

Wartime victim writing in Eastern Europe

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Diaries

Certain genres come to the fore under certain historical circumstances, and diaries, we know, are especially prevalent in wartime. "Everyone" wrote diaries, historian Emanuel Ringelblum reported in 1943, "journalists, writers, teachers, community activists, young people, even children."¹ And although most of those written in the Warsaw ghetto were destroyed during the Great Deportation, a significant number did survive: diaries written on the run, in a safe house, a monastery, an underground bunker, a loft, a pit, a labor camp, a transit camp – diaries in every European language.

In the Jew-Zone, the ghetto often served as a buffer against the truth: ghetto diarists were preoccupied with themselves or their fellow Jews and barely able to account for the behavior of the Germans. Not so the Hebrew pedagogue Chaim Kaplan, who began keeping a diary in 1933 and renamed it *Megilat yisurin* (in English, *Scroll of Agony*) on July 29, 1940, to signal a shift in perspective from the individual to the sacerdotal. Kaplan consistently reports on German actions, and he consistently employs Scripture to underscore the desecration of God's covenant and the daily degradation of God's chosen. "How has Warsaw, the royal, beautiful, and beloved city become desolate!" he writes on the first day of the Jewish year 5700 (in the Western calendar, September 14, 1939). Biblical analogies eventually fail him, as death itself ceases to have meaning, especially after Kaplan introduces a sinister confidant in the person of Reb Hirsch. "My Hirsch cannot be budged from his opinion," Kaplan writes on June 16, 1942. "A catastrophe will befall us at the hands of the Nazis and they will wreak their vengeance on us for their final downfall."² Whether Hirsch was a real person or a literary invention, we will never know. His role, however, is clear: he is Kaplan's alter ego, his naysayer, the speaker of unspeakable truths. Hirsch's prophecy of doom, which proves to be accurate (the Great Deportation is a month away), anticipates the diary's last, truly eschatological sentence,

written in the diarist's own voice: "If my life ends, what will become of my diary?"

In the Vilna ghetto, the voice of Zelig Kalmanovitch – as befitted a founder of the famed YIVO Institute – was that of a public intellectual. In Yiddish, he lectured on Peretz and Abad Ha'am and delivered an occasional sermon. But Kalmanovitch kept his diary in Hebrew, replete with scriptural and Talmudic passages to underscore his return to the fold. He believed that history would revere the memory of the people of the ghetto. "Your least utterance will be studied," he prophesied in 1942, "your struggle for man's dignity will inspire poems, your scum and moral degradation will summon and awaken morality."²³ Most stunning was the voice of Ringelblum, whose every waking hour was dedicated to preserving the inner Jewish dialogue: between past and present, the elite and the folk, Hebrew and Yiddish. Oblivious to the conditions outside his underground bunker, he completed his most sustained piece of historical research, *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, after Polish Jewry was no more. The work was written in Polish for a Poland that no longer had any Jews.

The art of ghetto reportage

Diarists recorded what they experienced, heard, and dreamed. But the reporter's job was to cover every late-breaking development and draconian measure, on a beat where "images succeeded one another with cinematic speed."²⁴ The daily assignment was to write about a whole people *in extremis*, through the prism of the unique social organism that was the ghetto, as if for a deadline sometime in the future, when the war was over, and these writings would see the light of day.

In the ghettos in years 1–4, reportage was the bedrock of shared communication. Like song and epic poetry, reportage was not a stand-alone genre designed merely to transcribe or testify or record. It presupposed a collective audience, schooled in a very particular mental curriculum. No subject was too terrible for the reportorial pen, as long as there was room in the horrific present for some reference to a shared past. Reportage was a game of *déjà vécu*, even if the purpose of the analogy, or allusion, was to underscore the irreparable break between the familiar past and the unbearable present.

Peretz Opoczynski was a seasoned reporter before the war, becoming the scribe of urban poverty and neglect in Warsaw. Working as a letter carrier in the Warsaw ghetto by day – an unnerving and thankless job that he described in one of his finest reportorial fictions – he managed to produce carefully wrought vignettes of ghetto life in the early 1940s by describing a

single ghetto courtyard or profession and tracing its changing fortunes and misfortunes over a specific period of time, ranging from one day in the life of ghetto smugglers to several years in the life of an apartment complex. Welcomed in 1941 by the ghetto population as the first in Poland's history, the Jewish letter carrier eventually must bear witness to the people's despair. Yet in the voices that greet and ridicule him at his debut on the ghetto streets, he picks up on something not heard since the days of the greatest of Jewish humorists, Sholem Aleichem: "A Jewish mailman? Oh, I can't believe my eyes! Tell me, who are you looking for? At what address? We'll show you, you won't have to waste time looking. Jews, will you get a load of this: we've got a Jewish mailman, just exactly as if we were in Palestine!"²⁵

This ironic sense of living "in Palestine" pervades the writings of many ghetto chroniclers, for whom the analogy is always sardonic. Echoing the monologues of Sholem Aleichem allows Opoczynski to conjure up a *shtetl*-like environment where Jews are all on intimate terms with one another, and then to use this model of solidarity as a foil for unmasking the *shmendrikes*, the self-hating assimilationist Jews, the corruption, and the apathy that takes hold of the ghetto population. Thanks to the modern Yiddish classics, Opoczynski had a rich and adaptable model of the *shtetl* (a small town with a large Jewish population in Central and Eastern Europe) as collective hero – or antihero – especially in time of crisis.

