joined the Nazi Party, he does nothing to demonstrate that he hopes she will live.

*Out of the Ashes* never portrays Kapezius, and instead depicts Mengele as the one who puts her on the camp medical staff. Without the presence of Kapezius, American viewers get little sense of the betrayal that Perl suffered at the hands of those she had considered friends and allies before arriving at the camp. Without Kapezius, American viewers can easily retain assumptions and oversimplifications, such as concluding that Perl and her family are deported only because they lacked the foresight and resourcefulness that Anne Frank’s family had when they went into hiding. Betrayals by people they thought were friends is a common theme in

Holocaust memoirs. Were it to depict this theme, the telefilm would lay bare before its audience that Gisella is not responsible for the position in which she finds herself. Moreover, by exposing how too much of the non-Jewish world ignored the suffering of Jews in the Shoah, the telefilm would risk implicating too much of its viewership. It is easier for most people to blame the survivor for her suffering than to face up to the truth of what she experienced.

Just as the telefilm erases the treacherous Kapezius, so, too, does the adaptation bypass the noble Abbé Brand, who is the main focal point of the book's conclusion. A Catholic clergyman from France, Brand meets Gisella after "liberation" at Bergen-Belsen and, through various acts of kindness, helps her to reconnect to humanity in numerous ways. It is significant that in the book's final pages, Perl turns the reader's attention to him and not to her own suffering or that of other survivors and victims. Brand would seem to signify Perl's belief that the world's only hope after the Shoah is that gentiles recognize the Nazis' crimes and offer compassion to the victims and survivors. As Perl writes on the memoir's last page, Brand "fought for me, for my future, as if he, the Catholic priest, carried the tragedy of the entire Jewish people on his shoulders" (189). Coming at the end of such a dark, emotionally wrenching work of testimony, this is an important message from the survivor. However, Brand does not appear anywhere in the adaptation, let alone at its end, which instead highlights Gisella's joyous delivery of a Jewish infant on the Lower East Side. The decision to delete Brand from the narrative is likely rooted in his irrelevance to the telefilm's highlighting of the abortion topic. Also, as we shall see, the adapters mean to celebrate American, not French, heroism.

One last pattern of omission in *Out of the Ashes* is worth exploring. Perl spends many pages of her memoir—far more than she spends telling about pregnancy and abortion—

describing the love and gratitude that she feels for being part of a team of nine Jewish doctors and nurses in the camp. While the memoir tells of their many brave and selfless actions to save the lives of their fellow inmates, the telefilm never depicts any of them. It is as though the telefilm wants us to believe that Gisella had no positive interactions with or support from Jews in the camp. Certainly, the adapters' invention of the Zozia character, who even before the death of her loved one always treats Gisella with contempt, supports the notion that *Out of the Ashes* presents survival as an enterprise that is every Jew for herself. If this is indeed the opinion of the adapters, it is not that of the survivor memoirist. While many Holocaust survivors can and do testify to the abundance of horrors that were perpetrated on Jewish inmates, not many memoirists can describe having had the ability to work as a team that is consciously devoted to saving innocent lives.

Because of her unusual, privileged position as a camp doctor working with other Jewish staff, Perl offers an important point of view on resistance against Nazism. One of the ugly lies too many people still embrace about the Shoah is that Jews compliantly went like sheep to the slaughter. This all-too-popular myth means to let us off the hook, at least in terms of ethics. After all, if the Jews refused to act on their own behalf, why should other people as far away as the United States have cared to risk their own lives on Jews' behalf, and why should anybody care about the victims today? Perl's testimony powerfully refutes the canard that Jews were simply willing victims who did next to nothing to fight back.

In acknowledging Perl's emphasis on mutual support among Jewish medical staff members, we must be careful to understand how unusual their situation was. The Nazis designed the camps not merely to kill victims, but to tear at the fabric of civilization, beginning with

interpersonal relationships. In other words, the camp was not an environment that was made to nurture familiarity and understanding between inmates. Survivor-memoirist Ruth Kluger writes of her resentment at the popular notion that “the victims should have come closer together and formed strong bonds.... But this is sentimental rubbish and depends on a false concept of suffering as a source of moral education” (52). As she continues, “Auschwitz was no instructional institution... You learned nothing there, and least of all humanity and tolerance. Absolutely nothing good came out of the concentration camps... They were the most useless, pointless establishments imaginable” (65). Precisely because Perl was in a very different situation from the vast majority of prisoners, one that allowed for deep bonds of friendship within a small circle of Jews, this part of her account is of great importance.

As Perl writes, she made a pact with four Jewish doctors and four Jewish nurses in the camp hospital “to defeat the Nazis in their attempt at degrading us, debasing us, and breaking our spirit before throwing us into the flames.... I observed acts of such human greatness, kindness, sacrifice and selflessness that witnessing them made life worth living. Only an inferno like Auschwitz could produce people like Olga, Kati, and many others, whose friendship is still my proudest possession” (88-89). Perl then goes on to describe at great length the medical staff’s numerous attempts to save patients against all odds.

By contrast, it is as though Gisella acts alone in the adaptation’s narrative. Of course, by deliberately separating Perl from her fellow inmates, the adapters fall in line with Hollywood conventions. As Custen observes, “A central conflict of the biopic, then, is the hero’s antagonistic relations with members of a given community” (72). While this tradition may work well for other subjects, it proves ethically problematic for depicting Perl. The deliberate

misrepresentation of Jews as selfish, self-involved, cruel, and unwilling to get along with others is textbook antisemitism and has no roots in Perl's written testimony, which instead actively supports the opposite viewpoint. Once again, we uncover seeds of Nazi thinking sprouting in *Out of the Ashes*. However, what works against the survivor's voice can still endear the telepic to its audience.

By entirely removing acts of generosity and selflessness that are performed by Perl and other Jewish medical staff in the memoir, the adaptation establishes a narrative that positions Americans to be the true heroes in *Out of the Ashes*. Quite unlike the memoir, which mentions the United States only in the Foreword's reference to the Statue of Liberty (12), *Out of the Ashes* may be read as a celebration of America and Americans. It is tailor-made for an American audience, and not merely due to the uplifting ending featuring Jewish childbirth among Holocaust survivors. Understandably, the adapters chose the American setting of New York City to make the broadcast more relevant to American viewers. This is understandable, as most biopics have been set in the United States (Custen 90). Several issues linked to the American characters and the American audience become apparent.

