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Writing the Unspeakable: Language, Memory and Trauma
In *Survival in Auschwitz, Still Alive* and *Nightfather*

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Abstract

Writing the Unspeakable: Language, Memory and Trauma
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By Mikaela Janet Malsin

A theme of "incomprehensibility" pervades discourse surrounding the Holocaust. Despite the notion that the attempt to annihilate European Jewry has been deemed "unspeakable," many survivors have written accounts of the events they witnessed. This thesis explores the problems of language in relation to the Holocaust through the analysis of two memoirs by Holocaust survivors and one "post-memoir" by the daughter of a survivor: Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered,* and Carl Friedman's *Nightfather*. I analyze the ways in which each writer overcomes the problems of inexpressibility in order to tell his or her story.

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First Words

The concept of "unspeakability" dominates both scholarship and popular discourse on the Holocaust. From the time we first learn about the historical tragedy, we also discover that it has been considered an unthinkable, and thus inexpressible, event. As Naomi Mandel writes, the Holocaust is "commonly referred to as unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable, incomprehensible, and challenging (or forcing us to reestablish, or to rethink, or to acknowledge, or to probe) the 'limits of representation'" (Mandel 204). Although some scholars object to this construction of the genocide, there is no doubt that it permeates our collective understanding of these events.

The problem lies in the complex relationship between the concept of language and the nature of the event itself. Language is a uniquely human construct that we rely upon to chronicle and communicate the spectrum of human endeavors. Accordingly, "the inhuman—in the form of radical evil, infinite good, absolute beauty, or the utter alterity of the divine—poses a specific challenge to the potential of human conceptualization and hence to language" (Mandel 210). Thus, the crimes committed upon the Jewish people, and others deemed "unfit" by the Nazis, fall into the realm of the unspeakable because of their inhumanity. Our frames of reference simply cannot accommodate such brutality; we lack the necessary conceptual framework.

Another significant element of what makes the Holocaust unspeakable is the extent to which it is perceived as an instance of a *trauma*. As originally articulated by Sigmund Freud and commonly understood within the literature of psychoanalysis, a traumatic experience is one that "create[s] a breach in a protective covering of such

severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss" (Mitchell 121). One of the coping mechanisms with which trauma interferes is the ability to express the experience using narrative language (van der Kolk 176). Trauma evades language because it occurs "outside the parameters of 'normal' reality… outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery" (Felman and Laub 69). The Holocaust has frequently been described as an historical trauma, which casts into doubt the possibility of expressing, or even comprehending, the event. Furthermore, according to Shoshana Felman, the victim of such an extreme trauma "is *robbed of a language* with which to articulate his or her victimization" (Felman 125, emphasis in original). For the survivor, the "imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling" (Felman and Laub 79).

This conception of the Holocaust presents a nagging question: If the Holocaust is unspeakable, how have those who witnessed and lived through it managed to speak and to write about their experiences? For, as we know, many survivors of the Holocaust have written their stories; a casual estimate of such accounts numbers in the hundreds. Furthermore, the theme of unspeakability pervades not only secondary sources on the subject, but the survivors' narratives as well. Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate and author of the internationally acclaimed Holocaust memoir *Night*, has declared, "Auschwitz negates all systems, destroys all doctrines" (in Mandel, 204). Within many such memoirs, we find echoes of this sentiment.

In some way, then, writers who choose to document their experiences of the Holocaust must account for and overcome the problem of inexpressibility. The purpose of this thesis is to explore and analyze this theme in three particular accounts: Primo

Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive*, and Carl Friedman's *Nightfather*.

The works discussed here have been chosen, from among many possibilities, for a number of reasons. The first is that they all have both scholarly and literary value, an admittedly subjective judgment based on the quality of writing and the depth of analysis displayed by each. Secondly, each memoir deals with the experience of the concentration camp, which is generally considered the locus of the worst atrocities and most disturbing aspects of the Holocaust. Auschwitz, which has become a metonym for the experience of the concentration camps, appears in two of the works; the author of the third chooses not to name any specific camps at all, but "talks about 'the camp,' as if there had been just one," indicating that the horrors of the experience could be generalized to any of the camps (Friedman 1). Third, all three are written by Jewish authors. Although many other individuals were victimized and murdered in the Holocaust, the "Final Solution" was ultimately intended to eradicate the Jewish people, a fact that lends an especially "unthinkable" element to the experiences of those whose entire culture was threatened by the massacre.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, each of these works has been included for its distinctive approach to the question of inexpressibility and language in relation to the Holocaust. In the first, Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz,* we find a man driven by an overwhelming need to write about what he experienced in the Third Reich's most notorious concentration camp. Levi's greatest fear is the inability to tell others what happened, as symbolized by a recurring nightmare in which he tries to tell a group of people about Auschwitz, only to find himself ignored. Although Levi recognizes the

ways in which the experience falls beyond the limits of language, *Survival in Auschwitz* represents the decision to write *through* that difficulty. In fact, writing became Levi's life's work after the Holocaust, despite his background as a chemist who wrote nothing at all before Auschwitz. Levi's ceaseless efforts to document his experience demonstrate that Levi was determined to reclaim language from the threat of destruction by the concentration camps. I argue that this linguistic repossession plays a crucial role in the response of *Survival in Auschwitz* to the problem of ineffability, as well as in Levi's life during and after the war.

The second memoir, Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered,* is unique in its explicit acknowledgment of, and refusal to back away from, the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in discourse surrounding the Holocaust. Kluger encounters nearly every problem posed by the attempt to assimilate the Holocaust into our familiar language and schema, from the difficulty of finding the right words to describe something to the fear of discomforting her peers in a social setting by referring to her experiences in concentration camps. Unlike Levi, Kluger initially feels overwhelmed by the forces that act to silence her and make telling her story too difficult, until she unexpectedly returns to the trauma of the Holocaust while living in Germany. *Still Alive* demonstrates that the core of a Holocaust survivor's trauma lies in the shock of continued existence past an event that could easily have killed her. Kluger finds her place as a witness in the precipice between life and death.

The final work is Carl Friedman's *Nightfather*, which tells the story of a Holocaust survivor who talks about his experiences *ad nauseam*, despite the complexity involved in transmitting the ineffable. Friedman grew up learning every detail of her

father's life in the concentration camps from his endless stories and recollections, and she came to understand these memories as an integral part of her own identity – a concept known as *postmemory*. Although Jochel Friedman did not pen his own memoir, his daughter grew up to write a version of it for him, filtered through the lens of her own generation's experience and under the guise of a work of fiction. *Nightfather* demonstrates that both the memories and the problem of language after the Holocaust can be inherited, with effects reverberating to the present.

The issues raised here have significance that extends beyond the study of the Holocaust and its literary representations. At some point in their lives, most people encounter difficulty in finding exactly the right words to articulate an emotion, a thought, or an idea. When it comes to the Holocaust, we encounter this problem on a massive, systematic scale, suggesting that the capacity of language to capture human experience is more limited than we might think. The question, then, is whether the crisis of language suggested by the Holocaust endangers the very system that we rely upon to communicate with one another and to establish our place in the world. If so, we might need to re-think the faith that we place in language. This thesis will seek to evaluate this question on the basis of what the three selected texts seem to tell us about the problem of ineffability.

A discussion of language in relation to the Holocaust warrants a note on terminology. The word "Holocaust," which became the most common term for the Nazis' attempt to annihilate European Jewry after the war ended, has ancient Greek origins and refers to a "sacrificial offering" (United States Holocaust Museum). Speakers of Hebrew often use the word *Shoah*, which simply means "catastrophe" and avoids the connotations of an intentional or voluntary "offering." Many Yiddish speakers use the Hebrew term

Churban, which roughly translates to "total ruin" or "destruction," and was originally used to refer to the destruction of the First and Second Temples (Kruk xxiii). Each of these words carries its own baggage; I do not take a stance on the desirability of one over the others. This thesis will primarily use the term "Holocaust," as it remains the most common in the American context in which I write.

Chapter 1: Primo Levi: Writing As Survival

Primo Levi addresses the question of why he writes in the preface to *Survival in Auschwitz*. Although he was trained in the sciences and worked as a chemist both before and after World War II, Levi felt a vital imperative to write of his time in the concentration camp. He explains that he knew he intended to write a memoir while still at Auschwitz, and adds that many other prisoners felt the same way: "The need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs" (Levi 9). For Levi this urgency manifested itself, initially, in the form of the memoir *Se questo è un uomo* ("If This Is A Man"), which he began writing within months of his return home from the concentration camp, and which later became the English *Survival in Auschwitz* (Thomson 221). The book, originally published in 1947, is now one of the most highly acclaimed memoirs written by a survivor of the Holocaust.

Survival in Auschwitz deals intimately with the effect of the Holocaust on language, both within the concentration camps and after their eradication. At many points in the work, Levi expresses the difficulty of assimilating and describing the Shoah. *Survival in Auschwitz* demonstrates the ways in which the Holocaust facilitated a breakdown in language, and it also represents the power of Levi's ultimate reclamation of language, which he achieved through his writing.

It is important to note that *Survival in Auschwitz* functions not only as Levi's personal memoir, but also as a chronicle of the collective experience of Auschwitz. Philip

Lejeune defines autobiographical writing as that which is "written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" and that it is most often marked by "the use of the first person" (Lejeune 4, 5). Levi diverges from this form with his frequent use, as seen above, of plural rather than individual pronouns: unless referring to a particular interaction or to his own unique circumstances, such as his job as an assistant chemist in the Buna Werke laboratory, Levi's "I" becomes "we," "my" becomes "our," and "me" becomes "us." This linguistic choice underscores Levi's emphasis of the aspects of the Auschwitz experience that many others shared. The work thus differs from the standard memoir or autobiographical text in that Levi's concern is not primarily his own experience, but also that of the other prisoners in the concentration camps – both those who survived, and those who did not. At the same time, Levi's own experience does play a critical role in the work; it provides much of the content by which we see the day-to-day minutiae of Auschwitz, and it naturally informs Levi's perspective as he writes.

