Afterword

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The editors of this special issue of the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* on "Confronting Mass Atrocities" asked me to contribute an Afterword in part because of my thirty-five years interviewing, teaching, and writing about Holocaust survivors. I am honored by the opportunity. Interestingly, what I believe most noteworthy are the *differences* between the work represented here and most of the oral history done in the context of the Holocaust. It is not surprising that radically different histories, political, and geographic circumstances, would raise different challenges and methods. But it is worth noting some of these, both to highlight the complexity and contingency of oral history itself, and to consider what wider questions may emerge precisely through such juxtaposition.

The history of the Holocaust is well documented. Indeed, given both the range of archival sources and more than 100,000 personal memoirs and recorded testimonies, there may be no historical event that is better documented.[1] Of course, that does not mean Holocaust historiography does not continue to evolve. In recent years, new research has identified camps, ghettos, and sites of mass killing that we had not known existed.[2] There has been a general "eastward" shift in Holocaust studies, with greater emphasis on the Holocaust in Ukraine and Belarus.[3] And there has never been a shortage of contested narratives in Holocaust studies, particularly concerning how to represent the range of "victim groups"—Jews, Poles, Roma, Soviet POWs, and others—and the relationships between their histories during the destruction.[4]

All of that said, none of the debates in Holocaust historiography compare with the situations that Roosa and Pohlman describe in Indonesia. Even five decades later, the history of the massacres of 1965-66 remains largely hidden under officially sponsored fabrication, obfuscation, and continuing threat. Roosa pungently notes that the events are "so poorly understood" that researchers "have hardly known what to look for." Rather than being able to rely on oral history's

[1] Henry Greenspan, "Survivors Accounts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 414-27.
[2] Eric Lichtblau, "The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking," *New York Times*, 1 March 2013, 3.
[3] See especially, Tim Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
[4] Particularly well known are conflicts over representation at the Auschwitz site. Prior to the fall of Communism, the Jewish experience was restricted to a display in a single barrack. The camp, in general, was a memorial to the "victims of fascism," similar to the ways the Holocaust was represented throughout the Soviet bloc.

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familiar distinction between history and memory—what actually happened relative to what people remember—Roosa writes that in Indonesia "historians can hardly distinguish between remembering and misrembering." Instead, historians and others search for pieces of a puzzle that may never be complete. Every source—archival, oral, and material—must be weighed against others. Micro and macro perspectives are needed to inform each other. A few basic patterns, such as typical killing procedures, can facilitate learning more—just as the identification of certain bullet casings, long buried, has helped locate otherwise unknown mass graves in recent investigations of the Holocaust in Ukraine.[5] It is long-term, complex work. Roosa emphasizes that interviewing alone—without exquisite sensitivity to contingency, pervasive disinformation, and fear—may not yield much.

Pohlman adds to this complexity by reminding us that the threat of violence is not over in Indonesia. Even with the political changes that have taken place, researchers generally work with small groups of survivors, against the background of neighbours who may or may not be trustworthy, and, at times, the arrival of police from whom garnered documentation must be concealed. Reading Pohlman, one gets the sense that in Indonesia distance from the 1960s atrocities is more spatial than temporal—places avoided or visited at risk and remembered mainly in private. The past is "not even past" in a more literal sense than Faulkner intended.

In a different sense, the past is also not past in Rwanda and the wider Great Lakes region. Aside from pogroms following liberation, most famously in Kielce, and the continuing blight of Holocaust denial, the Holocaust as event is over. The violence that that reached horrific apotheosis during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is far from over. It persists most obviously in the Congo wars—but also in the continuing anxiety over potentially renewed violence in Rwanda itself. Of course, the situation remains quite different from Indonesia. On the official level, memorials, formal programs of remembrance, and the contested history of post-conflict justice and reconciliation are all actual in Rwanda. As both Bouka and Lynch emphasize, within Rwanda's borders, it is in the wars between narratives—representing diverse content, speakers, and forms (from formal testimony to whispered asides to poetic suggestion)—where unresolved conflict mainly plays out. These articles suggest that, for many Rwandan Tutsi, Hutu, Twa, and the large number who carry more complex political identities and affiliations, precisely *who* might seek "reconciliation," *what* is being remembered, and how the relevant "stories" (if they even *are* "stories") ought to be retold are anything but resolved.

