

Wordless Holocaust memories speak truths for today

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The Holocaust has shaped discourse on collective, social and cultural memory, serving both as touchstone and paradigm, according to a study published this month in the journal *Memory Studies*, published by SAGE.

The article, by Holocaust authorities Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, titled Holocaust Studies/[Memory](#) Studies: The Witness in the Archive will appear in a book due to be published shortly: *Mapping Memory*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. It focuses on the contradictions at the core of Holocaust witness testimony to determine what Holocaust Studies has brought to the study of memory, and Memory Studies' influence on theoretical Holocaust studies.

The idea that even a witness' silence tells a story has gained increasing currency, and has brought about a paradigm shift in our telling and retelling of history, and the meanings we place upon it. The authors discuss the Eichmann trial, a milestone in Holocaust memory where a collective story emerged through individual victim testimonies, to become 'semantically authoritative,' in stark contrast with the Nuremberg trials, where the focus was on the war criminals themselves. At the Eichmann trial, witness and concentration camp survivor Yehiel Dinor (who also wrote as K-Zetnik, publishing works on 'planet Auschwitz') fainted during questioning, falling into a coma for several weeks. Dinor's body language ultimately proved more influential than his words.

Audio and video recording have altered testimony's direction and

function - now first-person accounts transmit empathy and emotion as well as knowledge. Where previously testimony's aim was to glean facts for legal and historical purposes, it has become a vehicle to transmit memories to future generations.

Especially in video testimony, moments of collapse or silence are common when victims express unspeakable trauma. Yet Hirsch and Spitzer caution that taken out of context, we risk appropriating this testimony and projecting our own meanings upon it. Indeed some scholars argue that those who fall mute are the most 'true' and 'complete' witness to the Shoah. The 'aporia of Auschwitz', lies in the contradiction that the only true witnesses cannot speak, and their embodied memories go beyond the usual limitations of legal record and fact.

Oral and video testimonies have redefined listening as 'secondary witnessing' placing new burdens on the interviewer, the authors argue:

"Video testimonies show that memory and testimony are acts in the present, not present accounts of the past. They show how memory enters language, and how it changes in the process. They show how an event lives on, how it acquires, keeps and changes its meaning and its legacy. They show how the witness changes in the process of telling, or re-living. Listeners must hear silence, absence, hesitation and resistance... Theorists of testimony have spent a good deal of effort to define the fine line between good listening and appropriation."

Hirsch and Spitzer caution against over-emphasizing trauma and speech breakdown, which can mask the wealth of knowledge and information thousands of witnesses have offered.

The Holocaust can be viewed as the worst act of anti-Semitism - principally as a crime against the Jews; or as the worst act of racism, and as a crime against humanity. Mute victim testimony lends itself to

interpretations that directly or indirectly support one of these viewpoints.

Commentators may use this appropriated testimony to support the image of Jewish extreme victimization that fuels nationalist and identity politics. The authors aim to increase awareness that this appropriation takes place.

One alternative is to turn the Holocaust into a holocaust, (alongside events of the magnitude of Rwanda, the Balkans and Darfur). This leaves behind the uniqueness and exceptionalism attributed to victims' suffering. Other perpetrators and other bystanders involved in acts of mass violence and persecution may then enter the broader field of memory, so we may apply Holocaust lessons more globally. Our response to Holocaust witness testimony would then be our determined and collective efforts to prevent or stop genocide and ethnic cleansing from being committed yet again.

More information: The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/ Memory Studies, by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer is published in the May issue of *Memory Studies*, published by SAGE. The article will be free to access for a limited period from mss.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/2/2/151

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