The first way in which *Survival in Auschwitz* suggests the linguistic problems created by the concentration camps can be found in Levi's particular use of the term *Lager* – not merely as a German referent for the English word 'camp,' but to denote a different world. Levi writes, "Many people… can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'… when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premiss in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager. Here is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion" (9). The Lager thus differs from the universe that we know; it signifies the manifestation of the dangerous, unbearable implications of Hitler's view of humanity. A survivor named

Yehiel Dinoor, a writer who testified at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, articulated in his deposition some of the radical differences between what he called "planet Auschwitz" and the rest of the world:

> Time there was different from what it is here on earth. Every split second ran on a different cycle of time. And the inhabitants of that planet had no names. They had neither parents nor children. They did not dress as we dress here. They were not born there nor did anyone give birth. Even their breathing was regulated by the laws of another nature. They did not live, nor did they die, in accordance with the laws of this world. (Felman 136)

These vast, impenetrable differences between "planet Auschwiz" and the world we know cause immense difficulty for the person attempting to tell the story of the experience. Yehiel Dinoor found this problem to be profound; he collapsed on the witness stand as he tried to describe Auschwitz, and specifically the experience of watching other prisoners walk toward their deaths in the crematoria: "They left me, they keep leaving me, left…for close to two years they left me and always left me behind…I see them… I saw them standing in line" (Felman 136). Dinoor fell into a paralytic stroke at this moment in his testimony, unable to bridge the expanse between Auschwitz and the world we live in. He was in a coma for two weeks, and would never complete this description of "the planet of Auschwitz." And yet, as the Israeli poet Haim Gouri writes, "In a way he had said everything" (in Felman, 137). The inability to speak makes a powerful statement of its own; this unfortunate collapse demonstrated vividly the

prisoners' experience of a breakdown in language and communication.

Although Levi's discussion of Auschwitz is slightly less explicit than Dinoor's in declaring it to be a different world, Levi does make clear that every facet of the Lager departs sharply from "what is here on earth." One of the most poignant points of divergence, and one that is highly relevant to the exploration of trauma and memory, comes in the realm of language. Levi writes that in his first days at Auschwitz – after the SS has taken away his and his fellow prisoners' clothes and shoes, shaved their heads, and forced them to go through "disinfecting" showers – he and the other prisoners look at each other and discover the unspeakable, dehumanizing truth of their lives in the camp: "Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (26). The experience of Auschwitz, which begins with the utter destruction of those things that Levi perceives as marking his and others' humanity, falls beyond the scope of existing language. Simultaneously, Levi discovers the unexpectedly tragic and horrifying possibilities within the language he already knows; he writes of this first day at Auschwitz, "It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term 'extermination camp', and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: 'to lie on the bottom'" (27). The phrase "extermination camp" is appropriate in multiple senses because the Lager both serves to murder people deliberately, through the use of the gas and other means, and to strip away so many essential facets of the prisoners' humanity that what constitutes "life" changes completely. The prisoners' lives are diminished in so many ways long before they stop breathing. Auschwitz thus concurrently contracts and expands Levi's understanding of what words can signify.

Later in the work, Levi again expresses the difficulty with language, this time with regard to the words that one would use to express more ordinary phenomena – words that fall short when it comes to describing life in the Lager:

> Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger,' we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer. (123)

To Levi, the lexicon that came before the Holocaust, which chronicles the experiences of people in their everyday lives – people who have not been captured and targeted for annihilation by the Nazis – is insufficient. It is precisely *because* "free men" use words like "hunger" and "fear" to convey typical human emotions and occurrences that these words fall short for Levi. The term that one person uses to refer to a general chilly sensation, when that individual has the freedom and means to return to a warm home, does not begin to compare to Levi's experience of being forced to perform endless manual labor while improperly clothed in subzero temperatures, for the benefit of a group

of people who fully intend to annihilate him based on nothing but his ethnicity.

There is also a sense in which Auschwitz makes not only language, but even thought itself impossible. Levi writes that in his first few weeks in the Lager, he and the other Italian prisoners would meet every Sunday to reunite and talk. However, this did not last long: "We stopped it at once, because it was too sad to count our numbers and find fewer each time, and to see each other ever more deformed and more squalid. And it was so tiring to walk those few steps and then, meeting each other, to remember and to think. It was better not to think" (37). The problem with contemplation in the Lager is that the future remains uncertain, but it is undeniably grim. Whether any individual will be "selected" for the gas chambers soon, or will escape that fate only to face constant hunger, exhaustion and barbarism, the conditions of the Lager offer no source of comfort or optimism. There is the chance that they will somehow be freed, but this cannot be counted on. Levi notes that some prisoners believe more strongly than others in the possibility of salvation, but that "the two classes of pessimists and optimists are not so clearly defined… not because there are so many agnostics, but because the majority, without memory or coherence, drift between the two extremes, according to the moment and the mood of the person they happen to meet" (36). In other words, the circumstances of Auschwitz make most reflection futile, both because the prisoners' physical states are so fragile that they struggle for coherence, and because any thoughts of the future raise an unanswerable question.

Levi also confronts the issue of incommunicability in a broader sense: Not only does language in its current form seem insufficient and strange in the context of Auschwitz, but the very notion of communicating about the experience raises problems.

Levi recounts a recurring dream that he has while in the Lager:

> This is my sister here, with … many other people. They are listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling… [I] speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding… I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. (60)

Levi's dream reveals the potent fear that "others," people who did not experience the camps, will not be able to grasp the dehumanizing atrocities or their consequences – or worse, that they will not care to know. This brings forth an important component of the problem of language and the Holocaust: Language is an "interactional social process" that can only serve a communicative function if another person is listening (Mitchell 121). Thus, even if Levi can resolve the dilemma of whether the experience can be put into words, the difficulty extends to the ability or willingness of *other people* to listen. Moreover, Levi learns that others in the camp see a manifestation of the same concern while they sleep: "Alberto … confided to me, to my amazement, that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone. Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?" (Levi 60) The implicit answer to this question is that what the

prisoners fear most is the inability to communicate what has happened to them; such dreams demonstrate the acuteness of their anxiety. This recurring dream may have been the impetus for the overwhelming urge to which Levi refers in his preface, the need "to make 'the rest' participate in [our story]" (9). However, the nightmare has other implications as well. The others' reactions to Levi's descriptions of Auschwitz suggest an inability to comprehend what Levi tries to tell them, indicating that, in addition to being unspeakable, Auschwitz may be *un-hearable*: even if Levi can summon the existing language in an attempt to convey his experience, his listeners may not make meaning of those words. Perhaps, then, *Survival in Auschwitz* constitutes one element of Levi's resolution to this problem. Writing provides a more permanent form for his narrative, and allows for the possibility of translation into languages that Levi himself did not speak. Levi could write his story, and hope that even those who would not listen in his presence, as in the nightmare, might eventually read his words.

From the very beginning of *Survival in Auschwitz*, the nature of memory and its relationship to the Holocaust plays a central role in Levi's account. When the Fascist Militia arrested Levi in December 1943, he was initially sent to a detention camp at Fossoli, along with hundreds of other Italian Jews and political prisoners. In February, a squad of German SS arrived at the camp and announced that all Jews would be rounded up and sent to another camp. Levi notes that the vicious brutality of the Nazi treatment, as well as the rapidly diminishing likelihood that the prisoners would survive, became clear at this juncture: "Our destination? Nobody knew. We should be prepared for a fortnight of travel. For every person missing at the roll-call, ten would be shot. Only a minority of ingenuous and deluded souls continued to hope; we others had often spoken with the

Polish and Croat refugees and we knew what departure meant" (14). Levi goes on to describe the prisoners' reactions to this news and to the understanding that they were "condemned to death" (14). Although not every individual at the camp would actually die in the next days, many would, and the others (including Levi) would subsequently be stripped of nearly every last vestige of their humanity. Indeed, the famous poetic epigraph prefacing the book poses the question of whether those imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis could remain truly human in the face of such atrocities, or whether the definition of humanity needs to expand to include the damaged, degraded form of life that survived in the concentration camps:

> Consider if this is a man
> Who works in the mud
> Who does not know peace
> Who fights for a scrap of bread
> Who dies because of a yes or a no.
> Consider if this is a woman,
> Without hair and without name
> With no more strength to remember,
> Her eyes empty and her womb cold
> Like a frog in winter.

These questions and their implications have sparked fierce debate. Many believe that Levi's death in 1987 – which has widely been considered a suicide – provides at least

a partial answer; it may suggest that the experience of Auschwitz foreclosed the possibility of truly living or returning to the realm of humanity. A friend of Levi's named Ferdinando Camon told an interviewer, "This suicide must be backdated to 1945. It did not happen then because Primo wanted (and had to) write. Now, having completed his work… he could kill himself. And he did" (Gambetta). As mentioned previously, Levi did not have writing experience before World War II; however, after he left Auschwitz, he became an extremely prolific writer. Levi felt driven to record his experiences, as Camon suggests, and from the early 1960s until his death, Levi produced a new work every few years, throughout which themes of the Holocaust and of concentration camps play a prominent role. He retired from his job at a chemical factory in order to devote himself solely to his writing (Keffer). These biographical details reveal that Levi's time in Auschwitz instilled in him a compulsion to write so powerful that it became his primary passion and occupation, eclipsing his other work, and that it may even have kept him alive: Camon indicates that Levi wrote until he was finished, and thus felt at peace enough to die. Elie Wiesel famously echoed this sentiment, saying that Levi "died at Auschwitz forty years later" (Gambetta).

