Review: “Many things I cannot tell, many things I am not allowed to tell, and many things I am ashamed to tell.” Children’s Early Holocaust Testimonies, 1944-1948

***Alexander Freund**, University of Winnipeg*

Feliks Tych, Alfons Kenkmann, Elisabeth Kohlhaas, Andreas Eberhardt (eds.), *Kinder über den Holocaust. Frühe Zeugnisse 1944-1948*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2008. ISBN 978-3-938690-08-6.

How did children survive the Holocaust? Oral history interviews conducted since the 1980s have provided most of the answers so far. The book *Kinder über den Holocaust* [Children About the Holocaust] presents a different, remarkable source. From 1944 until 1948, the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland interviewed Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Poland. They did not audio tape the interviews. Rather, the interviewers wrote protocols of the interviews immediately after talking to the survivors. Among the 7,300 interview protocols are several hundred interviews with children.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one includes a preface, a short essay by Feliks Tych, and an extensive introduction by Alfons Kenkmann and Elisabeth Kohlhaas. The introduction provides a historical and methodological context for the interviews. It describes the kinds of experiences children had with “stations” of survival (e.g. ghettos, Catholic Polish families’ homes, hiding in the forest), with helpers and saviours, with enemies and persecutors, and more generally, their experiences under persecution and after liberation. It also describes how the interview protocols came to be, how the Commission worked, what instructions it gave to interviewers, and who the children were. Finally, it explains how the protocols published in this book were selected and translated. Part two contains the protocols of interviews with 55 children. This is the main body of the book. The protocols are arranged in alphabetical order by the children’s last names. The third part is the book’s valuable appendix that includes the interview instructions and guide, maps, some facsimiles of type-written and hand-written protocols, a useful glossary, and an index.

As the authors of the introduction explain, children’s survival was the exception, their murder the rule (16). Prewar Poland counted one million Jewish children up to the age of 14 - 5,000 survived. Children’s survival depended on where they were at a certain time, i.e. the German or Soviet occupied part. Jewish children were more likely to survive if their looks and language skills allowed them to pass as Polish Catholics. Their young bodies had to bear heavy work,

hunger, and illness. Their young minds had to cope with witnessing the murder of people, including their parents and siblings. Their young souls had to carry the burden of having committed brutally selfish acts (e.g. the betrayal of friends) in order to survive. Only those strong enough to stand up to these pressures lived to be liberated by the Red Army. Even then, often it was simply chance that children survived.

The interview protocols, the editors explain, also give us detailed insight into the complex actions and motivations of "helpers" - Poles, Ukrainians, and Germans who hid, protected, supported and helped Jews in diverse ways. Furthermore, we learn about the German, Polish and Ukrainian "enemies" and persecutors. Finally, the interview protocols document children's lives after their liberation by the Red Army. Anti-Semitism and pogroms in postwar Poland, the loss of relatives, the physical and psychic consequences of hiding in the forest or in small spaces for months and years, and deep identity conflicts for those who had lived as Catholics for many years continued to endanger the children's lives. But a few children also told the interviewers of their dreams and wishes for the future. The children hoped to find some normality again, be it through education or emigration to relatives abroad.

This book is not the first publication of these testimonies. The Central Jewish Historical Commission had collected them both as evidence for war crimes trials and to commemorate the murder of three million Polish Jews. It published the first volume of protocols in Poland in March 1946. Thirty-six other volumes were published, most in Polish, a few in Yiddish. The editors state that the original protocols were not accessible to researchers "for two generations," but it is unclear why and when they were made accessible again. While these sources would not have been accessible to Western researchers until 1990, there is no indication why East European researchers would not have used them. Nevertheless, this is the first new edition of protocols with children and it is the first in German.

