Nazi Victims as Witnesses after 1945
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“I would love to live to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and shriek to the world proclaiming the truth. So the world may know all. So the ones who did not live through it may be glad, and we may feel like veterans with medals on our chest. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future. ... But no, we shall certainly never live to see it, and therefore do I write my last will. May the treasure fall in good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened ... in the twentieth century. ... We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.”

Excerpt from David Graber’s will, written in 1943

I. Introduction

The late twentieth / early twenty-first century is often referred to as the “era of the witness.” This label is a direct reflection of the unprecedented ubiquity attained by the figure of the witness and the act of bearing testimony over the past three decades. The degree to which television documentaries, feature films, exhibitions, interview projects, reports and memoirs have become established as vehicles of historical consciousness and mediums for conveying history to the public matches the immense increase in the significance of the “contemporary witness”. The latter has also been charged with new contents and meanings within this period. Even experts sometimes have difficulty determining what kind of witnesses they are dealing with in various contexts, and knowing how to assess those persons – real and fictive – stories and reports about history experienced and suffered.

Although historians occasionally emphasize the novelty with which the phenomenon emerged in the late seventies “quite suddenly out of nowhere”, its lines of development reach back significantly further in time. To disregard the precursors in ancient historiography for the time being, from the eighteenth century onward a distinction can be made between three ideal types of witnesses that still dominate linguistic usage today. In addition to the religious “witness to the faith” – who is more the guarantor of a present belief in God than a source of information on past events – there are the judicial “eyewitness” who appears before court, and the “witness” of historical scholarship. If in different ways, we count on the statements of the latter two to give us insights into past occurrences.

Despite the profound changes the processes of modernization brought about in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this early history is still a key to understanding the modern conception of witness-bearing. The latter, for its part, can be traced back predominantly to the mid-twentieth century, while the specific context of its emergence goes back to World War II and the National Socialists' Europe-wide persecution project.

What are the reasons for the fact that the emergence of the “Zeitzeuge” (German for “contemporary witness”) and the experience of Nazi rule are so inextricably interlinked? This question can perhaps best be answered by a roundabout route. Both the National Socialist “rupture in civilization” (Dan Diner) and the endeavours to come to terms with it afterward contributed to temporarily unsettling traditional forms of testimony, leading to a veritable crisis. The credibility crisis of the witness was by no means a

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5 As Laura Jockusch has stated, many works on Nazi-victim witnesses and witnessing tend to overlook the specific Eastern European Jewish tradition of "Khurbn-Forshung" (=destruction research) that emerged around the turn of the century in reaction to the pogroms in Russian Kishinev; see Laura Jockusch, Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe (Oxford, 2012), pp. 18–33.
concomitant of Nazi race and nationhood policy, but, quite to the contrary, one of the deliberately precipitated consequences of that policy. This was because the politics of the Nazi state differed from that of other repressive regimes in that it endeavoured, firstly, to rid itself of all undesirable population groups before, secondly, also obliterating the memory of the abused and murdered victims. The persons directly affected by this undertaking perceived its monstrosity, lack of precedence and totality at an early stage, and in many of them it triggered an impulse to document the crimes for posterity.

Those among the victims of Nazi persecution in any way capable of bearing witness to their own fates and those of other victims no longer alive usually conceived of such testimony as a means of preserving personal dignity and restoring integrity, and not least importantly as an expression of the will to survive. On the other hand, it was above all Polish-Jewish intellectuals who recognized, even before the war ended, that this extreme form of state-inspired National Socialist persecution would play into the hands of the perpetrators. They correctly assumed, for example, that the Nazis would either claim ignorance of the facts or discredit the victims’ reports across the board as exaggerations and the products of a “Jewish” desire for revenge.

The efforts to gather evidence and document the events accordingly served the purpose of countering the – cognitively and emotionally – overwhelming language of the Nazi perpetrators. In connection with the Holocaust, a phenomenon developed early on that the historian Laura Jockusch has referred to as the “moral imperative” to bear witness and the “collective duty to testify on behalf of the dead”. In the exercise of this duty, the boundaries between primary witnesses, i.e. those who experienced certain acts of violence first-hand, and secondary witnesses, i.e. those endeavouring to preserve the fates of their murdered fellow sufferers from oblivion, often grew hazy.