Thus, whether the prisoners deported from the camp at Fossoli in 1943 physically died the next morning or, like Levi, went on to Auschwitz, for these individuals the night of February 21st represented the final hours – in one form or the other – of life. Levi writes that "it was such a night that one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive" (15). The sight of so many innocent human beings, only a fraction of those who would ultimately suffer at the hands of the Nazis, facing torture and death for no reason at all, offers a microcosm of the massacre that we call the Holocaust. The period of time

between the announcement and the departure remains, to Levi, impossible to assimilate, and perhaps this is for the best: “Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remains no memory” (16).

Levi also notes that during that night at Fossoli, “All reason dissolved into a tumult, across which flashed the happy memories of our homes, still so near in time and space, as painful as the thrusts of a sword” (16). Once in Auschwitz, however, these memories fade away, simply because “when one works, one suffers and there is no time to think: our homes are less than a memory” (55). In their pain, hunger, and exhaustion, the prisoners lose the language necessary to articulate – even to themselves – their memories of home. But when Levi suffers an injury and spends time in Ka-Be (Krankenbau), the camp infirmary, he discovers that he has not forgotten. The respite from constant labor and SS-distributed beatings lends itself to a form of reflection that has otherwise been absent: “Whoever still has some seeds of conscience, feels his conscience re-awaken; and in the long empty days, one speaks of other things than hunger and work and one begins to consider what they have made us become, how much they have taken away from us, what this life is” (55). When excruciating physical conditions no longer prevent such contemplation, it becomes all too clear just how inhuman the Lager really is, and how much it stretches the limits of tolerance and emotional strength. Levi and the other infirmary patients find themselves reminiscing about their former lives, and discussing them with each other. The camp hospital, “crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, memories and of another pain. *‘Heimweh’* the Germans call this pain; it is a beautiful word, it means ‘longing for one’s home’” (55). Levi associates the respite of Ka-Be with the restoration of language: the

ability to *speak* with other prisoners about their experiences. Thus, the loss of language seems fundamental to what Levi considers most unbearable about the Lager. Although these memories of home bring pain, Levi finds this pain "beautiful" in comparison to the other forms of suffering of the Lager. Moreover, he rejoices in the ability to express this feeling in the form of the German word *heimweh*, in contrast to other components of the experience of Auschwitz, which seem inexpressible and fall outside the bounds of current forms of language. However, all of this contemplation leads Levi and his fellow prisoners to a devastating realization of how much they have lost: "In this Ka-Be, an enclosure of relative peace, we have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is much more in danger than our life" (55). As soon as Levi and the other infirmary patients return to their former positions in the Lager – for their only other option is "selection" to the gas chambers – they will once again lose their memories and reflections to the demands of constant suffering, to the pain, hunger and exhaustion that leave no time or energy for thinking.

Levi's musings in the infirmary have even more significant consequences. He suggests that the Lager's effects on the prisoners are so catastrophic that even if they "survive the illnesses and escape the selections, perhaps even resist the work and hunger which wear us out," that there is no possibility to return to their former lives or to live among other people again: "No one must leave here and so carry to the world, together with the sign impressed on his skin, the evil tidings of what man's presumption made of man in Auschwitz" (55). This startling line ends the chapter entitled "Ka-Be," as if for the moment, no more can be said beyond this revelation. Here, Levi implies that Auschwitz has made life itself impossible, and that the prisoners' return to the free world

is not only unlikely but also dangerous, because it would bring the evil of the Lager to the outside.

Of course, Levi – along with very few others – did leave Auschwitz, conveying with him the "evil tidings" of the camp. By writing *Survival in Auschwitz*, he provides to the rest of the world some illumination of the inner workings of the Lager as well as its consequences. And yet, he struggles with what this means. The abrupt textual break at the declaration that "No one must leave here and so carry to the world…the evil tidings" suggests that Levi can provide no resolution to his internal dilemma. Perhaps he still believes, as he hints here, that the human consequences of Auschwitz are too grave to contemplate or to understand outside the borders of the Lager; and yet, his compulsion to reach across the divide between himself and "the rest" – in other words, to write – prevails. The tension between this line and the purpose of the work as a whole speaks again to the theme of Auschwitz as fundamentally unassimilable within existing frameworks – in other words, as a trauma.

If the collective experience of Auschwitz is traumatic, this trauma manifests itself perhaps most intensely in the form of what Levi, among others, calls the *Muselmänner*, or the 'musselmans.' (Levi notes that "the old ones of the camp" used this word, but that he does not know the reason for it [88].) The chapter in which Levi describes his arrival at Auschwitz is called "On the Bottom;" it includes the moment in which language first becomes insufficient to encapsulate the experience of the camps. The introduction to 'life' in the Lager consists of becoming "a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of… everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily

loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity" (27). This is the moment in which Levi begins to question what constitutes a man or a life in the face of such senseless cruelty. "Here I am, then, on the bottom," Levi writes (36).

And yet, it seems that the prisoners at this early stage have not yet truly reached "the bottom." Later, Levi distinguishes between two types of prisoners (or *Häftlinge*). He explains that in Auschwitz, there were "the saved and the drowned," and that weak, old, or inept prisoners were essentially doomed to be selected for the gas chambers. Those who could demonstrate a special talent or some other advantageous trait were able to receive privileges that increased their likelihood of surviving. Levi, for example, parlayed his moderate scientific expertise into a job in the Buna Werke laboratory, allowing him to escape the harshest manual labor for the remaining months of his time in Auschwitz. Garnering some sort of favor with particular members of the SS is extremely important to survival, as is "organizing," or engaging in the exchange of camp goods in order to obtain more food or other material benefits (89). Levi refers to the "pitiless process of natural selection" in the Lager, in which those who do not receive any special privilege or exemption become "musselmans" as they experience all of the very worst aspects of the Lager without exception or hope for improvement. They thus follow "the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea" until they die, either from the conditions of the Lager or in the gas chambers (90). Levi writes that these prisoners "form the backbone of the camp," as they present the absolute devastation of Auschwitz in its human manifestation (90). They are "an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor *in silence*, the divine spark dead

within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are *too tired to understand*" (90, emphasis added). The *Muselmänner* continue to haunt Levi long past his time in the Lager, as they "crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" (90). Levi's description suggests that for the *Muselmänner*, any last remnants of language have fallen away, as these individuals have no "trace of thought." Since the time of Plato, thought has been strongly correlated with, and considered a prerequisite to, language (Preston 1). Thus, for Levi, the true mark of dehumanization is utter silence and the inability to form thoughts that could be translated into language. This reaffirms the importance of language, and the depths of despair reached when the prisoners have lost it, in Levi's analysis of the Lager.

To the extent that one of the greatest threats Levi faced in the Holocaust was the loss of language and the difficulty of communicating his experience, *Survival in Auschwitz* constitutes the ultimate assertion of his own humanity and endurance. The 1996 version of the book in English includes a conversation between Levi and Jewish American writer Philip Roth, in which Levi says, "For me thinking and observing were survival factors" (Levi 180). Although he also insists that primarily "sheer luck" kept him alive, the deliberate choice to hold on to language, to continue to reflect when possible and to prepare himself to write the story of Auschwitz, also contributed to Levi's survival (180). Furthermore, this background means that *Survival in Auschwitz* has power not only

as a profoundly insightful memoir, but also as an act of defiance against the Nazis' attempt to annihilate the Jewish people and their ability to use language. As Philip Roth puts it in the preface to the transcript of their conversation, *Survival in Auschwitz* "constitutes [Levi's] profoundly civilized and spirited response to those who did all they could to sever his every sustained connection and tear him and his kind out of history" (177). We do not know for certain whether Levi ultimately determined that the experience of Auschwitz could truly be translated into words, but we do know that he felt the overwhelming imperative, through forty years and nineteen books, to *try* – and this, in many ways, will be his enduring legacy. In one reviewer's words, Levi "may have survived in order to become a writer, but he also became a writer in order to survive" (Franklin).

Chapter 2: Ruth Kluger: Trauma and Witnessing

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have called the Holocaust "a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times and… a history which is essentially *not over*… whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*" (Felman and Laub xiv, emphasis in original). They argued, in 1992, that these consequences could be seen in political contexts such as the Gulf War, as well as in the modern "historical, cultural and artistic scene" (xiv). Today, the pertinent political examples have changed; one might cite rising tensions between Israel and Iran, or recent developments in the conflict over Palestinian statehood, as contemporary correlates to this argument. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the trauma of the Holocaust remains highly relevant today; we also continue to see historical, literary, and artistic interpretations of the genocide and its effects, on both individual and collective scales. Few events in modern history have generated as much ongoing research and analysis as the Shoah. Scholars continue to refer to the Holocaust as a defining traumatic event, and it seems unlikely that this will change in the foreseeable future.

According to the Freudian interpretation, a traumatic event differs from any other occurrence in that it breaks through the "protective shield" that allows an individual to process and interpret things as they happen (Freud 33). The extreme input of stimulus in a short amount of time causes a shock to the individual's cognitive system, and he or she faces "the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of" (33-34). The problem of trauma comes not only from the *amount* of stimulus, but also from "the lack

of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply… the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*" (Caruth 62, emphasis in original). Recognition of a shock or threat, in the moments *after* it would be possible to prepare for it, results in the inability to experience what happened in an organic, effortless way and to incorporate it into an existing semiotic system. Some argue that the dissociation that occurs at the time of a trauma results in the inability to remember the event at all (Suleiman 277). For this reason, leading trauma studies scholar Cathy Caruth refers to trauma as "belated experience" (7). As a result, the mind may return to the traumatic event in an attempt to "master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (Freud 37). This phenomenon, known as repetition compulsion, is seen sometimes in the form of a recurring nightmare of the original event.