One issue is the way the adaptation pits Gisella against Americans, with the latter emerging as the moral victors. In the telefilm's early scenes, Gisella immediately aggravates her American hostess by insisting on going shopping and having her pay. She incessantly talks about how much better Europe is than the United States, even while Americans shower her with attention, help, and a luxury apartment. In fairness, we should acknowledge that these Americans are all fellow Jews, but most viewers are unlikely to pick up on this. Instead, they will see Americans generously helping the Jewish refugee from the mess in Europe, even while she fits

the stereotype of a spoiled, materialistic Jew. This is the impression one has of Gisella by the time the INS agents enter the narrative to interrogate her.

The dynamics of the interrogation are disturbingly intriguing, especially for the way they coax the audience into doubting the survivor's word and pressure the survivor into admitting her guilt in the Shoah. For many of the exchanges, Gisella comes off as feisty and combative. At one point, she passionately exclaims that nobody outside of Auschwitz is in a position to judge anyone who was there.<sup>25</sup> However, later scenes undo the survivor's strong voice and make plain that even she herself is open to the idea that she deserves judgment by the American men.

Several moments build up support for that ridiculous notion so that viewers may reasonably agree. In one memorable exchange, Perl furiously lashes out at the panel's line of questioning about her past life in Europe: "While we [Hungarian Jews] were being slaughtered in the summer of 1944, what were *you* doing, Mr. Smith?! And *you*, Peter Schuman, my fellow Jew, what were you doing to occupy your time? Going to Temple or watching your son's baseball game?!" Had the scene ended there, one could find much to applaud in the film's sensitive portrayal of Perl's appropriately placed indignation.

However, those lines scream out their own painful, truthful accusation that the United States was not the heroic rescuer of Europe's Jews that most Americans like to believe it was. For an audience that can easily switch the channel, the filmmakers dare not give Perl the last

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps to avoid highlighting religious and political distinctions within its viewership, the film curiously omits any reference to the fact that arguably, as a Jew, Perl observed religious law by performing these abortions. Judaism allows and even sometimes requires abortion when pregnancy places a mother's life at risk. I do not mean to suggest that religious laws may be applied in equal terms both inside and outside the camp, but rather that the character, who comes from an Orthodox Jewish family, would have known to raise such a defense.

word on the matter, so the scene must continue until she is torn down by Schuman's [Bruce Davison] calm reply: "My son was killed on D-Day. Body's never been recovered." Upon hearing these words, Perl stops in her tracks and bursts out in tears, offering a sincere flurry of apologies to the American father for his loss. One must condemn the gall of filmmakers who would have us believe that this woman, who survived Auschwitz and lost her own child and every other known relative, suddenly has reason to weep and apologize to an American Jew, whose son was at least granted a hero's death and, presumably, a burial.

By setting up the staggering case that Perl has cause to beg the man's pardon, the telefilm restores to viewers' minds the comforting, big lie that American boys nobly risked their own lives to save European Jewry, even despite the latter group's perpetual ingratitude, as embodied in the selfish and greedy character of Gisella. Presumably, few American viewers would want to see a film about the Holocaust that leaves out America, and fewer still will sit through a movie that makes Americans out to be less than heroes. *Out of the Ashes* hardly breaks the mold. The character of Schuman, who never appears in the memoir, exists to serve the adaptation's goal of scolding the haughty Jewish survivor until she may accept the judgment that is her due and find peace in the New Jerusalem.

As if to reinforce that dubious notion that Americans can and should judge the death camp survivor, the film presents the character of Zozia, a Jewish woman who, during a flashback, begs Gisella to save Zozia's dying brother in Auschwitz. However, solely because the beleaguered Zozia has no goods worth bartering, Perl refuses to provide care, and the young man dies. Later, in the United States, Zozia contacts the government to make the case against permitting Gisella to become a citizen and to practice medicine. When the two survivors



unexpectedly run into each other on a New York street, Gisella is once again reduced to tears when Zozia publicly accuses her of the murder and of being a Nazi. Gisella returns to her beautiful apartment (that a generous American has provided her, purely out of the goodness of his heart) overlooking Central Park, lights a *yahrzeit* candle for her father, and begs him and the Jewish God for forgiveness.

The filmmakers' questionable intentions are once again laid bare by that scenario when one considers first, that the character of Zozia is entirely their invention, and second, that Perl's depiction of the selflessness of Jewish medical staff is never shared with viewers. In the memoir, neither Perl nor her colleagues demand bribes of any sort. By pitting the wholly fictional character of a fellow Jewish survivor against Gisella, the film tries to circumvent the idea that only those who were there may judge one another. After all, if a fellow Jewish Auschwitz inmate can say with complete confidence that Gisella, and not the Nazis, is responsible for a Jew's death in the camp, and if over her father's sanctified memory Perl herself confesses guilt for this exact crime, then certainly Americans will recognize that they have license to judge and condemn her. Of course, the great majority of viewers, having never read Perl's account, will be none the wiser that the character of Zozia and her allegation are a total sham on the filmmakers' part.

The courtroom drama, which has a long tradition of entertaining Americans, feeds dramatic tension by forcing viewers to choose between compassion and condemnation as they wrestle with the question: were Jews in the Holocaust truly innocent victims, or did they simply bring the trouble on themselves? Indicting the Jew in the Holocaust also imposes a governing logic that is nowhere evident in the history. This logic is akin to the popular mindset that we all create our own destinies through the good or bad choices we make. There is no discernible

narrative arc in the Holocaust, where innocent human beings suffer persecution and torture, are robbed of the ability to make ethical choices, are exposed to nothing of any educational value, and are then murdered. But if Jews may be rendered as somehow to blame for their own demise, and as ultimately responsible for sinfully murderous acts of betrayal against their fellows, then a modern-day Passion Play takes shape.

The invented narrative arc thus spotlights a Jew who commits unforgivable crimes, is forced to admit them, and then briefly works hard to receive forgiveness from God, characters on the screen, and viewers at home. Moreover, the suggestion that Jews were their own worst enemies falls on ready ears of an audience that was raised on the *Oprah* show and self-help books, and that remains eager to affirm that anybody can simply choose not to be a victim in life by choosing her own fate in any given situation. By eclipsing the Nazi assault on the Jew, the adaptation reduces Holocaust survival to a familiar story of personal striving against inner demons, confessing past sins, and ultimately developing the strength to seize control of one's own fate in the Promised Land of America. Because of its long history as a cinematic trope, the courtroom drama offers the filmmakers a familiar vehicle for moving the portrayal of the Holocaust away from the systematic torture and mass murder of European Jewry.

