

## Interpreting Auschwitz: For a Theologically-Oriented Reading of History

The theology of grace has not yet systematically come to grips with the challenge that Auschwitz embodies for Christianity. The problem is that the human condition laid open by radical evil in the world, as exhibited in Auschwitz, since then has become an ever-present and lingering reality that has yet to be coped with in a responsible manner. The impact of radical evil on the relationship human beings share with God still needs to be duly assessed. The word “Auschwitz” symbolizes the experience of the radical evil undeservedly undergone by millions of persons interned in the Nazi labor and extermination camps during World War II. The evil experienced by the prisoners in these camps so far exceed and differ from “normal” living conditions that their faithful description and analysis entail a serious re-evaluation of human morality and reason. In this regard, the conditions and modes of existence experienced by the prisoners can be conceived as actually bringing human nature and culture to the asymptotic limit of both denial and suffering.

### 1.1. Addressing the Challenge of Auschwitz

Theodor W. Adorno produced the seminal formulation of the challenge Auschwitz presents to philosophical and theological discourse, and Western culture in general. After and because of Auschwitz, death has been transmogrified in human existence. Human beings can no longer provide death—their death—with meaning. The invocation of transcendent sources of meaning in reference to human life and death is not permissible anymore. The evil of Auschwitz is such that it automatically permeates, corrupts, and disqualifies positive justification. Any attempt to explain Auschwitz involves an element of profound disrespect toward millions of victims.

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence. Such a construction would affirm absolute negativity and would assist its ideological survival—as in reality that negativity survives anyway, in the principle of society as it exists until its self-destruction. . . . The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals' empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life.<sup>1</sup>

Reduced to generic exemplars unable to (re)claim their death, Auschwitz survivors are not entitled to life either. Creeping deep into the survivors' hearts and souls, Auschwitz leaves an indestructible imprint. Auschwitz takes all legitimacy away from their existence and induces everlasting suffering.

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream. . . . But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), 361–62.

of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.<sup>2</sup>

Auschwitz has proven—beyond reasonable doubt—the breakdown and failure of European culture and civilization as channels of moral and spiritual formation. “Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed. That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them. All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”<sup>3</sup>

Unilateral criticism of the European culture that led to Auschwitz or its complete replacement with another will not do. What is required is responsible acknowledgement of the bankruptcy of human culture that, amidst the ruins of European civilization, attempts to define and foster more humane identity and society. “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.”<sup>4</sup> Which functions do culture and civilization serve in relation to the constitution of human identity and society? What is this human nature, at once so easily informed by detrimental ambient culture and not underdetermined by honorable practices and traditions? How is it possible to go on thinking, rationalizing, and conceptualizing after Auschwitz? Can ethical, metaphysical, and theological discourses be defined after and in light of Auschwitz? Do human beings (still) have access to truth?

Adorno’s verdict is clear: after Auschwitz, no word or thought can be positively asserted or conceived without having to undergo complete inner transformation. “After Auschwitz there is no word tinged from

2. *Ibid.*, 363.

3. *Ibid.*, 366–67.

4. *Ibid.*, 367.

on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation.”<sup>5</sup> After and because of Auschwitz, Kant’s categorical imperatives have been reformulated to reflect the true first obligation of human thought and action: never allow Auschwitz to happen again. “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”<sup>6</sup> If, following Adorno, we are willing to acknowledge the reality of Auschwitz and its deleterious impact on human culture and reason, how then do we define and justify the practice of history, philosophy, and theology? How can we justify the use of historical, philosophical, and theological approaches, concepts, and methods to the reality of Auschwitz itself? Can Auschwitz be the object of scientific inquiry?

## 1.2. Finding a Voice

As he critiques Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history, Adorno sets forth a basic methodological attitude and orientation. After Auschwitz, access to truth and transcendence is gained not by means of positive affirmation, but by embracing the experience of negation. “No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.”<sup>7</sup> In similar fashion, Pierre Mertens argues that under the impact of Auschwitz, culture crumbled down and must be completely rebuilt. What remains of human language and expression is analogous to a high-pitched scream breaking through the darkness. “To utter the core of the scream, considering that after Auschwitz culture needs to be entirely reconceived, and not merely restored—which would come in handy—after its catastrophic failure.”<sup>8</sup> In the face of Auschwitz, words, theories, and sciences seem to lose

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 365.