The merits and accuracy of this theory of trauma have been debated widely since its inception. Some theorists take issue with Freud's arguments on the basis that he frequently changed his mind about particular aspects of trauma theory, and may even have imposed his own theories upon the patients whose experiences supposedly form the foundations of his work (Suleiman 279). Additionally, many clinicians and researchers point to contradicting empirical evidence from psychological experiments, in which people remember the details of traumatic events quite vividly, rather than dissociating from them (279). Whether or not this Freudian theory of trauma holds true for every individual encounter with an overwhelming experience, it provides a useful lens through which to view Ruth Kluger's Holocaust memoir, *Still Alive*, as the work evokes many common themes of trauma and its "endless impact on a life" (Caruth 7). *Still Alive*

demonstrates some of the ways in which the Holocaust constitutes a trauma, and how its effects reverberate throughout her life. Furthermore, the book represents Kluger's struggle to overcome one of the central problems created by trauma, namely, the "collapse of language in the face of uncontainable and unintelligible suffering" (Felman 157). Many have argued that trauma "kills language" because the experience is so ineffable. This poses an obvious dilemma for the writer. In *Still Alive*, Kluger concludes that as someone who lived to face these quandaries, while millions did not, she must write of her experiences.

Ruth Kluger was born in 1931 in Vienna. When she was eleven, she and her mother were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and then sent to Auschwitz, then to Christianstadt, a work camp. They escaped during the infamous "death marches" toward the end of the war. Alma and Ruth Kluger emigrated to the United States in 1947, and Ruth eventually became a professor of German literature. She did not write her memoir until the late 1980s, because "other urgencies interfered and because other books had appeared and seemed to have done the job," but an extremely harrowing experience in Germany prompted her to begin at last (Kluger 208). Kluger initially wrote her book in German, hoping that her mother would not see it, because it contained many passages criticizing her parenting and their complex, troubled relationship. Although Alma Kluger did read the German edition, Ruth waited to complete an English version until her mother passed away. *Still Alive* is the English "parallel book" to the original memoir, published in 2001.

Kluger evokes many of the well-known tropes of trauma in her memoir. She writes in terms that make clear how difficult she finds the task of assimilating her

memories of the Holocaust: "[Spoken] details have a way of leveling the horror, as appeals from Amnesty International never quite get across what they are telling you because the familiar words, black ink on dry white paper, interfere with the mute and essentially wordless suffering—the ooze of pain, if I may so call it—they aim to communicate" (Kluger 18). For Kluger, the problem with the human rights organization's written pamphlets lies in the attempt to put into succinct words a set of experiences and atrocities that remain "essentially wordless" in their traumatic impact.

The quality of muteness or wordlessness is intimately related to an event's status as a trauma. By virtue of its nature, trauma does not lend itself easily to pure, traditional forms of description or explanation; narrative language is one of the existing mental schemas that falls short in the attempt to assimilate an overwhelming experience (van der Kolk 176). As poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan writes, "Language… had to *pass through its own answerlessness*, pass through a frightful falling-mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—*but it went through those happenings*" (in Felman and Laub 50, emphasis in original).

And yet, there can be redemptive power in language as well. Some scholars, such as professors of clinical psychology van der Kolk and van der Hart, suggest that for the victim of trauma, the transformation of the experience into narrative language constitutes a vital component of the mental healing process. Psychological responses like repetition compulsion function to create a process by which the individual can "complete" the memory and integrate it into the proper linguistic structures: "In the case of complete recovery, the person does not suffer anymore from the reappearance of traumatic

memories in the form of flashbacks, behavioral reenactments, and so on.
Instead the story can be told, the person can look back at what happened; he has given it a place in his life history" (van der Kolk 176). Language is capable of communicating the trauma, but only after the individual has done the necessary psychological work to master the problematic stimulus. This might be interpreted as language "passing through its own answerlessness" in relation to the trauma, but then coming out the other side with the power to repair the psychic wound.

For Kluger, it is not so simple. She certainly seems to perceive language as a necessary component of her own postwar process – after all, her memoir makes use of language, even of "black ink on dry white paper." However, Kluger is skeptical of the redemptive power of the narrative, or even of the possibility of healing at all. She thinks of her memory of Auschwitz as "a bullet lodged in the soul where no surgery can reach it" (Kluger 10). Her ability to craft the narrative of her time in Auschwitz does not make it possible to assimilate this memory; nevertheless she seems to find the narrative process necessary, as she wrote *Still Alive* not once but twice – originally in her native German and again in English, "for [her] children and… students" (210).

Another component of the problem of language and of telling the story appears within specific contexts. Kluger notes that she rarely feels that she can talk about her Holocaust experiences with her peers, because such subjects do not "fit the framework of social discourse" (92). Although memories pervade her mind, she feels obligated to stay silent for fear of discomforting her companions: "I visited friends and we talked about claustrophobia. People mentioned incidents where they had gotten stuck and described feelings of panic or near panic… And meanwhile I had this transport to Auschwitz on my

mind, but didn't contribute it, because if I had, it would have effectively shut up the rest of the company… And so my childhood falls into a black hole" (93). Here, the problem of language inverts itself: Kluger has the words to speak about her experiences, but she holds them back out of concern for how her own trauma will affect others. She finds herself silenced by the expectations and norms of social discourse, in which her memories of the Holocaust have no place.

The expectations and preconceptions of others bear heavily upon Kluger and affect her ability to speak, not only in lighthearted social settings, but even among academic colleagues. She writes:

> In the late sixties, when I was teaching in Cleveland, a young Jewish political scientist… said to my face, without flinching: 'I know what you survivors had to do to stay alive.' I didn't know what we had had to do, but I knew what he wanted to say. He wanted to say, 'You walked over dead bodies.' Should I have answered, 'But I was only twelve'? Or said, 'But I am a good girl, always have been'? Both answers implicate the others, my fellow prisoners. Or I could have said, 'Where do you get off talking like that?' and gotten angry. I said nothing, went home to my children, and was depressed. (66)

Others' preconceived notions about the Holocaust thus interfere with Kluger's own memories, making her feel that whatever she says about her time in the concentration camps will somehow be wrong, or inappropriate. This amalgam of fear and

strange social pressure has a strong silencing effect.

Even more troublingly, Kluger encounters people who explicitly advise that she leave her past unspoken. When Kluger and her mother have dinner with relatives in New York a few months after their arrival in the United States, an aunt tells her,

> 'You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard.' … I thought, she wants me to get rid of the only thing that I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived… Struggling with foreign words that seemed to lurk behind seven veils, I told her why I had to reject this invitation to betray my people, my dead. The language was recalcitrant. My aunt hardly listened to my alien gibberish. (178)

Here, the language barrier emerges as part of the problem; at this time, Kluger has not yet become fluent in English, and she experiences an extremely frustrating inability to make herself comprehensible. Had she explained in perfect English, however, it is not at all clear that the two would have come to an agreement. The aunt believes that Kluger can simply erase her past and not worry about bearing witness to what happened, while Kluger sees this idea as a betrayal. Although she is not yet ready to write her memoir when this conversation happens, she knows that she cannot simply be silent on the subject of the Holocaust and pretend it did not happen or did not affect her deeply. The mere suggestion that she should "forget" indicates a profound unwillingness to listen to

the stories that Kluger has to tell. Sociologists note that this was not uncommon in the United States in the years after the war; Holocaust survivors "were often silenced by individuals they encountered" (Stein 44).

The problem of silencing sometimes arises in reverse. Kluger recounts a conversation with a group of Ph.D. candidates, in which a student asks her how a certain survivor of Auschwitz, who curses Arabs, could be so prejudiced after what he had lived through: "I get into the act and argue…What did he expect? Auschwitz was no instructional institution… You learned nothing there, and least of all humanity and tolerance. Absolutely nothing good came out of the concentration camps… They were the most useless, pointless establishments imaginable. That is the one thing to remember about them" (65). In response to this outburst, the students fall silent, neither agreeing with nor contradicting her. This troubles Kluger. She finds the roles reversed: Her status as a survivor has a silencing effect upon others, because "Who wants to get into an argument with the old bag who's got that number on her arm?" (65) Here, the Ph.D. students are the ones who hold back from speaking, out of fear of breaking social taboos. And yet, Kluger notes, "They could easily have objected. Don't I often insist that I learned something in the camps about what happens to us in extreme situations, which was good to know later on and was usable… And don't I resent those who would deny me this knowledge and those who assume… that we all lost our minds and morals there?" (65) The problem of communication is not merely one of finding and marshaling the appropriate words. It also requires a shared expectation and understanding between speaker and listener. Kluger finds that the Holocaust has created myriad situations in which she feels irrevocably separated from those around her, rendering that

understanding impossible.

Kluger's story, then, requires another medium, one that will not feel inappropriate or have a silencing effect on others. In this sense, *Still Alive* is the outlet for the memories that cannot otherwise be expressed.