In their writings, Auschwitz survivors including Primo Levi, Wiesel, and Perl, herself, uniformly insist that the Lager was a place with its own perverted rules, logic, and morals. Once the diluted picture of Auschwitz in *Out of the Ashes* becomes accessible to the imagination of Americans who sit comfortably at home and eat popcorn in front of the television, it follows that the actions of the Auschwitz prisoner may be judged by familiar standards of right and wrong. If we permit ourselves to be deceived into believing that Auschwitz is merely a much harsher

version of everyday life, then we may eventually wrap our minds around that false image and respond accordingly. It is obvious that the adapters of Perl's memoir are counting on exactly that sort of faulty thinking. To market the movie, the narrator to its short trailer asks three times, "What would *you* do? [in Perl's place]," thereby putting forward that by watching a film for two hours, the average viewer will be capable of empathizing with the death camp prisoner. Moreover, an important plot device, which is invented specifically for the film, presents a panel of American men judging Perl's actions in the camp, thus opening further the door to our own judgment of the Jewish prisoner. The movie drafts a straightforward challenge: If Perl can prove to the panel – and, by extension, to the viewer – that the abortions she performed on Jewish women in Auschwitz do not signify complicity with the SS, and that her other work was performed under and not beside Mengele, then she may become an American citizen and practice medicine for happily-ever-after.

According to Perl's memoir, especially its Foreword, Americans are people who need to learn about the Holocaust to prevent the victimization of other innocents. According to the movie, Americans are the heroic people who sacrificed their sons on the beaches of Normandy, and now are all too eager to spend their hard-earned money on a grand apartment and expensive shoes for a strange Hungarian Jewish woman they just met. Likewise, to avoid any perception that America is cruel for subjecting Perl to a trial by panel, the movie implies that the panel is actually generous for acquitting the survivor even after she confesses to them: "So, you're right. I have blood on my hands, and I can see it as clearly as you can see this [tattoo from Auschwitz on my arm]." The movie's imagining of an America which readily forgives sins with open arms

denies the repugnant truth concerning the country's unwillingness to help or listen to most of Europe's innocent Jewish victims both during and after the war.

Additionally, *Out of the Ashes* deftly sets up parallel scenes to suggest that the granting of American citizenship is akin to liberation from Auschwitz. (One imagines that the filmmakers could not quite stretch historicity to the point where Americans, and not Soviets, liberate the real Auschwitz!) Towards the end of the narrative, there is a flashback to Perl's delivery of a baby right at the moment when the inmates are liberated by the Red Army. "Your baby is free!" she proclaims to the weak mother. "First free baby in Auschwitz!" Suddenly the movie jumps to the American panel's declaration that her citizenship is approved. Then, just as quickly, the film moves to New York, where Perl, delivers a baby to a survivor mother.

This ending means to reassure the American viewer by underscoring three points: the Auschwitz survivor cannot truly be free to move on until she is an American; because of her new life here, she is able to erase past pain and repopulate the earth with Jews; and she, like a new generation of Jews, now enjoys the good life and has reason to be grateful. To be sure, it would seem that America has not only liberated the Jewish doctor, but also rehabilitated her from her participation in the murder of European Jewish youth. It can be no accident that, despite the fact that far more than a million Jewish children were brutally murdered in the Shoah, Perl is the *only* character in the entire film ever depicted on screen in acts of killing the young. The movie even suggests that America restores what was lost in the gas chambers and at the Jew's own hands.

Late in the telefilm, during the same scene in which Perl admits her guilt to the panel, she makes her final, successful plea for citizenship with an idealistic speech. She describes how she always wanted to work as a doctor because babies are a gift from God, but Auschwitz changed

her plans. “I only did what I had to do to survive....Those of us who did not survive – perhaps on some days, they are the best of us...My family – they will not be joining me here [in America] – no coming home to them. Why did G-d allow me to survive? Who knows. I must believe it was so I can bring more children into the world...*If I deliver Jewish children, the Nazis will not have succeeded!*” Taking to mind the greater context of the narrative, one can hear in her words an additional meaning: *If I deliver Jewish children, the Nazis will not have succeeded in turning me into an unrepentant murderer!* Only in Hollywood can America save world Jewry and undo the Shoah simply by letting one grateful doctor into the United States to deliver Jewish babies. This final scene, unlike anything in Perl’s written account, effectively hides the foul truth that Hitler was irrevocably successful in his war against the Jews precisely because America and the rest of the world allowed him to be. Only by denying the survivor’s ongoing pain, loss, and anger—indeed, even her innocence of any crime—as well as the Nazi victory and America’s inaction, can the movie give the counterfeit gift of “closure” to the character, as well as to the viewer.

Like the character of Rocky Balboa and so many others that are familiar to most American viewers, the Gisella of *Out of the Ashes* can emerge as someone to root for, only because the American dream helps her break free from her supposed past sins and looming guilt. America makes her stronger and affords her cause to celebrate her survival. However, the historical Shoah, which Perl takes care to document so soon after leaving Auschwitz, rejects that conventional narrative format and characterization. As Langer writes, “How much darkness must we acknowledge before we will be able to confess that the Holocaust story cannot be told in terms of heroic dignity, moral courage, and the triumph of the human spirit in adversity?” (*Admitting* 158). By affirming popular myths about American rescue and by ultimately denying

the survivor's straightforward presentation of essential facts of the Shoah, *Out of the Ashes* constitutes an ethical violation of the survivor's intentions and trust and a slander against her good name.

In its effort to satisfy American viewers at the expense of transmitting basic historical facts, Sargent's adaptation guides viewers through a "Holocaust" that is not different enough from Hollywood movies about any other dramatic subject. Ironically, the filmmakers' radical departure from the Holocaust memoir leads to the conventional. The familiar trappings of conventional Hollywood formats encumber the adaptation. Inevitably, what has worked onscreen for most other subjects will only obscure the audience's understanding of the historical Shoah.