7. Ibid., 360.

8. Pierre Mertens, *Écrire après Auschwitz? Semprun, Levi, Cayrol, Kertész*, Conférence des “Midis de la Poésie” Series (Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 2003), 13.

their capacity to denote, model, and interpret their referents, giving way to (respectful) silence. “The camps have existed, they exist. Out of so horrendous destruction of human life, of so awful abomination, from whom should we ask an account, if not from God?”<sup>9</sup> After their liberation, and in order to outlive Auschwitz, many survivors forced themselves to forget their experience of the camps. For Jorge Semprun, the choice to make was between writing (death) and oblivion (survival).

I came back to life. In other words, to oblivion: that was the price of life. A deliberate, systematic forgetting of the experience of the camp. Of writing, as well. There was no question, in fact, of writing anything else. It would have been absurd, perhaps even ignoble, to write anything at all that would pass over that experience in silence. I had to choose between literature and life; I chose life. I chose a long cure of aphasia, of voluntary amnesia, in order to survive.<sup>10</sup>

The problem is that after and because of Auschwitz, it is only possible to speak or write about human life from within the memory of death. The task of putting Auschwitz into words turns out to be a lethal undertaking. “I possess nothing more than my death, my experience of death, to recount my life, to express it, to carry it on. I must make life with all that death. And the best way to do this is through writing. Yet that brings me back to death, to the suffocating embrace of death. That’s where I am: I can live only by assuming that death through writing, but writing literally prohibits me from living.”<sup>11</sup> More problematic even is the fact that survivors cannot evade testifying to the experience of Auschwitz. If not by means of their actions and words, they inevitably do convey it through their silences. As Elie Wiesel explains, the survivors

were afraid of saying what must not be said, of attempting to communicate with language what eludes language, of falling into the trap of easy half-truths. Sooner or later, every one of them was tempted to seal his lips and maintain absolute silence. So as to transmit a vision of the

9. Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, cited in Pierre Mertens, *Écrire après Auschwitz?*, 44.

10. Jorge Semprun, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), 195–96.

11. *Ibid.*, 163.

holocaust, in the manner of certain mystics, by withdrawing from words. Had all of them remained mute, their accumulated silences would have become unbearable: the impact would have deafened the world.<sup>12</sup>

Despite their acute awareness of the sheer inadequacy of the mediations they are using to produce their testimony (gestures, words or other), the survivors need to speak themselves out of Auschwitz. As Giorgio Agamben aptly coins it, “the survivor’s vocation is to remember; he cannot not remember.”<sup>13</sup> To them, it is a life-and-death matter, for no one can survive by remaining in the abiding silence of the memory of death. “Survivors and witnesses have done their best to describe their experiences, yet their writings have perhaps no substantial relationship with what they have seen and lived through. They have written because they could not do otherwise: after all, one needed to lift the tombstone, however slightly, and grope one’s way out of the night. By speaking out, they have forced us to see that the mystery endures.”<sup>14</sup> Auschwitz was intended to deny inmates existence and voice. The survivors feel it is their “sacred duty” (Isabel Wollaston) to witness and preserve the memory of the deceased victims.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.3. Living Memory as History

From the survivors’ standpoint, the experience and reality of Auschwitz did not end with the liberation of the camps by the allied forces in late 1944 and early 1945. As a historical event, Auschwitz remained alive within the body, heart, and soul of each and every survivor in the form of a living death. The survivors needed to learn how to live with Auschwitz outside the camps, and this, till the end of their lives. One does not simply come back from Auschwitz. The survivor’s entire existence is so infused with the experience of

12. Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1970), 8.

13. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999), 26.