And yet, Kluger did not write her memoir until the late 1980s. It required a fresh experience of trauma to impel her to put the words to paper at last. At the age of 57, Kluger moved to Germany, because she felt drawn to the country and to its history, with which her own story was intertwined: "I realized that I had unfinished business with a past that's an ongoing story" (205). She wanted "to understand, if not the killer culture of the past, at least the next generation and a bit more of my own," and so she went to work for the university in the town of Göttingen (205). After only a few months there, Kluger had a terrifying encounter:

> …A teenage bicyclist ran me down one evening as I was crossing the street in a pedestrian zone. Suddenly I saw three bikes coming downhill from my right at what seemed a tremendous speed, one of them headed right at me. It was too close, too fast for me to leap back. I stared at the cyclist's lamp and stood still so he could bike around me, but he didn't seem to try… and he comes straight at me. At the last fraction of a second I jump to the left, and he, too, swerves to the left, in my direction. I think he is chasing me, wants to injure me, and despair hits like lightning: I crash into metal and light, like floodlights over barbed wire. I want to push him away with both arms outstretched, but he is on top of me, bike and all.

(206)

This moment takes Kluger back to the terrors of her childhood: She is in Germany, suddenly thrown into serious physical danger for no apparent reason, targeted by someone she does not know – the bicyclist, who sees her in the path but does not stop or avoid her. These circumstances echo Kluger's memories of the Holocaust. The reference to "floodlights over barbed wire" suggests that she feels transported to the site of the concentration camps, as the image evokes two of the security mechanisms used by the Nazis to prevent prisoners from escaping. Of course, the accident is profoundly traumatic for Kluger. She thinks, "I am fighting for my life, I am losing. Why this struggle, my life, Deutschland once more, why did I return, or had I never left? I had become the victim of my own hit-and-run nightmares. That's why I fell so badly" (206). Kluger thinks she is going to die, and cannot discern the difference between this collision and the concentration camps of her youth. The strong connection between her past and this moment makes the accident worse, as Kluger is too shocked to protect or brace herself as she falls, and strikes the back of her head on the pavement.

Kluger loses consciousness and an ambulance takes her to the hospital, where she discovers that the damage is as much emotional as physical. Kluger feels that "time was splintered… as a heap of broken glass, shards cutting into your mind when you try to put them together. I would forget by afternoon who had visited me in the morning, and the sequence of weekdays confused me" (208). This trauma affects her perhaps even more deeply than her childhood memories, as she feels so utterly overwhelmed by the experience that she cannot process even basic information. For weeks, Kluger stays in the

hospital. Her body requires intensive care and physical therapy to recover from the accident, while her "thoughts whirled in a circle or in a spiral, form[ing] the oddest geometrical figures… never linear" (208). Kluger's German acquaintances also visit her in the hospital during this time, feeling "appalled at the idea that I might die from a brutal accident in their country, where they're trying to redeem the sins of the past" (207). She tries to talk to them, but the accident has made speech difficult as well, an immensely provoking experience for Kluger: "Tears come to my eyes from the strain and the frustration and the sheer effort of wanting my life back" (208). Once again, trauma threatens the ability to use language and to communicate. Nevertheless, the Germans continue to visit her, which Kluger appreciates deeply.

Psychoanalyst Dori Laub writes, "Survivors will experience tragic life events not as mere catastrophes, but rather as a second Holocaust, the ultimate victory of their cruel fate, which they have failed to turn around, and the final corroboration of the defeat of their powers to survive and to rebuild" (Felman and Laub 65). In Kluger's case, this re-traumatization catalyzes her to begin her memoir at last. The experience dislodges her memories of the Holocaust from the recesses of her mind, where Kluger had long pushed them. As she writes, "The memories … had at last caught up with me; in my hospital bed I had been their prisoner. When I was well, I had been able to escape them every morning by getting up, away from their shadowy assaults, and making coffee against their sound and fury and focusing on some immediate task" (208). The impetus to write comes in part from these memories that she can no longer ignore, as they now pervade her consciousness. Additionally, the encounter with the "angel of death," whose presence she feels lingering after the accident, brings Kluger to the realization that she wants to tell her

story while she still has time alive (209). Finally, Kluger writes her memoir "for the good people of Göttingen who had become my friends, who hadn't let me die in their clinic alone, but cheered me back into movement and activity" (210). She feels a connection with these "new friends," and perhaps believes that communication is now not only possible but even vital, in order to forge true understanding between them.

The accident in Germany also reveals another important facet of traumatic experience, which lies in the bewildering fact of survival in the face of violence. According to Caruth, "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (Caruth 58). Throughout her memoir, Kluger grapples intimately with this "enigma of survival," and how it affects the attempt to write of her memories (58). Even the book's title suggests that Kluger perceives the simple fact that she is "*still alive*" to be the defining element of her story.

Kluger escaped from the SS in February 1945, with her mother and a girl named Susi. The Nazis, realizing the impending change of military fortunes, evacuated the prisoners from Christianstadt and moved them around the countryside in hopes of evading the Allied forces. Ruth, her mother, Susi, and three Czech women "took off during the chaos of being horded into yet another container" (Kluger 129). When describing their long trek to freedom and safety, Kluger pauses in her narrative to write that even recounting the story of how she survived troubles her, because "we start writing because we want to tell about the great catastrophe. But since by definition the survivor is

alive, the reader inevitably tends to separate, or deduct, this one life, which she has come to know, from the millions who remain anonymous. You feel, even if you don't think it: well, there is a happy ending after all" (138). Kluger struggles with the idea of her readers finding a source of solace or triumph in her own escape, her own survival, because this would do a disservice to those who did not survive: "You cannot deduct our three paltry lives from the sum of those who had no lives after the war. We who escaped do not belong to the community of those victims, my brother among them, whose ghosts are unforgiving. By virtue of survival, we belong with you, who weren't exposed to the genocidal danger, and we know that there is a black river between us and the true victims" (138). Her own escape does not alter or improve upon the fact that so many did not, and Kluger believes that both truths must be given equal emphasis and consideration.

There is concurrently a separation and an entwinement at work here: Kluger wants to distinguish her own experience from those who did not survive, and simultaneously to make clear that she cannot write about the former without emphasizing the latter. This "black river" between herself and so many victims distresses Kluger, precisely because she feels "the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death" – in this case, the story of not only one death, but of millions (Caruth 8). And this, according to Caruth, constitutes the "crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives" (7). Indeed, Caruth suggests that this crossroads between death and survival has an extremely important role to play in our study of history: "It is the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling, that constitutes their historical witness" (8). In this sense, Kluger's survival and her narrative matter not only for her own personal story, but also for the possibility of

understanding the Holocaust and its place in history.

Kluger's lengthy account of one particular day at Auschwitz in 1944, in which there was a selection among female prisoners, furthers the theme of the "enigma of survival" at the heart of her story. Kluger describes the way that she and her mother both go through the lines; while her mother is chosen for transport to the work camp, Kluger is deemed too young and frail – a death sentence, for staying at Auschwitz at this time would mean the gas chambers: the selector "condemned me as if I had stolen my life and had no right to keep it" (Kluger 104). And yet, Kluger did not end up staying at Auschwitz. Her mother convinced her to go through the line a second time, and to lie about her age, making her seem old enough to work. This plan had little chance of succeeding, both because Kluger did not look older than her age, and because "all reports insist that the first decision was always the final one, that no prisoner who had been sent to one side, and thus condemned to death, ever made it to the other side" (106). However, a young female prisoner working with the selector sees Kluger, told her to pass as fifteen, and argues for her ability to work, so that she "[won] an extension on life" and is selected for the labor camp after all (108). Kluger writes that in her mind, this moment "is loosely suspended from memory, as the world before Copernicus dangled on a thin chain from Heaven" (106). She still cannot quite believe that she survived this episode. As she writes, "Virtually all those still alive today who have the Auschwitz number on their left arm are older than I am, at least by those three years that I added to my age… To get out of the camp, you really had to have been alive longer than twelve years" (103, 108). The Nazis tattooed each prisoner in Auschwitz with an identifying number, stripping away his or her name and replacing it with numerals. Here, a very different form of writing comes

into play – in this case, the writing of the crime itself, the engraving of the Nazis' murderous intentions inscribed into Kluger's own flesh. And yet, for Kluger this "stenographic sign" also represents the statistically improbable confluence of events that "broke the chain of knowable causes" and kept her alive (98, 108). After the war, she would eventually have her tattoo removed. Until then, however, it would serve as a physical imprint of the "oscillation… between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth 7). The tattoo simultaneously marks Kluger's encounter with some of the most unthinkable atrocities of the twentieth century, and demonstrates that against all odds, she came out alive.

Ultimately, Ruth Kluger's memoir has significance far beyond its narrative of a single experience. Kluger's insistence upon nuance, critical examination, and acknowledgment of inconsistency speak to her concern with what Caruth terms "a deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past*" (Caruth 27, emphasis in original). This problem sets up the complex task of witnessing, or testifying to what happened from the perspective of one who was there. The French social theorist Maurice Halbwachs argues that the accuracy of a witness's account of an event may be subject to distortion: "When an event occurs that is worth remembering and reporting, it is precisely the presence of direct witnesses which increases the chances that some of its features will be changed, so that it becomes quite difficult to determine its characteristics… especially… when the event is of a nature that arouses deep emotions" (Halbwachs 194). Profound personal involvement places at risk the ability to evaluate with objectivity; effective witnessing thus requires emotional distance. In the case of the Holocaust, the nature of the event magnifies the inherent difficulty of witnessing. Dori

Laub writes, "It was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside" (Felman and Laub 81). Furthermore,

> The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence.* The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above of all, of its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. (Felman and Laub 84, emphasis in original)

The act of witnessing, then, can occur only belatedly; for Kluger, it begins in earnest some forty years later. As with every facet of her subject, she understands and acknowledges the subjectivity of her own account and the difficulty of bearing witness, while insisting upon the necessity of the act. As Lore Segal notes in the foreword to *Still Alive,* "She worries that the very act of literature betrays what was experienced in the Holocaust: don't works make 'speakable' what is not? The recollection of her mother physically punished and out of control is so 'vivid and lurid,' she thinks, 'I can't write this down.' Then she writes it down" (Kluger 11). Above all, the trauma of her own survival has placed Kluger in the position of someone who *must* write it all down: in a gesture that echoes Levi's experience, "One must *survive* in order to bear witness, and

one must bear witness in order to affirm one's survival, one's own crossing of the line of death" (Felman and Laub 117, emphasis in original). After many years of silence and a brush with a second trauma, Kluger seems to have achieved both.