[5] See Patrick Dubois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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Beyond war crimes trials and various material reparations and claims for reparation that continue, there is essentially nothing in Holocaust history that is comparable to any version of reconciliation as understood in Rwanda. The majority of survivors in western and central Europe left the continent within five years after the liberation. Soviet Jews, in large numbers, left later. Those who remain—Roma as well as Jews—continue to struggle at times; and, at some times, struggle severely. But reconciliation as aspired to in Rwanda, South Africa, or other post-conflict nations is a not an issue in the Holocaust context.

Needless to say, all of these differences impact the ways oral accounts are gathered and engaged. Roosa, Pohlman, Bouka, and Lynch all spent months or more in Indonesia and Rwanda. Their projects are sustained immersions in ethnography, multiple conversations, and reliance on key contacts and informants. Their work is on site—and sometimes in search *of* site. By contrast, the vast majority of Holocaust survivor accounts were gathered in single interviews, recorded in video studios or in survivors' living rooms, far removed from the events recalled. Here, as always, there are exceptions. Accounts collected during the Holocaust—most famously in the secret archive organized by Ringelblum and his colleagues in Warsaw[6]—and by the historical commissions in Europe soon after liberation,[7] bear some resemblance to the work *within* sites of mass violence represented in this issue. But this is not what Holocaust "testimony" (the word was rarely used in the early Holocaust projects[8]) has come to mean: a highly performative and specific genre of retelling, now so culturally institutionalized that it is hard for many even to imagine alternative models.

As someone who has spent decades pursuing an alternative model for engaging Holocaust survivors—one founded in multiple interviews and sustained acquaintance over years—the work represented in this issue is particularly evocative for me. For example, Lynch's vivid depiction of the differences between the genre of retelling Mudende solicited by the UNHRC, and the quite different ways survivors retell the same history with Lynch and with each other, was reminiscent of the differences I have found between survivors' recounting in formal Holocaust "testimony" and in the more intimate space of sustained

[6] The best source is Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Vintage, 2009).
[7] Here the best source is Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[8] For example, in his study of David Boder's 1946 project, often represented as the ancestor of much later projects devoted to electronically recording Holocaust survivor accounts, Alan Rosen notes that Boder "did not use the term *'testimony'* [italics in original], but rather referred to the DP interviews as narratives, reports, personal histories and documents, stories, and even 'tales'." Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

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conversation.[9] The Roundtable discussion of trauma and narrative (to which I will soon turn) organized by Kilburn and colleagues includes a related example shared by Rothermel and initially noted by Finley (note 38): veterans who began carrying blankets to their narrative counseling sessions "because of a typo in official literature that a sign of PTSD was carrying 'survivor quilt.'" This, indeed, is "co-construction" with a vengeance, and an example of the power of narratives underwritten by officialdom to shape not only actors' lines but also their props. It is also a reminder that invoking "co-construction" may mean a host of very different things. We often need much finer-grained analysis to most usefully understand the "dialogic space" within which retelling takes form.

It is also worth noting that even in the Holocaust context, the distinction between memory and history—and the role of interviewing related to each—is often not obvious. In his ongoing study of a resistance movement in Buchenwald, my colleague Ken Waltzer interviewed two survivors who remembered being on a transport from Buchenwald to Theresienstadt. The Germans kept extremely reliable records of such transports, and neither survivor was listed. Waltzer was tempted to speculate about why they might have "misremembered" this episode until one of the survivors asked whether a different name was listed. Indeed, it was. It turned out that both he and his brother had taken on other names during this phase of their ordeal—a tactic that had survival value—and they were so recorded on the transport. This was one of many instances Waltzer has found in which seeming discrepancies between archived documents and oral accounts led, not to richer analysis of subjectivity, but to new historical knowledge: here, about the prevalence of name-changing during the Holocaust. That information led, in turn, to additional insight about the history of Buchenwald and about patterns in resistance more generally.[10]

For me, the lesson of all of this is renewed appreciation for the complexity and continuing evolution of oral historical work. The articles in this issue problematize virtually every organizing construct in our practice: the memory/history distinction; the line between past and present; the actual meaning of "co-construction" and similar terms; the designation (by whom?) of official narrative and counter-narratives; the meaning of "narrative" itself in light the multiple genres through which past and present (themselves not always distinguishable) are retold.