Members of the organized Communist resistance in the camps and Europe’s leftist liberation movements, on the other hand, had slightly different motives. Already during their imprisonment in Nazi concentration and work camps, these persons undertook to draft the most coherent possible historical narrative with an emphasis on the prominent status of the international working class and national inmate collectives in the antifascist liberation struggle. To be sure, in view of the National Socialist repres-
sions – which were as comprehensive as they were heterogeneous in character – and the multiplicity of victim categories, it will hardly have seemed conceivable that any kind of generally valid and consistent persecution narrative would take shape after the end of the war. However, recent research has clearly shown that, shortly after the war, there was still a heightened willingness in the majority of European post-war societies not only to concede compensation and reparation to the “political” victims of concentration camp custody and deportation, but also to confirm the status they claimed for themselves as “survivor-witnesses”.

II. Witness-bearing in the early post-war period and the incipient Cold War

Although in the present-day perception the Holocaust is considered the “key frame of reference for witness-bearing” in the twentieth century, at the end of the war Jewish survivors constituted only one of many victim groups. They sought to make themselves heard by various publics, often encountering rapidly changing interests in the process. Even if the conditions in the post-war European societies differed significantly, it can be said that, in general, there was a veritable boom of published memoirs and reports on experiences in the initial years. As Constantin Goschler has pointed out, however, the impact and self-conception of this newly emerging genre was, on the whole, rather limited. After all, the primary concern was with the public “verification of the persecution events by the survivors, which was achieved primarily through the claim to authenticity associated with contemporary testimony”.

To judge from the sizes of the respective editions, Jewish voices were nothing more than a little-noted marginal phenomenon in this initial phase. To be sure, the diary of Anne Frank, published in 1950, became a world bestseller practically overnight and by the early sixties had reached more than 800,000 readers in the Federal Republic of Germany alone. Otherwise, however, in a period in which myths of resis-
tance and self-victimizing legends attracted wide attention, descriptions of the fates of persecuted European Jews were extremely unpopular. After 1945, despite a political and cultural climate ranging – in western and eastern Europe alike – between latently defensive and downright hostile, Jewish relief organizations initially continued the efforts they had launched during the war to enlighten the public about the specific history of their own group’s persecution. Here the guiding principle was to respond to one’s own survival – a circumstance usually perceived as coincidental and in isolated cases could lead to the “survivor’s guilt” syndrome – with an all the more resolute ethical self-commitment to the act of bearing witness. A call to “all Jews in Poland” published by the Central Jewish Historical Commission (CZKH) in Lublin shortly after the city’s liberation by the Red Army accordingly proclaimed that “two thirds of the European Jewry have been murdered over the course of the past six years. … We, the small group of Jews in our power to perpetuate the time we suffered through in documents for the coming generations. We must collect the testimonies to human bestiality, gruesome barbarism, sadism and the thirst for blood,”

Of the many diaries written, letters collected and photo albums put together during the war for documentation purposes, only a small proportion had weathered the turmoil of the National Socialist era. In the initial post-war years, institutions such as the CZKH therefore began conducting extensive witness surveys among Jewish survivors. These reports provided above all information on the persecution practices of the German occupiers, but also described the behaviour of the non-Jewish population as well as the Jewish community. A further aspect of the collecting activities was directed towards compiling evidence for the Allied and national trials. Indeed, Jewish organizations in the United States and Europe contributed substantially – both conceptually and materially – to making those trials a reality. In view of that circumstance, the fact that only few of their representatives were summoned to give testimony in Nuremberg and other trial venues must have been particularly devastating for those organizations. Although the court records and documentary evidence from early proceedings would prove to provide important impulses for the first overviews of the history of the National Socialist genocide of the Jews, the later near-complete silence of Jewish voices had thus already been predetermined, for the most part, in the late 1940s. More or less the same also applied to other victim groups that had no apparent background of political persecution.

Whereas Holocaust survivors were compelled to adapt their stories to a heroic narrative of resistance if they wanted to spark public interest, former political inmates enjoyed a relatively high degree of respect, attention and sympathy in the early post-war period. This was especially true of the reports by the two left-wing intellectuals Eugen Kogen and David Rousset published immediately after the war in the American-occupied zone of Germany and in France, respectively, in large editions. Both of the former Buchenwald inmates linked their individual experiences with...
the collected survival testimonies of other inmates. The combination of ego story and fundamental analysis lent these accounts a high level of authenticity and credibility and laid the foundation for the reception of the National Socialist concentration camp system in scholarship, the media and the judicial system. As a witness for the prosecution, Kogon – who worked for the American occupying power as a publicist – had frequent opportunities to renew his individual perspective on the history of the camp, for example in the Nuremberg doctors’ trial of 1947 and the main Buchenwald Trial held in Dachau in 1947/48.