Chapter 3: Carl Friedman: The Power of Postmemory

Nightfather tells the story of a young girl whose father is deeply traumatized by his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, which he barely survived. This man, although he does not write, feels the strong impulse to speak of his memories to his children, and does so at every available opportunity. As Laub writes, "The imperative to tell and be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling ever seems to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story" (Felman and Laub 78). The narrator of *Nigthfather*, along with her brothers, listens and tries to understand the father's pain as he attempts to put words to the events that continue to echo in his life – and in hers.

The cover of *Nightfather* categorizes the work as "a novel" – a form that we associate with fiction, whose details come from the author's imagination. One might ask, then, how the work fits into an examination of the memoir, which chronicles true, lived experience. The answer is that *Nightfather* blurs the line between these two genres, belonging exclusively to neither, yet substantively to both. Philippe Lejeune, in his analysis of autobiographical writing, writes that the distinction between autobiography and novel lies in the relationship among the name of the narrator, the name of the writer, and the "pact" concluded by the author (generally found in the work's official classification, on the cover or title page). *Nightfather* falls into a peculiar category in Lejeune's breakdown, as its cover indicates a "fictional pact" with the words "a novel," while its first-person narrator is never given a proper name – leaving open the possibility

that author and narrator are the same. Lejeune writes that this case "must happen infrequently," as "no example comes immediately to mind" (16). The clues that *Nightfather* derives from Friedman's memories of her childhood come first and foremost from the author's afterword, in which Friedman writes about her Holocaust survivor father and the stories that he told, commenting, "My father remained a victim of [Nazi] hatred all his life. And indirectly, his children were its victims as well" (Friedman 136). As a central theme of *Nightfather* concerns the ways in which the narrator and her siblings inherit the suffering of their father, this afterword complicates the "fictional pact" set out by the cover. The book also does not bear the disclaimer, typical for a work of fiction, that "all names and places are a product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously" – perhaps because this does not apply to *Nightfather*.

Additionally, the text itself offers hints that the narrator's name, if given, might turn out to be the author's own. Carolina Friedman was born in 1952 in the Netherlands to Holocaust survivors Bette and Jochel Friedman, who also had two sons. In *Nightfather*, the narrator also has two brothers. Jochel Friedman returned from the concentration camps with tuberculosis and hunger edema; the narrator's father in the book spends time in a sanatorium because his tuberculosis is "acting up again" (135, 50). Although the narrator's age is never given explicitly, textual details suggest that she is young – an age at which her friend joins the Brownies, her school assignments consist of drawing pictures, and her brother tells their mother, "She isn't big enough yet for the zoo" (3). Placing her at around age ten in the book's timeline, consistent with these details, matches Friedman's biography – she was nine at the time of the Eichmann trial, which occurs during the timespan of *Nightfather*, as we learn when the narrator sees her father

watch parts of it on television.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives,* "The boundary between the autobiographical and the novelistic is… sometimes exceedingly hard to fix" (Smith 9). *Nightfather* exemplifies this difficulty, as it interweaves a deliberate fictional pact with strong autobiographical details and nameless protagonists. The final way in which Friedman complicates the genre of the book – calling into question even the possibility of true classification – comes from a line in the afterword in which she writes, "In *Nightfather* you won't find the name of the camp to which they sent [my father]. I have deliberately mixed up the names of familiar extermination camps, to arrive at nonexistent ones: Treblibor, Majdawitz, Soblinka, Birkenhausen. These are unreal names for places in which unreal things happened: abstract references to sites of an evil so great that it cannot be named" (Friedman 134). Friedman thus suggests that *Nightfather* is fiction only insofar as the true experiences of people who lived through the Holocaust lie somewhere beyond our ability to capture or catalogue them with language. It is almost as if, to Friedman, the horrors of that series of events that we call the Holocaust *requires* some element of invention to pay homage to inherent unspeakability.

Although Friedman "initially…had no ambition to become a writer," publisher Wouter van Oorschot encouraged her to write, and in 1991, *Nightfather* came out in Holland (Schoonheim). Friedman was 39 – a fairly advanced age to be writing her first novel. Friedman offers no explanation for the long stretch of time between her childhood memories, which form the basis of the book, and its actual publication. She writes that she "cannot explain why I wrote *Nightfather,*" let alone why she waited so long to do so

(136). However, this temporal gap provides a foil for the many forms of distance that ultimately emerge in the book.

Nightfather addresses the question of how language functions in the aftermath of the Holocaust, both for those who survived it and for their descendants. The story centers upon the narrator's father's attempt to put into words his memories of hiding from the Nazis and subsequently laboring in a concentration camp. Much of the book consists of the father recounting experiences from the war, such as the tribulations of manual labor under the SS, a particularly vicious *Kapo* named Willi, or his business relationships in the "flea market" bartering system of the camp (111). The children struggle to understand and make sense of what their father says and what it all means: As the narrator remarks, "Things are never as simple as they seem" (43). These stories of the past raise extremely complex issues. For instance, the narrator's frustrated brother Max once asks their father how he could still believe in God when God "didn't do anything" about the concentration camps (82). The father tells his son that he would "rather have a God I can't understand than no God at all," to which Max retorts, "Suit yourself! … Just don't keep coming to me with stories about that stupid camp of yours. It served you right!" (83) The argument quickly escalates, with the narrator's mother intervening; the father is left sitting at the table, rubbing his face: " 'What do you all want from me?' he says. 'It's hard enough as it is'" (83). Discussions like these demonstrate that the attempt to achieve understanding of the Holocaust between the two generations remains extremely difficult on both sides.

These interactions, and their effects upon the narrator and her brothers, illustrate a form of what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory," or "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that

were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2008, 103). Hirsch writes that postmemory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection;" in other words, postmemory stands at the crossroads of history and memory, while remaining distinct from both (Hirsch 1997, 22). *Nightfather* tells the story of how this transmission of trauma operates and functions within the lives of its characters. The power of the father's memories extends beyond his own trauma to affect how his children perceive the world and interact with other people; they grow up "dominated by narratives that preceded [their] birth" (107). These "inherited memories" permeate nearly every facet of the narrator's life and that of her brothers, setting them apart from their peers in ways that are both predictable and startling. Carl Friedman's work raises the question of how the children of Holocaust survivors respond to the tragedy of their parents' generation and whether the memory of catastrophe belongs, in some respects, to them as well.

French historian Nadine Fresco has also asked this question. She interviewed eight children of Holocaust survivors, in order to "study what impact an event of the nature and scope of genocide had had on the generation following the event," originally with no particular final product in mind (Fresco 417). However, when asked to write an article for the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* on the subject of "L'Emprise,"[1] Fresco

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[1] The title of the issue of *Nouvelle Revue de Psychoanalyse* in which Fresco's article appears, "l'emprise" is a French word with no true English equivalent. In this context, it "might be rendered by 'hold' or 'grip,' as in phrases such as 'to take hold' or 'to be in the grip' of something" (Fresco 417, translator's note).

returned to her interview files and wrote an article called "Remembering the Unknown," about the "emprise of silence," the "blindness" and "incomplete mourning" experienced by the children of survivors (418, 421). *Nightfather* differs from the experiences expressed in Fresco's interviews in one important way. For the individuals in Fresco's article, what stands out about their parents' memories is not the stories that they tell but the absence thereof – the wordlessness: "The silence formed like a heavy pall that weighed down on everyone. Parents explained nothing, children asked nothing… Putting a name on what the silence of others had made strictly unnameable generally remained impossible for the child" (Fresco 419). In contrast, the narrator's father in *Nightfather* is highly verbal; he chooses to mourn the atrocities of the Holocaust by telling his stories unremittingly. Nevertheless, the way in which Fresco's interviewees felt their identities to be infused by, or even "indivisible from," their parents' experiences, closely resembles what the narrator in *Nightfather* goes through and thus provides a useful analytic frame for the examination of Friedman's work (421).

The question of language and meaning in the wake of the Holocaust comes to affect even the most basic of the narrator's family dynamics. At dinner one night, the narrator's brother Max claims to be so hungry that he "could easily eat a whole pound of cherries" (9). The children's father reacts strongly to Max's use of this particular term:

> "You, hungry?" My father laughs. "You don't even know the meaning of the word."
>
> "Yes, I do," says Max indignantly. "It's when your stomach growls."
>
> My father shakes his head.

> "When you're really hungry, it doesn't growl, it gnaws. You're completely empty inside and limp as a punctured balloon." His eyes grow distant. "You can't even begin to understand," he says. (10)

This scene demonstrates that the father's language and his understanding of particular words remains disconnected from that of the next generation, because the external referents that he associates with words such as "hunger" fall so far beyond the children's constellation of experience. To the survivor, the typical experience of hunger – in the overall context of a well-fed life in which one does not have to fight for mere scraps of food, survive on bread made of flour and sawdust, or risk being struck with a metal soup ladle if one dares to complain of poor rations – does not even approach the constant, debilitating and life-threatening hunger of the concentration camp. This distinction mirrors Levi's discussion of language in the Lager, suggesting an important thread between *Survival in Auschwitz* and *Nightfather*. Despite the enormous differences between the two works, the theme of the insufficiency of existing language emerges as a unifying factor, indicating perhaps the dominance of this experience in the lives of Holocaust survivors.