14. Wiesel, *One Generation After*, 43.

15. See Isabel Wollaston, “‘Memory and Monument’: Holocaust Testimony as Sacred Text,” in *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, ed. Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 41.

Auschwitz that the latter survives and is transmitted through her. Again, in the words of Agamben: “One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity, since in truth it has never ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself.”<sup>16</sup> As he describes his repeated experience of the same dream (basic content and structure), Primo Levi confirms Agamben’s assertion in most striking fashion:

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “Wstavac.”<sup>17</sup>

The truth is that for survivors, the experience and memory of Auschwitz constitutes the most determining and stable aspect of their lives. To them, Auschwitz represents the most reliable criterion of reality and truth. All other experiences the survivors might have or have had after are measured against the experience and memory of the camps. The angst that has taken root at the center of their soul, and which, from time to time, manifests itself, demonstrates yet again the utter vacuity of everything else. Commenting on Primo Levi’s text, Jorge Semprun explains that

It’s true that everything becomes chaotic, when that anguish reappears. You find yourself in the middle of a whirlwind of nothingness, a nebulous

16. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 101.

17. Primo Levi, *The Truce*, in *If This is a Man, The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Everyman’s Library, 2000), 454–55.

void, murky and grayish. From that moment on, you know what this means. You know that you have always known. Always, beneath the glittering surface of daily life, this terrible knowledge. Close at hand, this certainty: nothing is true except the camp, all the rest is but a dream, now and forever. Nothing is real but the smoke from the crematory of Buchenwald, the smell of burning flesh, the hunger, the roll calls in the snow, the beatings, the deaths of Maurice Halbwachs and Diego Morales, the fraternal stench of the latrines in the Little Camp.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, certain persistent recurring dreams are experienced by the survivors as endowed with more reality than waked life which, to them, identifies with fancy. Witness Semprun's own words: "I'd woken up with a start. Awakening had not brought comfort, however, had not swept away the anguish—on the contrary. It deepened the distress while transforming it. Because the return to wakefulness, to the sleep of life, was terrifying in itself. That life was a dream—after the radiant reality of the camp—is what was terrifying."<sup>19</sup>

#### 1.4. A Change in Method

The scope and significance of historical events such as Auschwitz cannot be embraced and pondered about properly if their enduring life-defining effects are not taken into consideration. The history of Auschwitz will forever remain incomplete if its embodiment in the survivors' afterlife is not integrated in the historical analysis of the Auschwitz event. The survivors bear within their own bodies and souls the Auschwitz event as it is still in the making. In a profound sense, there is no return from Auschwitz. "Sometimes I felt certain that there hadn't really been any return, that I hadn't really come back, that an essential part of me would never come back, and this certainty upset my connection with the world, with my own life."<sup>20</sup> Historian Annette Wieviorka characterizes the transformation in the understanding of history and historical science induced by Auschwitz and its survivors testifying at court trials, such as Adolf Eichmann's:

18. Semprun, *Literature or Life*, 236.

19. *Ibid.*, 155.

20. *Ibid.*, 115.

At the heart of this newly recognized identity of the survivor was a new function: to be the bearer of history. And the advent of the witness profoundly transformed the very conditions for writing the history of the genocide. . . . The witness became an embodiment of memory [*un homme-mémoire*], attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past. Concurrently, the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify.<sup>21</sup>

Wieviorka acknowledges the dependence of historical science upon reliable sources and defines the historian as follows:

The writing of history cannot take place without “testimonies,” in the broad sense that Marc Bloch gives to this term, that is, without traces—of which archives constitute the most basic form—that make that writing possible. Nor can history be written without men and women who, in the present time of their existence and of their experience, of their desire to know, seek to understand and to put this understanding into language in order to communicate it to others, interrogating the past based on the traces that past has bequeathed to them.<sup>22</sup>

Historians are individuals who, from the standpoint of their own limited subjective experience of human existence and history, attempt to integrate particular events within a unifying framework of temporal succession, to provide these events with greater coherence and meaning.