Oskar Rosenfeld became a refugee for the second time when, in November 1941, he and five thousand other Jews were deported from Prague to the Polish industrial city of Lodz, which had been renamed Litzmannstadt after a Nazi general on April 11, 1940. Thanks to his credentials and impeccable German, Rosenfeld landed a secure job working on the official ghetto chronicle, but on February 17, 1942, he also began keeping a combination diary and literary journal, of which twenty out of twenty-two notebooks would survive. Three days into his writing – after describing the first public hanging in the ghetto, dutifully recorded by a German film crew – he described the ghetto landscape, a panorama in snow that turned subjective at the mention of the children:

Bleak and barren roads, partly snowed in and partly covered with mud, stretch between houses dotting the landscape. Stunted trees and bushes extend their meager trembling branches toward the sky. Throngs of children in rags cross the streets, their yellow, weatherworn faces furrowed, weary. At times a fleeting smile appears on one of those faces, sometimes one [pair] of those bloodless lips begins to sing. At times these children throw snowballs like children everywhere in freedom. Nobody can tell what the morrow will bring. What will happen with all of us? . . . And yet, everybody wants to live, "to live it," to know that this life was not completely senseless after all.²⁶

Life on this barren soil where nothing can grow has already turned adults into innocent children. No one knows what tomorrow will bring, or even if there will be a tomorrow. Only innocent children, "like children everywhere," think there will be a tomorrow. All roads leading out of the ghetto have been destroyed, so there remains only the slimmest hope of communicating with the people who live in freedom. The Jews in the ghetto write to sustain a future that they know will exist – if at all – without them.

Josef Zelkowitz from Lodz also led a double life. His day job, working alongside Rosenfeld, was to report on the productivity of the dizzying array of workshops and makeshift factories in which every able-bodied ghetto Jew was forced to work – and on the social assistance needed by the sick, the old, and the unemployed. Some of these reports are dry as dust, but many have the tone of an omniscient narrator, free to formulate broad, transcendent truths and generalizations and free to pass judgment on the sordid conditions of the ghetto.

When not reporting on the carpenter's strike in the winter of 1941, or the removal of forty-six patients from the psychiatric ward in the ghetto and their subsequent deportation, Zelkowitz penned the reportage "Twenty-Five Live Chickens and One Dead Document." It was the true story of a murderous guard at the ghetto fence known as "Red-haired Janek," a pure-blooded Christian Pole who passes himself as a *Volksdeutsch*, or ethnic German, a veritable VIP. This time, however, Janek's deal to smuggle twenty-five chickens into the ghetto had fallen through, so he plotted revenge against his Jewish partner by shooting and killing twenty-four innocent Jews in reprisal.

Schooled in Jewish historical memory, Zelkowitz understood the treacherous workings of memory through time. To signal that knowledge, he framed the story of the live chickens and the dead document within a double frame, the first an epigraph, in Aramaic: "Through a cock and a hen Tur Malka was destroyed ([Babylonian Talmud.] Tractate Gitin 57a)." "Tur Malka" was another name for Jerusalem, and Zelkowitz expected

his readers to remember the rabbinic legend that blamed the catastrophic Jewish rebellion against Rome on a banal incident with a cock and a hen. Roman soldiers had seized these animals from a Jewish wedding procession, the Jews beat the soldiers up, and the emperor thought a rebellion had broken out. Zelkowitz's point is that if such a trivial event could have had such disastrous consequences then, it could happen again. The Germans were no less cruel than the Romans. Wearing two hats – that of the criminal investigator and that of the keeper of Jewish historical memory – Zelkowitz raised the stakes, for if the Lodz ghetto were analogous to Jerusalem, then

nothing less than the survival of the Jews as a people was hanging in the balance.

Another ghetto reporter was Leyb Goldin, who had worked as a professional translator of European literature before the war. His sole surviving work from the Warsaw ghetto is the masterful 1941 "Chronicle of a Single Day," in which he breaks himself up into two voices: Arke, the cynical superintendental and one-time revolutionary, and his stomach. Arke knows about the malleability of time not only from reading *The Magic Mountain* but also from having done time before the war, in solitary confinement. But the war has been going on for two years, "and you've eaten nothing but soup for some four months, and those four months are thousands and thousands of times longer for you than the whole of the previous twenty months – no, longer than your whole life until now."⁷ Starvation time is further broken down into three uneven segments: before the single bowl of soup handed out each afternoon at precisely the same hour, during the soup, and after the soup. Ghetto time defies all clockmakers, including those we call writers.

