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PERPETRATORS & POSSIBILITIES: HOLOCAUST DIARIES, RESISTANCE, AND THE CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

by

ERYK EMIL TAHVONEN

Under the Direction of Jared Poley

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the way genocide leaves marks in the writings of targeted people. It posits not only that these marks exist, but also that they indicate a type of psychological resistance. By focusing on the ways Holocaust diarists depicted Nazi perpetrators, and by concentrating on the ways language was used to distance the victim from the perpetrator, it is possible to see how Jewish diarists were engaged in alternate and subtle, but nevertheless important, forms of resistance to genocide. The thesis suggest this resistance on the part of victims is similar in many ways to well-known distancing mechanisms employed by perpetrators and that this evidence points to a "crisis of imagination" – for victims and perpetrators alike – in which the capability to envision negation and death, and to identify with the "Other" is detrimental to self-preservation.

INDEX WORDS: Holocaust, Jewish Diarists, Holocaust Diaries, World War II, Psychological Defense Mechanisms, Trauma, Diaries, Textual Analysis, Resistance, Imagination, Abel J. Herzberg, Éva Heyman, Hannah Senesh, Dawid Sierakowiak, Etty Hillesum, Emmanuel Ringelblum, Janusz Korczak

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by

ERYK EMIL TAHVONEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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PERPETRATORS & POSSIBILITIES: HOLOCAUST DIARIES, RESISTANCE, AND THE CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

by

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Georgia State University

August 2006

Dedicated to the memory of

Paul Eugene Goodwin

17 August 1971 – 15 November 2003

A Sailor, a Shipmate, and a Friend

Always Missed and Never Forgotten

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Introduction

Thoughts on the Study of Perpetrators in Holocaust Diaries

"Normal men do not know that everything is possible."
– David Rousset, 1947

I: The Problem

The twentieth century has been referred to as "the century of genocide."[1] From the intentional eradication of the Herero people of South-West Africa in the first decade of the 20th century to the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and Rwanda in the last, more people were systematically exterminated in the last hundred years than in all of previous recorded history. This seemingly modern proclivity toward ideologically- or racially-based mass murder has been pondered and researched as much as any other topic. And while scholars have devoted a great deal of time to determining chronologies and identifying the mechanics of extermination, less work has been done probing the thought processes of those victims personally affected by genocide. This thesis seeks to investigate a basic problem: how victims understood and represented their tormentors.

II: The Thesis

Attempts to explain the Holocaust since the 1950's – from Hannah Arendt's systemic arguments about totalitarianism and seminal theory of "the banality of evil" to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's purported discovery of "eliminationist anti-Semitism" in

[1] Found, among other sources, in Mark Levene's "Why Is the Twentieth Century the Century of Genocide," in *Journal of World History* 11.2 (2000), and in Eric Weitz's *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

German society – have focused largely on perpetrators and their attitudes toward victims.[2] While the actions and mentalities of perpetrators have been closely studied, their victims have received comparatively scant treatment. This thesis seeks to redress that historiographical omission by examining the way a genocidal *Zeitgeist* leaves certain marks in the writings of targeted people. It posits not only that these marks exist, but also that they indicate forms of psychological resistance. It also suggests this resistance is similar in many ways to distancing mechanisms employed by perpetrators and that this evidence points to a "crisis of imagination" for victims and perpetrators alike in which the capability to envision negation and to identify with the "other" is detrimental to self-preservation.

In Holocaust diaries, perpetrators can appear, not appear, or appear in some less threatening and linguistically mutable way. Therefore, each chapter in this thesis focuses on a different strategy Holocaust diarists used to deal with perpetrators. Chapter one is important because it lays out the basic groundwork for the more theoretical chapters to follow. In it, I examine the work of diarists Éva Heyman, Hannah Senesh and Dawid Sierakowiak. While perpetrators are present in these chapters, they are often depicted in what might be termed "visual," "descriptive," "photographic," or "journalistic" terms. For various reasons, although "Germans" appear occasionally, not much effort is devoted to analyzing or questioning their specific natures, desires or motivations. In order to establish a kind of starting point, or a type of diary that bears some kind of resemblance to the other diaries I discuss, the writings of Abel Herzberg from Bergen-Belsen are also

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[2] See Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Viking Press, 1964). See also Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

examined at length in chapter one. Chapter two examines the ways jokes, metaphors and tropes frequently come to stand in for Nazi perpetrators in the diaries of Etty Hillesum of Amsterdam, and Emmanuel Ringelblum of Warsaw. These diaries manifest ways in which authors could confront perpetrators indirectly through the manipulation of language. If the theme of chapter one is the "presence" of perpetrators in Holocaust diaries, the subject of chapter two is the "dissolution" of these concrete figures into shadows and phantasms. Chapter three examines a final characteristic of Holocaust diaries: the "absence" of perpetrators. Here I provide an in-depth examination of the *lack* of perpetrator analysis in the diary of Warsaw physician Janusz Korczak. Although Korczak saw perpetrators up-close, both as a prisoner and as an administrator of the Warsaw ghetto orphanage, he only discussed perpetrators on four occasions. In three of these instances, Korczak plainly resisted the very thought of perpetrators – and so the references to them are veiled and subtle. It was only in Korczak's very last entry, written just hours before his death, that he recognized the futility of avoiding perpetrators, and so addressed them head-on. A brief conclusion will sum up my findings and suggest directions for further research.

III: Victims and Perpetrators

For victims, the "crisis of imagination," can be defined as the tension between awareness/surrender and denial/resistance. These categories are important because their presence is apparent, explicitly or implicitly, in all the texts I examined and indicate the author's orientation to the world in written form. The way these categories are combined provides an intellectual and emotional "fingerprint" that gives us clues as to how individual victims coped with trauma. The extent to which hope was essential to these

victims and the importance of not seeing themselves as perpetrators saw them – as "lives unworthy of life" or as corpses waiting to happen – cannot be overstated.[3] The sources seem to indicate that a complete, conscious awareness of the possibilities of annihilation and negation on the part of the victim impeded the capacity for resistance – decreasing chances of survival. Only by mentally keeping the reality of genocide at bay could the victim cope with a world in which perpetrators sought to erase him or her spiritually and culturally and physically.[4] Traces can be found in many Holocaust diaries of a tendency to avoid what seems obvious – the Nazi attempt to impose a final, physical solution to the so-called "Jewish Problem."[5] This is not to say that diarists had identical levels of awareness of how systematic and thorough the "Final Solution" was. For instance, the head of the Warsaw *Judenrat*, Adam Czerniakow (1880-1942), was plainly aware of the genocidal complexity of Nazi plans and his powerlessness against them – hence his suicide, while other diarists (one thinks of Anne Frank, for example) were unable to see the bigger picture. However different understandings might have been, violence was endemic toward the Jews of Europe during the Second World War and one wonders why

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[3] Euphemisms were very important during the Holocaust. Phrases like "*unnütze Esser*," (useless eaters) or "*lebensunwertes Leben*" (life unworthy of life) were essential to defining who was human or less than human during all phases of the *Shoah*, but especially in the beginning during the medical phase. See Henry Friedlander's *The Origins of the Nazi Genocide*. The phrase "Final Solution" (*Endlösung*) is itself a euphemism that lends itself to radical interpretation. See Berel Lang's *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[4] See David Rousset's *The Other Kingdom,* (translated and introduced by Ramon Guthrie, New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947) and also Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity,* (translated by Stuart Woolf, New York: Collier Books, 1993) and *The Drowned and the Saved* (translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Summit Books, 1988), Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Jean Améry's, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

[5] It is not being suggested that Jewish victims should have seen the genocide in its sinister entirety. The question is not whether they understood the actions taken against them as a matter of high policy, but whether they could recognize that they and their communities were in grave danger and whether they found ways to mentally avoid the implications of the implacable Nazi enmity amid the violence, deportations, slavery and mass murder that surrounded them.

questions like "Why me?" or "Why are they doing this to us?" or especially "What kind of person does this to another one?" did not appear more frequently in diaries from those years. The absence of questions like these indicates denial and avoidance. These mechanisms of avoidance, which kept awareness of genocidal intent from impinging upon consciousness, are of particular interest here.

Implicitly, this thesis argues that perpetrators experienced a dynamic comprised of a tension between awareness/opposition and denial/surrender. For them, comprehension of genocidal intent provoked mental opposition, whether in the form of the controversial psychological "doubling" Robert Jay Lifton describes, or in the drunkenness and mental breakdowns common among the *Einsatzsgruppen* troops in the east.[6] Conversely, the ability psychologically to deny the victim's reality and humanity allowed individual perpetrators to surrender to the Nazi imperative of genocide as state policy between 1939 and 1945.[7]

Undeniably, some sort of relationship existed between perpetrator and victim. This thesis is concerned with one side of that relationship. The historiography is replete with examples of how *perpetrators* required elaborate psychological mechanisms and rationales that enabled them to dehumanize Jews and inhibit their understanding of them as human beings. Here, the problem is examined from the other side by probing how Jewish *victims* writing diaries during the Holocaust displayed parallel distancing and resistance mechanisms that limited their understanding of the Nazis' humanity, though

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[6] See Leni Yahil's *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945* (translated from the Hebrew by Ina Freidman and Haya Galai, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 259.

[7] See Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland,* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993) and Yisrael Gutman, and Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *The Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington - Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum): Indiana University Press, 1994).

for very different reasons. This method allows us to analyze Jewish perceptions of the perpetrator and permits us to ask how the individual writer of a Holocaust diary understood the desire of a Nazi to negate him or her physically and spiritually through an analysis of how that knowledge was reflected in the language used in their diaries. Together, this thesis interrogates the question of how victims represented and made sense of perpetrators in diaries written during the Holocaust.

IV: Source Material

As primary sources, I have used only Holocaust-era texts, among which are included diaries, notes, letters and memoirs written during the period 1939-1945. When selecting sources, I decided that it was important only to look at the responses of Jewish victims written *during* the Shoah. Valuable memoirs written after the fact, like Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz,* Elie Wiesel'*s Night,* or Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*, are to be distinguished from works written concurrently with the genocide because they were composed in the aftermath of trauma, not in the crucible of the extermination process itself. Hence, they may contain perceptions or philosophies that were not present among those persecuted at the time. Memoirs written after the fact, while important, have the disadvantage of being composed after the dominant, post-World War II narrative of the Holocaust had already begun to crystallize, transforming memory and imagination. Rather than include memoirs, I initially examined about 25 diaries that seemed to represent a broad spectrum of Jewish life throughout Europe during the Holocaust. In order to develop a diverse portrait of Jewish understanding of perpetrators I consulted diaries by men and women, teenage boys and girls, Eastern and Western, assimilated and unassimilated Jews, intellectuals and workers. When available, letters and notes from the

time were used as well.[8] In the end, however, due to the constraints of space and time, only about seven diaries are analyzed at length in this thesis. Every other source cited is secondary to the diaries and used only for interpretive purposes.

The diaries provide evidence of a fulcrum located in the perpetrator–victim relationship at which the victim's desire for survival met the perpetrators desire for negation. By "negation" I mean the place where the *idea* and the *act* of genocide meet – where both Jewish victim and Nazi perpetrator come together in a moment of annihilation (almost invariably the annihilation of the victim).[9] My reading of these sources indicates that a deep, conscious awareness of this negative focal point was anathema to both parties and that a close examination of the language used to describe each other reveals this aversion when psychological defense mechanisms are operating most forcefully.

The construction of this thesis and its applicability to the broader field of comparative genocide studies is based upon the central supposition that an unequal yet reciprocal relationship existed between perpetrators and their victims.[10] Simply put, the existence of a perpetrator requires the existence of a victim. During the Holocaust, these relationships may have been brief or even momentary (like, for example, those of the physician conducting "selections" at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the people who passed

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[8] Alexandra Garbarini finds that letters, notes and diary entries, because most were designed for an audience broader than the individual, are best read together as "interrelated genres, "'To bear witness where Witness must be borne': Holocaust Diaries 1939-1945" (PhD dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2003).

[9] See Klaus Theweleit's discussion of negation and armoring in *Male Fantasies, vol. I, Women, Bodies, Floods* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[10] For some, any comparison of perpetrators and victims is difficult to acknowledge and is even perceived as disrespectful to the victims. That is not the intention of this paper. The point of this comparison is to demonstrate common human reactions to "inconceivable" experiences, or what in religious terminology might be referred to as "radical evil," not to suggest any kind of moral or legal equivalency.

before him), or of a much longer duration (such as the relationship that developed between members of the *Judenräte* across Eastern Europe and the German occupation authorities). In many cases, the relationship was largely imaginary because direct communication between victim and perpetrator rarely took place (think of guards in a watchtower and concentration camp inmates on the ground).[11] However, to say that the details of this relationship were imaginary does not change the fact that both sides thought about and had opinions and impressions of the other. Here, I have tried to determine what victims thought of perpetrators, not come to a conclusion about what the perpetrators actually were. In the specific case of the destruction of the European Jews, Holocaust diaries are central to our understanding of the meanings of this relationship because they provide the historian access to a complex vision of the victim's mental universe during that defining genocidal moment.

Diarists had a wide range of imaginative reactions to their circumstances. But if we recognize that some kind reciprocal relationship existed between persecutors and persecuted and that the dynamics of this relationship were as important on one side of the equation as they were on the other, then Holocaust diaries should be especially valuable when it comes to understanding genocide in general. Victim responses during the Holocaust should give us an indication of the cognitive processes of those experiencing the "incomprehensible" as well as provide clues to what kind of responses we might expect from victims of other genocides (though those responses would undoubtedly be influenced by culturally and historically specific elements as well). It is important to be clear, however. While the idea of a "relationship" implies a mutually dependent or

[11] Thanks to Professor Jeffrey Herf of the University of Maryland who brought this to my attention during a discussion of this topic.

symbiotic link, no moral equivalency between victims and perpetrators is suggested, nor are concepts as different as volition and compulsion forgotten.

V: Historiography

Recent research by Christopher Browning, Michael Burleigh, Robert Jay Lifton and others demonstrates that, in the case of the Holocaust, the commission of genocide was not easy for individual perpetrators to perform. The evidence indicates that Nazism, far from being infernally efficient at transforming "ordinary men" into killers, was at best only partially successful.[12] The common stereotype of the icy, emotionless Nazi is as much a mask behind which a real human being hides as it is a myth that was assiduously cultivated by the leaders of the "thousand-year Reich."[13] Those perpetrators closest to the actual process of genocide in the killing fields and death camps, as opposed to high officials and lower *Schreibtischtäter* (whom we contrast with victims caught in the maelstrom of the Holocaust) did not just leap blithely into the bloody fray. Instead, they required a great deal of internal or external pressure and conditioning to perform their jobs.[14] In fact, among most historians of the Holocaust, it is now taken as a matter of course that certain defense mechanisms were employed, consciously or unconsciously, by mass murderers which not only eased the killing process, but also enabled it to occur on such an enormous, industrial scale. For instance, the party line (and official propaganda)

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[12] See Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, This view seems to contradict Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's inexplicably popular "eliminationist anti-Semitism" theory.

[13] Hitler's speeches, "table talk" and *Mein Kampf* are replete with references to "hardness" and the importance of pitilessness. This talk worked its way into the speech of his mandarins like Himmler, Göring et al.

[14] See Michael Burleigh's *Death and Deliverance: 'Euthanasia' in Germany 1900-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), as well as Henry Friedlander's *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

that continuously vilified Jews was used to rationalize genocidal behavior.[15] Genocide became permissible because it was condoned and sanctioned by what passed for legal authority – absolving those performing it of responsibility for the *act* because the *idea* was not theirs. There was also the Manichean tendency, prized in Nazi Germany, which tended to view things in black and white or apocalyptical terms. Most simply, at Auschwitz and among *Einsatzgruppen* units in the east, alcohol was used to numb or repress the conscience.[16]

It is apparent that perpetrators and victims alike employed defense mechanisms like transference, repression, or denial. They "numbed" themselves in order to maintain some kind of psychological equilibrium. This raises the question of what it was exactly that they were trying to distance themselves from. The answer may seem obvious at first, but, counter-intuitively, it seems to me that it was not so much the *act* of genocide that was bothering them, but the *idea* of it. For victims, this is borne out in the diaries by the way writers are able to describe the "symptoms" of genocidal intent ("photographic" or "journalistic" descriptions of conditions and atrocities), but cannot seem to come to terms with the human will and motivation required to make genocide a reality.[17] For the perpetrators, the importance of this distinction is apparent in a series of speeches Heinrich Himmler gave to SS leaders in Posen, Poland on the 4th and 6th of October, 1943. During the course of a discussion about the necessity for eliminating the Jews of Europe, Himmler expressed his belief that the SS, as an organization, had remained "decent" and

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[15] This is exemplified by the "*Befehl ist Befehl*" defense seen at Nuremberg during every trial, including that of the Major War Criminals in 1945-46 and the "Doctors' Trial" of 1947-1948.

[16] See Peter Padfield's *Himmler: Reichsführer SS* (New York: Holt, 1990) as well as Yahil.

[17] An example of this might include Emmanuel Ringelblum's frank recitation of atrocities in the Warsaw ghetto combined with his tendency to dehumanize Germans by referring to them as "They" or "the Others," which serves to establish distance as well.

navigated a "Scylla and Charybdis" between becoming too hard and being too soft in the course of the "Final Solution." He was cognizant of and sympathetic to the mental difficulties his troops faced murdering the Jews of Europe ("Most of you know what it is like seeing a hundred corpses lying together, five hundred, a thousand…"), but to him there was a clear the distinction between *conceptualizing* and *implementing* genocide. He states it explicitly - "I believe that it is better for us all to have endured this for our people, and accepted the responsibility (*the responsibility for deeds not the idea behind them*), and then take the secret with us to our graves."[18] For those perpetrators lower down the chain of command, this separation of act or deed (*Tat*) and idea or word (*Idee*) facilitated personal involvement in the genocidal process because it enabled them to inwardly rationalize their personal actions during the Holocaust while outwardly minimizing their participation in it afterward – as can be seen in an examination of legal defenses employed at trials of war criminals from Nuremberg to Bergen-Belsen to Auschwitz to Jerusalem.[19] This polar separation of act and idea is a key, not just to understanding how perpetrators killed, but also to discovering how victims dealt with the ever-present possibility of death.