History, as a science, can therefore be defined as a rational attempt, informed by the historian’s present situation, to construct, by means of the interpretation of past events with the help of objectively reliable documents and sources, a unique narrative. History, far from being a purely objective “discovery” of the meaning of historical events, rather, consists in meaning-building by means of storytelling enterprise. Criticizing Daniel Goldhagen’s conception of history as a science, Wieviorka “wonders . . . whether the absence of the desire to think in more general terms is not in effect the very negation of history. It would signify the death of the intellectual operation that consists in constructing a story and which is called, precisely, the

21. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.

22. *Ibid.*, 5.

writing of history.” Historical science, according to Wieviorka, identifies with and produces “a narrative that seeks both to establish the facts of the past and to give them meaning.”<sup>23</sup> History, considered as both a scientific endeavor and the result of such an activity, does not substantially differ from testimony (in oral or written form), insofar as these forms of inquiry and witnessing use the medium of narrative to construct and provide meaning to a given set of data (experiences). In both cases, the historical subject is directly involved in the meaning-making process. As Bernard Lonergan explains, “the historian starts out from statements he finds in his sources. The attempt to represent imaginatively their meaning gives rise to questions that lead on to further statements in the sources. Eventually he will have stretched a web of imaginative construction linking together the fixed points supplied by the statements in the sources.”<sup>24</sup>

This constructive process is dynamic in nature and subject to constant revision, due to the discovery of new sources, the production of new analyses of the events studied, and the fact that new events provide a wider context for the interpretation of past ones.

So, in general, history is an ongoing process. As the process advances, the context within which events are to be understood keeps enlarging. As the context enlarges, perspectives shift. . . . New documents fill out the picture; they illuminate what before was obscure; they shift perspectives; they refute what was venturesome or speculative; they do not simply dissolve the whole network of questions and answers that made the original set of data massive evidence for the earlier account. . . . Only inasmuch as a context is still open, or can be opened or extended, do later events throw new light on earlier persons, events, processes.<sup>25</sup>

More exactly, the historian acts as an interpreter reconstructing (that is, constructing again or anew) the sequence of events as they actually occurred in the past (then present). In so doing, the historian unveils aspects of the context, events, and actions under consideration which eluded the awareness (that is, the consciousness) of the agents

23. *Ibid.*, 92–93.

24. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 205.

25. *Ibid.*, 192.

involved. In this regard, history—as a reconstructive interpretive process—produces new intelligibility by shedding light on correlations and interactions of whose existence the persons involved were, at best, only implicitly aware. To illustrate this point, Lonergan uses the example of the development of Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on grace in contradistinction to its subsequent interpretation.

Thomas Aquinas effected a remarkable development in the theology of grace. He did so not at a single stroke but in a series of writings over a period of a dozen years or more. Now, while there is no doubt that Aquinas was quite conscious of what he was doing on each of the occasions on which he returned to the topic, still on none of the earlier occasions was he aware of what he would be doing on the later occasions, and there is just no evidence that after the last occasion he went back over all his writings on the matter, observed each of the long and complicated series of steps in which the development was effected, grasped their interrelations, say just what moved him forward and, perhaps, what held him back in each of the steps. But such a reconstruction of the whole process is precisely what the interpreter does. His overall view, his nest of questions and answers, is precisely a grasp of this array of interconnections and interdependences constitutive of a single development.<sup>26</sup>

History therefore identifies with the attempt to make explicit the network of relations tying a series of actions or events together so as to unveil their intrinsic intelligibility, as revealed by their integration within a larger context and sequence. The witnessing survivors—by the production of their testimonies—attempt to accomplish the very same interpretive task in regard to their own lives, their own experience of the camps.

