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The Moral Witness

The Eichmann Trial and Its Aftermath

Abstract

This lecture addresses how “bearing witness to genocide” became a central trope of contemporary Western moral culture. The 1960/1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem put victims of genocide centre-stage and affirmed the pre-eminence of the Jewish Holocaust survivor in European and especially American politics and culture. The lecture revisits the Eichmann trial to understand its contribution not simply to bringing the world’s attention to the Jewish dimension of the Holocaust, but also to understanding how the trial shaped the pervasive figure of the Jewish “witness” who marked the Holocaust as a caesura in human history. The Holocaust survivor remained the iconic witness even when, after the 1990s, the witness to genocide became a more generic symbol of suffering humanity in the shadow of all state-sponsored mass violence against persons and cultures. The lecture suggests that only by placing the witness to genocide in a longer historical trajectory can we understand why the Holocaust remains iconic in spite of the occurrence of many other genocides since.

By the end of the twentieth century, “bearing witness” to genocide was an increasingly common expression of social solidarity and of protest against the pain of others. The “witness to genocide” was a pervasive icon of suffering humanity in place of “human conscience” and the “conscience of mankind” to symbolise the affront caused by mass violence to human moral sensibilities. Today “witness to genocide”, which first described the survivors of the Holocaust of European Jewry, is used as a title for books and conferences about the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides, as well as for articles in newspapers and museum events.¹ My subject is how the witness to genocide has become a central trope of contemporary Western moral culture. Like witnesses from earlier periods, including abolitionists fighting slavery, Jews condemning pogroms, and humanitarians denouncing mass atrocities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the witness to genocide is a moral witness for whom false testimony is a sacrilege.² But this recent “witness” is also a new figure that tracks the history of how Western Europeans’ and North Americans’ understanding of genocide changed over time, from an unconscionable, reparable, and at worst regrettable form of barbarism to a permanent feature of modern political formations. The witness traces a development in which “never again” has been replaced by the conviction that for now, we should do our best to prevent genocide.

How did this most recent witness take shape? How did this figure, now a ubiquitous and self-evident reference to the Western moral imagination, first appear and

1 A small sample (the list could go on) includes: Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide*, New York 1993; Richard A. Salem (ed.), *Witness to Genocide. The Children of Rwanda. Drawings by Child Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide of 1994*, with a foreword by Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York 2000; *Bearing Witness to Genocide and the Plight of the Minorities in Iraq*, panel presented by NGO leaders in Washington, D.C. on 16 April 2016.

2 The prohibition against false witness is the ninth commandment of the Hebrew Bible. On the “moral witness”, see: Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, MA 2002, 163-168.

change over time? The usual discussion of the witness to genocide assumes that it emerged in the form of the Jewish Holocaust survivor during the 1961/1962 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. In this essay, I revisit the Eichmann trial, not to challenge the myriad accounts of the Israeli and broader reception of the trial, including the debate around Hannah Arendt's writings, or the assertion that the trial marked the recognition of Jewish survivors for the first time – it did. The “survivor”, as has so often been argued, became an exemplar of heroic Jewish memory and later an icon in a new Jewish civil religion.³ Instead, I make three other historical and conceptual claims:

First, the Eichmann trial is so widely remembered not only because it brought recognition to the Jewish dimension of Nazi persecution, but also because it first developed a novel concept of survival linked to the experience of genocide. The symbol of the Holocaust survivor was part of a broader shift that defined victims as authoritative sources and genocidal massacres as distinct from mass death in combat and colonial conquest. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moral witnesses like abolitionists and humanitarians were dismayed spectators more often than victims because distance afforded them credibility that victims' accounts did not possess. Though first-hand accounts by war veterans after the First World War (1914–1918) were granted special status, it was only after the Second World War (1939–1945) that victims' voices more fully replaced the “civilised” spectator's dismay with the victim's experience and injuries. French and Italian anti-Nazi resistance members, like war veterans, were “witnesses” to the camps.⁴ Jewish Holocaust survivors, the recognition of whose suffering emerged only belatedly in the 1960s, came to represent universally suffering humanity whose revelations derived not only from war or resistance, but from another experience of extreme degradation and near annihilation. Holocaust survivor testimonies represented the Nazi genocide as a particular violation of humanity and attributed a new meaning to survival, which was no longer merely a reference to bare physical sustenance but to having endured an ostensibly novel experience of human vulnerability. Jewish survivors symbolised the caesura created by genocide between two images of the West: an enlightened, progressive past committed to human betterment and a post-genocide recognition of Western barbarism. By the 1970s, Jewish survivors possessed authority derived from their experiences as the concentration and extermination camps became a metaphor not only of totalitarian repression, but also of modern destructiveness; the survivor's violated humanity represented modernity's and postmodernity's potential political and cultural consequences.⁵