In April 1945, shortly after the liberation of Buchenwald by American troops, the former members of the Communist camp resistance composed and distributed the “Oath of Buchenwald”. As is evident in its famous wording, the German and French-dominated Communist inmates’ organizations felt called upon to speak on behalf of their murdered party comrades. “We survivors”, the oath reads, “we who witnessed the Nazi bestialities, looked on in powerless rage as our comrades fell.”

From the beginning, however, the Communists pursued more wide-reaching aims with their remembrance politics. On the one hand they undertook to serve not only as intermediary witnesses but also as judges in the prosecution of the crimes (“The day of revenge will come!”). On the other hand, from their common experience of persecution and imprisonment they deduced a hegemonic status in conjunction with the process of commemorating the hardships suffered, but also pride of place in the task of designing a new Europe, both politically and socio-economically.

In the initial post-war phase, if not longer, it appeared as if the former Communist inmates would actually succeed in implementing this expansive conception of historical testimony. Even if this was less true of the western section of post-war Germany, it did apply to freshly liberated France, where a Buchenwald survivor – Marcel Paul – even held a ministerial office in the first de Gaulle administration. The French prosecution in Nuremberg assigned the Communist witnesses a prominent role when it came to attesting war crimes committed against members of the Allied military in the concentration camps. In January 1946, for example, the former Mauthausen inmate Maurice Lampe reported on how 400 Soviet and some 70 American, British and Dutch officers had been murdered in extremely cruel manner in the quarries. A historical exhibition staged in Clermond-Ferrand, France in 1946/47 mirrors the extent of the power wielded by the Communist organizations after the war in dictating how the circumstances surrounding the crimes against humanity were to be interpreted. In order to underscore its exclusive claim to historical truth and authenticity, the Fédération nationale des déportés et internés résistants et patriotes (FNDIRP) had replicas of (among other things) the Buchenwald gate building, crematorium and an inmates’ barrack constructed especially for the show. As Philipp Neumann-Thein observes, the visitors would thus not only be granted an opportunity to empathize with the inmates’ suffering, but would also serve to “support their stylization as martyrs and heroes, who, even if they had suffered, had ultimately retaliated and triumphed.”

Nevertheless, the fact that doubt would soon be cast on the activities of the Communist camp resistance was already foreseeable at the end of the war. For one thing, as early as December 1945 the American occupying power arrested three former inmate functionaries in preparation for the later Buchenwald Trial in Dachau. What is more, attacks against prominent survivors holding French Communist party membership cards also began to grow fiercer at around this time. The associations’ leaderships sought to arm themselves against these attacks by continuing the efforts to canonize the Communist resistance narrative, but also by calling on their members to attest the good character of the comrades under suspicion. In the long run, counter-strategies of this kind naturally could not prevent the ever-widening dichotomy between the Eastern and the Western-oriented perception of the Nazi concentration camp system and the ambiguous role of the Communist inmate functionaries within it. Yet even if, in view of the looming Cold War, this development ultimately appeared inevitable, the targeted politicization pursued on both sides decisively accelerated the loss of credibility of the early post-war testimony to Nazi crimes.
III. From the courtroom to a media-enhanced culture of remembrance

Some time ago, the Israeli historian José Brunner pointed out that witnesses are always “part of an institution” that dictate their words and actions.21 This observation implies that, as society’s institutions change, so do the forms and functions of witness-bearing. Precisely this process got underway in the early 1960s when the antagonism of the Cold War began to soften and the history of the war – which in many post-war societies had been a factor inhibiting peaceable international and economic cooperation – now returned to the agenda. Two decisive barriers that, ten years earlier, had prevented the consolidation of the witnesses with regard to remembrance policy had thus been overcome.