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[9] Those differences are most fully elucidated in Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, 2nd edn. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2010). A more concise iteration of the argument is in Henry Greenspan, "Collaborative Interpretation of Survivors' Accounts: A Radical Challenge to Conventional Practice," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 17, no. 1 (2011): 85-100.

[10] Described by Waltzer in a presentation at the University of Michigan, 18 November 2013.

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So also the relationship between narrative and trauma, the topic of the multidisciplinary forum that concludes the articles in this issue. While the primary, but not exclusive, focus here is on combat veterans, these issues are certainly ones in which there has also been a great deal of discussion in the context of Holocaust and other genocide survivors, their memories, and their retelling. Here, I will touch only on a handful. There is not the space to go further, and I understand that a future issue of the *Oral History Forum* will develop these questions.

Above all, there is again the issue of complexity. Not surprising in a multidisciplinary forum attempting to connect several conceptual levels, neither "trauma" nor "narrative" are themselves defined in any consistent way. There is nothing unusual about that; they are very rarely consistently defined! "Trauma," for example, can mean everything from that which yields a constellation of "PTSD" symptoms to virtually any events that may equally be termed shocking, horrific, or catastrophic. Regarding the former, no constellation of symptoms arises independent of individual life-histories and multi-faceted social and cultural contexts—and that is true no matter how "overwhelming" an event or situation is presumed to be.[11] Shamai Davidson, whose psychiatric writing about Holocaust survivors continues to be among the most nuanced ever done, concluded that concepts of psychopathology and clinical psychiatry in this area were of "limited significance" at best. Instead, Davidson argued that "the only satisfactory approach" to understanding trauma in Holocaust survivors would be detailed "longitudinal studies" of the lives of individual survivors, including the evolving and specific roles of family, community, peer groups, political culture, and much more.[12] Work like that with Holocaust survivors essentially never happened and now, of course, never will. But there is no reason to suppose that understanding psychic trauma among combat veterans or other traumatized people requires any less sustained and differentiated an approach.

Regarding the relationship between trauma and narrative, one fascinating aspect of the forum is the movement from suggesting that narrative retelling can contribute to healing, or at least ameliorating, trauma, to Kilburn's argument that some narratives—above all, highly politicized ones—are part of what *leads to* trauma, for both individuals and collectivities. "A compelling story, it seems, trumps inconvenient truth." Of course, there is no inherent contradiction; life is at least that complicated. Kilburn also suggests that, ideally, "politicians can work to restore narrative coherence and rebuild legitimacy." Among many other questions, one wonders: How is this different from endorsing democratic process

[11] Compare with Sean Field, *Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[12] Shamai Davidson, *Holding on to Humanity: The Message of Holocaust Survivors*, ed. Israel Charny (New York University Press, 1992), 77-78.

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more generally? Is it obvious what policies lack "narrative coherence"? The ongoing debates about drone strikes, Gitmo, Afghanistan, and even Vietnam suggest that the "coherence" of a narrative is largely in the mind of its recipient or proponent. As Kilburn suggests, what is most important is not this or that narrative per se, but processes of civic engagement in which they can be engaged and, as participants choose, critiqued.