The research represented by this thesis indicates that victims often found the genocidal picture too shocking to consciously accept as well, although my studies also indicate that, at critical moments, they allowed themselves to see what they had only

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[18] Heinrich Himmler, "Moral Dilemmas" in Roger Griffin (ed.) *Fascism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). p. 161-162.

[19] A deeply ingrained concept of the "Führerprinzip" was part of the cultural baggage of all Nazis in the Third Reich. This "leadership principle" served to consolidate the power of those higher up the chain of command and absolve those farther down of personal responsibility. In effect, however, it left a gap or vacuum of responsibility, allowing elites cover for morally reprehensible acts.

intuited and repressed before.[20] While genocide was easier for perpetrators to *commit* than to *admit,* their victims found it was essential to ignore (but not to deny) the genocidal reality they were facing. By analyzing the way the two basic human components of genocide – the perpetrator and the victim – interact with and think of each other, a more complex understanding of genocide in its entirety emerges.

For perpetrators, regardless of which mechanisms were used, the aim was ultimately, as Robert Jay Lifton put it, to increase the "psychic distance" between killer and victim to the point where complete dehumanization of the "other" could take place.[21] Whether the Nazis used ideology, alcohol, or physical measures like numbering, shaving, or even what Terrence des Pres called an "excremental assault" to dehumanize their victims, it *did* require effort on the part of perpetrators to come to think of their victims as completely different.[22] This dehumanization and distancing is apparent in perpetrator diaries.[23] Close examination of victim diaries written during the Holocaust, reveals its presence on the other side of the genocidal equation as well.

VI: Language and Trauma

Scholars as different as Hayden White and Lawrence Langer have suggested that Holocaust survivors employ certain narrative patterns to describe their experiences.[24]

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[20] See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Gitta Sereny's, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

[21] See Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

[22] See Terrence Des Pres' *The Survivor: Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Also see Paul Ricouer's discussion of dread and defilement in *The Symbolism of Evil* (translated from the French by Emerson Buchanan, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

[23] See the diaries of Dr. Friedrich Mennecke in Aly, Chroust and Pross (eds.), *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (translated by Belinda Cooper, John Hopkins Press, 1994).

[24] See Lawrence Langer's *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) and *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). See also, Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca:

Recent work on other sources confirms these arguments, and my own experience conducting interviews with survivors suggests that certain patterns, narrative strategies, and forms of speech continue to be employed by those who lived through the Holocaust. While interviewing almost three dozen Holocaust survivors and their children, it was possible to see these patterns in Holocaust discourse emerge clearly. They appeared in the way stories were told, in the adoption of certain phrases, in the inclusion of certain characters associated with precise meanings and in the exclusion of certain elements central to understanding genocide. The most significant exclusion was the tendency of survivors, speaking years after their experiences, to characterize perpetrators only in cliché formulations revolving around anti-Semitism and hate. Attempts to come to terms with the humanity beneath the barbarity were non-existent. My preliminary research on diaries suggests that some of the same defense mechanisms thought to have shielded perpetrators were at work among victims at the same time. These psychological inhibitors provided a powerful bulwark against a frightful awareness of annihilation and mortality – maintaining sanity in the case of perpetrators and facilitating the will to resist among victims. These distancing mechanisms, still found among Holocaust survivors, even sixty years after the events, are visible in the contemporary accounts as well.

It is not hard to discover transparent instances of psychological defense mechanisms of denial and avoidance in the diaries. One famous example might include the assertion by Anne Frank (1929-1945) "…I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart." At first only the heartbreakingly naïve wishful thinking of a teenage girl, a closer reading suggests a protective denial of the exterminatory reality of

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Cornell University Press, 1994) and Saul Friedländer, (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) as well as Berel Lang.

Nazi-occupied Amsterdam in 1944.[25] Etty Hillesum (1914-1943), another Dutch Jew, reported people in the camp at Westerbork telling her "We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, it's best to shut your eyes to all this misery."[26] While Hillesum derides this tendency to look the other way in others, a close examination of her diaries and letters reveal that, over a long period and almost without exception, she engaged in the same practice herself.

The type of language in which they chose to communicate is the only means left by which we can understand writers of Holocaust diaries. There are as many styles as there are diarists, but they share one common aspect. Holocaust diarists are all in some way trying to come to terms with what Charlotte Delbo called "*l'inconcevable*."[27] Victims alternately described perpetrators in what I call "journalistic" or "photographic" or "visual" terms – minimizing the analytic components of their entries – or they transformed them, through the use of tropes and jokes, into metaphors symbolically representing something other than mere individuals. In some cases, victims ignored perpetrators completely – negating Germans *textually* even as their persecutors were attempting to negate them *physically*. While the act of writing and documenting Nazi actions is viewed by most scholars as an act of resistance, the diarists' excision of perpetrators is highly significant and suggests a more active and aggressive, though unconscious, form of mental resistance to Nazi genocide.

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[25] Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* (edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, translated by Susan Massotty, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1995), p 332.

[26] Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p 587.

[27] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (translated by Rosette C. Lamont, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. x.

In Holocaust diaries, we quickly discover the limitations of language. Everyday language is used to transmit everyday ideas. But, in an exterminatory and extraordinary environment, no language is able to convey the totality of meanings that one expects or hopes to find.[28] In a genocidal atmosphere, words and meanings do not remain static, but fluctuate in an effort to express a traumatic reality. A wall exists in Holocaust diaries between the act/idea of genocide and the capabilities of language and imagination to deal with it. The full psychological import of the trauma can only be inferred. Quite simply put, genocide is more real than language. In this sense, the Holocaust, as Primo Levi maintained, is *beyond* comprehension.[29] While extraordinary experiences cannot be adequately conveyed through everyday language, nevertheless, it is only by "probing the limits of representation" that we can hope to historicize the experiences and mentalities forged in the moment of genocide. This thesis is committed to acknowledging those linguistic limitations while analyzing them at the same time – increasing our knowledge of genocide to the extent it is possible. Understanding in spite of language *is* possible because trauma has left traces and intimations behind in the choice of words and in the way they are employed, even if their full significance is not always apparent. To this extent, the thesis is a work dedicated to finding meaning in Holocaust diaries.

VII: Periodization

Unfortunately, when examining these diaries, it is impossible to engage in that favorite pastime of historians – periodization. It would be convenient to be able to say that as the war went on and the "Final Solution" progressed, for various reasons,

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[28] See Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995). See also Judith Herman Lewis' *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

[29] See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*.

imaginations became more subdued and perpetrators receded out of focus. However, it is not possible in 1939 to distinguish some kind of understanding of perpetrators that had disappeared by 1945 (or the reverse). The reason this linear progression is not traceable is because we are dealing with the individual histories of people enduring different kinds of trauma at different times.

This is not the kind of history based upon overall public opinion or things as prosaic as government documents, foreign newspapers, policy papers or radio broadcasts. In other words, this is cultural, not diplomatic or military history, and there are no broad generalizations to be made here about the effect of specific events or decrees on vast numbers of people. The focus is on the individual. What I am examining is a series of private moments in the lives of people as different as assimilated secular Dutch Jews in Amsterdam and unassimilated orthodox Polish Jews in Warsaw. The similarities I am seeking to identify in these Holocaust victims lie in only one thing – their understanding of the people who wanted to kill them.

VIII: The Holocaust and Comparative Genocide

While Holocaust diaries are the specific lens through which victim responses to perpetrators and their motivations are examined, the goals of this thesis are broader. One might regard this paper as an attempt to develop a theory of what could be termed "traumatized imagination" – in which I strive to discover the mental boundaries associated with the average person's understanding of the "other" during the course of traumatic events. It may also be seen as an attempt to establish a paradigm or method from which subsequent studies of genocide and imagination might profit.

My research suggests that by constructing a rubric into which references to perpetrators fall (whether they are present in the text, or absent, or in some in-between state I term "dissolution"), it is possible to classify responses of Jewish victims to their circumstances and their persecutors in order to see the emergence of patterns. This thesis indicates that these patterns form a picture of a traumatized imagination that can comprehend events "journalistically" or "photographically," but which has great difficulty conceiving "analytically" of a will dedicated to annihilation. The reality of the perpetrator is altered in the imagination of the victim, just as the historiography indicates that the victim was transformed in the mind of the perpetrator.

The point of this analysis not so much to recover lost *voices* as it is to recover lost *meanings* buried in common texts. It should be noted, however, that it is not the intention of this thesis, nor is it possible within the constraints of this format, for this to be a comprehensive study of how victims in *every* Holocaust diary viewed perpetrators. Instead, the more modest goal is to discover how some victims of the Holocaust saw their oppressors and to offer some thoughts as to why there appear to be limits to their understanding.

IX: Format and Representativeness of Diaries

The thesis is divided into five chapters. A short introduction and conclusion will buttress three chapters of primary research. The title is explanatory of the work as a whole. It centers on Jewish depictions of perpetrators in Holocaust diaries with special emphasis on how they understood the possibilities of genocide and how aversions to those possibilities constituted both actual and psychological resistance.

While the methodological approach to this study reflects an interest in the broader question of genocide, Holocaust diaries form the primary means of examining the problem. This is for several reasons: first, because my own interests and research experience lies in the field of Holocaust studies and secondly, because the thesis format and length of this paper requires a narrower scope. However, this leaves open the possibility for a larger and broader study to be undertaken in the same manner at a later time. Because many instances of mass murder contain actors falling into these categories, this method of analysis may also be used to analyze and historicize other genocides as well.

I have not commented throughout on the question of how representative the diary entries examined in this thesis may be. After all, those who actually wrote diaries only represent a fraction of those who lived and died during the Holocaust – and that group was, in many senses, self-selected. Rather than focusing on how typical a certain writing strategy was, it seems more important to simply to demonstrate the existence of these strategies of depicting perpetrators and to assess the possibilities that exist for using them as a category of analysis.

X: "Normal Men" and What is Possible

In his 1947 book about Nazi concentration camps, *The Other Kingdom*, French resister, activist and author David Rousset famously remarked that "normal men do not know that everything is possible."[30] When I first stumbled across that phrase in an undergraduate course on the Holocaust at Michigan State University in 1995, it caught my attention – and, as an idea, it has remained in the forefront of my thought ever since.

[30] John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (eds.) *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 99-105. The passage also appears on p. xx.

Since discovering that comment, I have found that every approach I have taken to the study of genocide has been colored, for better or for worse, by the philosophy encapsulated in that short sentence.

The comment contains several ideas that are important to this thesis. First, Rousset was arguing that there are two different types of people (to say just "men" would be sexist and would ignore many of those diarists I have looked at) – people who know *what is possible*, and those *who do not know what is possible*. Rousset is not saying that people are born differently, or that they are different because of their race or religion or ethnicity. He is saying that they become different because of what they experience. In this case, he is saying that trauma – living through the Holocaust – changed the way victims understood the world. "Normal men" (that is everyone else who did not experience Nazi genocide) cannot know it the way they do. This is much the same argument that Jean Améry makes in his essay "Torture," when he says that what is lost forever is "trust in the world."[31] In addition, people who are sufficiently traumatized cannot explain their experiences to other "normal" people with any degree of accuracy, nor can they convey the meaning of what they have come to know. What they have learned is that every possibility, every degradation, every pain and every fear unimaginable to average people is always present, unmitigated and unaltered, in their minds. This is to say that those who experienced genocide were forcibly set apart from the rest of the world. Those who died experienced unimaginable horror. Those who lived continue to experience pain and grief the likes of which those of us who mill around them uncomprehendingly will never understand. These people have gained wisdom, but many have lost faith in humankind. This is how I interpret Rousset's short remark.

[31] Améry, "Torture," p. 21-40.

One line of reasoning that I pursue in this thesis – that the diarists who wrote about their experiences in the Holocaust could not make "normal men" understand what happened to them – is only part of the argument. As many times as I read the diaries and as much as I try to empathize with these writers, the more I realize it is impossible. I could never "know" what these people knew. However, after engaging these diaries long enough, I began to wonder if Rousset, and those who died, and those who lived, were themselves able to recognize all the "possibilities" genocide entailed. Or if they were just as lost and confounded by it as "normal" people.

The case I am trying to make in the following pages is that while Jewish diarists and those who lived and died in the Holocaust may have experienced something the rest of us have not experienced, they themselves did not necessarily "know" something we do not. Due to their proximity to the event, they were only capable of understanding portions, or small pieces, of the larger genocidal process as it moved along. One could argue, strongly I believe, that we "know" more today – of the facts at least – than most victims did at the time.[32] In addition, even in those instances in which victims/diarists attempted to analyze and define the events that transpired around them and identify and explain the people who persecuted them, they were limited both by language and by their own imaginations. In other words, the trauma of genocide is so great that even the most astute observers and the most talented writers were only able to allow a portion of the true reality into their consciousness – and consequently into the pages of their diaries.

Some might ask the question then "What is the importance of studying Holocaust diaries if they do not really tell the whole story?" This is a fair question, and I offer now

[32] This was done, as much as possible, by design. The Nazis rationalized and compartmentalized the Holocaust, disassociating the parts from the whole in order to maintain secrecy and also to create doubt and uncertainty among their victims.

two preliminary answers. First, despite the fact that the numbers of victims is counted into the millions, only a handful of diaries have survived for historians to examine. To me, it seems important to engage these rare works with all the tools at our disposal, if only to learn what people are capable of writing during times of genocide. It seems important to know how these diarists used writing to resist, as well as to learn what they considered important to pass to posterity. Second, and sadly, genocide did not disappear with the Nazis. By asking questions about *how much people can know* and *how much they can tell us* about genocide, we are plumbing the bottomless abyss wrought by cruelty and hatred a bit further. By pushing these boundaries of knowledge, by "probing the limits of representation," it may possible to bring those who "know everything is possible" and those who do not "know" closer together.

These diaries were not written in a vacuum. Historicizing and analyzing the experiences related in them allow us to understand *both* the diaries *and* the history of the period more clearly. The texts do not stand in isolation as purely literary artifacts. They also represent specific and terrible historic moments in ways that would not otherwise be possible. I make no pretense to have conducted a comprehensive survey. I would claim, however, to have developed a rather unique rubric, or approach, for studying the relationships between perpetrators and victims as they exist within the pages of Holocaust diaries. Only future research will be able to answer questions beyond the scope of this paper – questions regarding the overall prevalence of each of the three major discursive strategies across a broad spectrum of diaries, or the distribution of these strategies across different cultural, religious, generational and gender categories. Work in the future should concentrate on these and other historical questions raised by the thesis. Only time

will tell whether or not this line of inquiry will prove valuable for examining texts like Holocaust diaries that were produced in a genocidal environment.

Chapter 1: Presence

Descriptive Accounts of Perpetrators in Holocaust Diaries

"…words and events remain linked by the inscribing hand, a literal part of the experience and the record of it."
– James E. Young, 1987

I: Introduction

Noted Holocaust scholar James E. Young has written that

> …for diarists…bearing witness was less a 'literary act' and more a 'biological necessity'; for some it was even a 'national obligation.' So acute was the fear that their experiences would remain, in Himmler's horrifying words, 'a never-to-be-written page in history,' that 'literary testimony' became for many victims the sole reason to survive. When survival and the need to bear witness become one and the same longing, this desperate urge to testify in narrative cannot be underestimated.[1]

All of the diarists examined in this thesis are examples of the compulsion to testify that Young is referring to. They all seemed to recognize the importance of creating a historical document that captured the events they lived through for future readers, and they all took the time to create those documents. Yet when historians ask the question "how do these diarists depict perpetrators in their writing?" something interesting occurs: in many diaries the perpetrators recede, change or even disappear. The question being addressed then, is not just "how do perpetrators appear in diaries written by Jewish victims during the Holocaust?" but also "Why, in documents

[1] James E. Young, "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs," in *New Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Winter 1987), p. 406.

manifestly written for the purpose of creating a record of atrocity and murder, are the murderers strangely absent or held at arm's length by the diarists?"

I believe the answer to these questions lies in the tensions surrounding the production of these diaries. As Young maintains, diarists *needed* to write. However, they needed to survive too. To survive frequently meant having to ignore the painful and terrifying genocidal reality around them. I argue that obsessing, or even thinking, about the most frightening aspects of their daily existence – the perpetrators of the Holocaust – damaged the victims' ability to cope with their situations. Because of this tension between the need to write and the need to cope, the image of perpetrators was altered in the diary entries we read today.

I have termed the conflict between the desire to testify and the psychological need to avoid the harsh reality of the Shoah a "crisis of imagination," and this concept will be addressed and defined both here and (at greater length) in chapter two. However, it is basically the concept that the tension between the need to communicate and the need to avoid painful thoughts or emotions – especially those associated with perpetrators – makes Holocaust diaries unique, and allows us to increase our understanding of different levels, or forms, of resistance undertaken by victims.

The thesis is divided by the way perpetrators are depicted in seven particular Holocaust diaries.[2] This chapter will discuss two of these ways. First, all of these writers

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[2] These diarists include Abel Herzberg, who wrote from Bergen-Belsen. Of all the diarists, Herzberg confronts Nazi perpetrators most directly. But, as I will show in this chapter, this confrontational approach seems to have been aided by Herzberg's position as a relatively privileged type of prisoner. When things became worse, perpetrators faded out as in many other diaries. Other diarists examined here include Éva Heymann and Hannah Senesh. These two young Hungarian women tended to discuss Germans only in the most general, "visual," "photographic" or "journalistic" senses – repeating what they heard from others or from the news. Dawid Sierakowiak's diary, written from the Łódź ghetto also discusses perpetrators "present" terms, but complicates the picture by transferring much of his aggression to other Jews by the end of his diary. In Chapter II, I examine the diaries of Etty Hillesum of Amsterdam

were individuals who brought their own perspective and focus to their diaries. Not every diarist had a hard time discussing perpetrators. In fact, some presented detailed analyses and descriptions of them. For instance, by examining the Bergen-Belsen diary of Abel Herzberg (1893-1989), it is possible to establish something of a baseline against which other accounts of perpetrators can be measured. To be clear however, Herzberg's frank and articulate discussion of Nazi cruelty and methods seems to be *a less common approach* than other types of discursive strategies in which perpetrators are treated in more abstract and distant ways.