3 Among the numerous discussions of the role the Holocaust plays in contemporary Western culture, see: Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, New York 2000; Gary Weismann, *Fantasies of Witnessing. Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, Ithaca 2004; Larissa Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance as 'Civil Religion'. The Case of the Stockholm Declaration*, in: Diana I. Popescu/Tanja Schult (ed.), *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, New York 2015, 288-304. Another strain of thought that stresses the boundary between history and memory and the problems of Holocaust sensationalism is best represented by Annette Wieviorka, *L'ère du témoin [The Era of the Witness]*, Paris 1998.

4 David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, translated by Ramon Guthrie, New York 1947. See also: Primo Levi, *Testimonianza per Eichmann [Testimony for Eichmann]*, in: *Il Ponte [The Bridge]* 17 (1961) 4, 647, reprinted in Fabio Levi/Domenico Scarpa (ed.), *Così fu Auschwitz. Testimonianze 1945–1986 con Leonardo De Benedetti [Thus was Auschwitz. Testimonies 1945–1986, with Leonardo De Benedetti]*, Turin 2015, 70. Levi proclaimed that “anyone who recounts massacres of women and children, by the hand of whomever, in whatever country, in the name of whatever ideology, is our brother, and we will be in solidarity with him.”

5 I should note here that while international law did not retain Raphael Lemkin's idea of cultural genocide, treating it instead by reference to more tangible property crimes or theft, the symbol of the Holocaust survivor represented this dimension of Nazi murderousness. Leora Bilsky/Rachel Klagsbrun, *The Return of Cultural Genocide?*, in: *The European Journal of International Law* 29 (2018) 2, 373-396.

Second, the Eichmann trial rendered the evil of the Holocaust a source of moral consensus in Western Europe and especially in the United States. The definition of who is and who is not a symbolic witness is always linked to a moral consensus around victims whose suffering can be universalised and whose presence no longer inspires guilt and denial. Eichmann's trial generated a lasting moral consensus about Jewish death, itself belated, extremely fragile, and contested by Holocaust denial. In the aftermath of the Eichmann trial, Jews, once berated for not having resisted their persecutors and suspected of complicity in their own deaths, were recast as innocent survivors of unspeakable violence. Because Western powers still rationalised imperial conquest as subduing savagery and repressing rebellion rather than violating humanity, the Holocaust survivor rather than colonised victims of genocidal violence came to represent Western Europeans' and North Americans' discovery of their own destructiveness and to reflect their self-recognition. By the 1960s there was a thin consensus against the violence colonised victims had suffered but not against the colonial regimes that perpetrated it. By contrast, the consensus that developed around the Nazis' attempted annihilation of European Jewry rendered Holocaust survivors relatively uncontested reminders of the destruction of which human beings were capable.⁶ Western reckoning with the legacy of colonial violence came later, in the wake of post-colonial protests against imperial nations.

Third, because of this moral consensus regarding Jewish victims of the Holocaust, they eventually became symbols of Western moral conscience. A decade after the Eichmann trial, Jewish survivors moved from the margins of the Holocaust to become its icons; as a new narrative of human and ecological survival developed in the 1960s and 1970s, Holocaust survivors became quintessential witnesses to genocide, especially in the United States, and shorthand for the moral obligations of Western populations to remedy the suffering of others. In spite of numerous other genocides since the Holocaust, the Jewish survivor remains a point of comparison when genocidal violence is imagined and conveyed. Indeed, the invocation of the Holocaust witness to summon the international community to invest resources or to act boldly has turned the Holocaust into an explanation, both by antisemites and anti-racists, for why other past and present genocides are marginalised or forgotten.