Historical accounts cannot elude the involvement of human subjectivity in the making of history as both event and interpretation of that event. The way human beings interpret events in which they take part directly influences how they actually do act, and therefore, generate history. The true perspective of the historical agent and interpreter, thus, identifies with “the uncanny middle voice of one who is in history and who tells it simultaneously, one who lives in

26. *Ibid.*, 165.

history as well as through its telling.”<sup>27</sup> With respect to Auschwitz and its historical interpretation, the decision to opt for such a perspective entails, as James E. Young explains, the “need to find a middle road by which the living memory of the eyewitness might be assimilated to the historical record without using it only rhetorically to authenticate any given narrative, without allowing it to endow the surrounding narrative with the seeming naturalness of the survivor’s voice.”<sup>28</sup> Integrating the input and perspective of the witness and her testimony within the historical record does not demand from the historian that she give up her critical mind, but rather, the opposite. If Wieviorka is right when she argues that “the imperative of an obstinate quest for the truth” constitutes “an imperative of the historian’s profession,”<sup>29</sup> it is partly because the multiple eyewitness accounts, sources, and the historian’s own perspective on the object of study are intrinsically biased and incomplete. These accounts therefore stand in need of critical assessment and correlation with other sources and perspectives. The factual discrepancies existing within and between multiple eyewitness accounts of the same events do not contradict the more fundamental fact that human action always is embedded within the context of a predetermined anticipatory interpretation of the course of events. Interpretive anticipation directly impacts the generation of historical events. According to Young,

Nothing can be more authentic than the ways in which the diarists’ interpretations of experiences gathered the weight and force of agency in their lives. Nothing is more “true” than the consequences for a life that issue from the manner in which this life may have been narrated the previous day. In this sense, diaries assume an historical importance beyond whatever facts they could possibly deliver. In the diaries of Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Ringelblum, Zelig Kalmanovitsh, and others, we have incontrovertible truth of the ways in which their narratives of events may have constituted the basis for action within these same events. Thus, the

27. James E. Young, “Between History and Memory: The Voice of the Eyewitness,” in *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, ed. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler (New York: Routledge, 2003), 280.

28. *Ibid.*, 279.

29. Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 132.

narrative grasp of events might be said to have woven itself back into the unfolding course of events.<sup>30</sup>

### 1.5. Surviving Auschwitz: An Unfinished Tale

The narratives from and in which the survivors draw the power to live and be historical agents after Auschwitz do take a particular form. Despite the research accomplished by thousands of historians and experts since the end of World War II, from the standpoint of the survivors and their descendants, the historical narrative of Auschwitz has yet to be constructed. According to Nathalie Zajde, a renowned psychiatrist, “the Shoah, today, is not only a concern for the survivors, but also for their children and their children’s children. It seems that these phenomena find a sufficient account in the nature of the Shoah itself: an event whose significance is unknown—an event to be constructed from the facts it generates.”<sup>31</sup> Beyond the factual description (remembrance) of camp experience, the survivors’ testimony and witness to Auschwitz is embodied in a quest for the meaning of this experience itself, putting into question their entire existence. Before anything else, Auschwitz is to its survivors an unfathomable existential and spiritual mystery, still to be resolved. The experience and memory of Auschwitz are profoundly traumatic in nature. “Survivors of the Shoah ask themselves numerous questions, some of which essential: Why did this happen? How did I survive? Why me? . . . They have suffered trauma, that is to say a transformative event which necessarily triggers a quest for meaning. As long as they have not found a suitable answer, they remain unresolved.”<sup>32</sup> This traumatically induced investigation of the foundation of human existence sets the survivors apart from the conventional, usual, and regular course of events and life, which in turn, estranges them from their communities.

The traumatized is an individual whose soul is the tragic bearer of an

30. Young, “Between History and Memory,” 282–83.

31. Nathalie Zajde, *Guérir de la Shoah. Psychothérapie des survivants et de leurs descendants* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), 21.