By attaching Perl's name to its narrative, and by rendering the Shoah for a television audience that far exceeds in size the readership of her 1948 memoir, *Out of the Ashes* has a special responsibility to her memory, to the truth that she wanted told and that she did tell in an era when few would listen. Her memoir shows that she never meant to sweeten the details of her experience just so more readers might like its taste. Nor did she invite readers to shift any guilt for her suffering from the Nazis to herself. It must not go unnoticed that the filmmakers implement the changes to the survivor's story after her death. Unlike fellow Auschwitz survivor Fania Fénelon, who famously campaigned against how she was to be portrayed in *Playing for Time* (Daniel Mann, 1980), Perl would never be in a position to judge or reject her own onscreen characterization. The explicit, unapologetic rejection of the late survivor's testimony, by way of the adaptation, thus operates as a warning against how the Shoah can be even more egregiously misrepresented once survivors are no longer with us. At least in this respect, I will agree that Baron is correct to claim that *Out of the Ashes* is an important piece of filmmaking.

In its radical attempt to stake new terrain in audiovisual representation by interrogating the theme of survivor guilt, *Out of the Ashes* denies the Shoah and assaults the real survivor's character. However unintentionally, it works against the survivor's voice and serves the Nazi's. As Wiesel poignantly writes about attempts to depict the Shoah for popular consumption, "The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes" ("Art and the Holocaust" B1). If the camp's truth remains hidden, the rest of its parts have too frequently been gathered up to form the stuff of adaptation for the masses. As we are reminded in the next chapter, this ethical problem in adaptation signifies a dangerous mode of thinking.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE JEWS UNHEEDED:

#### SCORNING SURVIVORS' SENSIBILITIES IN THE POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD

*Wisdom sings out in the street; it gives forth its voice in the squares. It cries out at the head of noisy throngs, at the entrances of the gates, in the city, it speaks its words: How long, O simpletons, will you love folly? Scoffers covet mockery for themselves, and fools hate knowledge. Return to my reproof! Behold, I will express my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.*

Proverbs 1:20-23

*Here am I (and I'm nobody special),  
I was beheaded  
I was hanged  
I was burned  
I was shot  
I was massacred.  
I was forgotten.  
(But why give an opening to Satan?—  
he might still recall  
that, morally at least,  
for the time being, I've won.)*

Dan Pagis<sup>26</sup>

Making a cogent reference to the earlier words of Auschwitz survivor-essayist Jean Améry, Ruth Wisse writes, "The world which forgives and forgets blames the [Holocaust]

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<sup>26</sup> Dan Pagis. "An Opening to Satan." *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. 1989. UC California Press, 1996, p. 30.



survivor for bringing his discomfiting accusation back with him from the edge of the grave” (48).<sup>27</sup> In the eyes of much of the world, the great sin of the Holocaust is not the persecution, torture, and mass murder of the Jews; nor is it so many nations’ shared guilt for not doing enough to save them. It is the survivor’s transgressive acts of surviving and telling the truth about what happened. The survivor’s accusation directs our attention to a common mindset that not so long ago permitted the Nazis and their accomplices to perpetrate their assault, and now hurries to forget it. The goal of this accusation is not merely to condemn or punish, but to awaken: it calls on us finally to heed the ethical imperative in both commemorating the past and moving forward. Jewish tradition teaches that human life has intrinsic value, and victims are worth defending and remembering. Sometimes—and testimonies regarding the Shoah mean to call to our attention exactly such times—we need to be shaken out of our slumber so that we will act.

Yet, popular representations of the Holocaust typically rely on shielding their audience. They mean to construct a buffer between the survivor’s accusatory testimony and the audience that wants no more than a brief emotional catharsis by way of entertainment from a Holocaust film. To create this buffer, adapters of written memoirs have typically opted not just to edit out key parts of the survivor’s testimony, but also to add elements that call into question the survivor’s very right to speak as a victim and on behalf of other victims. If the world cannot silence the survivor, it can at least attempt to discredit and perhaps even punish him for daring to bring back from the grave’s edge “his discomfiting accusation.”

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<sup>27</sup> Earlier in the same paragraph, Wisse directly quotes Améry’s 1966 essay, “Resentment”: “The world, which forgives and forgets, has sentenced me, not those who murdered or allowed the murder to occur.”

As we have seen, two of the three films examined in this study have worked to misrepresent Holocaust survivors, even to the point of impugning their reputations. This is no small matter, for there is far more than individual reputations at stake when survivors are depicted in such a damning fashion. In their efforts to speak to us as emissaries from the ashes—Gisella Perl frequently referred to herself as “Ambassador of the Six Million” (Brozan C20)—survivors also operate in the public mind as signifiers of the collective historical Jewish body. How survivors are represented, and how those representations are embraced or rejected by the public, can serve as a barometer of contemporary attitudes towards Jews. Arguably, those representations can also serve to reinforce or to help topple longstanding canards, with one of the most extreme being that Jews have no moral authority to speak about their own suffering, either because that suffering never truly occurred, or because they deserved whatever mistreatment they received.

It would seem that the track record yields substantial justification for Elie Wiesel’s distrust of film as a medium for representing the Shoah with authenticity, or even for treating the Shoah’s true victims with a basic sense of fairness; in fact, those elements are two sides of the same coin. While film is by no means the only artistic medium that has slyly hidden, unwittingly privileged, or seemingly condoned the Nazis’ crimes, it has proved especially effective at reaching, and arguably at influencing, a large audience. As Rachel C. Weingarten writes, “At a time when *Mein Kampf* once again tops the best-seller lists in Germany and in a world of increasing anti-Semitism and rampant anti-Jewish movements, Holocaust education is crucial, and that includes films on the subject” (“Why I Can’t Rejoice”). The utility of filmmaking as a vehicle for Holocaust education—and miseducation—remains important. There can be little

doubt that far more Americans have seen *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Mark Herman, 2008), than have read Holocaust survivor memoirs, heard live speeches by survivors, or watched survivor video testimonials.

In effect, too many films have thwarted rather than assisted the transmission of survivor testimonies by defending Nazis and attacking Jews. The camps may be liberated, but Hitler's sentiments regarding the Jews live on, having found ways to thrive in the movies. As Bill Niven writes, "Hitler regarded the representation of Nazism in celluloid as a gift to the future" (3) and "used the cinema in a variety of ways to promote Nazism" (5). Hitler meant for Nazism to find a perpetual haven on the screen, but there must be little doubt that the continuation of this phenomenon is a byproduct of later filmmakers' individual, artistic choices. It was never inevitable that filmmaking about the Shoah would fall prey to Hitler's intention. In fairness to contemporary filmmakers, though, we must also acknowledge that, from early on, the Nazis used the cinema to stack the deck in their favor. Tony Barta's essay, "Film Nazis: The Great Escape," proves especially detailed and insightful in this regard.