To address these claims, I will explore how the Eichmann trial rendered the survivor an object of moral consensus by erasing the guilt and ambivalence projected onto the victims. In so doing, it rendered stigmatised victims publicly blameless and worthy of recognition. Witness testimony was the first large public revelation, not only of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, but also of the psychological suffering endured by noncombatant victims targeted for extermination and industrial mur-

6 International human rights proclamations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Genocide Convention (1948) recognised the historical significance of the Holocaust as a vast exterminatory programme proper to authoritarian states, but also preserved state sovereignty in national and colonial undertakings, making it unlikely that genocide perpetrated by imperial powers would be prosecuted, at least in the short term. Moral witnesses emerged in colonial conflicts, such as Djamilia Boupacha, who in 1962 publicised her torture at the hands of the French army during the Algerian War. Such witnesses were heroes to some but remained enemies to others. Without a clear consensus about the wrongness of colonialism, the humanity of the victims might be acknowledged, but violence against them was often justified by logics of *raison d'état* and racism, effectively minimising the real impact of persecution and repression. See: G. Daniel Cohen, 'The Holocaust and the "Human Rights Revolution": A Reassessment', in: Akira Iriye/Petra Goode/William I. Hitchcock (ed.), *The Human Rights Revolution. An International History*, Oxford 2012, 53-72; Rebecca Jinks, *Representing Genocide. The Holocaust as Paradigm?* New York 2016; Simone de Beauvoir/Djamila Boupacha, *Djamila Boupacha. The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, translated by Peter Green, New York 1962. Erik Lindstrum, 'Facts About Atrocity. Reporting Colonial Violence in Postwar Britain', in: *History Workshop Journal* 84 (2017), 108-127.

der. Unlike resistance fighters, also called “witnesses”, Jewish victims had to prove in the face of skepticism that they could not have resisted and that their suffering was undeserved. They had to rebut insinuations that they had gone like “sheep to the slaughter”; their survival was a source of shame in Israel and of guilt and indifference elsewhere.

The head of the section of the Gestapo responsible for ‘Jewish affairs’ in 1941, Adolf Eichmann played an important role in organising transports of Jews to death camps in Eastern Europe. He escaped after the war but was kidnapped in Argentina by Israeli secret service agents and tried in Jerusalem after a lengthy investigation. He was finally sentenced to death and executed on 1 June 1962. How did the Eichmann trial lay the groundwork for transforming survivors into “survivors” and witnesses into “witnesses”? The Zionist narrative, the most important at the time, turned the trial into the last stage of an epic and heroic struggle to defend the Jewish nation, redeeming the victims’ suffering by symbolically rectifying their statelessness. Some accounts of the trial also focus on how, outside of Israel, the trial universalised Jewish suffering and made it accessible to non-Jews as a story about the human capacity for evil.⁷ Far less explored is how trial witnesses and observers shaped an alternative narrative about mass murder distinct from tales of tragic heroism like attorney general Gideon Hausner’s Zionist account or the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This alternative story cast survival not only in conventional heroic terms, but also as a source of unfathomable vulnerability more in keeping with the experiences the witnesses conveyed on the stand. The survivor recounted an inconceivable experience of terror and in the process challenged assumptions about the victims’ purported failure to resist Nazi persecution.⁸ These haunted figures articulated the difficulty of conveying their experiences by conjuring the dead in the courtroom, bringing them to life and bringing into presence the torment that had rendered resistance mostly desperate and survival a burden.

At the Jerusalem trial, survivor testimony actively supplemented the review of a multitude of documents with unusually rich, meaning-conferring narratives that placed victims centre stage by transforming Jewish survivors from passive objects, often of contempt, who did not fight back, into human beings constrained by unimaginable terror and despised by an enemy determined to wipe them off the face of the earth. Though Eichmann was under indictment, the witnesses were forced into a defensive position from the outset. Hausner famously asked them painful questions about why they had behaved weakly and passively in the face of the Nazi onslaught. The testimonies that recounted the pointlessness of resistance or escape punctuated the trial and were among its most harrowing moments. Hausner elicited this testimony because he aimed to undermine the then pervasive beliefs in Jewish cowardice and complicity, even at the risk of distressing witnesses. He forced survivors to describe the effects of terror, imminent death, the price of resistance, and the power of

7 Devin O. Pendas, *The Eichmann Trial in Law and Memory*, in: Jens Meierhenrich/Devin O. Pendas (ed.), *Political Trials in Theory and History*, Cambridge 2016, 226-228. Pendas historicises what is implicit in other accounts about the “globalisation” and “Americanisation” of the Holocaust.