32. *Ibid.*, 246.

emerging question to which his social group has not yet found a suitable answer, which perhaps it has not even formulated. . . . Among all the sufferings, all the pathologies to which the survivors' children are prone, to this day I must confess having been able to identify only one invariant: to consider themselves unique, alone in the world—singletons. . . . That they conceive themselves as marooned entails that they have not yet entered a world able to understand and speak to them, a world corresponding to who they are.<sup>33</sup>

For survivors (and their relatives), the act and process of producing a testimony of their camp experience then becomes a way to grant meaning to the latter, a way to reclaim and reconstruct their identity. As Wieviorka explains,

When former inmates know that they are at least being truly listened to, if not understood, testimony returns their dignity to them, in the very part of their identity that had been humiliated: that of former concentration camp inmates or ghetto survivors. . . . Thus testimony re-establishes not only the identity of the survivors but also the identities of the descendants of those who died without graves, by allowing them to imagine the circumstances of their relatives' deaths and thus to begin the work of mourning.<sup>34</sup>

Nathalie Heinich, sociologist, concurs with Wieviorka: "More than memory, testimonies of this experience also involve critical self-reflection. That is the reason why testimonies must be considered true means for the reconstruction of personal identity, and not merely as factual accounts fulfilling a purely informational purpose."<sup>35</sup> The words of Sara Selver-Urbach, a survivor, confirm Heinich's and Wieviorka's claims in poignant fashion: "Like everybody else, I was a human wreck, and writing was a futile attempt to pick up the pieces of my shattered life and faith, and to glue them anew."<sup>36</sup>

The instrumental relation of testimony production to personal identity reconstruction follows from the fact that to preserve

33. *Ibid.*, 31 and 50–51.

34. Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 127–28.

35. Nathalie Heinich, *Sortir des camps, sortir du silence. De l'indicible à l'imprescriptible*. Réflexions faites Series (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2011), 34.

36. Sara Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home: Memories from the Ghetto Lodz*, trans. Siona Bodansky (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1971), 133.

something of their identity, the inmates were forced to separate their inner life (over which they had some control) from their material living conditions (over which they had little influence). By witnessing, not only do survivors remain faithful, through the memorial act, to their personal identity as it entered and suffered the camps, they also build bridges uniting this past to the present. By so doing, they work at overcoming the estrangement of their inner lives and selves from their outer ones. As Heinich explains,

Indeed—as is confirmed by the literature produced by extermination camp survivors—the preservation of self-esteem, of a certain level of freedom of thought rather than of a small measure of autonomy in action most of the time follows from the splitting of personal identity, of the person’s ability to conceive herself independently from the reality she cannot evade. But once of necessity virtue has been made, this habit of identity splitting becomes a yoke preventing adaptation upon return to normal life. . . . Not to forget, to remember then becomes a means to avoid the destructive effects of this splitting: to assume the past in the name of mastery over the present.<sup>37</sup>

Lawrence L. Langer similarly argues that the behavior of witnessing camp inmates demonstrates that their remembered past coexists in tension with their present, leading them to simultaneously dwell in two distinct moral worlds. “It is clear from the struggle of many witnesses, from their expressions as well as their words, that they inhabit two worlds simultaneously: the one of ‘choiceless choice’ then; the other of moral evaluation now. Harmony and integration are not only impossible—they are not even desirable.”<sup>38</sup> By reason of the numerous and stringent conditions whose fulfillment the production of a testimony presupposes, witnessing camp survivors form a highly distinctive group of people.

In matters of camp internment, a witness, before being someone who has decided to produce a testimony, is someone who has returned. . . . A survivor who witnesses is someone who has returned not only with the physical, but also the moral ability to speak; someone, thus, whose

37. Heinich, *Sortir des camps*, 95–96.

38. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 83.

identity has not been decimated to the point of preventing her from speaking out. And finally: a witnessing survivor is someone who has been heard or, at least, received the promise, the hope that one day she would be heard.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.6. A Silent Witness