The second type of depiction is one that is primarily a recitation of facts gleaned from family, as in the case of Éva Heyman, or from news accounts (films and newspapers) of Nazi actions, as is the case in the diary of Hannah Senesh. It might be helpful to consider these types of entries primarily *visual* or *descriptive* discussions of events and perpetrators in the broadest possible context, because there is seldom any mention of how the author actually felt about them and even less seldom a discussion of individual perpetrators. In these types of entries, the average, day-to-day perpetrators are not really present at all. Unlike Hitler, the grand perpetrator, who is mentioned in every one of them, run-of-the-mill perpetrators do not appear in these diaries – except perhaps in the most superficial sense. This seems to be because the writer had not yet seen, or directly experienced, the genocidal world in which these individuals existed and wielded their power.

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and Emmanuel Ringelblum of Warsaw, paying particular attention to ways they manipulate language to depict perpetrators. In the final chapter, I look at the diary of Janusz Korczak of Warsaw, who avoided perpetrators as much as possible until the very last entry in his diary. Overall, some diarists depicted perpetrators, but did so in general terms, avoiding specifics and individuals for the most part. Others confronted perpetrators, but did so by manipulating language to make the confrontation easier to manage psychologically. Finally, some diarists ignored, or negated, perpetrators to the greatest extent possible.

Eva Heyman was a thirteen year-old girl whose family did everything it could to shield her from events. Hannah Senesh wrote from Palestine and had no personal knowledge of events and could only repeat what she heard about it in the world press or in rumors in her community. However, one final diary – that of Dawid Sierakowiak of Łódź – begins to complicate the picture because he *was* there to experience Nazi repression personally. And, while Sierakowiak frequently repeated headlines or relayed simple descriptive accounts of events, he also expressed the anger and rage one would expect to find under such circumstances. His diary soon becomes problematic however, because he does not direct his fury at German perpetrators, but rather at his family and other Jews. His diary provides an example of psychological avoidance and transference and demonstrates how, at times, victims held the real culprits and legitimate sources of their anger and misery – the Nazi perpetrators – at bay.

By thinking about these ways in which diarists expressed or avoided their own feelings toward perpetrators, it is possible to see the active tension created by a "crisis of imagination" in which the need to relate experiences bumps up against the need to put the problems created by perpetrators out of their minds. As much as possible, these diarists attempted to use "plain" language to describe what perpetrators were doing. As my analysis progresses, this tension becomes greater. In chapter two, the perpetrators recede into metaphors, tropes and jokes as diarists Etty Hillesum and Emmanuel Ringelblum begin to realize that their world has become "so extreme as to outstrip language's capacity to represent it altogether."[3] Chapter three discusses only one diary, that of Polish physician Janusz Korczak. It is a unique account in which perpetrators disappear, almost entirely, before making reappearing in the very last entry Korczak wrote, perhaps

[3] Young, p. 405.

only hours before his death. Taken all together, I believe it becomes clear that Holocaust diaries contain extreme tensions – tensions which do not exist to the same degree in memoirs written after the war – precisely because the physical threat represented by the perpetrators was no longer present.

II: An Example of a Confrontational Diary

Not every Jewish diarist avoided descriptions of Nazi perpetrators. Abel Herzberg wrote a very confrontational diary during the last year of the war while imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. I begin with his diary because it allows us to establish a point from which other diaries depart. Herzberg's frank and angry discussions of Nazi character, practices and ideology provide an important place to begin, not because other diaries were like his, but because they were so different. When I began this investigation, I expected to find, across the spectrum of Holocaust diaries, evidence of the rage, frustration, incomprehension and protest I found in Herzberg's diary. When I did not, I was surprised. Herzberg's diary was in fact the outlier, a diary that in the end did not conform to the patterns I saw emerging in other diaries. Because Herzberg's diary is so different from the other diaries examined in this thesis, I feel it is important to include most of his pronouncements about Nazis and Nazism, leaving aside only those that mention perpetrators in passing, or those that are redundant.

By way of background information, Herzberg was born in Amsterdam in 1893 and served in the Dutch Army during World War I. He studied law and was well-known within Amsterdam's Jewish community. Herzberg and his family were arrested by the Nazis in March of 1943, but his wife managed to smuggle the children to safety. He and

his wife spent several months in the Westerbork transit camp before being sent to Bergen-Belsen at the beginning of 1944.

More than a year before the final defeat of the Third Reich, Bergen-Belsen consisted of a number of sub-camps, and conditions had not deteriorated as they later would. The sub-camp to which Herzberg was attached consisted of Jews being "saved" on Himmler's orders on the chance they could be exchanged for German prisoners. In this camp Herzberg was one of the leaders, in charge of maintaining order and sitting in judgment of offenses committed by Jews against one another. It was in this position – as a comparatively privileged prisoner in a comparatively privileged camp that he was able to write his extensive diary.[4]

Rather than divide the analysis of Herzberg's diary into like-minded entries as I do in later chapters, I believe it is more illustrative of this type of diary to allow it to unfold chronologically. In this way it is possible to see swings in mood, theme or focus. This approach also meaningfully displays a fact that should not be ignored – that as the situation grew worse for Herzberg during the last months of the war, his direct discussions of Nazis tapered off. This is not unexpected. In the early part of the diaries, despite Herzberg's belief that his conditions were comparatively worse than for other Jews, he still had time and energy to carefully observe his surroundings and to write. Toward the end, the perpetrators begin to disappear from his writings as he devotes his energy toward staying alive and to documenting the starvation and death around him as it was experienced by other Jews. This seems to support the argument that the more

[4] All biographical information from Renata Lacqueur "Biographical Note" in Abel J. Herzberg's *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997), p. ix-xi.

traumatic the environment in which a writer found him or herself, the less psychological and physical energy he or she was able to devote to literary resistance to perpetrators.

Herzberg's first really aggressive entry was directed at the barbarity of those who imprisoned him. On 14 August 1944 he wrote

> Roll-call is like a religious rite, or at least a sacred act for that bunch of inferior anthropoids who, partly unfulfilled by the human ideals that their teachers and priests taught them, and partly out of genuine indignation at all manner of fine cant, have invoked with pounding hearts a stark and lewd heathendom which taught them that the absolute binding power of ethics and morals was nonsense, and that, in principle, whatever was advantageous would always be permitted.[5]

At this early point in his imprisonment, Herzberg establishes what becomes a long-standing tradition – symbolically flipping the tables on the "master race" by calling into question their supposed superiority. In fact, referring to them as "inferior anthropoids" is one of the dehumanizing gestures which became a fundamental component of many Holocaust diaries. As a lawyer, Herzberg is also highly critical of the "stark and lewd heathendom" that abandons ethics and embraces a "might makes right" philosophy – an opinion we would expect someone in a helpless position to subscribe to.

Herzberg frequently used sarcasm as a strategy to deal with his anger. On 17 August 1944 he wrote, "I have a nine-year old daughter. Have the Germans, those guardians of European culture, locked her away, taken her to Poland?"[6] Clearly Herzberg does not believe Germans are "guardians of European culture." The comment indicates extreme anger but it also tells us something else that was common knowledge – for Jews, moving east to Poland was something that was greatly feared. Though the details might

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[5] Abel J. Herzberg, *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997), p. 11-12.

[6] Herzberg, p. 15.

not have been known, the prospect clearly angers and terrifies Herzberg and it is through sarcasm that he is best able to express his emotions at this time.

On 17 August 1944 Herzberg made another observation common to many Holocaust diaries. In it, he identifies, or conflates, Germans with products they create – particularly metallic or machine-like products. In this case, he seems to indicate that barbed-wire represents a kind of national character. He wrote,

> …barbed wire seems to be a Germanic predilection. Wherever you stand or go there is barbed wire. All high-grade stuff: good, quality, rust-free. With long, thickly planted barbs. Horizontal and vertical barbed wire. Perhaps the ancient Germans used to have barbed beards.[7]

The idea that peoples have common national or racial characteristics was, of course, common at the time, and Herzberg's use of this kind of analogy might indicate that he subscribed to this point of view too. But it also seems to demonstrate a more general point – namely that Jews were just as capable of essentializing their persecutors as the Germans were of essentializing those they persecuted. On the other hand, the entry is somewhat ambiguous because it could also indicate a more sarcastic tone in which Herzberg adopts the faulty logic of his persecutors to make a broader point – that explaining today's phenomena in terms of fleeting cultural traits from the long past is patently ridiculous.

Silence occupies an important place in the study of Holocaust diaries and memoirs, but the subject has seldom been brought up as articulately as Herzberg does in an entry dated 18 August 1944. He wrote

> Last night I watched a new transport of Polish women arrive. It was a strangely mild August evening whose infinite beauty penetrates even to here. For although they have robbed us of the world, they have not succeeded with the sky. The clouds and the moon remain our

[7] As we will see, this conflation can be seen in Korczak's diary too. Herzberg, p. 16.

> witnesses. Oh, if only they could speak! But they cannot speak. They remain silent and embody the silence as it were. That silence which is filled with mysteries, of whisperings of the past, filled with an endless melancholy that evokes an almost intolerable longing. The depths of sorrow become fathomless.
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> In this silence the Polish women file past. This too, takes place without any sound. It is as if shadows are passing by, as if a film is being projected with the sound turned off. Not a word is spoken. Not a sound is heard. Their feet shuffle silently along the ground. If you look more closely you will notice that a significant number of them are walking barefoot. If ever a film is made of this period and the director wants to capture the effect of the infinite wretchedness of evacuation, let him revert to the silent film. Turn the music off too. Show only their eyes. Because not only are there no words with which to convey the misery of the dispossessed, no other sound is capable of it either – silence, silence, a bewildering silence.[8]

Like James Young and Saul Friedländer would later, Herzberg recognizes the limitations of language. Ironically, it is only *through using language to discuss the paucity of language* (a very self-reflective and post-modern notion) that Herzberg is able to describe it. More importantly, he is also aware – even before the war is over – of the important place art holds in the process of conveying historical events to a future audience. This seems to indicate Herzberg's experience of another kind of "crisis" – not one of imagination, but one of language. As many scholars would maintain after him, Herzberg felt that the experience of the Holocaust *could not* be adequately related. In this case, it was not that Herzberg believed it was too painful to describe, but because the idea of *others* attempting to imagine what had happened, either through the use of language or of art, seemed futile to him. For Herzberg to say "show only their eyes" is for him to resort to the intangible – to imagination. At the same time, however, even as he wishes that he could communicate his experiences to others, he acknowledges that it *cannot* be done and

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[8] It is said that eyes are the "windows to the soul," and perhaps Herzberg is appealing here to a kind of knowledge that lies beyond intellect or emotion – one that can be conveyed only by other means. Herzberg, p. 18.

so, in the end, he (and the imaginary director of his film) must paradoxically resort to "a bewildering silence" to convey the most accurate meaning.

Unlike some other diarists, Janusz Korczak for instance, Herzberg seemed to grasp Nazi goals and ideology completely.[9] In an aggressive and disdainful comment written 19 August 1944, he again lays out his understanding of the Nazi *raison d'etre*. "In every country that it marched into in its clumsy boots the Third Reich immediately began to carry out the most sacred item of its manifesto: the extermination of the Jews."[10] This clear understanding of Nazi purpose is, perhaps, one of the strongest points of Herzberg's diary and one that gives him the fortitude to write what he does.

Another means of resistance common to many diaries was to dehumanize perpetrators. By doing so, the diarists removed these people from what was familiar, or from what was common between the two groups. This was not unique to victims, and was in fact something done quite intentionally by the Nazis as they attempted to make genocide more palatable to those who had to carry it out.[11] This insistence on dehumanization, on the part of both the Nazis *and* Jewish victims, seems to be an example of the need to maintain a kind of simple binary division of peoples in an uneven and hostile environment. On 28 August 1944, Herzberg penned the following entry describing an SS man at Bergen-Belsen.

> The group had not worked hard enough; '*der Rote Müller'*, a sort of dressed up piglet, lazy as a pig on a hot day, fat and puffed up, with a red mouth and greenish slits for eyes, a cigar stump permanently stuck between a pair of clinging jellyfish lips, the *Rote Müller* felt that not

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[9] To be fair to Korczak, however, Nazi purposes were much clearer in the summer of 1944 than in early 1942 when he wrote the bulk of his diary.

[10] Herzberg, p. 20.

[11] See, for example, Terrence Des Pres' essay "Excremental Assault" in his book *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p 51-71.

> enough work had been done. Four days' *Brotentzug* [without bread rations] for a group of forty men….[12]

This account of Nazi as animals or monsters is similar to descriptions by other diarists (like Emmanuel Ringelblum's portrayal of Nazi perpetrators as "Frankensteins" or "bloody dogs," which will be discussed at greater length in chapter two). This tendency to dehumanize the hostile "other" continues in an entry from 30 August 1944, when Herzberg wrote, "Those who had not gone to bed yet but were still sitting up had to jump to attention, to listen to the roaring, the braying of the SS louts, learned through propaganda and training."[13] These animal metaphors – Nazis as lions and jackasses – are apt comparisons to Herzberg. In this entry, Nazi perpetrators – as cruel and powerful as lions, as loud and ridiculous as jackasses – are nevertheless symbolically being stripping of their power and placed under the control of some other force. To Herzberg, it seems that these men are nothing more than trained circus animals, only doing as their masters allow or as instinct dictates. At least that is the position his language puts them in.

Sometimes, Holocaust diarists referred to Germans as they may have tried to portray themselves – but through the use of sarcasm, managed to convey the exact opposite meaning. In the same entry of 30 August 1944, Herzberg refers to the SS as "their lordships" on two separate instances. This is also very similar to a strategy employed by Emmanuel Ringelblum in his Warsaw diary in which he refers to Germans as "lords and masters" (see discussion in chapter two).

An important entry on 1 September 1944 is another example of the kind of castigation and recrimination one would expect in many Holocaust diaries. Here Herzberg wrote

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[12] Herzberg, p. 34-35.
[13] Herzberg, p. 41.

> One day there will probably be peace again and then war again. And people like us, people who are convicted of crimes they have not committed, who are persecuted yet are innocent, who look at each other, and whatever we may think of each other, know we are innocent, we who with our wives and children are punished day after day by people to whom we can reply only with silent contempt, we who know their crimes, their immeasurable guilt, their lawlessness, and have discovered the extent to which they have repudiated every human responsibility for us, we who suffer for them, we who are made responsible for their responsibility, we who are accused of everything that belongs to their criminal intent, who are said to want everything that they bring about, who are said to aspire to everything that they wish to achieve, we who are imputed with every wickedness for the mischief-maker and who bleed for their misdeeds, we who know this from our history, again from generation to generation, we the eternal scapegoat, the brother of him who was beaten to death, who are branded with the mark of Cain the fratricide, we are not even satisfied with the illusion of the horizon – but we also want to know what lies behind it, like a child that stands at the seaside and asks: Where do the waves come from?[14]

This single long sentence is the most complete depiction, critique and repudiation of Nazi perpetrators I found in any of the diaries I studied. Herzberg seems to pass through every negative emotion, from "contempt" to scorn to anger, as all the blame for the Holocaust – the complete culpability – is placed on Nazi shoulders. Here, Nazis are thoroughly evil. The question is not asked *why* they are evil. Nor is the question asked *why* Jews are the "eternal scapegoat." It suffices for Herzberg that *this is the way things are* and *questioning it is a pointless exercise*, like asking where waves come from. It also bespeaks a kind of cultural resignation based upon countless years of dealing with the same anti-Semitic phenomena. The sentence demonstrates something else important, however. As Young has said, diarists felt compelled to not just to *write*, but to *testify*. Testimony implies not just relaying information or narrative, but also calling for judgment. It seems clear that by testifying in this way, Herzberg was looking forward to the time when perpetrators and the idea of Nazism would be placed on trial. The passage

[14] Herzberg, p. 53.

almost reads like a prosecutor's opening statement – something unsurprising since Herzberg was a lawyer in civilian life as well as a jurist within the world of Bergen-Belsen. The passage is a declaration both of Jewish innocence and of German guilt and as such seems a remarkable depiction of perpetrators (in general, though not specifically). It is interesting to note the timing of this indictment as well – 1 September 1944 was the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the war in Europe, something Herzberg acknowledges earlier in the entry.

On 4 September 1944 Herzberg returned to a more general critique of individual SS men. "The men who are required to work are being beaten terribly. Fritz, the Red Müller, Count Turd (so named because he is responsible for the latrines) and Rau are hounding men with a plank of wood."[15] Obviously Herzberg is indicating sympathy with those at the mercy of these perpetrators and anger at those doing the beating, but he is also demonstrating another strategy for dealing with a hostile "other." By using humor – in this case a scatological humor reference to one of the SS men – Herzberg (and indeed, all the Jews who used the demeaning nickname), is attempting, through the use of mockery to even out a disparity in power. The SS man, as "Count Turd" is not so powerful, or so great a threat, as he would otherwise be.[16]

Herzberg is testifying again in an entry of 7 September 1944.

> This morning, the commandant himself came to select the men. He sent everyone to work. Men up to eighty years of age, sick people with thirty-nine and forty degree temperature; he sent for the hospital soldier, generally known as the *Herr Sanitäter*, abused the Jewish doctor, and gave himself away completely. '*Ihr glaubt wohl wegen*

[15] Herzberg, p. 65.

[16] This also seems to be a Jewish version of the Nazi habit of designating a "*Scheißmeister*" – an old Jew to monitor the latrines at camps like Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Treblinka.

der kleinen Frontsverschiebung könnt Ihr alle sabotieren! Ich schneide euch den Hals ab.[17]

Here he is providing evidence of murderous intent – witnessing in advance – against the leadership of the Nazi camp.