With an eye to how the Third Reich's tentacles have managed to cross the Atlantic, Barta cautions, "In history there is a past, and there we need to keep checking that neither the imaginary Nazis nor the Nazi imaginary run off with the plot" (128). He presents an ominous assessment of the relationship between Nazism and the cinema, arguing that the Nazis' misuse of the medium has left a troubling, if not inescapable, legacy. Holocaust films must contend with the fact that Hitler successfully enshrined his own "screen adaptation," as Barta calls it, which remains a lasting motif for our culture. As Barta explains:

Hitler recognized that military marching and music was ready-made for a medium that loves a spectacle. His screen adaptation would have no competitor in action, content, and plot, and it would be the latest in modern fascist style. National Socialism as Dynamic Tableau was invented first as live presentation, experiential theater, and then refined for wider transmission and celebration by film....

And if the Third Reich became history rather prematurely, it at least supplied the Nazis' cinematic epic with a dramatically unsurpassable closure. (131-132)

However, the closure in the form of Germany's 1945 surrender has not prevented the recrudescence of Nazi thinking. An ever-lurking danger is that Hitler's point of view has continued to seep into even well-intentioned depictions of history in American cinema and television, ultimately dominating and supplanting other voices, including those of survivors. If Barta is correct, then adaptations of survivor testimonies have suffered at least partly because Hitler possessed a genius for adapting his story in a manner that could entrance audiences for generations. He understood at least that audiences throughout Western civilization would welcome narratives that could provide an escape from acknowledging, and thus having to act in response to the wounding reality of, Nazi atrocities against innocent human beings.

Barta writes that, when the Nazis' era of direct control over German cinema came to an end, Hollywood took up the slack in ushering the criminals into the safety of the shadows. Whereas Nazi-era filmmaking sacrificed history on the altar of propaganda, for postwar Hollywood, the gods were entertainment and profit. When portraying Nazis, it was never Hollywood's priority to convey the true evil at the heart of their belief system, and American filmmakers eventually diluted the Nazis' threat by not even depicting them as potent foes (Barta

132-144). The consequence of such depictions has been the normalization of Nazism on the screen, and possibly beyond, at the costs of losing our sense of history and our appreciation of the fundamental right of the Jewish people to live. As Barta concludes, “Whatever feeds the imaginary of Nazism can hardly be expected to create clarity in historical focus. What kind of film can bring the imaginary of Nazism itself into focus is the final question.... Hitler is certainly not immune to the deconstructive and reconstructive possibilities of film and history. Starring in his own epic, he leads and misleads as he did from the beginning. He invites a contest between film and history” (143-145). If Barta is correct, then this dissertation’s focus on the frequent mistreatment of Holocaust survivors’ written words is indicative of a wider problem in adaptation studies.

That problem concerns how today’s artist should respond when her chosen medium has a special history of being soiled by fascism. This is not a problem that is unique to film, of course, as we take particular care to remember the anguish of survivor poets—Paul Celan comes to mind—who achieved prominence even while struggling to represent the Shoah in the language of their abusers. Barta’s analysis of Hitler as a masterful, influential film adapter would suggest that today’s filmmakers have an ethical responsibility to place distance between their own vision of the Holocaust on the screen and his.

In whatever manner we define the parameters that artists should respect when working to construct a representation of the Shoah, there must be no doubt that survivors deserve to be heard through representations that claim to tell their true stories. All of the adaptations examined in this dissertation have made that claim in their promotional materials, such as film trailers. As Weingarten writes, “Surely even a film that commemorates the atrocities of the Nazi death

camps mustn't take precedence over those who lived through it" ("Why I Can't Rejoice"). I question the very idea of Holocaust commemoration as a possibility when survivor's voices are ignored.

Just as Barta maps out how the Nazis have managed to escape into the screen, I hope to have demonstrated how the drowning out of Holocaust survivors' voices on the screen is an ethical offense that gives the Nazis another convenient cover and accomplishes their greater goal against the Jews. Neither artistic freedom, nor matters of aesthetic quality or audience demands for entertainment, can provide sufficient ethical justification for squeezing survivors out of their own testimonies.

However, there is hope for improvement in future adaptations. One key to repositioning the image of the Nazis so that history can be seen with clearer eyes is found in the written firsthand testimonies of survivors, who found purpose in exposing the truth of the Offense. As I have contended throughout this dissertation, there exists an ethical component to heeding the survivors, which the passage of time has not erased. The Shoah could not have happened without a wide, deep breach in ethics. It stands to reason that any defense against the recurrence of Nazi race-based, antisemitic, annihilationist thinking rests on a mending of our ethics, beginning with how we choose to remember Nazi crimes. If we cannot be fair to victims in how we tell their stories, we should have little faith in our ability to defend the innocent in our own time.

Indeed, ethical inquiries into artistic license are both timely and warranted today. It can be no accident that moral relativism seems to be widely embraced, just as Holocaust denial continues to proliferate. Whereas decades ago the Nazis sought to remove the Jewish presence from history, now artists in the free world seek to redefine and thereby diminish the Jewish

character in the telling of this story. Jewish survivors' postwar role as a moral authority, and even as surviving victims of the Nazis, is called into question. Audiovisual adaptations of Holocaust memoirs have tended to help move our culture towards an ethical precipice, so that actual survivors' firsthand accounts of the atrocities continue to be dismissed when they do not support the imaginative vision of an artist or the commercial interest of a studio or television network. It might still be asked, then: if the artist's product satisfies its audience, where is the danger? Has not the adapter simply done her job of entertaining? And why should a film be expected to match, or even to take its direction, from any book? The better question to ask is whether the films, like the memoirs, endeavor to and succeed at combating the Nazi worldview. Most film adaptations have not fared well, at least by that ethical measure. Greater fidelity to the factual basis and the essential spirit of the source memoirs is the best recourse.

As survivors leave us, we are left with the records of their memories. Both the memories and their expressions were a heavy burden for the survivors during their lifetimes. Tensions have emerged in the transference of that burden, as films continue to compete with survivor memoirs for the right to shape our collective memory of the Shoah. There can be little doubt that, in terms of audience size, films are winning. This is not inherently a danger; as we have seen in the case of *Europa Europa*, film can do justice to a survivor's message. The danger has been, and continues to be, when important historical details from survivor testimonies are sloppily transmitted, when Nazi crimes are minimized, and when antisemitic tropes that mirror Nazi-era propaganda are depicted as though they are not merely historically sound, but also straight out of the survivor's testimony.