The search for historical meaning

To the Jews of Eastern Europe, schooled in collective memory, the search for ancient analogies always began with the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Faced with a catastrophe of unprecedented scope, both ubiquitous and inescapable, Jewish writers and chroniclers reached into the fund of Jewish collective memory for historical archetypes. Yizhak Katzenelson organized and presided over public readings of the Hebrew Bible in his own rhymed Yiddish translations, in which he sought to demonstrate that the Prophets had never been more alive, more relevant. The most ambitious publication of the underground press in the Warsaw ghetto was his *Job: A Biblical Tragedy in Three Acts*, of which Dror published about 150 copies on June 22, 1941, the day that Germany declared war on the Soviet Union. Gracing the cover was Shloyme Nusboym's illustration of Job crouched on the ground, nursing his wounds. While *Job* focused on the existential and erotic struggle of the individual Jew, *By the Waters of Babylon: A Biblical Folk Drama in Four Acts* described the plight of the nation and ended with a verse translation of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones.

Working by analogy, trying things on for size, comparing and contrasting present and past – these practices did not always lead to an experience of déjà vu. "The tragedy is tremendous," Rosenfeld recorded in Notebook E, in midsummer 1942:

Those in the ghetto cannot comprehend it. For it does not bring out any greatness as in the Middle Ages. This tragedy is devoid of heroes. And why tragedy? Because the pain does not reach out to something human, to a strange heart, but is something incomprehensible, colliding with the cosmos, a natural phenomenon like the creation of the world. Creation would have to start anew, with *berajshit* [the first word of the Hebrew Bible]. In the beginning God created the ghetto.⁸

Ghetto chroniclers were the first to perceive the outlines of something new: the birth of a new archetype of destruction. Was the measure of this new catastrophe the distance, the unbridgeable gap, between the spiritual superiority of prior generations and the demoralization of their own?

Did everyday acts of heroism count as Kiddush Hashem or only as acts of extraordinary self-sacrifice? The ghetto poets were divided on this point, with one school of thought represented by Yitzhak Katzenelson in Warsaw and the other by Abraham Sutzkever in Vilna and Simkhe-Bunem Shayevisht in Lodz. Polish Jewry, Katzenelson resolved in year 4 of the war, was heir to a model of heroism perfected over millennia of exile in which the supreme act of self-sacrifice was performed "with no weapons and no spurs." "And if this Jew spills any blood," he proclaimed, "it is only his own."⁹ A supreme instance of this type of Jew was the Rebbe of Radzyn; the scion of an illustrious Hasidic dynasty. In order to bring a trainload of Jews to burial, the Radzyner spurned efforts to buy him safe passage. "The Song of the Radzyner" was the last and longest epic poem that Katzenelson wrote in the Warsaw ghetto. It was an epic of the old school, about a named figure who was larger than life and who, like Rabbi Akiva and the ten martyred rabbis, turned private defiance into a supremely public act. Katzenelson's hero, moreover, was as fearless of death as of the pathos of God – a diminished, powerless God. The Radzyner redefined the meaning of martyrdom as absolute devotion to the people of Israel.

In the Vilna ghetto, even schoolchildren got into the act. The ghetto's history club put Herod on trial in front of an invited audience, and fifteen-year-old Isaac Rudashevski argued the case against him as a criminal, a Roman collaborator, and an agent of assimilation. After heated debate, the court declared Herod guilty. Sutzkever, meanwhile, immortalized the everyday courage of the teacher, Mira Bernsheyn, who plied her trade before an ever-dwindling class. The curriculum they were studying, according to Sutzkever, was I. L. Peretz's tale of triple martyrdom, "Three Gifts," which extolled the moral imagination of every man and woman and their courage to go beyond the letter of the law.

Not long after completing this most popular of his epic poems, Sutzkever shifted from the epic to the lyric, with a six-line poem commemorating a unique act of sabotage carried out at the ghetto gate:

A bliml

Farn veln durkhtrogn a bliml durkhn toyer
hot mayn shokhn zibn shmits batsolt.
Vi tayer iz far im atind der fringl der bloyer, –
Dos bliml min shvarsapl fun gold!
Mayn shokhn trogt zayn ondenk on badoyer:
Der fringl otemt in zayn layb – er hot azoy gevolt . . .
Vilner geto, 29stn may 1943

(Flower)

For wanting to smuggle a flower through the gates
my neighbor paid the price of seven lashes.
Now these blue petals with their nucleus of gold
are such a precious sign of spring returning.
My neighbor bears his scars with no regrets:
Spring breathes through his flesh, with so much yearning.
Vilna ghetto, May 29, 1943¹⁰

Resistance is first and foremost an act of volition: for *wanting* to smuggle a flower into the ghetto, a Jew receives seven lashes but is rewarded for "so much *yearning*" by having his pain transmuted into life-giving breath. Written in honor of spring, this poem ends with the spring coming alive within his neighbor's body, which bears its scars "with no regrets." Resistance is no less an act of the imagination – a spontaneous, creative response to cruelty and horror. Standing in for the precious flower, the standard of beauty that cannot be falsified, is this perfectly crafted poem built on two sets of rhymes: the feminine rhymes *toyer*, *bloyer*, and *badoyer* and the masculine rhymes *batsolt*, *gold*, and *gevolt*. One set is in ethereal, mystical blue and the other in earthly, material gold – two opposing realms yoked together through the mysterious power of rhyme. The "neighbor" remains anonymous because he is Every-Jew. Every poet, everyone willing to risk all in order to uphold an absolute standard that cannot be breached. Faced with an enemy that defiles and destroys, "these blue petals with their nucleus of gold" represent that which is most precious on earth, as in heaven. Nor a Jewish stance, to be sure, but like religious faith, it demands a supreme act of self-transcendence.