Of all the institutions facilitating the gradual rise in the social status of the witness, the judiciary made by far the most important contribution, but the growing influence of psychiatry and the emergence of a new trauma discourse also bore an impact. To a decisive degree, this process was triggered by the second wave of Nazi trials conducted at the behest of dedicated individuals: criminal prosecutors and victim activists. The most important court proceeding was undoubtedly the 1961 Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem, which played a key role in creating the conditions for the development of a victim-oriented conception of witness-bearing. More than a hundred Holocaust survivors were chosen to appear in court, where they were questioned as to their experiences. It was by these means that the Israeli prosecuting authority sought to link the genocide of the European Jews – which until that time, in the words of chief prosecutor Gideon Hausner, had remained a “fantastic, unbelievable apparition” in the minds of many contemporaries – with individual human beings and their feelings.22 In terms of remembrance culture, one lasting effect of the trial was the fact that the survivors – who now came into view as a great imaginary collective – became conveyors of a traumatic history. Virtually overnight, they became “embodiments of memory”, to quote Annette Wieviorka, of whom it was expected that, with their memories, they would bear witness to a version of history with which even those persons who did not share the same past could identify.23

If in a somewhat less spectacular form, the major Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–65) sparked similar public response. Although in concept and realization these proceedings differed strongly from the Jerusalem trial, Hessian State Attorney General Fritz Bauer likewise banked on the victims among the witnesses, whose testimonies he hoped would have a cathartic effect on the entire society. Yet whereas the media gave broad scope to the reports of former Auschwitz inmates, a large proportion of the West German population now avoided confrontation with the Nazi crimes to a greater extent than ever. In the long run, however, the trial did spark a turnaround in the remembrance culture of the Federal Republic of Germany. This was manifest, for example, in the fact that survivors such as Hermann Langbein abruptly became much sought-after interview partners for the major opinion-forming media as well as political education institutions. Not all victims of Nazi persecution dealt equally well with this new social role of the witness, which in the perception of Katharina Stengel was tantamount to a certain “reduction”.24 Those of them who had joined to form inmate associations after the war claimed comprehensive testimonial competence for themselves, encompassing not only the role of witnesses in court, but also that of the contemporary witness and even that of the witness-bearing historian. The increasing professionalization of contemporary history

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17 “Buchenwald-Schwur” (“The Oath of Buchenwald”), 19 April 1945; facsimile of German original reprinted in Neumann-Thein 2014 (see note 8), p. 75.
18 Neumann-Thein 2014 (see note 8), p. 106.
20 Neumann-Thein 2014 (see note 8), p. 93.
21 Brunner 2012 (see note 4), p. 95.
23 Ibid., p. 391.
and the emergence of a historiography of the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany gradually brought about a change in this state of affairs. Now there was an increasing division of labour between surviving “Zeitzeugen” and historians. Yet whereas the voices of the Nazi victims now became “more audible than before – not least importantly the voices of those groups of persecution victims previously overheard entirely …, their memories and accounts no longer possessed the same claim to contemporary-historical explanation that they had in the initial years”.

For many, it came as a surprise when, in the late 1970s, a process got underway that is described in hindsight as a recodification of the contemporary witness that ushered in a boom in the popularity of this role. Even if there were isolated signs of a cautious loosening of the heroic Communist resistance narrative in the Eastern bloc countries, this development was for the most part confined to the West. It had been triggered on the one hand by a growing interest in the marginalized and subaltern voices of history, for example those of colonized populations, women, and the “forgotten” victims of National Socialism. On the other hand, this period was distinguished by a more emotionalized approach to contemplating the past and a new form of historicism that gave fresh impetus to the biographical and autobiographical genre in the Federal Republic of Germany and elsewhere. The decisive factor, however, was the dawning of the digital age, complete with all manner of new technical possibilities. It was no coincidence, for example, that the first major video documentation project, presented to the American and international public in Yale in 1982 as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, was carried out only a few years after U.S. television had broadcast the series Holocaust. This phenomenon is even more tangible in the case of Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Visual History Foundation, which he founded in 1994 in response to the overwhelming success of his movie Schindler’s List. The Spielberg foundation and other institutions were not only expressions of society’s heightened desire for authenticity and identification with the victims of mass violence, but they also contributed, conversely, to a substantial redefinition of the term “contemporary witness”. This was because, on the one hand, against the background of their gradual extinction, such witnesses rose immensely in the public esteem. On the other hand, however, they rapidly mutated into artificial media figures who reproduced themselves in the form of “secondary witnesses”. Yet the much sought-after twenty-first-century contemporary witnesses must pay a high price for their hardly foreseeable move up the social ladder: today the emancipatory potential of their recollections is frequently concealed by history formats whose smooth and shiny narrative style deflect from the fact that these witnesses often have no more than very banal messages to convey to their publics.

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26 Sabrow 2012 (see note 3), p. 27.