On 8 September 1944 Herzberg plainly laid out the way prisoners at Bergen-Belsen physically resisted the demands of the Third Reich. He wrote,

> The Germans say we are lazy, indolent slouches, slow and incapable of work. Jews do not know how to work. They guess correctly. We cannot work under these circumstances and will not do it. They can drag us here, whip us and beat us, we will do it as slowly and as sluggishly as we want and not a fraction more than the minimum. Of all the methods of undermining the system, this is one of the best. To the Kraut it must seem as if he is chewing on a sticky mass, or walking through thick syrup.[18]

It should be noted again, that Herzberg was in a camp for relatively privileged Jews. Because they were being saved for exchange with German prisoners (under the direct orders of the Reichsführer SS no less), the amount of punishment that could be meted out was somewhat limited. It is almost impossible to imagine this kind of resistance taking place in Auschwitz, where, for example, the goal was either immediate *Vernichtung* in the gas chambers, or the slower *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* of day-to-day life in the camps.

There are several important points that can be gleaned from Herzberg's entry dated 12 September 1944 in which he wrote "Whenever there is a westerly wind, all over the camp one can smell the bones smouldering in the crematorium. The bones of the Jews smell exactly like the bones of the Aryan *Häftlinge* when they are burned. What a wonderful smell the bones of the Heroic Teuton Warriors will spread when they are

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[17] "You seem to think that because of the small shift of the front you can all start committing sabotage! I'll cut your throats." Herzberg, p. 71.

[18] Herzberg, p. 81-82.

placed on the fire."[19] The first point is that this is yet another frank acknowledgment of Herzberg's bitter anger and even hate of the Nazis who were murdering so many people in the less-protected or privileged camps around him. The second is the clear expression of his desire to switch places with the murderers. It is not enough now to stop the murder of Jews – Nazis themselves must die *and* their bodies will smell wonderful burning. He also makes a point about equality. Why are Jews being singled out, he implies, when the bodies of Aryan *Häftlinge* smell the same as those of Jews? Finally, the sarcasm continues – Herzberg believes the Nazi are anything but "Heroic Teuton Warriors." Calling them that is a mark of extreme scorn and contempt. The delight he feels in German death continues in yet another sarcastic entry written later that week. On 17 September 1944 he wrote. "The transport from Westerbork brought us newspapers. I read the *Deutsche Zeitung für die Niederlande* of 8 and 9 September. It is a pleasure to read how courageously the Germans are falling in battle."[20]

Something unique to Herzberg is his tendency to personify one specific – indeed one essential symbol of Nazism. On 19 September 1944 he declares that "The crematorium will have a good laugh today." In the midst of the death-throes of the Third Reich, Herzberg gloats at the prospect of the continued death and destruction of Germans and Germany. He continues,

> '*Der Herr Sanitäter'* has died. What is more, he died by his own hand. He used to threaten it: '*Wenn die Sache schief geht….*' Despite this threat, *die Sache ist nicht recht gegangen*. *Der Herr Sanitäter* had drunk a large bottle of rum, and with the courage of melancholy drunkenness, had pressed his revolver to his head.
>
> When he has arrived at the throne of eternal accountability, they will call a number of witnesses. Material witnesses. Jews from Bergen-

[19] Herzberg, p. 91.

[20] It is also indicative of Herzberg's privileged position that he is able to read newspapers at all. Herzberg, p. 100.

> Belsen, who had stood before him trembling with fever, whom he had refuses to make *Dienstfrei*. Jews who had been sent out to work last winter when they had longed for a little warmth and rest.
>
> In heaven they will stand before the throne of justice. All that the *Herr Sanitäter* can do then is to hope for God's mercy. Woe betide him on his day of judgment.[21]

Again, Herzberg is providing evidence of Nazi atrocity – this time to an imaginary, but higher court – not one presided over by man, but by God.

Early in the fall of the last year of the Third Reich, before things passed into total chaos, Herzberg seemed confident in victory – not just of the Allies, but of the Jewish people and Jewish culture. In an entry dated 28 September 1944, Yom Kippur, he writes "And every enemy, including the SS, exists for us as if they were yesterday, as if they were last year's snow. They are worthless. They lead to emptiness and vanity and we will survive. Next year in Jerusalem. With these words the Day of Atonement ends too."[22] These ideas express a belief in the resilience of the Jewish people even in the middle of the Holocaust. For Herzberg, the concept of the "eternal Jew" is something to celebrate.

The crematorium is again an active, living participant in an entry dated 3 October 1944. "The ugly skeletal men were all starving with hunger…each of them could already see the refuse cart waiting to take him to Hitler's silent ally standing in the background: the crematorium." He continues later in the same entry, "…a couple of stray Canadians arrived and began to fire at us. They were really angry and their machine-guns crackled lustily. We had two casualties, the *Schneebaumlager* one, and the poor *Häftlinge* eight. The crematorium had a feast."[23]

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[21] "If things take a bad turn"…"Things did not go right." Herzberg, p. 104.
[22] Herzberg, p. 118.
[23] Herzberg, p. 133.

Herzberg reverts back to legal language in the entry of 5 October 1944. "…we must do everything possible to avoid becoming accomplices of the Germans. We must stand by our principles."[24] Here, Herzberg again explicitly recognizes the criminality of the Nazi regime and implicitly expresses interest and satisfaction that when the day of reckoning finally arrives the Nazis will be seen for what they are by all men, by history and by God. This is why Jews must remain together – a coherent community – and not sully themselves by colluding with their enemies in any way.

The entry of 9 October 1944 is long and remarkable. In it, Herzberg lays out what almost amounts to a short version of Jewish history – one that clearly and unabashedly posits the primacy of Jewish culture and thought, and one that savagely critiques German/Christian culture. He wrote

> Here we see this man, face to face, in his true light. We – and I believe this to be our [Jewish] historical, our eternal, experience – encounter him in his nakedness, far away from the path of civilization, there where he feels no embarrassment. He gives reign to his passions. He does what his heart desires, he pursues the lust of his soul, and we are his spoils and his sacrifice. We Jews see man in the crevices and depths of his true nature. We see him as the fly sees the spider, as the roe deer sees the panther.
>
> And we even managed not to hate him. Instead, out of a most profound love for mankind and out of a vital urge and a philosophy of life, that could not be surpassed or tempered, we gave him a rule of life. Out of an all too great mercy for mankind we gave him the principle of accountability and retribution so that he might control himself.
>
> However, it was made into a kind of 'love' and 'mercy' which, from a psychological point of view, meant the enfeebling of accountability – and therefore became acceptable to him.
>
> And when one sees here how men, big strong men, send women and children on transport, shouting, cursing, raging, or when one has seen just once how the SS man transports corpses with a cigarette in his snout, unmoved as if he is transporting manure – no worse – as if he is transporting bricks, then one knows: this is man. *Ecce homo!*
>
> And even more than unmoved, the SS man is pleased with himself, precisely because he is unmoved. That he has succeeded in attaining this

[24] Herzberg, p. 135.

> state in the face of the most extreme human suffering, that and that alone he calls victory and power. It is the victory over the principle, which he senses to be a Jewish principle: the principle of the omnipresent Spirit, as God is called by the Jew. *Ha makom*.[25]

According to Herzberg's viewpoint, the Jews existed first. Others were encountered later, almost as secondary beings, as they climbed up lower rungs on the ladder of development. Nevertheless, he admits that, historically, the Jew has been subjected to the lower creature/man. Even though he qualifies his initial statement, in making this assertion, Herzberg flips the prevalent (at least in Nazi Germany) vision of Aryan and Jewish relationships and assigns the power and the wisdom to see true nature to the Jew, not to the Aryan. This could be considered the expression of a will to power and control – one that is natural and almost necessary among powerless people in situations like the one in which Herzberg found himself. He also asserts that while the Jews were frequently the victim of those with more power, the true moral superiority lies with the Jew, who is responsible for the Judeo/Monotheistic ethics and the law which gave the "other" (the Gentile/Aryan) the opportunity to grow and mature as a culture. Throughout this passage, Jews are tied in Herzberg's mind to the moral, the correct, and the legal. Continuing his history in a positively Nietzschean vein, he asserts that these Jewish laws and morals were only acceptable to the Gentiles/Aryans in the watered-down form of Christianity – the "love" and "mercy" which entailed an "enfeebling of accountability." This short "history lesson" which – quickly traces man's progress over thousands of years – out of some sort of Hobbesian state of nature, to Christian times, to 20th century man, to the individual SS man, to the complete elimination of what is human in man – is

[25]It is interesting to note that Herzberg uses a Christian phrase, *Ecce Homo*, to indicate man's base nature. The phrase, used by Pilate during Christ's trial is loaded. The trial was the place where Christian anti-Semitism can be said to have begun. It is, of course, also the title of a book by Friedrich Nietzsche. Herzberg, p. 141-142.

meant by Herzberg to encapsulate the basic structure of history according to the Jew. Regardless of whether other Jews felt this way or not, this is a fascinating insight into the mind of an intelligent and well-educated Jewish man who, suddenly powerless and surrounded by enemies, found it necessary to interpret history not just in a pro-Jewish light, but in one that was actively hostile to Gentiles/Christians/Aryans/Nazis.

The entry dated 13 October 1944 is both a kind of elitist class critique as well as one that continues Herzberg's assault on any political philosophy based strictly on power. He writes

> Germany is governed – and this is Hitler's secret – by the *Feldswebel* [Sergeant]. He gives the soldier good fodder, and the officer a leg up. He earns a good salary, pulls on his boots, and with his unbelievable insolence and unsparing coarseness walks through the land: the taskmaster, the slave driver, who will '*niederschlagen*,' [and] '*ausradieren*' everything, the servant as 'Herr.' The ruffian as the chosen one, the depraved in the role of the man of noble blood. The unworthy, who is fooled into thinking that because of his muscles, he has been called upon to form the ruling race and will, therefore, '*in die Fresse hauen*' [and] '*im Arsch treten*.' The lazy good-for-nothing who finds everything '*Scheisse*' except getting others to work for him. Others, he envies and hates for their achievements and talent.
>
> And as everyone has a rotten or worthless spot in his soul, there are many, many National Socialists and many, many men in the SS. They will be sorry enough, but regret is also one of the begetters of the incurable disease that Germany suffers from: *Deutschtum*.[26]

Although this assessment of perpetrators starts out simply as a critique of the lower or middling classes, by the end, it is German-ness itself that is the culprit to blame. Not only is *Deutschtum* responsible for his problems, but it is also the object of Herzberg's derision. The critique continues on 21 October 1944. This time, the healthy German bodies are envied – something that is again no surprise coming from someone reduced to eating sporadic rations of stale bread and the occasional rancid mussels. In this case,

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[26] "To smash down," "To eradicate," "To smash their faces in," "To kick in the ass," "Shit.," "German-ness" or "Germanity," Herzberg, p. 146-147.

however, he is also calling into question the very masculine virtues that the SS extol in an attempt to shame those who harass the "wretched heap of wrecks" to be found in the *KZ*s. If they are truly Aryan warriors, or real German men (something he has already expressed doubts about), Herzberg believes they would be fighting their more powerful enemies. He writes

> There is no news. There is only the endless bullying, provoking and tormenting by the SS, and every day anew it amazes us that a body of perfectly fit, well-fed men, at the peak of their lives, tall, muscled, strong men, who in fact could be the flower of the nation, actually have no other work and no other worry than daily to harass this wretched heap of wrecks formed by us men, women and children. Daily, now that the German fatherland is in great danger and the German nation finds itself in a historic crisis, in which lasting decisions are made about its fate, its happiness, indeed its life and death. One would like to shout at them: gentlemen, have you nothing better to do now?[27]

It did not seem occur to Herzberg that he and the remaining Jews really were perceived by the regime as Nazism's most powerful enemies. The illogical nature of National Socialism, and Hitler especially, who found it more important to win the war against the Jews than the war itself, is something Herzberg does not even consider. As with many other Holocaust diarists, the extent of Nazi irrationality is something Herzberg finds difficult to comprehend.

Herzberg's diary began on 11 August 1944. As we have seen, for about three months he managed to pay close attention to perpetrators. However, by mid-November, these depictions started to become fewer and farther between. The level of analysis began to deteriorate as well, until by December 1944 Herzberg's perspective, at first so different than all the other diaries I have examined, was reduced to the straight journalistic type of reportage of news that other diarists used as well. For instance, on Christmas Day he

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[27] Herzberg, p. 155.

repeated rumors like the following: "Yesterday it was alleged: Brussels retaken. The Germans again forty kilometers from the coast. 470,000 Americans taken prisoner. Significant retreat in Holland. Probably it is all much exaggerated, but the fact of the German initiative and offensive remains."[28]

Up until 8 November, Herzberg wrote 51 entries, many (as we have seen) dealt with perpetrators. He wrote 61 more entries afterward, and in these, perpetrators are present only in passing, with a few exceptions like the following. 20 March 1945. "*Aber: kapitulieren werden wir nie.* We, the SS, still have plenty to stuff ourselves on. The rest does not matter."[29] This statement does not really seem to be a direct quote from the SS. Rather, it is more likely Herzberg is putting words into their mouths – projecting his own sentiments about their stubborn refusal to surrender and greed into their mouths. Only one other statement regarding perpetrators is worth considering in this context. On 10 April 1945 he wrote a short entry. He wrote "The SS are allowing the 'organizing.' This afternoon they cut off the water because of an air raid alert."[30] This statement is of some interest because is demonstrates that metaphors ("organizing" is a metaphor for resistance through theft from the SS) which began in eastern camps like Majdanek and Auschwitz had been appropriated and were being used by inmates in the interior. This is unsurprising considering that as the Eastern Front collapsed, thousands of concentration inmates (like those from Auschwitz Herzberg mentioned in his 18 August entry) were transported to the interior of the Reich. The final sentence is just another example of reportage.

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[28] Herzberg, p. 186.
[29] "But we will never surrender." Herzberg, p. 203.
[30] Herzberg, p. 210

Through this brief analysis of Abel Herzberg's statements on perpetrators it is possible to accomplish several things. The first is to demonstrate potential literary or discursive strategies for dealing with both a painful experience as well as the need to communicate. Throughout his diary, Herzberg alternately writes in angry, sarcastic, dehumanizing, metaphorical, philosophical, historical and journalistic styles. Not only that, but although he early on recognizes the important role of silence in trying to convey genocidal reality, it is only in the end that his diary manifests that silence with regard to perpetrators. In other words, Herzberg's diary represents a unique example of the genre of Holocaust diaries by illustrating many of the possible ways a diarist could deal with perpetrators. It also demonstrates the progression one individual worked through while trying to come to terms with a brutal, genocidal world. In examining other diaries written during the same six-year period, few of the writers laid out their vision and understanding of Nazis as clearly or articulately as Herzberg did, but those who did discuss them used many of the same literary styles that he employed. In order to make the point that these other authors avoided perpetrators in their diaries, it was necessary to look at someone who did not. For this reason Abel Herzberg's diary has been examined first.

III: Depictions of Perpetrators at a Distance

Abel Herzberg was a grown man, well-educated and intelligent. Because of his privileged position in a unique camp, he was able to observe perpetrators closely and pen his entries in relative safety. Herzberg's long pronouncements on the nature of Nazi perpetrators stand in stark contrast to those of Éva Heyman (1931-1944) and Hannah Senesh (1921-1944) – two young Hungarian women who tend to speak of Nazis only at a distance. Their accounts are filtered through what they have been told by others, or what

they may have seen in newsreels, or read in newspapers. There are a couple of good reasons for this discrepancy. First, Heyman was only thirteen years-old when she wrote her diary. Her family was well-educated, not to mention being committed socialists to whom politics were second-nature. However, Heyman's mother (whom she refers to throughout the diary by her first name, Ági) and step-father tried to shield her from events as much as possible. Of course, much of the worry, fear, and general consternation the family felt as a whole comes through in Éva's diary. It is not that Heyman had no experience with Nazis at all. In fact, as her diary makes plain, her best friend had already been taken away by the Nazis and sent to Poland before the diary began. However, her direct experience was very limited, and the one close call she did have before she was deported to her death in Auschwitz-Birkenau on 2 June 1944 did manage find its way into a dream she wrote about.

The influence her family had on her is plain to see in an entry from 14 February 1944. In it Heyman wrote "…Ági thinks that the Russians don't tell lies, and neither does the Voice of America; only the German radio and the Hungarian radio tell lies."[31] Éva's tone is not one that questions her mother's judgment. As someone well-versed in politics, Ági understood the idea of propaganda and misinformation very well. One senses from this account that it is not that Ági is deluding herself, but that she is trying to make things simpler for her daughter. This tendency to reduce things to the simplest formulations is something common to many Holocaust diaries. It is as if there was not the time or energy to qualify every statement. Or perhaps it was easier, in an

[31] Éva Heyman, *The Diary of Éva Heyman* (translated from the Hebrew into English by Moshe M. Kohn, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974. p. 29.

environment of total war, to ignore the tendency of one's own side to adopt the same morally dubious tactics practiced by the other side (lies and propaganda).

In the same entry, Heyman continues "I heard Ági tell Grandma that at the Journalists Club the night before they had said that the government was preparing to do something terrible, and Jews who weren't born in Hungary would be taken to Poland where a horrible fate was in store for them."[32] Again, Heyman is relating something she heard from her family. The comment is illustrative of the fact Hungarian Jews, (the last European Jews to feel the full power of Hitler's "Final Solution") were aware of the events taking place in Poland. From Heyman's point of view, however, what this "horrible fate" was could be was not yet questioned. Continuing with the same entry, Heyman demonstrates her youth and naïveté. She knows that bad things are happening, but the idea of an ideology or political philosophy is not yet clear to her. At this moment in her life, people are defined by deeds, not ideas. Here she wrote, "I don't know what Fascism is, but one of the things it probably means is deporting Jews to Poland."[33] As in Herzberg's diary, while Jews might not grasp the full significance of the experience they are living through, "Poland" has become a kind of shorthand for the worst kinds of fears and a synonym for German depravity and evil.

Éva's attempts to understand the ideas that gave structure to the events occurring around her continued in an entry dated 26 February 1944.

> I don't know what 'politics' actually is, though everybody is always talking about it: I really don't understand it, or who does it, but they do it very badly. I'll just be a photo reporter, that's all. But I promise you one thing, dear diary; I won't photograph a single Rightist because I hate them with all of my might![34]

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[32] Heyman, p. 31.
[33] Heyman, p. 33.
[34] Heyman, p. 43.