Simkhe-Bunem Shayevisht completed the process of defining martyrdom broadly. The mass deportations from the Lodz ghetto resumed on February 22, 1942, and Shayevisht began writing a 448-line epic poem called

"Lekh-lekho" (Go forth), in which God's command to Abraham in Genesis 12 is transformed into an intimate, remarkably muted conversation between a father and his beloved eight-year-old daughter, Blimele (meaning little flower). Shayeivish was a first-generation secular poet in whose library "lie" holy books, / worldly books, my manuscripts. / Isaiah hobnobs with Goethe, / Reb Jonathan Eybeschuetz with Tuwim . . . And Yesenin wants to get drunk / and urinate in public, / but suddenly he sees Abraham / leading Isaac to Mount Moriah.¹² The intrusion of that "but suddenly" on the home and hearth of one ghetto family awaiting the expulsion order is the theme of this great poem; the attempt of an otherwise powerless father to draw out a semblance of meaning by redefining the biblical covenant in a collapsing universe. As they ascend this new Moriah, where no angel will intercede to stay the knife, the father instructs his daughter to face death with a smile, to defy the enemy with the indomitable spirit of the Jews.

Time after

"Am I the last poet in Europe?" Surzkever asked himself at the end of June 1943. "Do I sing for the dead, do I sing for the crows?" The answer he arrived at was a study in realms of opposition forcibly wrenched together: "I am drowning in fire, in swamps, in brine, / Entrapped by yellow badged hours."¹³ There were only two ways to escape from the yellow-badged hours: one was through the coming of spring, the regenerative cycle of nature, which for Surzkever was always linked to the process of artistic creation; the other was through armed revolt. In his wartime poetry, Surzkever tracks a paradigm shift that occurred in modern Jewish times. The new Jew, machine gun in hand, fighting as a Jew — the longed-for Jewish army finally fighting under its ancient banner — was born in 1943. From Surzkever we learn that the labor pains attending that birth were terrible.

"Abrasha" Surzkever joined the United Partisans' Organization (known as the FPO from its name in Yiddish), under the command of Isik Vitrenberg, soon after its founding. In midwinter 1943, Liza Magun, the FPO's main courier and liaison to the Jewish underground in other ghettos, was caught and executed by the Gestapo. (Magun was to the resistance movement in Vilna what Tosia Altman and Zivia Lubetkin were to it in Warsaw.) More than a tragic loss and strategic setback, Magun's death made clear to Surzkever that the FPO was fated to fight alone, because the ghetto population was utterly indifferent. Standing before his fellow partisans, who were gathered legally at a memorial ceremony for Magun, Surzkever

declaimed a thunderous poem of rage, written in the oracular mode of Hayyim Nahman Bialik.

Nowhere is the distance between poet and audience, between the one and the many, more pronounced than here, in "Lid tsu di letste" ("Song for the Last"). The farther apart the prophet is from the people, the greater the tension inside him between rage and sorrow, loathing and lamentation:

I bear my skull on stones to find consolation
for you in the fragments, you, the last,
for I, too, am a letter in your book,
my sun, too, is spring's leprous outcast.¹³

Deeper than the divide between the prophet and the people that refuses to hearken to his word is the gap between the different time zones that the two inhabit. The poetic prophet, alive to the cycles of nature, sees the first signs of spring. Yet just as the natural world is about to be reborn, the ancient cycle of a great and sorely tested people is about to be closed forever. Time has run out on this people, thunders the prophet, because so much of it has been squandered: "Millions at a time you were no one's, / but believed in your individuality." Even "when a thousand years of enmity / has walled the light out completely," it produced no palpable response, no protest, no vision for the future.¹⁴

By the end of 1943, year 4 of the war, metonymy became myth for the Jews who remained alive inside the Jew-Zone, most of whom were now alone: hiding alone, dying alone, fighting alone. For the young who took up arms, there were only three choices: go down fighting in a symbolic last stand against the Germans, turning the ghetto into a latter-day Masada; join a Soviet partisan brigade, where Jewish fighters were not always welcome; or forge whatever alliances were possible with the local underground in order to go on fighting as Jews. Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff belonged in the first group. The Surzkevers belonged in the second. Szymek (Shimshon) and Gusta Draenger belonged in the third. Each group left behind a literary legacy in multiple voices and tonalities. The diary, last letters, and calls to arms issued by Tenenbaum-Tamaroff in Warsaw and Biadystok were lovingly collected, translated, and published by the surviving members of his Zionist movement. Surzkever continued to date his poetry written in the Narocz forest, even as he edited and augmented his ghetto corpus for eventual publication. The return to the life-giving forest quickened his poetic spirit. "Stretch your hands out," he exulted in perfect rhyme:

To that whiteness: In its cold and burning
Veins

You'll feel returning
The redeeming life
It contains.¹⁵

Yet surrounded at the same time by so much emptiness and enmity, he suddenly perceived the most terrifying of all metonymies:

And if my people shall remain only a number,
I adjure it: that from my memory it disappear.
And may all the graves be buried deeper
And may no dust remain of the years.¹⁶

The Great Deportation

Metonymy and myth are the two basic means of symbolic shorthand. One is punctual, bare-bones, a world in miniature, which draws on the acute observation of present reality. The other is the punctual rendered temporal, a primal plot that recurs again and again, a foundational map of the future. Myth is rooted in collective memory; it is the alphabet used in the grammar of remembrance. What happened inside the Jew-Zone in year 4 of the war is that metonymy became myth. As one ghetto after another was liquidated – the smaller ones first, then the major ones – an entire people was reduced to bits and scraps, last letters, a few photographs, and piles of abandoned clothing. As the old, the infirm, the mothers and children were cast into the inferno, and all the strategies for survival failed, those few still left alive cast about for something – anything – that might represent the many, if only as a mnemonic. In the face of total destruction, every memento took on lasting significance.

For Rachel Auerbach, one of Ringelblum's closest associates, the part that stood for the whole had been the soup kitchen at 40 Leszno Street, where writers and intellectuals like Goldin received their daily ration – the kitchen Auerbach ran with selfless devotion and described with scholarly rigor for the Oyneg Shabes. But of what use was memorializing the social service network in Europe's largest ghetto after its liquidation? In the course of six weeks, 235,741 people were rounded up in one spot, the notorious assembly point called Umschlagplatz, and shipped off in cattle-cars to die in a place called Treblinka. A whole city of Jews, a city within a city, masses on masses of people – men, women, and children – were gone. The work of the Oyneg Shabes was temporarily suspended. The only task that remained for the surviving members of the staff was to chronicle the Great Deportation.

But where should they begin from: the perspective of the dead or that of the living? Each demanded a different lens. Yehoshue Perle renamed his

ferocious contemporary chronicle of the Great Deportation "The Destruction of Warsaw" the moment he understood it to be a literal reenactment of the original *hurban* (the destruction of the Jerusalem temple). No less fearful was the fate of those still alive, as brilliantly captured by the metonymy of Perle's dog tag, number 4580, issued to the "Chosen-People" Jews, those thirty thousand who survived the Great Deportation just long enough to work as slave-labor. An empty number with no history was all that remained of a lifetime of collective dreams and personal ambitions. Perle's number was, he saw, a sign of the Apocalypse.

The Polish-language poet Władysław Szlengel likewise adopted multiple perspectives. A popular cabaret poet in the ghetto and a one-time member of the Jewish police, Szlengel decided at the beginning of year 4 that it was time to sort through his papers and compose a last will and testament with the sardonic title of "Co czytalem umarłym" ("What I Read to the Dead"). To set the antisentimental tone, Szlengel began by recalling a prewar Soviet film about trapped sailors on a sunken submarine. The last survivor, about to suffocate, had scrawled a final message that affirmed his faith that he was dying for a higher cause. But speaking for the Warsaw Jews, Szlengel could take no such comfort:

With all my being I feel that I am suffocating as the air in my sunken boat slowly gives out. [Unlike the Soviet sailor] the reasons I am in this boat have nothing to do with heroism. I am here against my will, and without any reason or guilt.

But here I am, in the boat. And although I am no captain, I still think that I should at least write the chronicle of those who have sunk to the bottom. I don't want to leave behind only statistics. Through my poems, sketches and writings I want to enrich (a bad word, I know) the historical record that will be written in the future.

On the wall of my submarine I scrawl my poem-documents. To my companions I, a poet of AD 1943, am reading my scribbles.¹⁷

Among these "poem-documents" is one that recapitulates the methodical murder of Polish Jewry with absolute metonymic precision. "Things" tracks the six stages of the cross – not of one exemplary martyr or of the entire Jewish people, but of their "furniture, tables and chairs, / suitcases and bundles," as the owners are dispossessed and moved to ever more desolate and restricted quarters; forced, by station 4, to move "along a Jewish road / with no big bundles or little bundles, / no furniture or chairs"; reduced to carrying "a small suitcase and a knapsack, / no need for anything else," as they are marched off in even rows of five to the blockhouses reserved for slave-labor and finally, to their deaths, leaving behind their "abandoned

apartments, / abandoned bundles, / suits and down covers, / and plares and chairs."¹⁸ Aryans will then inherit the spoils in the first of two endings. In their Second Coming, however, the "Jewish things" return in a grand and vengeful procession of *materia mnemonica*, retracing the *Via Dolorosa* of a martyred people.