8 Hanna Yablonka argues that the trial generated a “new heroism” by reference to Hansi Brand’s testimony – one based on endurance rather than resistance – but she does not elaborate in any depth. Hanna Yablonka, *Three Variations on the Testimony in the Eichmann Trial*, in: David Bankier/Dan Michman (ed.), *Holocaust Historiography in Context. Emergences, Challenges, Polemics, Achievements*, New York/Jerusalem 2008, 577. One legal theorist argued that the prosecutor used nationhood to evoke heroism because efforts to emphasise the brutality of the Nazis alone could not confer “pride and respect” on survivors. Stephen Landsman, *The Eichmann Case and the Invention of the Witness-Driven Atrocity Trial*, in: *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 51 (2012) 69, 85. This is the sort of perspective Yablonka contested and that I call into question here, though clearly “new heroism” had its limits – it was not to emerge in earnest until the 1970s.

hope, compelling observers to grapple anew with their feelings that Jews should have put up more of a fight, which were as common in Israel as elsewhere. Hausner's questions about revolt were sometimes indirect, as when he asked why Jews continued to believe they would live in spite of what they knew about extermination camps after 1942. The testimony of Abba Kovner, leader of the Vilna ghetto resistance and also famous for regretting a statement he made about how Jews were led like lambs to the slaughter, described a hopeless world in which the illusion of hope prevailed and sealed Jews' fate.

Judge Halevi: At the end of your remarks you said: 'Between us and the enemy there was something more,' if I understood you correctly. What were you referring to?

Witness Kovner: The illusion that we did not all share the same fate. That until the last moment, even if one knew that there was a Ponary [Paneriai, site of mass execution near Vilnius, Lithuania], they always gave us a spark, this distorted hope, that possibly you would be exempt. The frightful illusion produced frightful results of people wanting to prolong the life of some at the expense of others [...] Only a minority that felt itself possibly less stricken, less misled, less under shock, due to its past, its education and its adherence to certain movements which trained people to give a personal example, perhaps only they could cope with it. And it is not, evidently, a matter of chance from where the people came in every ghetto, who formed the fighting nucleus. Perhaps it arose from the fact that they experienced less degradation, that they were less panic-stricken, and they knew better how to live in the ghetto as free men in every respect.⁹

Kovner emphasised the theme of hope and its ability to impede resistance. He speculated about the type of people who retained their humanity. They were a small minority, likely Zionists with training, who knew how to manage the degradation and panic from which even they were not free, as suggested by his use of the conditional "possibility" and "perhaps" in reference to "trained people".

Whatever his debt to Zionism, the memory of those too weak and too terrorised to fight was most engraved in Kovner's mind. In his testimony, the resistance hero remembered most acutely not an uprising, but the image of a terrified girl as she was shot. "If you will allow me", Kovner interrupted during Hausner's questions about the massacres at Ponary, "I shall describe the thing which is engraved in my memory most of all." He went on to describe the murder of a young girl about which a friend of his had told him, ending his story of how she was shot in the back by an Einsatzgruppen soldier with the words: "Why should I tell more?"¹⁰

Testimony refashioned survival as a form of extreme and miraculous endurance rather than conventional heroism, and as the experience of devastating and unfathomable loss. The dramatic contrast between received ideas about how human beings might fight and defeat their persecutors and the terror that discouraged all but the most desperate acts of resistance describes the incommensurable gap between the public's presumptions about how people might be expected to act under such circumstances and the survivors' experience. Participants, but also trial observers – Elie Wiesel, Hausner, Haim Gouri, Muriel Spark, Harry Mulisch, and others – figured the suffering that haunted most of the witnesses by invoking the deathly atmo-

9 The Trial of Adolf Eichmann. Record of Proceedings in the District Court of Jerusalem [hereafter TAE], 9 vols., Jerusalem 1992–1995, Vol. 1, 466.

10 TAE, Vol. 1, 460.

sphere their testimonies brought into being. They also cast them as emissaries of the dead. Asked first by the attorney general and then by the judge whether he had worked in a Sonderkommando until July 1944, witness Avraham Karasik replied: “On 13 July 1944 they liquidated us.”¹¹ Another witness, Dov Frieberg, who had been ordered to carry corpses in Sobibor, recounted how “the dead man – whom I believed to be dead – sat up and asked me: ‘Is it still far to go?’”¹² Rivka Yoselewska’s testimony was perhaps the most dramatic in this regard. It was given only one court session after Hausner announced that she had suffered a heart attack and might not be able to appear. She testified the next day. Shot along with her family and village, she was left for dead. As she put it: “the four whom we likened to Angels of Death shot each one of us separately.”¹³ She crawled out of the mass grave covered in blood, with nowhere to go. In despair, she sought to dig her way back into the grave, but it rebuffed her efforts. She slept on it for three nights and wandered around for several weeks, surviving because a sympathetic peasant took pity on her and gave her food, after which she joined a group of Jews hiding in the forest.