This quick entry gives us a clue to Éva's view of the world: politics – however it is defined – is done badly (and who could disagree with her analysis?). She believes it is simpler to dream a little dream of being a photographer. Finally, her statement indicates that, even though the causes of the war were unclear to her, hate in response to hate was still possible, even for one so young.

Éva's nebulous and ill-defined ideas of Nazis and Nazism end on 19 March 1944. In an entry that resonates with fear and trepidation, she wrote "Dear diary, you're the luckiest one in the world, because you cannot feel, you cannot know what a terrible thing has happened to us. The Germans have come!"[35] Here, Heyman gives us a clue as to how it is possible to deal with trauma. It is better not to be able to feel at all than to suffer. The Nazis come like the end of the world, making Heyman wish she could not feel, but at the same time, she believes it *is* necessary to live and to feel this trauma *through the act of writing the entry*. This entry is important because it underscores the idea of a "crisis of imagination" in which Holocaust diarists had to come to terms with the need to speak about what was happening, and at the same time numb themselves with regard to its full meaning.

Heyman divulged her dream to become a photographer in an earlier entry. On 25 March 1944 she made another statement that gives an idea of how the war made the most sense to her in photographic or cinematic terms. She wrote "I was on my way home when the German soldiers came marching in, with cannons and tanks, the kind I've seen in the newsreels."[36] A cinematic version of the war is just that – images and maybe some short journalistic descriptors that relay what is happening, but contain no real analysis of

[35] Heyman, p. 57.
[36] Heyman, p. 62.

why it happens. This is Heyman's first real experience of Nazis, yet she finds it impossible to discuss it in any other way than to say it similar to films she has seen. It is clear that she is avoiding – or perhaps has not yet really probed the idea of the Nazi perpetrator, as she herself admits in the next day's entry. On 26 March 1944, she wrote "Dear diary, until now I didn't want to write about this in you because I tried to put it out of my mind, but ever since the Germans are here, all I think about is Márta. She was also just a girl, and still the Germans killed her. But I don't want them to kill me!"[37] The fear in this short entry is palpable. Heyman is terrified. She knows her friend has been murdered and this realization allows her to understand her own mortality as well. But the idea of death is something she must not think about and she tries "to put it out of [her] mind." But again, she is compelled to write about the fear, to write about the Nazis and to write about the murder of her friend. Again, we see the tensions of a "crisis of imagination."

Things quickly became worse for Éva and her family, as she related in brief and factual entry dated 28 March 1944. "Early this morning the German and Hungarian Police took Uncle Sándor and everyone they knew who is a Socialist or a Communist."[38] Clearly the genocidal pressure was increasing and the little girl's world was becoming more and more dangerous. This short entry again relays information. It is almost a journalistic account. Something happened, that is all. Éva makes no effort to discuss why this happens. She merely records the event. It seems plain that she is still trying to keep certain things out of her immediate consciousness.

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[37] Heyman, p. 63.
[38] Heyman, p. 64.

Shortly after this entry, Éva and her family were moved into the ghetto in Nagyvarad. The next month's entries are devoted almost exclusively to life in the ghetto with all its horrors and deprivations. However, as much as she may have wished to keep a conscious awareness of Nazi perpetrators at bay, subconsciously she was still trying to cope. In a fascinating entry of 5 May 1944 she wrote "I dreamt that Pista Vadas was the driver of the truck [taking the family to the ghetto], and I was awfully angry that Pista Vadas had become an S.S. man."[39] Pista Vadas was the young Jewish man Heyman was in love with (a youthful crush, at a distance). It is interesting that in order for Éva's mind to let perpetrators through – even in a dream – they had to be disguised in the form of someone Heyman loved and could trust. What the dream reveals then, is not a perpetrator at all but a Jew in an SS uniform. The actual German human being is nowhere to be found. This type of imaginative alteration dealing with the uniform continues in other diaries and will be examined later in the thesis.

As things moved from bad to worse, Heyman, like Herzberg, began to ignore perpetrators even more. In fact, in the last month of her life, they disappear entirely. One final entry on 18 May 1944, written only about two weeks before Heyman was deported to Auschwitz, again conveys a young child's fear of death and the unknown. Although she quotes her grandmother, one senses that she is appropriating the words for herself too. She wrote "Even Grandma said: I really don't want to die, because maybe I will yet live to see a better world, and all those people who are now so inhuman and wicked will be punished."[40] This entry expresses two important things. First, it displays dread and horror in the face of imminent death. Secondly, and more importantly, the

[39] Heyman, p. 89.
[40] Heyman, p. 97.

comment, like many of Herzberg's, testifies to the desire to see justice served and perpetrators punished for the pain and misery they have caused.

We now turn to the diary of one of the great heroes of the Holocaust, Hannah Senesh. Interestingly, although Senesh clearly felt the need to resist Nazi aggression very strongly, her diary is almost devoid of comments on perpetrators. Categorically, her diary could almost fall under the heading of "Absence" or "Silence," were it not for the fact that she repeats some of the visual or cinematic elements Heyman expressed and periodically makes short personal comments on their significance. Although both young women were Hungarian, Senesh was considerably older than Éva Heyman (born in 1921 rather than 1931) and could therefore express a more mature opinion about the war. Unlike Heyman, she was also not present in Europe during the period in which she wrote her diary. Writing from a kibbutz in Palestine, Senesh's diary clearly conveys the mental as well as physical distance from the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Although she sympathizes with her family back in Hungary, and she editorializes somewhat, it seems that, for someone who would eventually give her life to fight the Nazis, she thinks far less about them than one would expect.[41]

Her entry of 8 September 1939 lays out, in few words, the immediate cause of the war.

> The war we feared has begun. It broke out over the matter of Danzig and the Polish Corridor…If they had really wanted to they could have preserved the peace. But they didn't want to – so there is now war between Germany and Poland. The Germans have already captured a large part of Poland, and France, and England, Poland's allies have entered the war.[42]

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[41] Senesh eventually volunteered to become a paratrooper and an officer, and she worked with British forces behind enemy lines. She was captured, tortured and eventually shot as a spy on 7 November 1944.

[42] Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary The First Complete Edition* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004), p. 81-82.

This comment is completely neutral in terms of perpetrators. The war is to be feared, but the "they" who could have avoided it could include any or all of the Great Powers.

Her tone is more personal on 14 May 1940 when she says

> I was struck by the realization of how cut off I am from the world. How can I have the patience to study and prepare for an exam while the greatest war in history is raging in Europe? We are witnessing, in general, times that will determine the fate of man. The European war is engulfing vast areas, and fear that it will spread to our land is understandable. The entire world is gripped by tension. Germany grows mightier daily.[43]

In this entry, Senesh begins to express what she is compelled to do – namely to *act.* Writing is not necessarily something her psychology requires. Senesh wants to act, not just react – this is why she questions her patience. The enemy is no one in particular – she has not seen perpetrators or experienced the war – it is only that "Germany" grows mightier and hence must be fought.

Senesh's comments of 4 June 1940 are worth mentioning because they indicate that she was attempting to identify with those who were suffering under Nazi oppression. "I can't feel a thousandth of what Mother must no be living through. She is suffering for our plans, dreams, which perhaps in this world holocaust will turn to ashes."[44] This is of interest for several reasons. First, it acknowledges the idea that imagination is limited – she cannot understand what is happening to her mother in Hungary. She expresses anxiety because all of the hopeful Zionist dreams she has invested so much hope in could go up in flames. Finally, "this world holocaust" is an important phrase. In it, Senesh seems to indicate her realization that the flames of war could exceed the bounds of Europe and completely engulf the world if something is not done. Her use of the word

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[43] Senesh, p. 95.
[44] Senesh, p. 99.

"holocaust" is the only example I have found in which the word that would come to resonate around the world as a synonym for Nazi atrocity is used during the war by a diarist.

Senesh again repeats simple news in her entry of 17 June 1940. "The Germans are on the threshold of Paris. Perhaps today the city will fall. Paris and France and the entire world. What is going to become of us? All I ask is, how long? Because that Hitler must fall, I don't doubt. But how long has he been given? Fifteen years, like Napoleon? How history repeats itself."[45] Clearly, Senesh understood the stakes at play in this war, particularly the extent to which those stakes affected Jews. At this point, before she goes back to Europe to fight, she is concerned with only one major villain, rather than the innumerable soldiers and functionaries who competed to fulfill Hitler's anti-Semitic wishes across the continent.[46]

The only time Senesh truly expresses fear, it not in relation to what is happening in Europe, but what might happen in Palestine. On 23 April 1941, she wrote

> But no one dares ask, what will happen if the Germans come here? The words are meaningless – on paper. But if we close our eyes and listen only to our hearts, we hear the pounding of fear…Whether I want to or not, I must imagine what the fate of the Land will be if it has to confront Germany. I'm afraid to look into the depth of the abyss, but I'm convinced that despite our lack of weapons and preparedness, we won't surrender without resisting strongly. Half a million people can face up to a force, no matter how greatly it is armed.[47]

This entry is very revealing and recapitulates some of Herzberg's themes. First and foremost it expresses the resolution to resist and fight back – even if the wish itself is

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[45] Senesh, p. 100.

[46] It should be noted that Senesh finished her diary and left it for her brother on the eve of her departure from Palestine for Europe. We have no personal records of her thoughts or feelings after she arrived and fought in the war zone of Eastern Europe – only second-hand testimony.

[47] Senesh, p. 119.

naïve and fanciful. It also acknowledges the inability of words to convey or to help cope with the trauma a German invasion of Palestine would create. Finally, like Herzberg, who repeated some Nietzschean philosophy in his diary (in relation to the "weakness" of Christianity), Senesh paraphrases Nietzsche from *Beyond Good and Evil* – admitting her aversion to looking into the "abyss" of German aggression – an admission which also reinforces the idea of a "crisis of imagination" in that she is saying she does not want to think about certain possibilities that might befall her or her comrades.

The last two entries in which Senesh substantively address perpetrators goes back to the model of the simply descriptive account of what is happening in the broadest geo-political sense. On 9 July 1941 she wrote.

> Germany attacked Russia about two weeks ago [it was 16 days] and swiftly captured Russian Poland, as well as a good part of Finland, and has begun advancing toward the interior of Russia. According to radio reports, the Nazis are now encountering strong Russian opposition. Everyone knows that the results of this struggle will be decisive to the future of the world. The suspense is enormous.[48]

Cleary, despite expressing her opinion about the importance of Operation Barbarossa, Senesh is clearly dependent on news reports and the radio to let her know what is going on. The final entry pertaining to Nazis or Nazi Germany was written on 6 July 1942. It simply states, "The Germans are at the gates of Alexandria." [49] Although she wrote sixteen more diary entries after this one before she left for Europe at the beginning of 1943, there seems to be no more for her to say about perpetrators. As with Herzberg, the more traumatic the environment was in which Senesh found herself, the less there was to talk about. It seems plain that there is some link between the intensity of the atmosphere

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[48] Senesh, p. 121.
[49] Senesh, p. 152-153.

surrounding the writer and the ability or desire to deal with those who are responsible for that intensity.

IV: Distance in Proximity – The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak

We have seen how some Jewish writers, like Abel Herzberg, took direct aim at Nazi perpetrators in the pages of their diaries. Others, like Éva Heyman and Hannah Senesh found it necessary to describe perpetrators in "photographic" or "visual" terms, due to their limited knowledge of events and their distance from the situation. The diary of Dawid Sierakowiak (1924-1943) is different from Herzberg's in that he does not undertake much analysis of individual perpetrators, though he did have the opportunity to observe them. It is also different from the diaries of Heyman and Senesh because it was written by a keen observer from the very center of the Holocaust – the Łódź ghetto. The diary is far longer and more complicated than that of either Heyman or Senesh, but even though he was almost as close to the Germans as Herzberg was, he finds it difficult to sustain any consistent analysis of their character or nature. In fact, as the diary progresses, Sierakowiak becomes angrier with the Jews of the ghetto than he is with the Nazis. This diary, then, occupies a kind of middle ground in which perpetrators appear, and appear *as* perpetrators – not as metaphors or tropes as we will see in the next chapter, yet remain analytically undefined. Much like Heyman and Senesh do in their visual, or media-driven depictions, Sierakowiak's preferred method of reporting is to relay what the Germans *do*. There are too many instances to mention in which he reports a new order that has been posted, or mentions the visit of a prominent Nazi personage. A short description of the most salient perpetrator depictions will have to suffice to indicate some

his experiences as well as how those experiences bear similarities to other themes introduced in this chapter.

On 4 September 1939, only three day after the war began, Sierakowiak, only fifteen years-old at the time, penned this optimistic entry. He wrote

> …optimistic but outrageous news reached us about the Germans having torpedoed an English passenger ship carrying several hundred exceptionally rich and influential American citizens. Eight hundred people died! And even before receiving this information, Roosevelt had announced that the United States would not stay neutral! What will he say now?[50]

Clearly, through this almost rote repetition of the incident with the *RMS Lusitania* in 1915, Sierakowiak and the other distressed Jews of Łódź hoped to invoke some of the hope that had been kindled when that passenger ship went down and the United States began to move toward hostilities against Germany in the First World War.[51] Sierakowiak and the other Jews of Łódź would of course have to wait until the end of 1941 for the United States to enter the war against the Axis – and by then it was much too late to make any real difference for many of them, including Sierakowiak, who died of tuberculosis and starvation in August of 1943.

On 9 September 1939 Sierakowiak got his first personal look at the Nazis. He wrote

> I go to the Pabianicka highway to watch the arriving troops. A lot of cars. The soldiers are not so extraordinary; only their uniforms make them different from Polish soldiers – steel green. Their faces tough, boisterous. They are the conquerors after all! A car full of high-ranking

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[50] Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto* (Translated by Kamil Turowski, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 33.

[51] 1,198 people died aboard the *Lusitania*, including 128 Americans, one of whom was Alfred G. Vanderbilt. The rumor in the ghetto seems to be clearly based on this incident, with President Roosevelt simply taking the place of President Wilson. See Melvin Maddocks (ed.), *The Great Liners* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1978), p. 136-137.

> officers with grim faces passes at lightning speed. People on the street are quiet and look at the passing troops indifferently. Hush, hush![52]

This entry is ambiguous. First the soldiers are "not so extraordinary," but by the end they are "conquerors after all." This early in the war (nine days in), the people of Łódź, including Sierakowiak, did not yet know what to make of the occupying forces – this is the reason for the indifference he mentions – though there is clearly some dread and trepidation present as well. As time when on, however, it became clearer to the Jews of Łódź what their German conquerors had in store for them.

Only three days later, the first real violence enters Sierakowiak's diary. In his *Dziennik*, or diary, on 12 September 1939 he wrote about the beginning of the new and miserable life that awaited the people of his city for the next few years. "People are being seized again for forced labor; beatings and robbings. The store where my father works has also been robbed. The local Germans do whatever they wish. There are numerous stories of how they treat Jews at work; some Germans treat them well, while others bully them sadistically."[53] The treatment of Polish Jews becomes more intense within just a few weeks and by 4 October 1939, after a particularly shameful incident in which he was put to work in front of gaping and laughing non-Jewish citizens of Łódź, Sierakowiak has this to write. "It's our oppressors who should be ashamed, not us. Humiliation inflicted by force does not humiliate. But anger and helpless rage tear a man apart when he is forced to do such stupid, shameful, abusive work. Only one response remains: revenge!"[54] This passage is interesting because it attempts to rationalize – and thus mitigate – the feelings of shame he feels at undergoing this experience. At the same

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[52] Sierakowiak, p. 37.
[53] Sierakowiak, p. 37.
[54] Sierakowiak, p. 47.

time, his rage and intensity are still great enough for him to desire revenge. Over time, however, the hope of avenging himself on Nazis seemed to fade away for Sierakowiak. As lack of food and constant pressure from the Nazis and from the Jewish ghetto authorities mounted, much of his energy was diverted into keeping himself alive and much of his remaining anger turned elsewhere.

Unlike the diaries of Heyman and Senesh, the fact that Sierakowiak does not attempt much of an analysis of Nazi perpetrators cannot be explained away by saying he had no contact with them. In an extended entry written 28 October 1939, he relates a long story in which the Sierakowiak's home was entered by a German officer searching for radios and other contraband. During this intrusion, Sierakowiak and a friend were assigned a few hours of heavy labor under the supervision of a Nazi soldier. Rather than make them walk their heavy load all the way to the police station, the officer supervising the young men, a man who "sympathizes" with them, allows them to take their burdens there aboard a streetcar. Although, in itself, the story this event is fairly innocuous, it is one of several close confrontations between the diarist and individual Nazis. The event terrified Sierakowiak and his family, leading him to write at the end of the day "Don't let this kind of day happen again," but it did not cause him to rethink or begin to analyze the perpetrators in any new or different way.[55]

In the first of the five surviving notebooks comprising Sierakowiak's diary, there always seems to be some surprise when confronted with violence. He wrote in an entry dated 12 December 1939

> A horrible day…On my way home I suddenly saw a horrible scene near Kilińskiego Street. A German dressed like a wagon driver was following a Jew, hitting him on his back with a huge stick so hard that the Jew (who was trying not

[55] Sierakowiak, p. 55-57.

> to turn around, not to be hit in the face) kept bending lower and lower, while the German reeled in his effort.[56]

The next diary, detailing life in the ghetto from 1 January 1940 – 5 April 1941 is missing. By the time the reader catches back up with him, Sierakowiak has endured much more suffering and is much more experienced in ghetto life. The tone of the later diaries is more stark and resigned. It is clearly important for him to write, but the possibility that he might not survive is not lost on him.