We would do well to listen to Holocaust survivors. But what happens when none are left? This question, which seems to have been asked for decades at every Yom HaShoah commemorative event, is surely more pressing than ever. It has inspired not only the writing of memoirs, but also the construction of numerous museums, the touring of exhibits, and the gathering of video testimonies, including the tens of thousands now found in Steven Spielberg's collection at the USC Shoah Foundation.

In anticipation of the day when there are no living Holocaust survivors, several museums and organizations have invested small fortunes to capitalize on flashy innovations in technology. A few years ago, a Holocaust museum staff member eagerly escorted me to a visiting exhibit that featured an interactive hologram of an elderly Holocaust survivor. "Tell us a joke!" gushed the staff member, and the seemingly jolly survivor hologram obliged, if only for a moment. (The platform chose that moment to crash, which was perhaps the most appropriate response to the absurd scenario.) I have little doubt that many, possibly most, of the museum's visitors were thrilled by the novelty of the new technology, and also by feeling as though they had gotten so close to the essence of a real survivor. It is quite telling that this was the image of the survivor that investors employed creative talents to render.

My lasting impression is that the entire hologram project functioned as nothing more than a patina of or distraction from the Shoah, fooling all but the discerning eyes into accepting—no, cheering!—that the real experience and character of a survivor had somehow been preserved. My observation at the museum should come as no surprise. After all, what should be expected of a future without survivors, when we consider how their testimonies have been ignored or nullified in their own lifetimes? One thinks of the well-publicized backlash against survivor



Fania Fénelon, who publicly campaigned against what she deemed the fundamentally antisemitic retelling of her story in the adapted telefilm, *Playing for Time* (Daniel Mann, 1980). As the survivor's wishes were mostly dismissed, Hitler gained a foothold on television screens the night that the film aired. A joking survivor hologram on display at a prominent museum similarly chips away at our understanding of the survivor experience, effectively minimizing the suffering of millions so that we may feel better, not worse, for our encounter with the past through this format. As is the case with filmmaking, the fault is not so much in the medium of holographic image-making, but rather in the misguided notion that the artist's main priority should be to give the public whatever she or they want.

For most survivors, the choice of artistic medium for telling their story has always been less important than ensuring the continued accuracy of their message on behalf of the dead. This principle guided, and arguably consumed, Primo Levi and others. It remains a source of stress and motivation for the survivors who remain. Survivor Branko Lustig reveals in the documentary, *Imaginary Witness* (Daniel Anker, 2004), that his experience as a co-producer of *Schindler's List* was fraught with rows between himself and director Steven Spielberg over how true to survivor testimony the film should be. Lustig's motivation for fighting on behalf of the testimonies is clear when he states:

I know that when I go, I will be one of the last survivors who is working in the film industry in the world. And when I go there will be nobody anymore who can build a set, and if somebody makes a mistake or something, to tell him exactly was looking, how exactly it was looking when somebody was hanged, and how exactly it was looking when somebody was beaten, or how exactly the roll call was. I remember when the people were

dying, and they were telling us, “*Abei gezunt*, and tell to the world how we died. And this should never happen again.”

At an age when most men might be enjoying the pleasures of retirement, Lustig makes clear what continues to drive him in his work. It is certainly also worth noting that, for all of Lustig’s concerns over inaccuracies in Holocaust depictions in movies, his choice to work in the industry demonstrates not only his concern about the future of filmmaking, but also his confidence that the medium has the potential to do justice to the subject. Unlike Wiesel, he sees promise, and so do I. Of course, this promise is hollow if we turn a blind eye to past mistakes.

I suggest that it can be no accident that, at a time when survivors are dying off, *The X-Men*, the popular mutant superheroes of American comic books, has emerged as a highly lucrative film franchise, having so far earned 5 billion dollars at the box office. (In the 1980s, the X-Men comic books were already the most popular in the world.) Quite a few of the films’ most prominent scenes, including the opening shots in two of the films, are set in Auschwitz, where the series’ maniacal chief villain, Magneto, was once a Jewish child-prisoner. As depicted, he lost his family, was the subject of cruel experimentation by a Mengele-like mad doctor, and ultimately, embraced the goal of employing his superpowers to wreak vengeance on humanity by implementing a new genocide.

No doubt in response to the popularity of the films, the USC Shoah Foundation co-published with Marvel Comics a graphic novel, *X-Men: Magneto: Testament*. Unlike most comic books, it is written as a first-person narrative, so it reads like a survivor memoir with the addition of vivid visual images. In recent years, the sub-genre of graphic novels has become ubiquitous in classrooms, as the hybrid format tends to lure reluctant readers, who would never choose to pick

up a traditional memoir. *Magneto: Testament* looks like a respectable work, with endnotes that cite real memoirs and histories, and it even includes a teacher's guide. Having worked with many Holocaust educators, I have no doubt that, through the films and comics, more young Americans today are introduced to the Shoah through Magneto than through any real historical figure, with the possible exception of Anne Frank. This means that, as real survivors have died, and their testimonies have been subverted, a new image of the survivor—and also of the Jew—has been shaped. It is an image of a former victim who has now turned himself into an abuser of the innocent, using powers that are beyond that of the ordinary mortal. This profile connotes the diabolical, medieval image of the Jew that Joshua Trachtenberg describes in his 1943 study of antisemitism, *The Devil and the Jews*, and that Joel Carmichael likewise outlines in his 1992 publication on the topic, *The Satanizing of the Jews*. It resonates in other ways today, when anti-Israel media accuse citizens of the Jewish state of having survived the Shoah just to behave like the Nazis. For too many people, especially the young, the wholly fictional, broken, terrifying, but highly entertaining character of Magneto shapes the paradigm of the Shoah, the survivor, and the Jew. Before the last of the survivors are gone, he displaces them in the popular understanding of their historical narrative.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation refers to the theological concept of supersessionism, which asserts that, with the advent of Christianity, Judaism and Jews are at best an antiquated, useless presence in the world. In practice, most audiovisual adaptations of Holocaust memoirs have moved our culture towards what amounts to the wholesale supersession of Holocaust memory, so that actual survivors' firsthand accounts of the atrocities are apparently disregarded when they do not support the fabricated vision of an artist or the commercial interest of a studio or

television network. Most film adaptations of survivor memoirs privilege this post-Holocaust twist on supersessionism by asserting that Jewish survivors do not warrant much voice in how their stories should be transmitted. The supersession of Holocaust texts is a way of de-Judaizing the victims and their testimonies, so that the War Against the Jews may be denied. In place of real Jewish survivors, we have screens filled with Vanessa Redgrave's visage scolding Jews in Auschwitz in *Playing for Time*, a fictionalized Primo Levi lusting after women in *The Truce* (Francesco Rosi, 1997), and a grossly distorted Gisella Perl confessing her guilt of being the true murderer in the killing center in *Out of the Ashes* (Joseph Sargent, 2003).