The significance of this scene at the dinner table also lies in the way that the father simultaneously seems to create distance between himself and his children, and to try to bridge that distance. By telling them they "can't even begin to understand," he establishes a chasm between what his children comprehend and what he remembers, and indicates that this gap is unbridgeable. This is perhaps appropriate, as Hirsch notes that postmemory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance" (Hirsch 1997, 22).

And yet, the father goes on to speak more, recalling the agony of laboring twelve-hour days with only the tiniest rations of soup and bread, and of bargaining with the opportunistic Polish man in charge of delivering the prisoners' food rations, who would use the prisoners' desperation for sustenance to personal gain by holding back some of their soup and trading it for cigarettes (the currency of the camp). The attempt to reach across this generational gap demonstrates the distinction that Hirsch makes between postmemory and simple historical fact: postmemory is marked by "deep personal connection" (22). The stories about the soup-doling "Sigismund the Flogger," and the other personal details, contribute to the development of a strong personal connection between the children and these memories. For example, the father tells them that the bread he ate in the camp was "made out of flour mixed with straw and sawdust," prompting the narrator's brother Simon to compare it to something that he knows and can relate to – the sawdust sprinkled at the bottom of the family hamster's cage (Friedman10). Such comparisons might be seen as an attempt to cross the generational gap, to make the father's memories intelligible to the children.

However, Simon's youthful association upsets their father; his pain and the children's attempts to envision the concentration camps then evoke a specter that invades the family dinner. " 'You don't understand,' my father says. He gets up, but the bread ration continues to hover over the table like a ghost. I look at it helplessly and feel a sudden disgust for the cherries my mother is serving" (11). The cherries represent a proxy for the comfortable life that the narrator and her brothers lead. However, the narrator's intense connection with her father and his memories make her feel that this life is shameful and isolating, because it departs so dramatically from her father's experiences

and renders her unable to truly internalize his emotions. As Fresco writes, "Those Jews who have come late upon the scene, burdened with their posthumous life, infatuated by an irreparable nostalgia for a world from which they were excluded on being born, feel a vertigo when confronted by the 'time before,' the lost object of a nameless desire, in which suffering takes the place of inheritance" (Fresco 421). This sense of vertigo is evident in the narrator's response to her father's memory: His suffering from the "time before," which she will never experience first-hand, invades her consciousness and transforms the way she relates to the simple act of eating. The narrator adds, "How very lucky we are," a comment laden with irony, as she experiences the 'luck' of being able to eat the fruit freely – in stark contrast to her father's memory of the concentration camp and his intense suffering – uncomfortably and with confusion (Friedman 11). This irony invokes another form of distance; the expression of luck falls quite far from the "sudden disgust" she feels. The gap between the narrator's words and her own emotions mirrors the distance between her father and his children that emerges over the course of the scene. This parallel is significant because it illustrates the profound effect of these trans-generational interactions upon the narrator's perspective of her own life.

Throughout *Nightfather*, the narrator and her brothers continue to grapple with the inability to experience – or, by extension, truly to understand – what their father endured in the Holocaust. The children try, over and over, to achieve comprehension of that "time before." One evening, their father shows them a knife that he fashioned out of airplane steel while in the concentration camp and explains that he had to hold it in his sleeve to avoid being caught by the SS. The next day, the narrator and her brothers take the knife

outside, because Max says they should "practice with it" (19). They all have difficulty holding the knife in their clothes as their father described: "Max is the only one who eventually manages to keep it poised in his armpit for a few moments. 'You have to keep saying to yourself: it must not fall out, it must not fall out!' he explains. 'You have to think: if it falls out they're going to shoot me or gas me. Try that, it helps!' " (20). This scene demonstrates the lengths that the children will go to in their attempt to understand their father's stories of the concentration camp. They remain, as Fresco writes, "as if trapped in the fascination exerted on them by the mystery in which they played no part" (Fresco 420). More significantly, they internalize their father's narratives to such an extent that what happened to him seems to have happened to them as well. The transmission of experience between generations has a profound effect upon the recipient: Postmemory "approximates memory in its affective force" (Hirsch 2008, 109).

The desire to comprehend, however, is complicated by what these experiences represent: the attempted annihilation of "the very substance of a world, a culture, a history, a way of life" and the myriad atrocities perpetrated on European Jewry, including the use of gas chambers to slaughter as many as possible at one time – a fate that the children's father only narrowly escaped (Fresco 420). The narrator's brother Simon exposes the inherent contradictions in the children's yearning to achieve firsthand knowledge of their father's memories when he kicks the handmade knife and cries indignantly, "I don't want to be gassed!" (20) This visceral reaction demonstrates the paradox of postmemory: The deep connection to the previous generation's past, including the fascination and sense of jealousy of that 'time before,' seems on its face conceptually incoherent – since no one could truly *want* to be in a concentration camp or to face the

threat of extermination. The children in *Nightfather* experience, but never truly resolve, this paradox.

Despite the powerful influence of postmemory, the fundamental fact of their father's suffering – the horrors of what he went through – remain beyond the children's grasp. An encounter with a cat named Pinky demonstrates this difficulty. When the narrator and her brother find a sickly stray cat, they want to make it part of the family, although their mother scolds them lightly: "'What next?' says my mother. 'You can't take on the suffering of the entire world.' We don't know what suffering means" (30). This second line, expressed as an aside by the narrator, operates on multiple levels. In a basic sense, the children are too young to understand what their mother is saying about their urge to save the helpless cat – namely, that however strong the altruistic impulse, there comes a point at which the amount of pain in the world overwhelms the capacity to assuage it. However, despite this warning, the narrator and her brothers *can* save Pinky – and they do.

Even more significantly, the children "do not know what suffering means" because they have not lived through the horrors their father has witnessed. This line indicates the narrator's recognition of this impossibility and reflects an internalization of what the father has been telling his children, in scenes like the one at the dinner table: that they cannot understand his suffering, no matter how much he describes or tries to explain to them. Despite all of their best efforts, the words and stories remain inadequate. As Laub writes, "There are never enough words or the right words… to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory* and *speech*" (Felman and Laub 78, emphasis in original).

The cat, who the children name Pinky and who is so emaciated that they can "feel his backbone through his fur," gives off the aura of having experienced the sort of brokenness that the father felt in the concentration camp (Friedman 29). The narrator writes that her father "can see there's something special about Pinky. 'He looks the way I did when I came back. I was so scrawny I couldn't lift my feet off the ground. Any pebble on the road, I had to walk around it'" (30). The children's strong instinct to rescue the cat becomes even more significant in this light. Perhaps the children could also see "something special" about the cat, the same quality that makes their father feel a strong identification with the suffering animal. Thus, saving the cat – taking on its suffering, as their mother terms it – represents what the children could not do for their father.

A note of wistfulness enters the narrator's tone as she writes, "My father is lucky to have Pinky, who understands more than we ever will" (30). The father feels a connection with the cat that the narrator feels she and her brothers will never have, by virtue of their time of birth – after the war, temporally distanced from the suffering of the concentration camps. Fresco writes of the aggravation that members of this generation often expressed in her interviews, of "the intense frustration that stemmed for them both from the inability to identify with the victims and from the near certainty of never being one of them" (Fresco 421). The "certainty of never being one of them" is one of the forces maintaining distance between the children and their father. In contrast, Pinky "understands" the father's pain, as his physical condition epitomizes what the father remembers of the concentration camp.

Although the narrator experiences the difficulty of internalizing memories of the Holocaust without being able to understand them fully, the father's stories about his time

fleeing from the Nazis and in the camps – the content of which comprise the majority of *Nightfather's* 39 short chapters – do form an important bond within the family. The closeness that these dialogues foster becomes clear when the narrator struggles to communicate with people outside the family about the Holocaust. A conversation with the narrator's closest friend Nellie demonstrates this difficulty: " 'What a funny father you have,' Nellie says, giggling. She looks at me expectantly but I avoid her eyes. What can I say? She knows nothing about hunger or about the SS. Words like *barracks, latrine,* or *crematorium* mean nothing to her. She speaks a different language" (21). Interestingly, the issue here stems not from the *lack* of words or language to communicate, but rather from a fundamental difference between the narrator's family life and Nellie's – a difference so significant that it cannot be mediated by a common set of referents. For Friedman and her protagonist, words like *barracks, latrine* and *crematorium* represent the foundation of discourse within the family – listening to the father talk about his life during the Holocaust, and the war's devastating, lasting effects upon him. Yet to Nellie, the tragedies of the narrator's father's past and the way that they permeate his life in the present make him appear simply "funny." The narrator, aware that she cannot make Nellie understand, does not know what to say; the communication gap between the two girls here appears vaster than the distance that the narrator feels from her father and his memories. This suggests that despite the generational distance between memories and postmemory, the latter still creates a bond that sets the family apart from others in ways that may not always be clear from the outside.