The interview protocols are not unique. Similar interviews were conducted in other countries immediately after the war, for example, those by the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Munich (available at Yad Vashem); by a Polish institute in Lund, Sweden with 500 survivors, mostly from Ravensbrück concentration camp (http://www3.ub.lu.se/ravensbruck/index_eng.html and http://www.ub.lu.se/projects/the-ravensbr-ck-archives); and by the American psychologist David P. Boder, who interviewed and tape recorded more than 100 survivors in Displaced Persons camps in Western Europe (http://voices.iit.edu). The Polish collection, however, is by far the largest and earliest, with the first interview dated 2 September 1944. It includes 429 interviews with children, mostly in Polish (80%) as well as Yiddish, German and Russian (some 600 of the total of 7,300 have been translated into English). Copies of the collection are

available at Yad Vashem and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.[1]

The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland developed a 16-page guide for the interviewing of children, which included methodological instructions and an extensive interview guide that allowed interviewers to conduct a semi-structured, open interview. The interviewers were instructed to encourage the children to narrate extensively, openly, and honestly. Empathy and sympathy were to be expressed through their "words and gestures." Building trust was seen as crucial. Interviewers were instructed to take extensive notes during the interviews and to write a first draft on the basis of the notes and their memory. In a second draft, they ordered the testimony chronologically and thematically. (Apparently, the extensive notes and first drafts were not collected). Interviewers were asked to include many verbatim quotes. The interviews with the children were not conducted in order to collect detailed factual information, but rather to document the psychic impact of the atrocities. Indeed, the Commission saw the interviews as a psychoanalytic form of therapy and as a means of diagnosing mental problems. They were to provide guidance to pedagogues for the education of Jewish youth. All of this tells us something about the theoretical approach to the interviews.

There is less information, however, about the application of this theory. It is unclear how the children were selected. The book editors argue that accessibility was an important criterion, which would explain why there were more interviews with children in orphanages and other institutions than with children in families. There is detailed information about the children's age (all were born between 1929 and 1939), their sex (52% were girls), and their social background. But we have no direct information about the interviewers and little information about the children's feelings during the interviews. Clearly, talking about their experiences was difficult for both, the children and the interviewers. In some cases, interviewers noted that children cried when recalling particularly painful experiences; sometimes they had to stop the interview. A 15-year-old anonymous girl told the interviewer right at the beginning of the interview: "Many things I cannot tell, many things I am not allowed to tell, and many things I am ashamed to tell" (53). Interviewers reported that several children could barely speak. Sometimes, interviewers were so troubled by what they heard that they had to break off the interview.

Much of this emotion, however, is lost or suppressed in the protocols. Interviewers were asked to standardize their protocols. As the book editors note, many protocols therefore read like court evidence, but there is a diversity of style that depended on the interviewer. The interviewers did not always follow the Commission's instructions. Questions about children's games and songs, for example, were seen as particularly important but seldom asked (55). The book

editors also explain that interviewers most likely added facts such as perpetrators' names and positions, dates of events, or the number of murdered Jews during specific *Aktionen*. They conclude: "The told survival story may not always correspond completely with the real survival story" because children may have changed them during the interviews for various reasons (56).

The editors try to locate these sources in the context of oral history. Here, they seemed to part ways. In his short essay "Why Children?" Feliks Tych describes the protocols as "credible first-hand information that were put down in writing shortly after the events that are described, when the memory of the war years and the extermination were still fresh and unaltered" (11). This characterization is not unproblematic. The accounts are certainly based on first-hand *information*, but they are second-hand *accounts*, because they were written up by adults who interviewed the children. This second-hand character is clearly visible in the protocols, as Kenkmann and Kohlhaas note in their introduction. In addition, several signposts make the second-hand character of the source visible. First, their length: The protocols are seldom more than five pages; transcripts would be much lengthier, despite the fact that interviews were to be kept short in order not to tire out the children. Second, the protocols' narrative structure: What must have often been fragmented bits and pieces of stories, single words, and gestures were condensed into coherent narratives.[2] Third, the protocols' content: there are too many facts in these accounts that four- and ten-year-olds could not have known let alone remembered. Fourth, the protocols' language: Some interviewers wrote in officious language as if they were preparing a court document; others were more effective at catching the children's expression. Fifth, despite extensive note-taking (if the instructions were followed), the interviewers' own experiences, attitudes, and values filtered what they heard and consequently wrote.