12 April 1941 sees Sierakowiak turning to straight reportage. He writes, "Just as I expected, the Germans have broken through the front line in the Balkans, and gained enormous victories in Yugoslavia, Greece and Africa. In the near future they will become the overlords of all of Europe, excluding, of course, the Soviets."[57] Sierakowiak's faith in the Soviets is, of course, premature, as entries over the next few months attest. In fact, on 23 June 1941 he incredulously writes "It's all true! Today's newspaper brings an official declaration of war against the Soviets by Finland, Italy, Germany, Romania and Yugoslavia" – another demonstration of reportage.[58] It is at the point where the war expands into the Soviet Union that the first real hints of despair become evident in the diary. The very next month, Sierakowiak expresses the opinion that the Germans must be in league with Satan. On 20 July 1941 he wrote. "If only those Krauts did not lumber any farther, you could say it would not be so bad. But so far the bloody beasts keep moving on. All of the Devil's power must be helping them."[59] These dehumanizing and demonizing images are the first real emotional characterizations of Nazis since Sierakowiak's initial and ambiguous impression of German soldiers in the

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[56] Sierakowiak, p. 69-70.
[57] Sierakowiak, p. 79.
[58] Sierakowiak, p. 105.
[59] Sierakowiak, p. p. 113.

opening days of the war. His opinion is obviously much stronger at this point – but still he neglects to ask himself (or his readers) *why* Nazis are doing this and *why* they are the way they are. Like Herzberg, he seems to take it as a given.

As conditions deteriorated further in the ghetto, Sierakowiak turned the anger he was still capable of against more visible forms of authority. His first target was his father, whom he accused multiple times throughout the diary of stealing food from himself, his sister and especially his mother, whom he held dear. The second target was the Jewish ghetto leadership, symbolized by Chaim Rumkowski. There is no doubt that in the entire history of the Holocaust, no Jewish figure is as problematic as Rumkowski, or "King Chaim" as he was sarcastically known to his "subjects." In the most positive of analyses, he comes off tyrannical and authoritarian. In the worst, he is depicted as a traitor, perhaps even as vile as the Nazis themselves. There is no doubt where Sierakowiak stood. On 30 August 1941 he wrote. "Rumkowski gave a truly 'Führer-like' speech in the afternoon" – a speech which cut payments for food rations.[60] Likening Rumkowski to Hitler was not an idle comparison. To Sierakowiak, both men were trying to accomplish the same thing – the death of all the Jews of Łódź.[61] The complaints against the corrupt ghetto government continued. On 17 April 1942 Sierakowiak wrote that "A meat ration of 10 dkg per person has been issued. In addition, 3 kilos of vegetables and 10 kilos of slaggy coal per family. Systematically we are being pushed closer to death."[62] Although he does not say who is pushing the ghetto population toward

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[60] Sierakowiak, p. 124.

[61] It did not help when Rumkowski gave speeches like his infamous "Give me your children" speech of 4 September 1942 in which he actually begged the people of the ghetto to allow him to send their children to their deaths to prevent Nazi reprisals. See "The Deportation of the Children from the Lodz Ghetto" in <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/lodzdep.html> Yad Vashem, 2006.

[62] Sierakowiak, p. 155.

death, the ambiguity of the statement and the context in which it is delivered indicate that the hostility could be directed at both the Nazis and the Jews who Sierakowiak feels are abetting them.

By 24 April 1942, Sierakowiak's understanding of perpetrators was considerably different than it was during the first days of the war when Nazis were "not so extraordinary." "Today," he writes, "the German medical commission visited our workshop. They are people from another world; our rulers, masters of life and death."[63] Starvation and exhaustion are beginning to take their toll on the young man. The historian must be sensitive to instances of sarcasm in works they analyze, but in this case, I can find none. Sierakowiak is not like Herzberg or Ringelblum – mocking the Germans by using their own words or perceptions against them. Rather, at this point, less than a year before his death, Sierakowiak seems genuinely mystified by these people, these aliens "from another world." As mentioned above, Nazis made it a point to draw stark contrasts between themselves as overlords, and other peoples (especially Jews) whom they conquered. It seems that in this moment of weakness, Sierakowiak is adopting the Nazi frame of reference, placing the "rulers" above him, and above the other starving inhabitants of the Łódź ghetto.

Like Herzberg, Sierakowiak seems to have no trouble divining the Germans' goals vis-à-vis the Jews. Even though the entry of 17 August 1942 discusses optimistic developments, Sierakowiak is still suspicious – still counting on Nazi brutality and anti-Semitism to do their worst. He writes. "There's been an incredible uplifting of spirits in the ghetto [in response to Soviet military initiatives]. The Jews are raising their heads again, but they're very frightened by the rumors circulating about the Germans' intention

[63] Sierakowiak, p. 158.

to finish off the Jews in Europe before they lose the war."[64] Indeed, as historians have been fond of pointing out for many years, Hitler was more concerned with winning the war against the Jews than the one against the Allies. Starvation and disease may have wracked his body, but Sierakowiak's diagnosis of the situation was absolutely correct.

Finally, on 5 September 1942 an event took place that shattered Sierakowiak to the core. That day, he wrote "My most Sacred, beloved, worn-out, blessed, cherished Mother has fallen victim to the bloodthirsty German Nazi beast!!!"[65] Obviously, in this instance, Sierakowiak is blaming the perpetrators, not other Jews, for his mother's death. This well-placed castigation changes very quickly, however, perhaps because it gives him no relief. Later the same day he felt compelled to write "Dear Mother, my tiny, emaciated mother who has gone through so many misfortunes in her life, whose entire life was one of sacrifice for others, relatives and strangers, who might not have been taken away because of her exhaustion had it not been for Father and Nadzia [Sierakowiak's sister] robbing her of her food here in the ghetto."[66] Blaming starving family members for his mother's death, rather than those who made the ghetto possible, is another sign that Sierakowiak had begun to internalize the script written for him by the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

The death of his mother marked the beginning of the end for Sierakowiak. The remainder of the diary, while filled with valuable information about the events in the ghetto, tells us precious little about how he thought of Nazi perpetrators. He himself summed it up best the evening his mother died, writing "Nadzia screamed, cried, suffered

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[64] Sierakowiak, p. 208.
[65] Sierakowiak, p. 218.
[66] Sierakowiak, p. 219.

spasms, but these days it doesn't move anyone. I am speechless and close to madness."[67] In this short sentence, Sierakowiak tells us what he can about reactions to trauma. Like so many other diarists, from Herzberg to Hillesum, he pronounces the unspeakability of the events he is bearing witness to, and recognizes that genocidal reality is another kind of reality – one in which madness reigns supreme.

Madness and murder are the subjects of the last entry I will examine in this chapter. On 11 March 1943, six months after the death of his beloved mother, Sierakowiak again strikes out at the Jews who have come to stand in for Nazis in his world.

> Lunatics, perverts, and criminals like Rumkowski rule over us and determine our food allocations, work, and health. No wonder the Germans don't want to interfere in ghetto matters: the Jews will kill one another perfectly well, and, in the meantime, they will also squeeze maximum production out of one another.

This conflation of Jewish victims with their oppressors is not something unique to Sierakowiak. In many diaries, like that of Emmanuel Ringelblum, this is a common quality, and it points to several things. First, it tells us that the Nazi perpetrators, at the point this effect occurs, have become so completely part of the world of the victim that they are no longer looked to as the first cause of the horrible conditions afflicting them. Secondly, it tells us that, at least to some degree, the Nazis were succeeding in breaking down the solidarity of the Jewish community. If diarists like Sierakowiak, who felt compelled to tell the story of the ghetto in their writings, also felt compelled to blame other Jews for their misfortunes, the work of subjection was almost complete. Finally, this entry is another example of a "crisis of imagination" in which the pain of dealing with perpetrators themselves has become too much to bear – and so secondary sources

[67] Sierakowiak, p. 221.

are found upon which to pour scorn, derision and hatred. The transference of emotions from one painful object to another that is less painful or threatening is a common psychological reaction to trauma and one that can be seen in many instances in other diaries. Dawid Sierakowiak's diary simply lays out the dynamics of this effect most clearly.

V: Conclusion

When they attempted to deal with them at all, Dawid Sierakowiak, Hannah Senesh and Éva Heyman tried to deal with perpetrators in plain, descriptive language. These writers either did not have the maturity (as in the case of Heyman), or they did not have the proximity to perpetrators (as in the case of Senesh), or they lost the strength to criticize perpetrators as time went on (as in the case of Sierakowiak). In this sense they stand apart from the way Abel Herzberg was able to criticize perpetrators, at least in the early part of his diary. However, all three of the diarists examined in the second part of this chapter did manage to make some kind of statement about perpetrators, even if it was simply to express fear of them. In the diaries I will discuss in the next chapter, the idea of the perpetrator itself changes as the language of reality is altered in genocidal circumstances. It is to the ways diarist's employed metaphors, tropes and jokes to deal with perpetrators throughout some Holocaust diaries that I now turn.

Chapter 2: Dissolution

Jewish Diarists, Perpetrators, and Depictions of the Inconceivable

> *Metaphor is probably the most fertile of man's resources, its effectiveness verging on the miraculous. All other faculties keep us enclosed within the real, within what already is… Only metaphor aids our escape and creates among real things imaginary reefs, islands pregnant with allusion.*
>
> – Jose Ortega y Gasset,1925

I: Introduction

In a short entry dated 5 October 1940, Emmanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian and resident of the Warsaw ghetto, recorded a joke. "There's a Jew riding in a streetcar. When he comes to the Hitler Platz, he cries 'Amen!'"[1] The noun *Platz* refers to a city square in both German and Yiddish, but the verb *platzen* also means "to burst" or "to explode."[2] Ringelblum was playing with words – quite literally swerving from one meaning to the other. Surrounded on every side by enemies, Ringelblum and everyone else who repeated the joke were symbolically doing what no one had been able to do physically – killing Adolf Hitler.

The ways language was used to define and resist perpetrators is addressed in this chapter. In some instances, the lines between perpetrators, collaborators and even other Jews began to blur or collapse. In other cases, like Ringelblum's joke, victims used

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[1] Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 68.

[2] Ringelblum wrote in Yiddish - *Platz* spelled פלאץ

language to indicate aggression, hostility and the will to fight. In every situation however, the kind of language these victims used was indicative of the presence of defense mechanisms that protected the solidarity of the Jewish community and the identity of the individual writer. If diarists did not depict aggressors as distant or abstract actors responsible for the misery they saw everywhere around them, they used linguistic swerves to transform aggressors into something "other"— something more capable of being resisted than the merely human.[3] Resistance was frequently contingent upon the ability to repress, deny, or avoid unpleasant realities. The Jewish writers examined here demonstrated psychological defense mechanisms even as they attempted to define the perpetrators, explain their actions and convey a sense of hostility toward them.

The introduction examined the historiography of psychological defense mechanisms during the Holocaust. Chapter two demonstrated how, with some exceptions, diarists had no trouble depicting the *physical dimensions* of persecution – the blood, the beatings and the barbarity – but did have problems comprehending the *agents* of persecution and the *motivations* that drove them. What is clear from this analysis is that victims experienced difficulty imagining and recording accounts of individual or

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[3] To avoid confusion, "linguistic swerves," or "turns" will be used in place of the word "tropic." The word "tropic" derives from the Greek *tropikos* and the Latin *tropus* – meaning "a turning." In conventional usage, the word connotes a certain style or discourse. Here, the "swerve" discussed represents "a turning" from one possible meaning toward another in an effort to relate two or more ideas, but without the literary and historiographical baggage "tropic" entails. See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 2**.** In this chapter, these swerves are considered in their metaphorical and comedic manifestations. Paul Ricoeur's study of metaphors also supports this interpretation. He argued that "The metaphor [swerve] was correctly described in terms of deviance." To him, a metaphor was a "transfer" and the goal of this transfer was to fill a "lexical lacuna" of meaning between writer and reader. Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1. Special Issue on Metaphor, (Autumn 1978), p. 145.

collective wills dedicated to personal or Jewish annihilation.[4] Diarists not only resisted death, but they resisted the idea of death as well.

The difficulty writers had coming to terms with an "incomprehensible" will to genocide indicates two things: first, the presence of psychological mechanisms of defense; and secondly, the near impossibility of manipulating ordinary language to convey the experience of trauma.[5] The evidence suggests that keeping an awareness of murderous Nazi intent at bay enabled some Jewish diarists to maintain the mental equilibrium needed to get through the day. Although Jewish diarists moved physically and temporally toward a moment of confrontation and negation with Nazi perpetrators, they ultimately recoiled from the possibilities of that meeting in their writings. This was the Jewish diarist's "crisis of imagination." The closer victims came to the moment when the idea and act of genocide become one, the more necessary it was to psychologically avoid that moment. This tension is apparent in a range of sources penned during and after the war by Jewish victims, but it is particularly evident in Jewish diaries written during the Holocaust. While diarists felt compelled to commit their experiences to posterity in writing, these writers could not fully acknowledge the scope of the experiences they were living through. They desperately tried to convey some sense of the reality to the reader, as well as any potential meaning they felt it might contain, but at

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[4] There is a great difference between contemporaneous Jewish accounts of genocide and post-war testimonies. In the latter, perpetrators appear in a distinctly different and more obvious manner than in the former. It is my contention that for those caught in the maelstrom of the Holocaust, engaging in speculation about the nature of persecutors and their motivations was problematic because it broke down mental boundaries separating perpetrator from victim.

[5] In 1937, Anna Freud enumerated ten defense mechanisms: regression, repression, reaction-formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, reversal and sublimation. In the case of the writings examined here, the focus is mainly on avoidance/denial – the repression of painful external stimuli. Anna Freud, *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense* (translated from the German by Cecil Baines, New York: International Universities Press, 1946), p. 47 and 190. Also see Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

the same time pulled away from a horrifying new actuality that faced them. These opposing tendencies make Holocaust diaries singular, and it is by examining the way perpetrators are depicted by the victims of the Holocaust that historians are offered a unique perspective on the way Jews experienced trauma and facilitated psychological resistance during the Shoah.

One method of reading these diaries and of seeking out the broader meanings and contexts included in them is through an application of the techniques developed by historically-informed literary critics. Hayden White argued that "…to write a history mean[s] to place an event within a context by relating it as a part to some conceivable whole."[6] By this he suggests that no historical event can have meaning if it stands alone and that history *is* the attempt to create a context able to bridge the difference between two discrete events. One way this could be done, he contended, was through the use of linguistic mechanisms like metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor or irony, which link disparate elements together. In Holocaust diaries, noticeable departures in style, syntax, tone, tense, imagery, or the use of irony or jokes pointed toward similarities *and* alternate meanings when used to describe perpetrators. They indicated a victim's attempt to come to terms imaginatively with an "unimaginable" situation which represented a "rupture" in the "cultural continuum."[7] When examining these diaries, it is possible to detect a writer's need to avoid the implications this kind of imagination might have led to. In many instances, creative use of language was the only permissible way diarists had of venting their anger and aggression toward those who persecuted them.

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[6] White, p. 94.

[7] James Young in "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs," *New Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Winter 1987), p. 404.

Linguistic swerves often indicate the presence of forms of psychological defense. In fact it is a long-recognized observation that certain linguistic devices serve this function. In *The Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White paraphrased noted literary critic Harold Bloom, and argued that,

> …a trope can be seen as the linguistic equivalent of a psychological mechanism of defense (a defense against literal meaning in discourse, in the way that repression, regression, projection and so forth are defenses against the apprehension of death in the psyche), it is always not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning, conception or ideal of what is right and proper and true "in reality."[8]

Writers of Holocaust diaries were trying to represent a new and "incomprehensible" reality to their readers. However, the language they used – that of our mundane, "everyday" world – was unable to convey the new and extraordinary circumstances the writer was attempting to describe. To the diarists, perpetrators were anything but "ordinary men."[9] The evidence suggests that perpetrators were understood as an evil, or a malignancy representing the exact opposite of the true "human." To acknowledge the perpetrators' humanity would have broken down the boundaries between "us" and "them" necessary for resistance. The need to maintain this separation was a central component in the diaries of Holocaust victims. This is why David Rousset's comment that "normal men do not know that everything is possible" is so important. In this case, the reader or historian (Rousset's ostensible "normal man") is left with the difficult task of attempting to reconstruct a historical event using an "inconceivable" text.

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[8] White, p. 2.

[9] This is not to assert that Christopher R. Browning's description of German killers as "ordinary men" is incorrect. It is to say that to Jewish victims writing diaries at the time, it was less important what Nazis were in "reality" than what they were imagined to be. See *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland,* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).

II: Sources

With few exceptions, Jews were the only group singled out for complete extermination during the Second World War.[10] By submitting to Nazi control, most other groups could reasonably expect to survive – if they did as they were told, kept their heads down and remained inconspicuous. However, from 1941 on, Jews could not acquiesce to the full range of Nazi demands in any way other than through their deaths. Therefore, *any* action they took which kept the individual alive longer or which perpetuated the community was an act of resistance.[11] The sources presented in this chapter are explicitly acknowledged as examples of opposition and resistance, whether they are classified as preemptively aggressive, or reactively protective.[12] In either case, the point is not to lionize these forms of psychological resistance, but show that they were an inevitable

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[10] Soviet *Kommisars* were explicitly singled out for death by Hitler's *Kommisarbefehl*. But, as historians like Arno Mayer point out, Jews were conflated with bolshevism in the Nazi mind. Sinti and Roma ("Gypsies") were also singled out for annihilation. See Christopher Browning's *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 220-221 and Arno Mayer's *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The Final Solution in History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

[11] Martin Gilbert ended his history of the Holocaust with the assertion that "To die with dignity was a form of resistance. To resist the dehumanizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be abased to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the perpetrators, these too were resistance. Merely to give witness by one's own testimony was, in the end, to contribute to a moral victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit." *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), p. 828. Lawrence Langer took Gilbert to task for the final two sentences, saying it was "like strewing violets in Dante's and Virgil's path as they toil downward through the noxious atmosphere of the Inferno…." *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 165. The analysis in this chapter supports Gilbert's implication that resistance was not only a common, but an intrinsic component of human psychology during the Holocaust. However, it also concurs with Langer's contention that to portray resistance as a triumph of the human spirit is like "building a monument to hope on the rubble of decay." Langer, p. 165. To find any redemptive value in the Holocaust would be an attempt to find meaning in most meaningless of events.