The power of postmemory and its influence upon the narrator's life are evident in other contexts, as well. One day, the father sees in the paper the news of a group of

Holocaust deniers and their claims that there was no mass genocide during World War II, and becomes extremely upset as he worries that these are signs of a resurgence of Nazism, that the SS "are going to take their uniforms out of mothballs" (106). The next afternoon, the narrator digs a hole in her neighbor's garden and brings her toys to bury in it. She tells Simon that she is hiding them from the Nazis:

> "Don't tell anyone," I whisper, "it's a secret. I'm burying them, because as soon as the SS come they'll take them all away and give them to other children."
>
> "Why do you care?" says Simon, shrugging. "IF the SS come, they'll kill you. And if you're dead you won't be able to play anyway." …
>
> When the hole has been filled we stamp on the earth together.
>
> "Swear you won't tell a soul!" I say. Simon nods. "Not even the SS?" He nods again. (107)

This scene offers a powerful example of the ways in which a survivor's child's life is "dominated by narratives that preceded [her] birth," and in which her own stories are "evacuated by the stories of the previous generation" (Hirsch 1997, 22). The controlling force in the narrator's life is her father's memories and their effects upon her own experience. Here, the narrator internalizes her father's fear that the Nazis will regain legitimacy and responds by making preparations the best way that she knows how. The force of her father's emotions and their effect on the narrator demonstrates how the next generation may come to feel the weight of the Shoah on their own shoulders. It is not the

first time that the fear of some future genocide affects the children. Earlier in the book, Simon tells the narrator that one day there will be another war, and that the children will have to "hide in the cellar and eat grass," even insisting that when they run out of grass they will be forced to kill the cat Pinky for food: "[We'll] have to, it's a case of survival. In war, people are more important than animals" (54). These fears and hypotheses demonstrate how completely their father's memories of the Holocaust permeate their lives and become part of their reality. The children experience this effect in many ways, many of which are confusing and upsetting – here, the narrator's "eyes fill with tears" at the thought of sacrificing Pinky (55). Another time, the narrator's brother Max becomes extremely frustrated with their father, shouting, "'All you love is your SS! When we're at the dinner table, you go on about starvation. When we have a cold, you go on about typhus… The camp this, the camp that, always the camp. Why didn't you damn well stay there!'" (97) The children find it difficult to comprehend certain aspects of their father's life, wondering how and why he holds onto these memories to such an extent. The father's past complicates his relationship with his children and makes it difficult, as Max's anger illustrates. And yet, the children feel compelled to understand as much as they can and to demonstrate solidarity with their father's suffering. Later, the narrator and Simon find Max sitting with his feet in the refrigerator, waiting "to know what it feels like when they freeze" (114). He tells his siblings, "I want to be one of them. And you can only be one of them if you're half-starved or if you've had typhus… You have to have suffered damage in some way" (115). Despite the anger and frustration at his father, Max continues to try to identify with the torment of the concentration camp. This, like the narrator's decision to bury her beloved toys, illustrates the complex and fluctuating ways

in which the children deal with their father's memories.

Moreover, the toy-burial scene represents another dimension of postmemory, in which the narrator responds to her father's *present* emotion (in contrast to his prior experiences) – namely, his anger at the people who would deny the fact of the Holocaust, who would expunge the horror of the concentration camp, erase the murdered, and have the world believe that "all those stories about starvation and gas are a pack of lies. We were imprisoned just for the fun of it" (105). There are many reasons that such denial is upsetting, not the least of which is that for the Holocaust survivor, "The absence of those millions of dead is still being lived through" (Fresco 424**)**. As the narrator notes, after dinner every night her father takes time to sing songs that he learned "from fellow-sufferers drawn from every corner of Europe, people who shared barracks or bunks with him, or perhaps a piece of bread. They are dead, they can no longer speak, and they can't hear him. Yet it is for them that he sings" (28). In these songs, the father lives through the absence of the dead, while his children find their own ways to cope with the catastrophe.

The narrator's decision to bury her toys thus offers a poignant response to her father's anguish – it constitutes a sort of sacrifice, as she gives up the toys she values. Her preparations counter and silently rebuke the treacherous claims of the Holocaust deniers, as though by going through motions that imitate her father's escape, she can silence them. This response demonstrates the way that her father's struggle has become her own; her actions replicate her father's escape from the Nazis. She will go to great lengths to protect her father's memories from the threat of Holocaust deniers, even at the expense of losing her own possessions.

Marianne Hirsch notes that postmemory is "as full and as empty, certainly as

constructed, as memory itself" (Hirsch 1997, 22). This raises the question of how much of any memory consists of details or perspective that the mind fills in after the fact. Memory, by its nature, cannot correspond to an event exactly as it happened; there is always some element of (re)construction. In *Nightfather*, however, memory manifests itself in various ways – some of them physical. Early in the book, the narrator and her brothers wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of their father falling to the floor. When they bring him to his feet to awaken him, he "jumps to attention and brings his hand to his head. 'Caps off,' he whispers in German. He lets his arm drop to his side, then jerks it up again. 'Caps on.' There's blood on his fingers… 'The bell for roll call has rung,' says my father in a voice I don't recognize" (8). This scene demonstrates a form of the repetition compulsion, as conceived by Freud. The nightmare reveals the extent to which the father's memories continue to dominate and shape his life – and, by extension, his children's lives. When they are safely back in bed, the narrator and her brother ponder the nature of what has just happened: "Deep down under the covers I start to cry. 'Don't be frightened,' says Simon. 'It isn't real. Papa's been dreaming everything, the bell and the roll call.' 'And the blood?' I ask him from under the blankets. 'Did he dream that, too?' There is no reply" (8). The exact source of the blood on the father's fingers remains unclear, but it seems to represent the trauma of the Holocaust, that which "one does not wish or is not able to confine within one's past and which makes it difficult for time to fulfil its function as the privileged place of mourning" (Fresco 424). The Shoah cannot and will not remain in the "past," and this has consequences not only for the father whose hand bleeds in the middle of the night, but also for the daughter who cries herself to sleep.

In this way, *Nightfather* brings forth a manner of bearing witness that differs substantially from the other works in this analysis. Carl Friedman's father faced both the difficulty of expressing his experiences using existing modes of language, and the overwhelming need to speak as much as he could. In Dori Laub's words, "The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues" (Felman and Laub 78). In doing so, however, Jochel Friedman did not commit his words to paper in the form of an autobiography; instead, he passed on his memories to his descendants. Carl Friedman's choice to write *Nightfather,* which might be termed a "post-memoir," places these memories among the body of literature that documents the Shoah.

Last Words

Ruth Kluger cautions us against reading too much into one survivor's account of the Holocaust, or trying to map one experience onto that of millions of others. She writes, "The role that prison plays in the life of an ex-prisoner cannot be deduced from some shaky psychological rule, for it is different for each one of us… Though the Shoah involved millions of people, it was a unique experience for each of them" (166). In this vein, what becomes clear in the analysis of these three accounts is that the problem of overcoming inexpressibility, and the corollary question of how to bear witness, plays out differently for each individual. While Levi felt the need to write of his time in Auschwitz as soon as he possibly could, and to continue to do so unremittingly, Kluger could not and did not begin to write until many years later. Jochel Friedman, in contrast, never wrote his story, but transmitted it to his daughter, who did write it. The texts analyzed here present three radically different approaches to speaking and writing about the Holocaust, united primarily in their insistence upon the *necessity* of doing so – despite, or perhaps even because of, the challenges therein.

A question that I initially asked in examining these narratives was whether the Holocaust's legacy of incomprehensibility would ultimately threaten the primacy of language as a vehicle for human experience. The collective message of Levi, Kluger and Friedman suggests that this threat amounts to very little. It is true that language falls somewhat short in the attempt to express what happened in the Shoah. However, if those victimized by the experience can summon the ability to communicate despite the myriad difficulties they face, there seems little reason to doubt that language will continue to

serve its function. Breakdown may occur, but does not create insurmountable obstacles. Furthermore, reclaiming language, as we see in *Survival in Auschwitz*, can be at least as powerful in the reassertion of humanity as its failure can be in destroying communication. It is important to remember, however, that the Holocaust and its interpretive difficulties highlight the *fallibility* of language and of communication. Although I conclude that unspeakability does not ultimately make language impossible, there can be no doubt that the Holocaust poses enormous challenges to our existing semiotic systems and frameworks. A world in which one of the most significant historical events of the twentieth century has been overwhelmingly cast as "unspeakable" is one in which our trusted modes of transmission are always at risk. Just as Carl Friedman has written a "post-memoir," which does not fit neatly into any existing literary genres, we may need to explore new avenues for self-expression.

One important area for further exploration would be the extent to which the legacy of incomprehensibility will persist in the future, as our temporal distance from the events increases, and as the number of survivors who are still alive diminishes. Will the Holocaust continue to be the classic example of an unspeakable historical trauma, or will our focus shift elsewhere?

Finally, I would like to turn to the task of the reader who receives the texts analyzed here. The most compelling theme that comes through these narratives has less to do with *how* the survivors surmounted the obstacle of unspeakability and more to do with the simple fact that they all, to one degree or another, did so. There may always remain, in the words of one Czech Jew who was hidden in France during the war, "a residue which passes beyond our comprehension," but this does not prevent the survivors from

giving voice to the experience as much as they can (Kluger 83). Moreover, the very fact that so many have felt the need to tell their stories suggests that we have an obligation to pay attention: "It is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard… that… constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" (Caruth 9). This imperative should not be taken lightly. Kluger notes that, despite the ubiquitous cries of "Never again," "In our hearts we all know that some aspects of the Shoah have been repeated elsewhere, today and yesterday, and will return in new guise tomorrow; and the camps, too, were only imitations (unique imitations, to be sure) of what had occurred the day before yesterday" (64). The international legal conventions instituted after the Holocaust did not prevent genocide in Rwanda; it would be irresponsible to believe that we have learned our lessons. For this reason alone, we must listen to survivors, who can come closest to piercing the fog of incomprehensibility that surrounds such events. The impulse to tell the story, enacted by all three writers, does not constitute a neutral act. These texts bear a message. They tell us the story of past trauma, but that narrative implicates us all. In Caruth's words, "The act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time… can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others" (Caruth 108). In order to bear out the implications of these works, we need to be listening.

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