Furthermore, Tych's idea that memory is "fresh and unaltered" shortly after an event is also problematic. Memory is malleable. It can be manipulated, changed, even erased and implanted within minutes of an event, as the work of Elizabeth Loftus has shown. This is particularly true of traumatic memories.[3] The idea that there is an original memory that deteriorates later is misleading. Memory is a continuous process of making sense. It is constantly renegotiated as we go through life. The major difference between memory shortly after an event and a long time after an event is that of narrative cohesion. Fred Allison has shown this in the case of a Vietnam veteran who was interviewed within days of a battle and again decades later.[4] In the first interview, the story was incoherent, fragmented, full of details, told in detached, military language. The second interview produced a coherent narrative that was told with the purpose of making sense. In the first interview, the soldier had not yet made sense of anything, in the second interview

he had. His memory had not deteriorated; rather, he had found different ways of remembering this experience and integrating it into the life he was living.[5]

None of this invalidates the sources. Like all sources, they are socially constructed and need to be deconstructed or interpreted to get at their many different layers of meaning. The children's experiences and memories clearly shine through the adult interviewers' narrative constructions. But we have to read them critically and contextually to distinguish the different voices that speak through them. Oral history can help read such sources. Indeed, Kenkmann and Kohlhaas are at pains to relate the interviews to oral history. They characterize the protocols "as an early oral history project" but qualify this: they are not "fully" oral history but have a "double character;" they are a "mixed form between oral and written transmission. They are not pure ego-documents" (59). Rather, they are "written sources that are based on an oral interview and that they integrate to a large degree" (60).

All attempts to define these sources are useful to some degree. The crux of this kind of source, however, is that any interpretation must take into consideration the "interviewers' decisive influence on the textual document" (60). Unfortunately, the editors do not pursue this idea by showing, for example, how oral historians have struggled with and developed approaches to the interviewer's impact on the stories told. Moreover, even though the editors acknowledge that the children's stories were "certainly shaped by their distraught mental state" (60) they do not point readers unfamiliar with this research field to the vast literature on trauma and memory. Instead, they simply note that the impact of these factors on the interviews "cannot be easily assessed" (60).

In order to evaluate the interviewers' influence, more information about the interviewers would be useful. We learn from the original instructions that interviews with children in institutions were to be conducted by the adults looking after them. It seems also likely then that these interviewers had no training in interviewing. How carefully they read the guide or used the questionnaire is unclear. They knew the children, but whether they had their trust is open to speculation. They may have had a poor relationship or decided to interview only their favourites. They certainly brought a host of views about a certain child to an interview that coloured their protocol. If the interviewers were not professionals, they may not have always had the opportunity to write up the notes immediately after the interview. Indeed, some members of the Commission were critical of this interview method. Cohen reports:

> [Rachel] Auerbach, one of the leading figures in the Commission and later the founder and director of the Department for the Collection of Testimonies at Yad Vashem in Israel, described in detail the system used in interviews and its problematic character. She recounted that "the witness was retelling his experiences and the interviewer was, from time

> to time, reformulating the testimony in his own words and summarizing it. In this way, some unique personal characteristics of style and language would be lost." Moreover, the witness had to be stopped occasionally in order for the interviewer to write down what he heard. These pauses, she claimed, "exhausted the … tension, dramatic energy, and narrative" of the testimony. She wrote that more than once she felt that stopping the witness from talking was a "barbaric act."[6]

As difficult as it is to assess an interviewer's influence on an interview, addressing this issue would have been a useful help for readers unfamiliar with oral history or other qualitative interviewing methods.

The main body of this book is, of course, the interview protocols. They were selected because they were expressive, documented the diversity of experiences, and were representative of the whole collection. Much has already been said about them in this review. As one reads through them, one is struck by the dissonance between their subtle, at times officious, subdued, almost always un-dramatic tone and the horrific events they describe. The form of a coherent story and its chronological order appear to create meaning; the adults' language smoothes over the painful process of remembering and telling, closes all gaps and silences, and glosses over the speechlessness and incomprehension that must have characterized many of these interviews. The protocols focus on facts rather than feelings. In story after story, children recall in simple descriptions the murder of their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. Seldom is there any sense of how and what they felt, even though the interview instructions specifically asked the interviewers to concentrate on feelings rather than facts.