What has happened in those film adaptations of Holocaust memoirs, in the traveling hologram of the Holocaust survivor, and in the dissemination of the Magneto character are all symptoms of the same ethical problem, which is the commonly felt, overwhelming desire to rid ourselves of the survivors' burden once and for all. By insisting that we learn from the past and act on its lessons, the survivor's real message exhausts our spirit, challenges our faith, and wounds our sensibilities.

As I have argued, adapting Holocaust testimony for the screen is not inherently evil or antisemitic, even though it necessarily involves distortion of the survivor's words. Nor is it an unavoidably doomed enterprise, in ethical terms. The danger arises when an adaptation actively fosters the impression that it speaks in a survivor's name, but then finds ways to deny the Holocaust by undermining her expressed, pointed—which is to say, wounding—written account. Such a transgression is at least ethically akin to the Nazis' well documented strategy of slandering Jews by intentionally misrepresenting their teachings and practices. I do not suggest that adapters are Nazis. My contention is rather that, in seeking to please viewers who are

naturally reluctant to take on the burden of the survivor's testimony, adapters have typically fostered an environment where Nazism has room to revive its voice and even to thrive in performance for an ever-expanding audience.

At a time when few survivors remain, the world is all too eager to bury them and their testimonies. Survivors and their memoirs are arguably our most direct link to a past that horrifies and implicates us, so it is no wonder that they are under attack. It is never convenient or uplifting, except perhaps in fiction, to be called upon to fight for the innocent. As the title of his 2009 book indicates, Alvin Rosenfeld dubs our era, *The End of the Holocaust*. We might also call it, "The End of the Holocaust Survivor;" for the two epithets approximate the same disturbing trends. By accepting, funding, applauding, and awarding attacks on the survivors and victims, we perpetuate the very thinking that made possible the Shoah.

In *The End of the Holocaust*, Rosenfeld contends that the popular understanding of the Shoah has been twisted and abused, so that we have finally reached a point where it has no meaningful resemblance to historical reality. He writes that "the Holocaust becomes broadly acceptable only as its basic narrative undergoes change of a kind that enables large numbers of people to identify with it. At the core of this process of transformation and identification lies the fate of the victims and survivors—their memories, stories, and future status as imagined figures within a continually evolving narrative of the crime against the Jews" (1). What Rosenfeld calls "this process of transformation and transformation" is essentially adaptation, and in ethical terms, he is absolutely correct to assert that it must put at its core the victims and survivors and thus refute antisemitism. For an adaptation to achieve authenticity and still reach viewers, it

needs to engage simultaneously both the survivor's sensibility and the filmmaker's artistic vision.

In such a light, it seems prudent to revisit questions I posed at the start of Chapter 1: *When survivors are known to have agonized over their inability to craft memoirs that sufficiently convey the complexity and depths of what the Shoah inflicted, how can others hope to find the means of doing justice to its representation? And why make the attempt?*

Adaptation is an important and worthwhile pursuit in the arts, not only by the standards of aesthetic achievement, but also by way of fostering historical understanding and ethical improvement. When constructed with sensitivity to the subject of the Shoah, adaptations can help guide us, just as the survivors sought to teach us during their lifetimes. Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1990) shows us that film as a medium can indeed do justice to certain survivor memoirs not just adequately, but masterfully. More than any other film adaptation of a memoir, Holland's release demonstrates the potential of filmmaking to communicate Wiesel's ethical dictum: "Listen to the survivors and respect their wounded sensibility" (Wiesel "Art" *NYT* B1). Through the viewing of such an adaptation, at least some piece of the survivor's burden can be transferred to our shoulders, hopefully positioning us to act with readiness and purpose when we hear the cries of those who suffer in our own time. And by finally adapting to the survivor's terrible burden, we move in the right direction, at least when judged by the ethical standards that Nazism strove to and in some ways did destroy.

In Chapter 1, we marked the words of Lawrence Langer, who writes seemingly contradictory assessments of how the Holocaust should be approached. In one, he calls for an "easing into," and in the other, he proposes an "unbuffered collision" (*Preempting* 129 and 2).

Which, then, is ultimately the more ethical option for the adapter? The more pressing issue concerns a different binary relationship, that of fidelity and creative license. Whether the adapter eases an audience towards the Shoah or compels an audience to collide with it is less important than choreographing the shared movement towards the clearest, uncompromised understanding of the Event and its aftermath. That is, the direction of the movement matters more than its pace, though on an aesthetic level, the right choice of pace may help viewers encounter the ethical. An easing into, rather than a collision, may be just enough to coax people towards a more truthful encounter with this history. *Europa Europa* affords us an example of an adaptation that masterfully balances scenes of easing into with others of unbuffered collisions. However, neither type would matter if each movement did not prompt us towards the appropriately compassionate understanding of what the victims' suffering entailed.

By minimizing, trying to justify, or otherwise denying Jewish suffering and Nazi crimes for the sake of entertainment, too many adaptations have ushered their audiences away from any meaningful confrontation, whether sudden or gradual, with what the Shoah entails. This confrontation is the very thing that survivors came back to demand through their memoirs, so that we may help to bear witness to the Event; as Primo Levi instructs, "everyone" should be led to understand the "sinister alarm-signal" that Nazism represents (*Survival in Auschwitz* 9). By excising the impetus for this confrontation, this ethical reckoning, an adaptation lacks both the intellectual and moral justification to call itself a Holocaust film or a survivor's true story. Worse still, an adaptation of this sort helps place us in the Nazi mindset, which amounts to a callousness for the suffering of real human beings, beginning, but never ending, with the Jews whose testimonies are ignored.

Undoubtedly, there are steep emotional, spiritual, and intellectual costs for acknowledging the right of survivors to convey to us their wounding sensibilities in the terms they set, not the terms we want. By allowing ourselves to bear the burden of survivor testimonies with authenticity and integrity, we will necessarily be wounded, just as many of our most precious assumptions about civilization, human nature, progress, and even what it means to be a human being are challenged at profound levels. Only by reckoning with these challenges may we begin to sense the enormity of how far humankind fell in the War Against the Jews. We know enough from our missteps and our few successes that film adaptation can serve as an effective, valid, and ethical means to force this reckoning.