Like Szlengel casting about for some disastrous analog, Auerbach begins her own requiem for the dead in 1943 by recalling a flood she once saw in the mountains. Facing the raging waters from afar, she was close enough to see the gaping mouths of the helpless victims, but not to hear their cries. Just so, standing on the far side of the river of time, she is close enough to recall the catastrophe in every detail, but far enough away to conduct a search for meaning: "And that's how the Jewish masses flowed to their destruction in the time of the deportations. Sinking as helplessly into the deluge of destruction."¹⁹ To make this leap from a natural to a historical disaster, Auerbach substitutes a "deluge of destruction" for a flood in the mountains to signify the primeval flood. Likening the Great Deportation to a flood in no way implies that she accepts the biblical belief that an act of God is a sign of divine retribution. On the contrary: the flood analogy means for Auerbach that the evil descended on the Jews from on high like a force of nature, fatally inevitable. The dead were blameless!

Auerbach proceeds to put flesh on the dialectic of destruction by drawing a composite portrait of her people, recalling them group by group: the children and the youth; the women and the men; the idealists and assimilationists; even the underworld, a distinct and especially vital branch of Polish Jewry; the grandmothers and grandfathers; and finally the pietists and the beggars.

Exhausted by the effort to recall each group of Jews individually, despairing of the possibility of ever completing the litany of losses, Auerbach makes her account of the flood more personal – and more gendered. She turns to an incident that happened to her while riding the Warsaw streetcar, the jarring moment that birthed this very work. Sitting opposite her was a Polish Catholic woman, her head thrown back, talking to herself. Seeing and hearing that bereaved mother crying, like one mad or drunk, reminded Auerbach of another woman who seemed drunk or mad with personal grief: Hannah in Shiloh, crying her heart out before God, because she is childless (1 Sam. 1). But as a Jew living on Aryan papers, Auerbach cannot cry in public. What can she do? She can sit down and write her chronicle. She can return to the ancient rite of Jewish mourning, to the recitation of *yizkor*.

I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.

And I need to groan. I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say Yizkor four times a day.²⁰

Auerbach's composite portrait of the living folk underwrites her personal covenant with a people that now lives only in memory.

The confessional diary

A Jew still alive in the Jew-Zone was a statistical error by the fall of 1943. For such a person to take pen in hand at that time was an act of profound self-awareness. At that precise moment, a unique form of confessional diary was born. Time in this diary flows forward and backward; events are both recorded as they happen and reflected on after the fact. The diarists have a terrible secret to confess, forcing them to backtrack to the time of the slaughter. However irrational, they blame themselves for being absent when the roundup occurred, for believing the false promises, for failing to secure a hiding place. They confess to having abdicated their role as father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, or sister, their own survival predicated on the death of their loved ones. "Everywhere [I turn]," wrote Grete Holländer on October 31, 1943, "I encounter only dead people. Am I really still alive?"²¹ Never far from Holländer's thoughts were her young daughter, Sonja, entrusted to a gentle couple, and "the terrible day" her husband, Marek, was taken from her, not to mention the four hundred women from the Czortków Lager who were taken away before her very eyes. Giving voice to her "unspeakable anger" at their murder, she began keeping a diary in pencil in notebooks typically used by schoolchildren.²² To write, from that moment on, was for her to work through overwhelming loss and a crushing burden of guilt. In diaries such as hers, time was split in two: time before and time after.

The moment of truth in these confessional diaries was the moment of moral complicity, of radical self-confrontation, which each diarist reached by a different route. In the first days of the Great Deportation, Abraham Lewin abruptly switched the language in which he kept his ghetto diary from Yiddish to Hebrew. Then, on the day his wife, Luba, was rounded up in Umschlagplatz and shipped off to her death, Lewin began a new calendrical and moral reckoning. Interspersed with the terrible news that reached him hour after hour, which he labored to put into chronological sequence for the sake of future generations, were flashes of self-blame. "The

Świeca family has perished," he reported at the end of a lengthy entry dated the eve of Rosh Hashana in 1942:

He [Mr. Świeca] gave himself up after seeing how his wife and two children were taken. Initially he went with us to Geśia Street; later he went back, gave himself up and was sent away. I feel a great compassion and admiration for this straightforward person. Strong in mind as well as strong in body. I think that Luba would have done the same, but I didn't have enough strength to die together with her, with the one that I loved so much.²³

"Where shall I start?" asks Stanisław Adler, hiding on the Aryan side of Warsaw. "There is an overpowering desire burning in me to put in writing as speedily as possible all that has happened to us in these years of war, especially that which I, myself, have been witness to in the last six months. Even now I am terrified that the dangers which threaten me from all sides might prevent me from finishing this manuscript."²⁴ Feeding Adler's panic is the knowledge that all his writing thus far "has turned out to be a Penelope's web": the border police burned his diary from the first months of the war; his reconstructed notes were also destroyed when he was interned in the Warsaw ghetto, and everything he wrote inside the ghetto he "had to leave for the wolves to devour" when he escaped to the Aryan side. "Against a logic which I cannot satisfy," he goes on to explain,

and against a literary tradition which I consciously ignore, I feel almost impelled to start from the end of my story. This is not because it is my intention to begin with the impact of my personal experiences, but because I feel the need to vindicate myself. Instead of an axe or a club I am now holding a pen in my hand. I am alive and living here, and not lying in trenches in an unequal battle or in one of the collective graves of Warsaw Jewry.²⁵