Silences run through the interviews. Jakub Michlewicz, born 1929 in Warsaw, lost his parents and five siblings. In his extensive interview, this experience was apparently not touched on, at least it is not visible in the protocol. Hanka Grynberg, born in 1931, simply noted that when she was at her aunt's, she "found out that my parents had starved to death" (136). Sometimes, emotions were expressed more clearly: Together with other boys, Jakub smuggled cigarettes in order to survive. Once they were hiding from the police in a field. Jakub was the only Jewish boy, all others were Catholic Poles. He told the interviewer: "The other boys were frightened, but I shook because I knew that the police would not simply beat me up like the other boys, but would find out who I was and that would be the end" (194). Later, he joined partisans, fought against the Germans, was wounded, eventually arrested and put into a camp where he had to hide that he was Jewish. This was difficult, because they were continually registered. Of one registration he said: "Again I was afraid that they would check whether my information was correct. I was so terrified that I forgot my mother's first and last name, only after a while did I recall. They immediately asked

whether I was of mosaic faith. I denied this. I was terribly afraid, I was convinced that I would not survive this" (196).

Szepsel Griner, born in 1938 or 1939, told an interviewer in 1947 about his time in hiding at a Polish woman's home. His parents and older siblings hid somewhere else but were discovered and deported. Only his father could escape from the camp, all others were murdered.

> Dad came to me and told me everything. At first he did not want to talk about it, but I saw that he was so sad and I cried constantly that I wanted to go to mom. Then he told me everything. […] Dad brought be a [gun] revolver, a harmonica, and other toys. I played harmonica the whole day. […] At night I often cried. I was so sad, I wanted so much to have one of my relatives with me. I had lost all appetite, and the food I got was very poor. Dad did not come to me for a long time. Then I understood that the Germans had killed him too. Once I sat in the house and looked out of a window. I saw many Jews with children being led away. Some did not have hands. I don't know where they were brought. I was always feeling like crying, but I cried only when no one was home or at night. Later, the Russians dropped bombs and soon they came to us. Then I got better food, but I still did not want to eat" (130-131).

These were the experiences of a three- to seven-year-old, told when he was eight. It is a wonder that such experiences could be put into any words at all.

If we consider that the protocols were the results of deeply emotional talks in which children and adults together tried to put into words experiences that to this day are often called "unspeakable," we may understand these interviews not only as children's testimony. We may see them as a conversation among Holocaust survivors (most interviewers themselves were survivors) immediately after the war. As Cohen reminds us, this runs counter to the common perception that survivors began to talk about their experiences only in the 1960s. There was, nevertheless, indeed a silence in the 1950s that extinguished this international attempt at comprehension begun in the 1940s. It is telling that none of these documents have been published in German until now, and it is telling that very few were published in English and then only in the 1990s. The children who survived the Holocaust were able and willing to talk about their experiences. Were adults around the world able and willing to listen?

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[1] For further information about the different projects, see Boaz Cohen, "The Children's Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21/1 (Spring 2007): 73–95.

[2] A moving example of an incoherent story is Boder's interview with Polia Bisenhaus, available at http://voices.iit.edu/interview.html.

[3] A useful synthesis of this memory research is provided by Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching For Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

[4] Fred H. Allison, "Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives over Time," *Oral History Review* 31/2 (Summer-Autumn 2004): 69-83

[5] Dori Laub and Johanna Bodenstab found a similar development when in 2005-6 they reinterviewed Holocaust survivors they had originally interviewed around 1980. "Wiederbefragt. Erneute Begegnung Mit Holocaust-Uberlebenden Nach 25 Jahren," *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 20/2 (2007): 303-15.

[6] Rachel Auerbach, "Mekorot u'drachim hadashim l'geviyat eduyot" ("New Ways and Methods for Taking Testimonies"), *Yediot Yad Vashem* no. 2, 29 July 1954, cited in Cohen, "Children's Voice," 77.