[12] In other words, the level to which behaviors or modes of thinking had to rise in order to be classified "resistance" was qualitatively higher for groups not singled out for complete extermination. For Jews, resistance was tantamount to survival, and any action, thought, or state of mind that maintained the individual ego *or* built communal bonds can be defined as resistance. Resistance for Jews and non-Jews were ontologically distinct categories. Kalí Tal said that "Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity…" In this instance, Tal is discussing witnessing *after* traumatic events, but her comments are applicable to contemporaneous Holocaust writing as well. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7.

reaction to the trauma produced by genocide. The linguistic swerves considered here are neither sacred, heroic, nor mystical. Rather, they represent struggles to reclaim agency amid Nazi attempts to shut off every avenue of opposition.[13] They are written examples of diarists' desire to bolster their own psychological well-being. If psychological and physical well-being were interconnected, the act of writing diaries was meaningful resistance because it helped the victim to stay alive. The linguistic resistance recounted here represents an important conflict over the dregs of autonomy and power. Therefore, concepts of "resistance," first as a psychological phenomenon and second as opposition to Nazi domination and authority are inextricably linked.

Two sets of primary documents are scrutinized here: the "chronicles" of Emmanuel Ringelblum of Warsaw, and the letters of Etty Hillesum of Amsterdam. These have been selected because they represent works by individuals with opposite personalities and styles who nevertheless employed many of the same kinds of linguistic devices to relate their experiences to readers. Both writers were ultimately victims of Nazi genocide, but as individuals and as Jews, they were very dissimilar. They were of two different generations – one raised before the Great War, the other after. One was from a largely Jewish milieu in Eastern Europe and the other from the largely non-Jewish cultural milieu of Western Europe. Ringelblum penned his account from a ghetto while Hillesum wrote from occupied Amsterdam and later from the interment camp at Westerbork. Despite these drastic differences, both writers retained similar linguistic constructions that suggest the presence of psychological defense mechanisms and

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[13] Resistance and mechanisms of defense were present on both sides. The deadly thing in the Nazi case was that the intentional creation of *structural* mechanisms of resistance (euphemistic speech and formal strategies of physical and psychic distancing, for instance) weakened the need for *mental* and *moral* resistance – perpetuating and intensifying the genocidal outcome.

underscore the difficulty they faced conveying traumatic experience. In the examples that follow, the presence of tropic or linguistic swerves indicates the coding of different levels or categories of experience which, taken individually or combined, form the basis for a new language of genocide and atrocity.

Emmanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944) was a professional historian who received his doctorate from the University of Warsaw for a dissertation on the Jews of that city during the Middle Ages. When the war began, he coordinated social aid in the ghetto and was a member of the political underground. Yet he is most famous for founding the *Oneg Shabbat* Archive documenting Nazi atrocities and for keeping a running chronicle of life and death in the ghetto. These entries were translated into English in abridged form as *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*.[14] Following the "liquidation" of the ghetto, Ringelblum and his family were taken prisoner by the Nazis. They were executed amid the ruins of Warsaw on 7 March 1944.[15]

The *Notes* are an account of events in the Warsaw ghetto from slightly before its formation in October of 1940 until the end of 1942, when it was dismantled and the vast majority of its residents deported "to the East."[16] Ringelblum's writings have been referred to as a "chronicle" rather than a "diary" by Jacob Sloan, who translated Ringelblum's *oeuvre* from Yiddish to English. Yet Sloan argued that the entries were

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[14] Currently, the only English version of Ringelblum's works is in the form of *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum.* This version, translated and edited by Jacob Sloan, is somewhat problematic for reasons to be discussed below.

[15] Israel Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, vol. 3*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), p. 1283-1285.

[16] Warsaw Jews made up approximately 300,000 of the 800,000 victims murdered at the Treblinka death camp. See Konnilyn G. Feig's *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979) p 293-312 and Yitzhak Arad's *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 60-62.

merely "notes toward a history of the times, and nothing else."[17] He explained his comment thus:

> Diaries usually restrict themselves to the lived experience of the diarist; they reflect his feelings and thinking; they are personal outpourings, confessions of a sort. *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* is nothing like that. Much of the material Ringelblum recorded he heard or saw himself; but he rarely describes how he felt about it.[18]

This dismissive categorization of Ringelblum's writing as a mere chronicle is inaccurate. The *Notes* are unlike most Holocaust diaries for two reasons. First, as a trained historian, Ringelblum was more attuned to the broader context in which events transpired than most diarists. Second, the goal of the chronicle was to represent a history of the ghetto which future historians could draw upon, as Sloan mentioned.

These *Notes* are not simply a dispassionate account, sterile and shorn of all personal sentiment. Even choosing which events to include in them revealed Ringelblum's point of view and made writing it a personal, autobiographical act in the most general sense. But even more, his choice of language showed that he inserted himself into the text — opining and editorializing while providing a professional account of the facts of Nazi aggression at the same time.[19] Ringelblum's entire "chronicle" was

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[17] Sloan seems to believe that the importance of the *Notes* lies in the fact that they establish certain facts about life in the Warsaw ghetto. Here, the concern is to discover how Ringelblum felt about those who put him there. Ringelblum, p. xxii.

[18] Ringelblum, p. xxii.

[19] An example of this would include a entry written on 13 April 1941 in which Ringelblum includes a quote from a ghetto newspaper *Against the Stream*, forcefully laying out the general rationale for Jewish resistance. Ringelblum called it a "fine lead article," and seemed to appropriate the sentiment for himself. "It's the thing to say that the war is turning people into beasts. But we did not wish the war, and we do not wish it now, and we will not be turned into beasts. We were, and we will remain, human beings." Ringelblum, p. 151. In another entry written on 17 June 1942, Ringelblum discusses a problematic way in which Jews were being reduced to "beasts." He wrote, "…we are left to be led as sheep to a slaughterhouse." He attempts to explain why this is so later in the same letter. He argues, "…every Jew knew that lifting a hand against a German would endanger his brothers…Not to act, not to lift a hand against the Germans, has since then become the quiet, passive heroism of the common Jew." Joseph Kermish, "Emmanuel Ringelblum's Notes hitherto Unpublished," *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. VII (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 179-180. This assertion of "heroism" is problematic – taken by historians like Martin

suffused with telling linguistic remarks and signs which indicated that he had developed a code he was inviting the reader to decipher. For instance, he used the words "They" "Them" or "Their" in a specific context on no less than 145 separate occasions.[20] He also described Nazis as "the Others," (also capitalized) some 70 times.[21] Sloan commented on this in his introduction,

> We know from the very first page of the notes who the cryptic "They" refers to. "They" are the Germans. It is not a good idea to mention Their real name too often; the notes may be confiscated by Them. For the same reason, the notes have many phrases and passages in pidgin Hebrew. "They" can easily understand Yiddish, the language of the notes, Yiddish being basically a medieval variant of German. But "They" would have more trouble decoding the Hebrew.[22]

Sloan was wrong here for several reasons. First, the *Notes* contain multiple references to Nazis, Hitler, the SS and so on.[23] If Ringelblum were attempting to hide the presence of Nazis in the text, he did so very poorly, and in a manner inconsistent with the rest of the work as a whole. Second, Yiddish may derive from German, but it is written in Hebrew characters the average Nazi would not be able to read. Third, if the *Notes* did fall into the wrong hands and if any effort at all were made to translate them, there was enough

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Gilbert to indicate some sort of moral victory, while others like Lawrence Langer consider it "an obviously desperate struggle on Ringelblum's part to rescue some shred of meaning from a hopeless situation." Langer, p. 165. Langer seems more correct. Ringelblum was explaining why Jews seemed *like* sheep (another linguistic swerve), but actually remained human beings – a mechanism of defense in that it is an attempt to maintain the integrity of the Jew as human being.

[20]These Sloan capitalized regardless of their position in the sentence – thereby defining them as proper nouns rather than as pronouns.

[21] Because Sloan's edition is abridged, the value of these numbers is to demonstrate that these words appear regularly in Ringelblum's work, not to establish some empirical truth or meaning in them.

[22] Ringelblum, p. xxv. It is important to note that there are no capital letters in the Hebrew alphabet. By capitalizing them in the English translation, Sloan is drawing attention to their peculiar context or placement in a sentence.

[23] For example, on 8 May 1942 Ringelblum discussed communiqués that gave hope to ghetto inhabitants by depicting the Führer as weak. He wrote "Another communiqué disembarked the whole army in Murmansk, borne by 160 ships, not one of which was sunk en route. Of course, when Hitler heard this news…he collapsed." Ringelblum, p. 260.

information to doom the writer or the bearer of the documents, whether certain names were thinly disguised or not.[24]

Sloan *was* on the right track when he wrote "It is not a good idea to mention Their real names to often…," but not for the reasons he thought. When examining linguistic turns in Ringelblum's discourse, it is possible to see that several things were happening at once. First, he interjected himself into the text, but in a subtle way different from the very personal tone used in most diaries. Second, his style revealed a keen understanding of the power of language. A belief, well-established in Jewish mysticism and theology long before the arrival of post-structuralist discourse, posits that the very act of naming confers power. It was not a good idea to mention "Them" too often because these utterances made "Them" more real, more powerful and less easy to ignore.

The other subject of this chapter's analysis, Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), was the daughter of Dutch and Russian Jewish parents. As a young woman, she studied law, Slavic languages and psychology in Amsterdam. In March of 1941, about a year after the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, Hillesum began a diary. After she was imprisoned in the Westerbork transit camp, she wrote letters to friends describing the treatment of Jews there.[25] In 1943, she was deported with her family and about 900 other Jewish victims to Auschwitz, where she was murdered later that year on 30 November. Salvaged and

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[24] The pages that form the *Notes* were buried in metal boxes and three milk cans in cellars across the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. One milk can was recovered in 1946. Another milk can and several containers were found in 1950. The third milk can has never been recovered.

[25] The majority of Hillesum's diary entries were written before her imprisonment in Westerbork and many of the letters she wrote while there were smuggled out of the camp, thereby evading Nazi censors. Her final letter was thrown from the inside of a cattle car bound for Auschwitz.

published after the war, her writings reveal an intimate portrait of a highly intelligent, spiritual individual.[26]

In some ways, Hillesum's letters and diaries were more personal and less problematic than Ringelblum's. Though she employed tropes on many occasions which swerved away from obvious meanings, her style was more reflective, relaxed and demonstrated less need to commit every fact to paper than Ringelblum's.[27] Her concerns were more inwardly directed and point to a personality more devoted to maintaining everyday relationships than with the social, political and military matters discussed by Ringelblum.

At the same time, Hillesum's writings were similar to Ringelblum's because they demonstrated ways in which writing was used as an act of resistance. This resistance was not only outwardly directed – helping to create communal bonds among Jews – but inwardly directed as well because the act of writing itself reinforced individuality amid Nazi attempts to eradicate difference amongst Jewish victims.[28] Yet in both sets of sources there remains an intrinsic tension between the goal of leaving behind a record of Nazi crimes on the one hand and maintaining the will to resist on the other. In an effort to relieve these tensions, these diarists resorted to the use of linguistic devices like

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[26]Originally published in Dutch, the diaries earned a wide readership and were translated into multiple editions in many languages, including French and English. The edition used here is the most recent English translation entitled *The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002). All biographical information comes from the introduction to this book.

[27] It might be supposed that Hillesum's diaries are less complicated than Ringelblum's "chronicles" because she was younger and had less riding on the details of her writing than Ringelblum had. This is not the case. Throughout, she demonstrates sophisticated insights and a keen intelligence. She was simply more interested in the good than the bad – for reasons to be discussed below.

[28] Nazis were extraordinarily concerned with categories – this is why concentration camp inmates were made to wear different colored triangles on their uniforms: pink for homosexuals, purple for religious objectors like Jehovah's Witnesses, red for political prisoners, two yellow triangles forming the Star of David for Jews etc. For all groups, the color of the triangle signified a violation of some aspect of the Nazi "moral" code, but for Jews, the fact that they wore the yellow star at all meant there could be no rehabilitation for them. They were expressly marked for death.

metaphors, jokes and sarcasm to explain something that was inconceivable – both to themselves and to those who would read their work. This manipulation of language was a method of relieving the contradictions inherent in an extremely traumatic and deadly environment.

III: The Limitations of Language and the Need for Meaning

The study of Holocaust diaries is the study of language and the limitations of language. In ordinary circumstances, everyday language is used to transmit everyday ideas. However, in the murderous environment in which Jewish diarists found themselves during the Second World War, no language was able to convey the totality of meanings the historian expects or hopes to find. As mentioned in the introduction, within the genocidal atmosphere of the Holocaust, words and their meanings did not remain static but fluctuated in an effort to express a traumatic reality. A wall existed in Holocaust diaries between the act-idea of genocide and the capabilities of the victim's language and imagination to deal with it. When reading diaries, the full psychological magnitude of the trauma can only be inferred and thus comprehension can be incomplete at best. Simply put, genocide was more real than language – and so the experience was inexplicable at the most basic level. In this sense, the Holocaust remains, as Primo Levi and other memoirists contended, *beyond* comprehension.[29]

The diarists writing at the time understood that the incomprehensibility of the circumstances interfered with their ability to communicate to readers. Etty Hillesum

[29] See Primo Levi's discussion of language and comprehensibility in *The Drowned and the Saved*, (translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Vintage International, 1989), and in Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 21-40.

addressed this issue explicitly. In a letter written from Amsterdam in December of 1942, she wrote

> To simply record the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, would soon become monotonous. Nor is it possible to pen picturesque accounts of barbed wire and vegetable swill to show outsiders what it's like.[30]

The reader who was not there, Hillesum seemed to argue, must of necessity experience difficulty grasping the truth accounts of the Holocaust represent. This is because extraordinary or traumatic realities cannot be dealt with adequately using everyday language. At the same time, Hillesum recognized that the quotidian was the only idiom readers would possess – hence the conundrum. Historians are as aware of this problem of language as Hillesum was. Nevertheless, it is only by rising to Saul Friedländer's challenge to "probe the limits of representation" that we can hope to historicize the experiences and mentalities forged in the moment of genocide or to increase our understanding of the experience of victims as they lived it.[31] This analysis represents an attempt not to recover *lost voices*, but to recover *lost meanings* – to translate the language of atrocity into something more comprehensible. This idea of "translating" is supported by William Reddy's recent argument that

> the concept of translation allows one to speak of the relations between language and the world in a way that is neither Cartesian (distinguishing sharply between subjective and objective conditions, as most psychologists continue to do) nor poststructuralist. It allows one to say meaningfully that there are kinds of thought that lie 'outside' of language, yet are intimately involved in the formulation of utterances.[32]

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[30] Hillesum, p. 581.

[31] Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[32] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 64.

Through the creative use of language, Holocaust diarists offered readers their nearest rendition of an extreme reality. It is the task of the historian to break down and examine potential meanings these offerings might convey.

Emmanuel Ringelblum also commented on the paucity of language when trying to relate the events of the Warsaw ghetto. In an entry written sometime in late June 1942, he observed that "The German soldiers' willful treatment of the Jews is beyond description."[33] This comment is interesting because "willful treatment" is such an understated phrase. By "willful treatment," he meant rapine, sadism and murder. But by expressly leaving those incommunicable words out, he underscored his point – nothing he said or wrote could make the reader any more aware of the true reality of the ghetto than a simple phrase like "willful treatment." The way these words are used indicates Ringelblum's belief that the imagination cannot follow where the victims were forced to go.

Hillesum repeatedly stressed the difficulty transmitting the true nature of what was happening to her, but also indicated the need to do so. In the same letter quoted above, she displays her concern with finding meaning. She wrote,

> True, things happen here that in the past our reason would not have judged possible. But perhaps we have faculties other than reason in us, faculties that in the past we didn't know we had but that possess the ability to *grapple with the incomprehensible* [my emphasis]. I believe that for every event, man has a faculty that helps him deal with it.[34]

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[33] Ringelblum, p. 302.
[34] Hillesum, p. 586.

Hillesum was expressing the desire or need to make sense of her experiences, as well as the hope that she could explain their meaning to others.[35] More importantly however, it was clear to her that she needed "faculties other than reason" to do so**.** Language is a function of reason, and it is worth noting that Hillesum used a verb of metaphoric force ("grapple") to indicate the problem she was confronting.[36]

In fact, Hillesum seemed to believe suffering conferred meaning, something later Holocaust memoirists like Primo Levi would dispute.[37] In the same letter, she illuminated the paradoxes of language in an argument which initially promoted and then dissolved the idea of Jewish specificity or proprietary monopoly of the tragedy presented by the Holocaust

> It is not easy – no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else – yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, than it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward.
>
> That's why it seemed such a great danger to me when all around one could hear, 'we don't want to think, we don't want to feel, it's best to shut your eyes to all this misery.'"[38]

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[35] Christian Meier has recently argued that while the Holocaust might not be comprehensible, it is explainable. Christian Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History*, (translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 137-169.

[36]Incidentally, Zygmunt Bauman has claimed that both language and reason are essential components of genocide. *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

[37] Hillesum's need to find meaning in suffering can be seen as a precursor to a similar debate that took place among Jewish scholars and theologians in the 1960's and 1970's as authors like Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg and Elie Wiesel grappled with the implications of Richard Rubenstein's seminal book, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) in which he asserted that he could no longer believe in God or Israel as the chosen people in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

[38] Hillesum, p. 586-587.

In this passage, it seems clear that Hillesum needed to believe there was meaning in suffering. If there were not – if suffering were only just that – she would have been bereft of any reason to stay strong or continue resisting. Throughout the text of her letters and diary entries she frequently stated, often very explicitly, that the mind required events to have meaning – this despite the fact that she also said it was impossible to write a description capable of conveying that meaning. This need to use communication to resist was the primary, though implicit, argument for witnessing and recording the events she lived through. At the same time, she seemed to have been under no delusions about the difficulties this posed. The fascinating, and very human thing about Hillesum was that even though she claimed it was "dangerous" for others not to want to "think" or "feel," an examination of her diaries and letters indicates that, over a long period of time, she avoided certain types of confrontation herself – particularly in the diaries, but also in the letters she wrote during the process of deportation.