Yoselewska’s testimony brought into being the dead and dying so dramatically that observers imagined her as a symbolic repository of cries from the mass grave. Her survival was miraculous, Elie Wiesel insisted, but she could not live in this “impure” world because her real home was with the dead.¹⁴ Observers tried to imagine her powerlessness and subjection, which defied all narratives of heroic redemption. She was not only an Israeli heroine but also an otherworldly presence; she relived her death every day and was too pure to live on earth. As Moshe Perlman, writing on the trial for an English-language audience, stated: “She remarried, has two children, and now lives in the Ramat Gan garden suburb close to Tel Aviv. But you can tell from her face and the way she speaks that she relives her living death in the bloody pit every moment she is awake.”¹⁵

Witnesses do not simply honor an oath to the dead by testifying, but bring their sacred bond with the deceased into being. These ghostly survivors took observers on a journey to hell, plunging them into flames, smoke, gas, and death. Israeli journalist Haim Gouri proclaimed: “One hundred eleven witnesses, an endless procession now receding from view, sinking and rising in a miasma of blood and smoke. One hundred and eleven proxies, each taking his or her turn on the witness stand, and leading us across the desolate landscape.”¹⁶ The witnesses spoke, the audience listened, and the room was transformed into an enormous meeting of the living and dead in which it was sometimes hard to distinguish between the two. It is as if the witnesses themselves had summoned the dead, the flames, and the souls into the courtroom.¹⁷ Survivors not only testified about their experiences, they also appeared to observers as oracles of truth from another world: Some transmitted the voices of the dead in a flat, constrained, and humble delivery, as if self-abnegation would allow their agonised bond with the dead to surface and was a tone better suited to the enormity of

11 TAE, Vol. 1, 474.

12 TAE, Vol. 3, 1177.

13 TAE, Vol. 1, 516.

14 Elie Wiesel, *Eichmann’s Victims and the Unheard Testimony*, in: *Commentary* 32 (1 December 1961) 6, 510–516. This essay is reprinted in revised form in Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, New York 1968, 174–197, here 173.

15 Moshe Pearlman, *The Capture and Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, New York 1963, 311. Interviewed in David Perlov’s 1979 film *Memories of the Eichmann Trial*, Yoselewska repeated much the same thing about how she felt on a daily basis, but also remarked that many other people went through the same experience.

16 Haim Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth. The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, translated by Michael Swirsky, Detroit 2004, 140.

17 Here one might speak of secondary trauma.

the crimes committed against them.¹⁸ Critics interpreted their testimony not only as free of sentimentality, but also as a form of self-surrender and an exercise in humility. The American writer Martha Gelhorn, covering the Eichmann trial for *The Atlantic Monthly*, wrote that “all of the witnesses were humble; none had anything much to say about his own life or acts. They were only reporting what they knew because they had seen and heard it, lived through it. [...] They spoke of others.”¹⁹

In his 1961 essay on the trial, Elie Wiesel, in despair about Hausner’s questions about Jewish resistance, argued that Jews died without a struggle in order not to betray those who had perished before them.²⁰ “Knowing themselves abandoned, excluded, rejected by the rest of humanity, their walk to death, as haughty as it was submissive, became an act of lucidity, of protest, and not of acceptance and weakness.”²¹ Survivors preferred, he wrote, “not to hurl their defiance at men” but to “remain silent” in a monologue with the dead.²² Hausner could not conceive the torment his questions must have inflicted on the witnesses, who now had to defend those who died not only from the usual suspects, but also from an Israeli prosecutor. Wiesel wrote:

“It is by a strange irony of fate that the only ones who were, who still are fully conscious of their share of responsibility for the dead are those who were saved, the ghosts who returned from the dead. They do not feel this through any concept of original sin; they are Jews, they do not believe in original sin. The idea that rules them is more immediate, more agonizing, a part of their very being.