Returning to trauma on the level of individuals, similar questions arise about our own "compelling stories" about trauma and narrative themselves.Sharma, for example, suggests that trauma leaves its victims "unable to forget, therefore unable to recount, much less able to testify." How, then, do we understand the tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors who have, indeed, recounted and testified? Of course, not all have chosen or been able to do so—in my experience, for a wide range of reasons of which "trauma" is only one.[13] But survivors like Jean Amery or Charlotte Delbo—whose descriptions of torture, degradation, and worse would be depictions of "trauma" if anything is—have provided some of the most important accounts we have, including reflection on trauma itself.[14] There is clearly more to understand. Is the real challenge retelling itself or retelling with emotion—"intellectual memory" or "memory of the senses," as Delbo suggests? Is the construction of narrative *primarily* in the service of "integrating" the self or being able to provide a coherent account for listeners? That is, do survivors seek *mainly* to be whole or to be heard (understanding that most, of course, seek both)? I often cite Leon, a survivor of Auschwitz and other camps, who provided this description of what he remembers and what he retells: "It is *not* a story. It has to be *made* a story, in order to convey

[13] Other reasons include: The memory is too intimate and potentially humiliating (often true of sexual experiences but during and after the destruction); memories that are inherently incommunicable such as certain smells, sounds, or other sensory experiences (not necessarily traumatic); the survivor judges that the memory does not "fit" listeners' expectations about what the Holocaust was "supposed to be like" (this is often true for memories which are *not* traumatic but, paradoxically, strangely positive in context); the memory does not seem to have any wider context, and feels "trivial" or "beside the point" (in such cases, a well-informed historian may *provide* survivors with such context, thus eliciting memories that would never have been otherwise retold); the survivor is protecting others' feelings and reputation, anticipating those others' or their families' reactions; the survivor fears a memory of personal agency will suggest that other victims, especially those who did not survive, "could have done more." The latter is one reason most survivors are so insistent on the central role of "luck"—which was certainly true, but not necessarily the entire truth.

[14] For Jean Amery, see especially *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Although he did not use the word "trauma," Amery's essay, "Torture," may be the single most informing first-person description of the phenomenology of trauma ever written. For Charlotte Delbo, see especially *Days and Memory*, trans. Rosette Lamont (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 2001). Delbo's description of the difference between "intellectual memory" and "memory of the senses," noted below, appears at the end of this essential volume.

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it. And with all the frustration that implies. Because at best, you compromise. You compromise."[15] Can survivors, particularly of genocide, ever retell more than such "compromises"? And, as survivors' listeners, might the most important thing be our learning not to mistake the "made story" for the "whole story"? That is, learning to share a version of survivors' own silences and the knowledge that no such narrative ever does more than point to a "not story" beyond itself.[16]

Allow me to end with a different kind of story. Not long ago, an undergraduate student came to my office hours. The student was not in one of my classes; she simply wanted to discuss some degree requirements (I am also an academic adviser). Glancing at my bookshelf, she noted, "I see you are interested in trauma." I mumbled agreement, but I was struck by her choice of words. She did not know I am a clinical psychologist. And when I looked at the spines of the books that she had perused, the word "trauma" did not appear on a single one of them. They were volumes on genocide, Nazi Germany, and a few specifically about the Holocaust. I keep most of my books at home.

So here was an undergraduate student, with no special background in the area, who chose "trauma" as the summary word for the history, not only of the Holocaust or Nazism, but of genocide as a whole. On one level, this was evidence, to me, of how all-inclusive notions of "trauma" have become. On another level, I was chilled. "Trauma," after all, almost always connotes an experience of *survivors*. However specifically defined, it is part of the burden of those who *live on*; who attempt (with whatever result) to retell; and whom we interview in order to understand their particular experiences, and more.

But if "trauma" has come to stand for the history of "mass atrocities" as wholes, even to subsume genocide as a whole, then there is also this: It makes all the dead people go away.

I find that troubling indeed.

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[15] Greenspan, *On Listening*, 3.

[16] The "not story" can includes many things, but, most essentially, it includes what Leon called an endless "landscape of death" and the "surreality" (his term) of being somehow alive within it. About that landscape, Leon noted: "Maybe a poet can evoke something approaching it. But even sound would be out of place. There is no sound actually. There is no sound. It would have to be a silent poem" (cited in Greenspan, *On Listening*, 28).

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