The extreme conditions and trauma to which camp inmates were subjected incite us to investigate further the nature and status of the surviving witness. These conditions actually reveal the primary purpose served by the camps: the extermination of the inmates, the mass killing of entire populations. The Nazis expected, planned, and considered “normal” that internment in concentration camps would end with the inmate’s death. The full extent of the experience of the camps, therefore, comprises death as one of its central elements, both in the intention of the perpetrators and as the tenor of the inmates’ experience of suffering. It would, therefore, seem that only the victims who died in the camps could offer an exhaustive and entirely faithful testimony of the Auschwitz experience. How could these victims, on the one hand, act as witnesses from the realm of death? How could camp survivors, on the other hand, testify of the experience of death? How and where could survivors find justification to bear witness to and on behalf of the dead? The Auschwitz experience appears to be mysteriously deprived of authentic witnesses. Giorgio Agamben captures the gist of the problem: “The Shoah is an event without witnesses in the double sense that it is impossible to bear witness to it from the inside—since no one can bear witness from the inside of death, and there is no voice for the disappearance of voice—and from the outside—since the ‘outsider’ is by definition excluded from the event.”<sup>40</sup> The condition of surviving witness seems paradoxical, if not, by nature, self-contradictory. As Orietta Ombrosi explains, the reality is that

Those who would have been able to bear witness directly—those who

39. Heinrich, *Sortir des camps*, 139.

40. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 35.

died in the gas chambers—are all dead, and those who survived cannot take the place of the dead. Nor do they have the right to testify, because their testimony is considered as false, given that they are still here, still alive. . . . In other words, the fact of bearing witness runs up against the impossibility of being a witness, or rather, testimony revokes and invalidates the witness because the true witness has died, has been annihilated, and with him his possibility of speech, including the speech to provide testimony.<sup>41</sup>

For survivors, the fact of being alive and able to speak plainly contradicts the existence of the Shoah, whose purpose it was to extinguish language and life in all its victims. Bearing witness to Auschwitz is not at all self-evident, the possibility and legitimacy of such witness need to be convincingly demonstrated. The form and content of survivor testimonies, the conditions under which such testimonies can be produced need to be properly defined. We must realize, though, that this framing of the question is abstract, as it presupposes the ability to distinguish clearly human life from death. In the extraordinary conditions of the camps, however, the frontier between good and evil, human and inhuman had been blurred, if not completely erased. In Auschwitz existed what Primo Levi called a “gray zone,” that is, a “zone in which the ‘long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner’ comes loose, where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion. What is at issue here, therefore, is a zone of irresponsibility and ‘*impotentia iudicandi*’ that is situated not beyond good and evil but rather, so to speak, before them.”<sup>42</sup> The condition of most camp inmates ultimately reached a point where, while remaining biologically alive, they displayed no identifiable signs of a distinctive personal identity. As Levi himself describes,

All the *Muselmänner* who finished in the gas chambers have the same

41. Orietta Ombrosi, *The Twilight of Reason: Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer and Levinas Tested by the Catastrophe*, trans. Victoria Aris, Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Series (Brighton: Academic Studies, 2012), 99.

42. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 21.

story, or more exactly, have no story. . . . [They] form the backbone of the camp, 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. They crowd my memory with their faceless presence . . . 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.<sup>43</sup>

Here is how Wladyslaw Fejkiel, an inmate physician, describes the *Muselmann*:

The patient's only symptoms were slowness of movement and debility. . . . The second stage began when the starveling had lost one-third of his normal weight. His gaze became clouded, and his face assumed an apathetic, absent, mournful expression. His eyes were veiled and his eyeballs hollow. His skin began to turn a pale gray, had a paper-thin, hard appearance, and started to peel. . . . The patient's hair became shaggy, lustreless, and brittle. His head became elongated, and his cheekbones and eye sockets stood out. The patient breathed slowly and spoke softly with a great effort. . . . Edemas appeared, and their size depended on the length of the starvation. . . . The patients became indifferent to everything that went on around them and detached themselves from all ties to their environment. If they could still move, they did so slowly and without bending their knees. As a consequence of their low body temperature, which was usually thirty-six degrees Centigrade, they shivered from the cold. Anyone who observed a group of patients from a distance had the impression of seeing praying Arabs. This accounts for the designation *Muselmänner* in the camp for starving prisoners.<sup>44</sup>

One can therefore argue, with Agamben, for the existence of “a point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human. This point is the *Muselmann*, and the camp is his exemplary site.”<sup>45</sup>