Why did you not revolt? Why did you not resist? You were a thousand against ten, against one. Why did you let yourselves, like cattle, be led to the slaughter?”²³

Angry at Hausner’s provocation, Wiesel represented Jews courageously marching to their deaths with dignity, recasting Jewish resistance in keeping with the realities of death camps, and portraying Jewish survival in a new light. The dead now set an example for those still alive. In Wiesel’s account, Jewish pride and protest are not intrinsic in resistance, but in the consciously chosen martyrdom of dying quietly without a struggle. He transformed behavior that the world stigmatised as weakness into a source of unheralded and magnificent strength that burdened survivors whose torments and responsibilities Hausner failed to comprehend.²⁴

No longer cause for shame, survivors’ stories of suffering recreated a world of horror and powerlessness that transformed the trial into a space of communal mourning and a forum for the transmission of terrible memories. Observers who were not survivors experienced testimony as a form of collective witnessing through which they were moved or illuminated. The trial represented a rhetorical erasure of the moral ambivalence that clung painfully to Jewish survivors of genocide. By capturing the harrowing nature of their experiences and the utter irrelevance of questions about why they had not resisted, the trial restored their dignity. The image of the ‘living dead’ expressed a relation to the dead that both redeemed suffering and in-

18 This tone of testimony is now most often equated with traumatised witnesses who narrate flatly what they feel in excess.

19 Martha Gelhorn, Eichmann and the Private Conscience, in: *Atlantic Monthly* (2 February 1962), 52-59. Available online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/62feb/eichmann.htm> (7 October 2018).

20 Wiesel, Eichmann’s Victims and the Unheard Testimony, 510-516.

21 Wiesel, *Legends*, 187.

22 Wiesel, *Legends*, 173.

23 Wiesel, Eichmann’s Victims, quoted in Wiesel, *Legends*, 170.

24 Naomi Seidman, Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage, *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1996) 1, 1-19.

fused it with cultural significance. By transforming the survivor into a symbol of living death, trial observers imagined the survivor as a vulnerable victim who relives an unbearable past. Efforts to counter victim-blaming first accomplished by the Eichmann trial became pervasive in the United States after the late 1960s, and the symbol of the traumatized Jewish survivor expressed the unmitigated terror of modern violence and the possibilities for life after death. Critics questioned the victim-blaming work of Austrian-born psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, who had accused Jews of going passively to their deaths; critics also took issue broadly with Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the complicity of the Jewish Councils in the Nazi genocide. By 1977, the American writer Terrence Des Pres could write that heroism was no longer reserved for tragic heroes, but was "commensurate with the sweep of ruin in our time".²⁵ The Holocaust survivor became central to perceiving and responding to the horror created by genocidal regimes in the late twentieth century, and supplanted heroic redemption with "survival".

By analysing testimonies of survivors in the light of the living death experience of Jewish Holocaust survivors, Des Pres and others, like the American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, whose work was crucial in explaining the symptoms of surviving mass death to a large audience, insisted that survival constituted the core experience of the twentieth century. "The survivor", Lifton wrote, "becomes Everyman. [...] the holocausts of the twentieth century have thrust the survivor ethos into special prominence, and imposed upon us all a series of immersions into death which mark our existence."²⁶ Lifton conceived survivors as psychologically injured people whose memory of the dead compelled them to strive for social justice, whether to campaign against the nuclear bomb (as did Hiroshima survivors) or against antisemitism and on behalf of Israel. Des Pres believed they possessed a luminous truth fit for dark times.

Survivors bore witness to the suffering they had endured and insisted on vigilance toward future suffering; they provided a model of social solidarity based upon a burning address to the world, in which the once-victim demanded that no one be abandoned to such a fate. After the 1970s, bearing witness to genocide became a modern, secular call to moral imagination and human conscience; survivors' "witnessing" turned them into "secular saints"²⁷ whose testimony was key to unravelling the "mystery" of the Holocaust.²⁸ The Eichmann trial's redemption of the survivor was essential to later Holocaust politics and its assertions of incomparable suffering. Survivors could not be cast in a 'heroic' role – the mere survival of victims who had not resisted but had endured their persecution had never before been a form of heroism. Survivors could not be heroes without the transformation of survival into a special form of endurance that gave cultural meaning to the distinct experience of genocide and restored dignity to the Nazis' Jewish victims. The Holocaust, as many have argued, became a "civil religion" in Western Europe and particularly in the United States, for many reasons: American Jews overestimated the force of antisemitism; younger Jews "fantasised" about having been "there" because they identified with their parents' suffering; the "religion" of the Holocaust substituted for a lack of ad-

25 Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor. An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, Oxford 1976, 6.