The specter of one's loved ones points to an essential feature of these confessional diaries: they labor to recreate what no longer exists. Their point of departure is when "my real life began to end." On the very day – May 22, 1943 – that Yitzhak Katzenelson arrived from Warsaw at the transit camp in Vittel, France, accompanied by his surviving son, seventeen-year-old Zvi, the poet and playwright began to keep a diary. Instead of bringing him and his son closer together, he recorded, the catastrophe had driven them further apart; both were going mad, in different ways. That distance, in turn, intensified Katzenelson's bereavement for three of the murdered millions, whose names – Hannah, his wife, and Bentski and Binyomin, their sons – he repeated like an incantation. Two weeks passed before he wrote another word in the diary. On July 21, the dam burst, with the

following day marking the first anniversary, the *yortsayt*, of the start of the Great Deportation. From then on, Katzenelson backtracked to the slaughter, as if reliving it in real time, back to the liquidation of the Little Ghetto with all its orphans, who had performed the plays he had written for their benefit; back to the discovery that his loved ones had been taken to Treblinka; back to the cellar at Karmelicka 9, on the eve of the first armed resistance; back to finding his works strewn about the abandoned ghetto streets. Each diarist inhabited a private hell. Each labored to reconstruct a paradise lost.

Everything about these diaries was fraught with tension – especially the question of what language to write them in. "Ikht mit mayn zun Tsvi," Katzenelson began his diary in Yiddish. "Ani im Tsvi beni," he translated the words and continued in Hebrew. As simple a phrase as "I and my son Zvi" was for the diarist a statement of faith, because in all the surrounding rooms and apartments, Polish Jews, the last of the last, were making a point of speaking . . . in Polish. What was it that moved both Katzenelson and Lewin to switch from one Jewish language to another? Did writing in Hebrew automatically elevate one's private testimony to a metahistorical plane? Ensure the document's eternity? Render it more conspiratorial? Insert a psychological buffer zone? Or all four? Whatever the reasons, the confusion of languages signaled an attendant confusion of addressee. Who was this document intended to reach? Who was still left to decipher its contents? When the outside horror penetrates the inner defenses and refuses to let go is when the confessional diary is born.

The last to die: the Sonderkommando

In the end the Germans created Auschwitz-Birkenau – the last stop, the final destination. The transport from Luna, which included Zalmen Gradowski and his family, arrived on December 8, 1942. At the beginning of each of his chronicles, he lists his loved ones who had perished in the gas chambers:

My mother – Sarah	My wife – Sonia
My sister – Libe	My brother-in-law – Raphael
My sister – Esther Rokhl	My brother-in-law – Wolf ²⁶

Also included was the address of one of his five uncles living in the United States – "J. Joffe, 27 East Broadway, N.Y." – who could supply the details of his biography and a photograph of himself and his wife. Of powerful

build, Gradowski had been handpicked for the thousand-member Sonderkommando: men who oversaw the murder of their own people, gave them instructions about where to undress and where to leave their belongings, shaved their heads, and led them to the baths; men whose job it was to pull the dead from the gas chambers, pry open their mouths to extract their gold teeth, and feed the bodies into the ovens; men whose own days were numbered, as he was to number the twenty-two months spent in their company and to mourn their liquidation, counting himself among the last 191 survivors. They were quartered in a special block, ate what no one else was allowed to eat, and saw what no one else was allowed to see.

Gradowski was not content merely to chronicle events. He wished also to contextualize them and anticipate the reader's response. Possessed of literary ambitions, with an iterative style and apostrophes to nature that betrayed his debt to Polish romanticism, Gradowski kept circling back to the question of Jewish passivity. To the postwar reader who sat out the war in the Free Zone, Gradowski addressed his "notes" from the underground, whose purpose was to explain how the people of Israel could have vanished so quickly from the soil of Europe. Were they merely casualties of the war? Were they destroyed by some natural disaster? And why did they, each individual and the millions in the aggregate, allow this to happen? As he labored to reconstruct the tortuous journey from ghetto to concentration and death camp, Gradowski dwelt on the myriad ways a person condemned to death could misread the signs. Of everything he witnessed in those twenty-two months, what stood out in his memory above all else was not the "courageous young man from a Bialystok transport [who] had attacked some guards with knives, wounded several of them severely and was shot trying to flee" or the incident of the "Warsaw Transport" before which he bowed his head in deep respect, singling out "the splendid young woman, a dancer from Warsaw, . . . who snatched a revolver from [Walter] Quackernack, the Oberscharführer of the 'Political Section' in Auschwitz and shot the Referat-führer, the notorious Unterscharführer [Josef] Schillinger."²⁷ Rather, it was the fate of the Czech family transport: such intelligent and resourceful Jews, who had been allowed to live together, were duped together, and were gassed together on Purim, March 7, 1944.