Agamben takes a step further and goes on to claim that the *Muselmann's* inhuman humanity disqualifies traditional understandings of ethics and human dignity, because this humanity exists

43. Levi, *If This Is a Man*, in *If This is a Man, The Truce*, 105–6.

44. Cited in Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 91–92.

45. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 55.

and evolves in a realm where these traditional concepts do not apply. “To deny the *Muselmann*’s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture. The *Muselmann* has, instead, moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless. But if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see.”<sup>46</sup> Agamben’s solution to the problem of defining a witness suitable for Auschwitz fully acknowledges the testimony *in absentia* of its complete victims (the millions of people who died in the camps). According to him, genuine witness must be borne not to Auschwitz itself (which, in any case, is impossible), but to the *Muselmann*, the human who, because of and through Auschwitz, has effectively become non-human.

Let us, indeed, posit Auschwitz, that to which it is not possible to bear witness; and let us posit the *Muselmann* as the absolute impossibility of bearing witness. If the witness bears witness for the *Muselmann*, if he succeeds in bringing to speech an impossibility of speech—if the *Muselmann* is thus constituted as the whole witness—then the denial of Auschwitz is refuted in its very foundation. In the *Muselmann*, the impossibility of bearing witness is no longer a mere privation. Instead, it has become real; it exists as such. If the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the *Muselmann*, if he speaks only on the basis of an impossibility of speaking, then his testimony cannot be denied. Auschwitz—that to which it is not possible to bear witness—is absolutely and irrefutably proven.<sup>47</sup>

The survivors who bear witness to the victims of Auschwitz—epitomized in the person of the *Muselmann*—therefore act “by proxy” or as “surrogate witnesses.” They stand for people, they symbolize an experience that has passed, which still remains far beyond the embrace of human language and thought. As Dorothea Glowacka explains,

Insofar as one is a witness, one is located in the victim’s place, vicariously

46. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

47. *Ibid.*, 164.

entering the unimaginable site where speech ceases, in order to bring that silence to speech. . . . The witness is motivated by an obligation to lend his voice and his talent as a storyteller to those who cannot speak. . . . The survivors are never true witnesses since they cannot testify to the limit experience at which only those who were permanently silenced had arrived. Rather, the survivor is already a surrogate witness, borrowing the authority to speak from the dead.<sup>48</sup>

### 1.7. Confining Languages

The root of the problem does not lie in the inexistence of a language able to bespeak Auschwitz, for Auschwitz did possess a language of its own. The problem, rather, is that camp language is only meaningful to those who have been interned. Isabella Leitner, a survivor, writes: “There is an English language, there is French. There is Russian, also Spanish. There is Hungarian, there is Chinese. According to the Bible, God punished humanity in Babel with a madness of languages, but there is one language even God cannot understand—only we do, those of us who were prisoners in the shadow of the crematorium. I call it *Lager* language, and each word means a different kind of suffering.”<sup>49</sup> The act of translating the language of the camp into other—neutral with respect to the camp—languages takes away the unique and extremely powerful emotional and existential impact it had on the inmates. “In translation, the fear that the sound of the German language strikes into the hearts of the inhabitants of the [camp], its harshness when it is used as a tool of torture, and the threat of betrayal sensed when it suddenly comes from the lips of their Polish neighbors, are neutralized and disarmed.”<sup>50</sup> The act of translation takes away the affective charge of camp language. Translation sets a distance and operates a mediation between the signified reality of the camp and the linguistic universe into which this reality is being translated. Translation, thus, provides the witness with greater freedom and

48. Dorothea Glowacka, *Disappearing Traces: Holocaust Testimonials, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, Stephen S. Weinstein Series in Post-Holocaust Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 38.

49. Isabella Leitner and Irving A. Leitner, *Isabella: From Auschwitz to Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 227. The word “lager” is the German word used to designate the camps; the phrase *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz* means “Auschwitz concentration camp.”

50. Glowacka, *Disappearing Traces*, 82.