26 Robert Jay Lifton, *History and Human Survival. Essays on the Young and Old, Survivors and the Dead, Peace and War, and on Contemporary Psychohistory*, New York 1961, 204; Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life. Survivors of Hiroshima*, New York 1968, 479.

27 David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Syracuse 1999, 7.

28 Alvin H. Rosenfeld/Irving Greenberg (ed.), *Confronting the Holocaust. The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, Bloomington 1978, xii.

herence to organised Jewish religion; and commemorative rituals evacuated memorialisation of substance and substituted cheap sentiment for a real engagement with Jewish death.²⁹

All these arguments are important, if occasionally overstated. I want to argue differently that the moral role attributed to survivors in the late 1970s and now fading was not only a late symptom of sometimes empty forms of commemoration, but was also originally the *condition* for a positive Jewish as well as non-Jewish public memory of the victims of genocide. The Eichmann trial showed the world that camp conditions made any resistance at all a miracle, helped Israelis not to be ashamed of Holocaust victims, and redeemed victims' memory in the name of the Jewish state. Later, critics conferred moral authority upon survivors and transformed them into "secular saints". These truisms now make sense because the trial told a story about survivors that took on a life of its own over time. In the 1970s, mostly in the United States and less so in Western Europe, this haunted presence became the quintessential survivor, a purveyor of dark knowledge central to understanding the violence perpetrated by genocidal regimes in the twentieth century.

The Holocaust survivor symbolised an affirmative and universal message about human survival and its moral purpose. Bearing witness expressed the limits and possibilities of human becoming in the wake of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, not to mention the Soviet Gulag. Today those who "bear witness to genocide" are of course not Jewish witnesses alone. Bearing witness refers increasingly to the moral, legal, psychological, and physical labour of second- and third-party witnesses as well as traumatised victims all over the world; it describes the hard work of physicians and journalists in the field, lawyers as well as victims who testify at the International Criminal Court (ICC), and even the act of spectators looking at a photograph depicting atrocities. The Holocaust survivor has been replaced by a symbolic global victim of genocide in whose name we all "bear witness" – activists invoke this symbol as a rationale for the work of the ICC and of humanitarian organisations.³⁰ The global victim is thus a construction that, unlike the icon of the Holocaust survivor, refers to no specific time, place, or event, and no longer possesses the Holocaust witness's authority of experience. The Holocaust survivor symbolised Western Europeans' and Americans' belated discovery of their murderousness and their moral conscience. The global victim is also a moral symbol, but serves mostly as a haunting reminder of the pervasiveness and inevitability of genocide and represents the recognition conferred now on millions of victims. It represents the ubiquity and self-evidence of mass graves and traumatised survivors, not the shocked recognition that they exist.

In conclusion, if there is any 'lesson' to be learned from the reception of Holocaust survival in Western Europe and the United States, it is no longer that Jews were finally recognised. The history of how Jewish victims were belatedly recognised tells us much more about the social and cultural processes by which some victims and not others are mourned. From a Western perspective, the global victim of genocide for whom others "bear witness" now symbolises so many victims' woes that it is no

²⁹ For these arguments, among others, see: Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*; Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing. Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, Ithaca 2004.

³⁰ Sara Kendall and Sarah Nouwen discuss the idea of a symbolic victim on whose behalf the ICC pursues perpetrators of crimes against humanity and genocide. Their work is framed as a criticism of the ICC and global justice generally. Sara Kendall/Sarah Nouwen, *Representational Practices at the International Criminal Court. The Gap between Juridified and Abstract Victimhood*, in: *Law and Contemporary Problems* 76 (2014) 3-4, 241.

longer a referent for a specific event. Rather, the victim – Rwandan, Bosnian, Cambodian, and a vast array of others – on whose behalf human rights workers and courts labour, embodies a generic recognition that no one should be targeted for murder. Indeed, the image of genocide victims is now so symbolically versatile that their fate is also invoked, in more recent populist discourses, not only to refer to our responsibility for such victims but also to an overstressed Western conscience whose obligations to suffering others must have limits. Unlike the Holocaust survivor, who came to represent a shaken but determined Western moral conscience, the global victim of genocide is a symbol of an entirely new responsibility for victims that can no longer live up to its own promises.

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