To "The Czech Transport" Gradowski dedicated his most sustained work, in which he tried to understand not only the psychology of the murdered, but also the psychology of the mass murderers. His literary means were limited, but his insights were not. The Germans were engaged in a mythic, life-and-death struggle with the demonic *Juden*. The one myth

that they were able to make real was the fires of hell – that is, the crematoria ovens – where the members of the Sonderkommando learned which body parts burned more quickly than others. All these crimes would be avenged – of this, Gradowski had no doubt whatsoever. After securing different hiding places for his writings, he led the one-day revolt of the Sonderkommando on October 7, 1944. He was caught, tortured, and publicly hanged. Gradowski believed that through his buried chronicles, future historians would understand the psychology of the murderers, the delusional hope of the victims, and the uniquely tragic fate of the Sonderkommando.

Notes

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2. Chaim Aron Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, 2nd rev. edn., trans. Abraham I. Karsh (New York: Collier Books, 1973), p. 351.
3. Zelig Kalmanovitch, "Three Sermons," trans. Shlomo Noble, in Roskies (ed.), *Literature of Destruction*, p. 511.
4. Ringelblum, "Oyneg Shabbes," p. 391.
5. Perez Opczynski, "The Jewish Letter Carrier," trans. E. Chase (modified by D. G. Roskies), in Jacob Glatstein, Israel Knox, and Samuel Margoshes (eds.), *Anthology of Holocaust Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), p. 57.
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7. Leyb Goldin, "Chronicle of a Single Day," trans. Elinor Robinson, in Roskies (ed.), *Literature of Destruction*, p. 427.
8. Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning*, pp. 105–106.
9. Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto and the Oyneg Shabbes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 328.
10. Trans. Anna Miransky. Abraham Sutzkever, *Lider fun yam-hamoves: fun vilner geto, vald, un vander* (Tel Aviv and New York: Remembrance Award Library, Bergen-Belsen Memorial Press, 1968), p. 75.
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12. Sutzkever, *Lider fun yam-hamoves*, p. 79.
13. Abraham Sutzkever, "Song for the Last," trans. C. K. Williams, in Roskies (ed.), *Literature of Destruction*, p. 498.
14. Ibid.
15. Abraham Sutzkever, "No Sad Songs Please," trans. C. K. Williams, in Roskies (ed.), *Literature of Destruction*, p. 501.

16. Suzkever, *Lider fun jam-hamoves*, p. 108.
17. Kassow, *Who Will Write?*, p. 317.
18. Wladyslaw Szengel, "Things," trans. John R. Carpenter, *Chicago Review* 52 (Autumn 2006): 283–85.
19. Rachel Auerbach, "Yizkor, 1943," trans. Leonard Wolf, in Roskies (ed.), *Literature of Destruction*, p. 460.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 464.
21. Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 147.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 145–48.
23. Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Antony Polonsky, trans. Christopher Hutton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 179.
24. Stanislaw Adler, *In the Warsaw Ghetto 1940–1943: An Account of a Witness*, trans. Sara Chmielewska Philip (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1982), p. 3.
25. *Ibid.*
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CHAPTER 2

Wartime victim writing in Western Europe

David Patterson

The victim wartime writers to be considered here are Jews for whom, although they were often unaware of it, wartime was to be a time of mass extermination. Despite their many differences in background, age, and upbringing, they had one thing in common: they put their words to the page along the edge of annihilation. This defining feature of their existential condition shaped the nature of their writing, the motives for their writing, and the stake in their writing. Pressed for time and in lands under German occupation, they had no time for rewriting. Regardless of genre, this victim wartime writing is characterized by an air of urgency, a sense of responsibility, and an impetus to testimony. And yet they had no real expectation that their words would see the light of day. Purting their pen to paper required both courage and faith on the part of these authors, as they took up their task in the midst of fear and foreboding.

As one might expect, much of the victim writing during the Holocaust took the form of diaries; they make up most of the writing that found its way into print. The Jews who kept their diaries did so in secrecy and at the risk of their own lives. Their entries measured not only the remains of the day but also the spilling of blood, charged as they were with a testimony not only to personal experience but also to communal ordeal. In contrast to the diaries of Eastern Europe, those that came from the West were not written in ghettos but in hiding places, camps, and sites where Jews awaited deportation. The fiction written during this time has similar characteristics, although there were far fewer works of fiction written under the shadow of Nazism; unlike the diaries, they were written by accomplished authors. Some are highly allegorical; others chronicle confrontations with the Nazi evil that had befallen the world. Letters make up yet another genre, and they have their distinctive features. Undoubtedly, given the dispersion of Jews throughout Europe, more people were writing letters than diaries or fiction; yet the number of published volumes of letters is comparable to published volumes of fiction, and there are far fewer than published volumes of diaries.