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Zelizer, Barbie. "Every Once in a While: *Schindler's List* and the Shaping of History." *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, edited by Yosefa Loshitzky, Indiana UP, 1997, pp. 18-40.

Zweibel, Alan. "Foreword." *It's Always Something: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, by Gilda Radner, Simon & Schuster, 2009, pp. xi-xiv.



## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

J.E. Wolfson was born and raised in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. He earned his BA in History from Beloit College, studied and worked in Chicago, and later moved to Texas, where he acquired his teaching certification. As a classroom teacher at public, private, and religious schools in Austin and Houston, he devoted time to completing professional development on teaching about the Holocaust. He graduated with his MA in Humanities-History of Ideas from the University of Texas at Dallas, which he chose for its program in Holocaust Studies. While pursuing his PhD in Humanities-Literature and his Graduate Certificate in Holocaust Studies, he taught at UT Dallas, Collin College, and a religious school. He currently resides in Austin, where he serves as Education Coordinator for the Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission and volunteers on the steering committee for the Austin Jewish Film Festival.

# **J. E. WOLFSON**

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## **EDUCATION**

**PhD in Humanities/Studies in Literature/Holocaust Studies**, The University of Texas at Dallas (GPA: 4.0), 2019

**Graduate Certificate in Holocaust Studies**, UT Dallas

**MA in Humanities/History of Ideas/Holocaust Studies**, UT Dallas (GPA: 4.0), 2008

**Provisional Teaching Certification**, Region XIII ESC, Austin, TX

**BA in History**, Beloit College, Beloit, WI

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## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Education Coordinator**, Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission, Austin, 2015-present

**Adjunct Professor** – Humanities, Collin College, McKinney, TX, 2013-2015

**Religious School Teacher**, Congregation Anshai Torah, Plano, TX, 2010-2014

**Instructor of Record** – Rhetoric, UT Dallas, 2011-2013

**Teacher/History Department Chair**, Emery/Weiner School, Houston, TX, 2002-2006

**Teacher**, Beth Yeshurun Day School, Houston, TX, 2001-2002

**Religious School Teacher**, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, Houston, TX, 2001-2002

**Teacher**, Austin Independent School District, 1998-2001

**Religious School Teacher**, Congregation Beth Israel, Austin, 1998

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## **HONORS AND GRANTS**

Doctoral Exams passed with Distinction, UT Dallas, 2013

Graduate Student Scholarship, UT Dallas, 2011-2013

Graduate Studies Travel Grant, UT Dallas, 2012

Provost Graduate Fellowship, UT Dallas, 2011-2012

Belofsky Fellowship in Holocaust Studies, UT Dallas, 2008-2011

M.A. conferred with Distinction, UT Dallas, 2008

Graduate Scholarship in Holocaust Studies, UT Dallas, 2007-2008

Alfred Lerner Fellowship in Holocaust Studies, Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, NYC

Student Fellowship in the Humanities at the Newberry Library, Chicago, IL

Student Symposium Day Presenter, Beloit College

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## **SELECTED PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED TALKS**

**Congregation Tiferet Israel Tisha B'Av Program**, Austin, Presentation: "Denying, Confronting, and Commemorating the Kielce Pogrom," 2019

**THGC/USHMM 2-Day Educators Workshop**, Edinburg, TX, Workshop Facilitated: "'The World Will Turn Right-Side Up One Day': An Interdisciplinary Workshop on Teaching about the Holocaust and Genocides," 2019

**Portland Genealogical Society**, Portland, TX, Presentation: "The Holocaust and its Challenges to Genealogical Research," 2019

**Shalom Austin Yom HaShoah Community Observance**, Class Taught: "From Anne Frank on Broadway to the X-Men Onscreen: How Artists Have Adapted the Shoah for Popular Consumption (And Why It Should Matter to Us)," 2019

**The Armenian Genocide 104<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Program**, Del Valle, TX, Presentation: "The Ethical Crimes of Denial," 2019

**Lago Vista Genealogical Society**, Lago Vista, TX, Presentation: "The Holocaust and its Challenges to Genealogical Research," 2019

**Eanes ISD Hill Country Middle School**, Austin TX, Presentation: "Recognizing the Faces of Genocide," 2019

**Austin ISD Social Studies Teaching Institute**, Presentation: "How the THGC Can Help You Teach about the Holocaust and Genocide," 2018

**Dallas Holocaust Museum Candy Brown Summer Institute for Educators**, Dallas, TX Presentation: "How the THGC Can Help You Teach about the Holocaust and Genocide," 2018

**Modern Language Association Annual Convention**, Philadelphia, PA, Paper Presented: "'But Hurbinek's Word Remained Secret': The Challenge of Adapting the Holocaust Memoir to the Screen, from Primo Levi's *The Reawakening* to Francesco Rosi's *The Truce*," 2017

**THGC Educators Workshop Series**, Waco, College Station, Amarillo, Fort Worth, Richardson, Odessa, San Angelo, Wichita Falls, Austin, Victoria, Beaumont, Houston, El Paso, Edinburg, San Antonio, Abilene, Lubbock (twice), Corpus Christi, Pittsburg, and Kilgore, TX, Workshop Facilitated: "'Do Not Say They Cannot Hear Us': An Interdisciplinary Workshop on Teaching about the Holocaust and Genocide," 2016-2017

**Region 7 Social Studies Teachers Summit**, Kilgore, TX, Presentation: "Best Practices in Teaching about the Holocaust and Genocide," 2016

**Austin Jewish Business Network**, Austin, Presentation: "What We Can Learn from the Holocaust," 2016

**Retired Old Men Eating Out**, Austin, Presentation: "What We Can Learn from the Holocaust," 2016

**Modern Language Association Annual Convention**, Austin, Paper Presented: "Holocaust Memoirs through the Screen of Adaptation: Wounding Voices of Fania Fénelon, Gisella Perl, and Solomon Perel," 2016

**Modern Language Association Annual Convention**, Chicago, Paper Presented: “Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity and Urban Redemption in Sydney Taylor’s *All-of-a-Kind Family*,” 2014

**American Comparative Literature Association Annual Convention**, Providence, RI, Paper Presented: “Perl and Perel: Two Holocaust Memoirs through the Screen of Adaptation,” 2012

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## **PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Modern Language Association

Network of Texas Holocaust Scholars

Association for Jewish Studies