In the sense that the need for meaning was of extreme importance, especially to young writers, Hillesum's comments are reminiscent of the assertion made by Anne Frank (1929–1945) another Dutch Jew. Frank wrote, "…I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart." At first, this passage simply seems to be the heartbreakingly naïve wishful thinking of a teenage girl. Closer scrutiny, however, suggests a protective denial of the exterminatory reality of Nazi-occupied Amsterdam in 1944.[39]

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[39] This comment was written 15 July 1944, shortly before the Frank family was discovered and Anne sent to Auschwitz. She was subsequently transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where she died of typhus. See Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* (edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, translated by Susan Massotty, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1995), p. 332.

In an undated letter written sometime after 26 June 1943, Hillesum made another comment similar both to her previous statements and to Anne Frank's. She wrote

> And in spite of everything you always end up with the same connection: life is good after all, it's not God's fault that things go awry sometimes, the cause lies in ourselves. And that's what stays with me, even now, even when I'm about to be packed off to Poland with my whole family.[40]

By shifting the blame for events from the divine to the human, Hillesum seemed to be saying the events she was living through were not God's fault – humans were to blame. If God were at fault, the suffering Hillesum witnessed at Westerbork would have been pointless. She could not bear for this to be the case. Though there is a veneer of hopefulness, this statement seems to be a symptom of denial and avoidance rather than one of true optimism. As in the case of Anne Frank, the denial functioned to insulate the self from what the senses said was going on around it. The world these two saw around them was not good. Neither were many of the people. Nevertheless, they both began optimistically, saying "in spite of everything," or "even now." This suggests a need or even a compulsion to paint things in bright terms. People *are* "truly good at heart." "Life *is* good after all."

One reading of Frank's passage focuses on her suggestion that people were inwardly good "at heart," although they may not have outwardly demonstrated that goodness. This implies the belief in a sort of Cartesian dualism between subjective and objective realities. Frank seemed to indicate that the cause for the discrepancy between a good nature and a bad deed was that people were alienated from themselves. Hillesum's approach was the opposite. She believed the reason things went "awry" was "in ourselves" – though it is not entirely clear if she thought the answer to the problem was

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[40] Etty Hillesum, *Etty*, p. 608.

inside as well, or if it needed to come from an outside source like God. Her emphasis on faith would suggest it is the latter. In either case, both writers seem to demand an ultimately positive meaning. If that meaning could not be found it was either because it was hidden or because there were those who chose not to find it. This point of view is indicative of a deep-seated need for a positive world-view. Events which did not fit this perspective (they both said "in spite of *everything*") were anomalous in the bigger picture. These young women not only needed to believe that "goodness" existed, but that the "good" in the heart would triumph in the end. This optimism itself can be read as a mechanism of defense and perhaps even as one of hostility. Not only did it enable the holder of the belief to maintain a needed distinction between those who were only good "at heart" and those who were good both outwardly *and* inwardly, but it also implied the superiority of those whose outward and inward natures were reconciled.

IV: Linguistic Mechanisms of Defense – Metaphors

A problem that arose for the authors of Holocaust diaries was that the events they wrote about were completely disconnected from any other type of previous reality. It was impossible to make a comparison to their experiences because nothing had ever been *like* them. This did not mean writers could not describe their experiences in language at all, but it did mean that language had to be modified and meaning encoded in a different way to even partially convey its significance. The remainder of this chapter will deal specifically with ways diarists encoded perpetrators, their motivations, and their attitudes toward oppressors symbolically in their diaries.[41]

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[41] In an essay, Jonathan Morse quotes Raymond Federman, saying "We must dig in to see where raw words and fundamental sounds are buried so that the great silence within can finally be decoded," in "Words Devoted to the Unspeakable," *American Literary History*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Winter 1993), p. 719.

The evidence indicates that the extreme conditions of the Holocaust gave rise to a different, perhaps inassimilable, form of historical writing based on trauma and atrocity – a new epistemology and language of genocide.[42] No period in history so demonstrated the fact that everything was indeed possible. When Nazi Germany willed or imagined a hellish new reality into existence, perpetrators and victims were both forced to create a new language to describe it.[43] These new types of understanding and language were not incidental, but inseparable components of a deadly new world, one where genocide was possible.[44] In other words, that new world was as much about how it was imagined or felt to be as it was about how it was purported to be in some "objective" reality.[45]

The meanings created in the discourse of genocide were purposeful, even if they were sometimes unconscious. As Berel Lang contended, "the writer is responsible for what the imagination does, and this is true even if the directions in which it moves are not the results of deliberation in its usual sense."[46] In Holocaust discourse, meaning shifted

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[42] In an essay entitled "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," Cathy Caruth has said that history is no longer "straightforwardly referential," and that rethinking about history in terms of trauma means that "reference [in the post-structuralist sense of knowledge being based upon a system of experience] is not aimed at eliminating history, but a resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not." *Yale French Studies,* no. 79 (1991), p. 182.

[43] In his essay "Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust," *History & Memory*, vol. 17. no. 1-2 (Fall 2005) Histories and Memories of Twentieth Century Germany, Alon Confino says "truth is a creation of the imagination." He also quotes Paul Veyne as saying "It is we who fabricate our truths, and it is not 'reality' that makes us believe. For 'reality' is the child of the constitutive imagination of our tribe." p. 317.

[44] Robert Jay Lifton quotes an Auschwitz survivor as saying "The world is not this world." Lifton explains, "What I think he meant by that was that, after Auschwitz, the ordinary rhythms and appearances of life, however innocuous or pleasant, were far from the truth of human existence. Underneath those rhythms and appearances lay darkness and menace." Lifton in "The World is not this World," John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum eds., *Holocaust: Religious & Philosophical Implications*, (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 191.

[45] Wendy S. Hesford supports this contention. In "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" she says, "Cultural narratives and fantasies are not antithetical to material "reality" but fundamental to social and political life." *College English*, vol. 62, no. 2 (November 1999), p. 193.

[46] Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 118.

and alternate definitions filled the spaces between the quotidian and the grotesque. Holocaust diarists built tenuous bridges between what *had been possible* and what was *now possible* – and in doing so translated between alternate realms of experience. Lang continued, arguing that

> …linguistic developments which occurred at the time of the Nazi genocide would disclose features resembling those of the process of genocide itself; it would be difficult to understand how that process might occur without corresponding changes in the language. [47]

Here, Lang was discussing the way perpetrators manipulated and changed language in order to find better ways to kill through the use of euphemisms. Words like *Sonderbehandlung* ("special treatment") come to mind when one thinks of ways Nazis sought to disguise their intentions, perhaps even from themselves, by conferring new meaning on normal language.[48] The ways Nazis twisted language reflected their attempt to create a new morality in which genocidal mass-murder was not only permissible, but an imperative. In order to do this, they sanitized genocide by investing old words with new meanings – hence the sinister connotations we now have for words like *Säuberung* ("cleansing").[49]

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[47] Lang, p. 83.

[48] The creation of euphemisms and languages of separation and degradation were one way of depersonalizing victims. See the Jew as "gangrenous appendix" in Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 16; Jews and psychiatric patients as "portions," Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, Christian Pross, *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 250; Jewish bodies as *Scheißstücke* – "pieces of shit," Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* (New York: Ziff and Davis, 1947), p. 83; Jewish corpses as *Figuren* – puppets or dolls or *Schmattes* – rags, Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 9; Jews and mentally ill as "animals in human form," Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: Euthanasia in Germany 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 119; Jews and mentally ill as *Ballastexistenzen* – human flotsam and jetsam, Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of the Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) p. 15 and targeted victims as *unnütze Esser* – "useless eaters," Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 22.

[49] This process of redefinition was incomplete, however. Nazis changed language to mock, degrade and dehumanize their victims in order *to make it easier to kill*, but it was only partially successful.

The development of strategies of differentiation and dehumanization was necessary for Jewish diarists as well, though for reasons very different from that of the Nazis. It is my contention that Jewish diarists during the Holocaust also avoided the full reality of the situation by altering language. But for them, the goal was to stay alive. An example of this alteration includes the way the word "organizing" was understood in completely different ways by victims in Auschwitz and other camps than it was by the outside world. In some instances in Holocaust diaries, victims used language figuratively or metaphorically to depict their persecutors. Writers were forced into this linguistic detour because of the contradictory necessity of keeping perpetrators mentally at bay while at the same time expressing the subconscious urge to confront them.

One example comes from the work of Emmanuel Ringelblum, who relayed an account not only of fascist and anti-Semitic violence, but also provided evidence for how perpetrators were viewed by members of the Jewish community. In a passage written in January of 1940, he told of the arrival of three German soldiers into the ghetto. He wrote, "Three 'Skulls' from the Totenkopf company came to an apartment on Wloclaweka Street, with *spitters*, sawed-off shotguns, in their hands, [and] took all the money there was."[50]

"Skulls" obviously referred to the insignia worn by the SS, especially the *Totenkopfverbände*, who not only wore the sign of the death's head on their headgear, but

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For example, the SS extermination contingent at Treblinka not only referred to the narrow barbed-wire "tube" through which victims were flogged on their way to the gas chambers as the *Himmelfahrtsstraße* ("the Road to Heaven"),but they also put up a sign, surmounted by a Star of David, *in Hebrew* reading "This is the gateway to God. Righteous men will pass through." Besides being cynical, the notice points to Nazi use of the tropic. In one sense it is saying the gas chamber is a portal to another, better place. In another, it is a *prima facie* admission of Nazi guilt – "Righteous men" by definition should not be put to death. See, Arad, p. 120 and Gitta Sereny*, Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p148.

[50] Ringelblum, p. 13. In Sloan's translation of Ringelblum's writings, italicized words are written not in Yiddish, but in Hebrew, a significant point that will be discussed below.

also upon their collars. The repetition of the skull motif in both Yiddish and German is significant. The sentence is almost redundant unless one reads "Skulls" and "Totenkopf" in different ways because *Totenkopf* already connotes skulls. Rendered in quotation marks by Sloan, this suggests the term was commonly used by other ghetto inhabitants, not just Ringelblum. This indicates that a new language specifically related to Nazis and atrocities was formed in the traumatic conditions of the ghetto. The short definition of *spitters,* written in Hebrew, performs the same function - making the reader aware of the development of slang particular to the Jewish denizens of Warsaw. However, "Skulls" seemed to be a more common term than *spitters*, as shown by Ringelblum's decision to define the latter.

By transforming the Germans wearing the uniforms of the death's head into "Skulls" themselves, Ringelblum pointed to another meaning. By using "Skulls" as a synecdoche (allowing a part – the *skull* – to stand in for the whole – the *Nazi perpetrator*) he was not only identifying those was responsible for the theft, but he was also underscoring their menacing connection with death in the minds of the ghetto's inhabitants. Like classical European depictions of Death coming with his scythe to harvest souls, so the Nazis came *like* Death with their *spitters,* gathering money in lieu of lives – for the moment.[51]

This reading of the Ringelblum's passage suggests that Death was personified in the form of these perpetrators. Like Death, these men were no longer human. Though they had recognizably human features, they had no feeling or remorse – no human qualities. To Ringelblum, the Nazis *were* death. They were the antithesis of what was

[51] One thinks in some ways of the painting *Death and the Miser* by Jan Provost (c. 1500). As in the ghetto, the painting seems to say Death can be avoided, but ultimately cannot be bought off.

human and alive – their existence as well as their insignia a grinning example of life's negation.[52] Ringelblum distinguished between what was human and what was inhuman in order to separate himself and his people from this deadly "other."

There is another synecdoche in the *Notes* that parallels this use of "Skulls." It concerns Ringelblum's discussion of the way Nazis drove Jewish police to ever more stringent measures against their own people. In an undated entry, written sometime in late 1942, he wrote of witnessing a scene "one day when every policeman had to meet a quota of four 'heads.'"[53] Again, the synecdoche, rendered in quotes by Ringelblum's translator Sloan, indicates that this was common slang used in the ghetto, not just a creation of Ringelblum's. The fact that Nazis entering the ghetto were "Skulls," while the victims were "heads" suggests a kind of equivalence.[54] Ringelblum could have simply reported the event (as Sloan wrongly implies he did), but he does otherwise. Instead of laying out the simple facts, he moved to a more poetic and illustrative way of narrating experience. At least if Hayden White is to be believed, such tropic devices correspond to the use of mechanisms of defense.[55] Just as the Nazis represented death, so too the Jewish

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[52] In some ways, Ringelblum's images of Death look back to a longer European tradition of death as the ultimate equalizer. This is symbolized by medieval tradition of *mementos mori*, as well as in the depictions of the *danse macabre*. To the degree both of these traditions echo the recognition that in death and decomposition all men become the same, the inclusion of this imagery in the *Notes* can be seen as an example of resistance through projection of a form of equality. See Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (translated by Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 156-172.

[53] Ringelblum, p. 331.

[54] "Skulls" appears to be Jewish ghetto slang. It is not necessarily clear if "heads" is also slang, or an example of Jewish appropriation of a dehumanizing German term. Nevertheless, Ringelblum is still implying equivalence between the figuratively "dead" German and those Jews who were destined for murder.

[55]Ringelblum did not always write this way. Some of his entries can be classified as strictly descriptive reportage. For example in an entry from 8 May 1940 he writes – "At twilight, Poles were all seized in every street. Jews had their papers checked to make sure they weren't Christians. Stopped streetcars, dragged everyone in them off to the Pawia Street prison; from there, it is said they are sent to Prussia…All the Jewish barbers were picked up, ordered to cut the hair of those being deported. Seized not only young people, but older people as well over forty." Ringelblum, p. 38.

victims were outside the bounds of the living. Even to other Jews, they were the walking doomed – written off and hopeless. Perhaps this attitude seems cold coming from people in a situation very similar to that of the poor victims, but even earlier in the *Notes* Ringelblum took pains to mention that the Jewish ghetto dwellers were developing a "marked, remarkable indifference to death, which no longer impresses."[56] By turning their own doomed people into simple 'heads" who existed now only to be counted and murdered, ghetto inhabitants resisted by preserving and consolidating the strength of those who remained among the living.

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum provide examples of both swerves and types of repressed aggression. In a letter written in December 1942, she described the two Commandants of Westerbork, the transit camp from which Jews were sent to their deaths in Auschwitz. She wrote,

> We have a Dutch Commandant and a German one. The first is taller, but the second has more of a say. We are told, moreover, that he likes music and that he is a gentleman. I'm no judge, although I must say that for a gentleman he certainly has a somewhat peculiar job.[57]

It is interesting to note that the Dutch Commandant, who starts out being the subject of the sentence, seems to dissolve or disappear into the German Commandant by the end of the paragraph. Either the two became indistinguishable to Hillesum, or she was shielding her fellow countryman from the repressed furor of her subsequent remarks. It seems more likely that the distinction between perpetrator and collaborator was beginning to dissolve. Hillesum implies that the Dutch Commandant was *like* the German one. While he may have retained the characteristics of the Dutch people, he was

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[56] Found in an entry dated 26 August, 1942. Ringelblum, p. 194.

[57] Hillesum, p. 582. In the English translation, the subject of the third sentence is not entirely clear. The reader could construe the Dutch Commandant as the implied subject. However, based on other descriptions of the Dutchman on other occasions, it seems that here she is referring to the German.

nevertheless lumped together with the Nazi in Hillesum's mind.[58] A relationship between the two is expressed – the Dutch Commandant is taller but the German has more power. Significantly, power is expressed in terms of language – the Nazi has more "say." The Dutchman is subordinate to, but of a piece with the German. That the German has "more say" implies that the Dutch Commandant also has some "say." The way lines of logic, causality and identity begin to fragment in these passages indicates something akin to what Derrida meant by writing "*sous rature*" (translated by G.C. Spivak as "under erasure.")[59] By writing and physically crossing out a word as Heidegger did in Derrida's example in *Of Grammatology*, or by figuratively "crossing out" words or identities that seemed as if they should be there, the author draws the reader toward a concept or idea without forcing her to use words that do not convey the totality of meanings she knows she cannot express. In the end, to Hillesum, the specific identities of the Dutch Commandant and the German merge together and they become indistinguishable.

The Commandant (presumably the German one, although it is not specified) likes music – his tastes are refined as befits a "gentleman." However, Hillesum's tone indicates that she believes there is more to a "gentleman" than just the outward expression of intellectual and cultural taste. To her, gentlemanliness is a state of being, not a veneer or superficial mask of culture that can be donned and removed at will**.** To Hillesum, this

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[58] There are two Commandants, but in another letter dated Friday 9 July 1943, Hillesum again brings up the issue of the Commandant without specifically addressing which she is talking about – "Mische [Etty's brother]…says 'I'm going to go and tell the Commandant he's a murderer.' We have to watch out that he doesn't do anything dangerous." When examined together it seems as if the Commandants' individual natures begin to disappear and they become indistinguishable in her mind. Hillesum, p. 627.

[59] Technically, this is to write a word and then to cross it out – keeping both the word and its negation since both are necessary. Spivak traces this practice from Derrida to Heidegger's *Zur Seinsfrage*. The point, she writes is that "Word, and thing or thought never in fact become one…We are reminded of, referred to, what the convention of words sets up as thing or thought, by a particular arrangement of words." Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974), p. xiv.

"gentleman" Commandant was a poseur, and even though the he had the ability to manipulate her body, she believed she could defeat him on the transcendent plane of culture.

The final understated sentence is the most fascinating. Hillesum begins by saying "I'm no judge." In doing so, she renounces the power judgment implies, but then proceeds to do exactly what she said she would not. She wants to remain detached from the perpetrator – even from the distant contact with him judgment presupposes, yet she is compelled to make a statement. She claims not to want to be the one to decide what made someone a "gentleman" (or a human) – this was something "They" do. But clearly, Hillesum *is* judging the man. By denying that this is the case, however, she distances herself from the perpetrator in an attempt to stand outside the event she describes.

Finally, her tone is disdainful, indicating hostility toward the Commandant because he has a "peculiar job" for a gentleman. Hillesum knew where the trains were going and was under no illusion about the fate of those who were shipped away. Here, she implies that a gentleman would never do what this man did daily: issue orders to pack people into cattle cars for deportation and death. The conclusion is obvious – far from being a "gentleman" (in Dutch the word *Heer*), the man is a criminal, a thug, and a murderer. This quick and bitter remark helps to differentiate the Jewish prisoner (Hillesum herself) from the perpetrator-collaborator and establishes a moral separation between one side and the other. It is significant that Hillesum places the Dutch Commandant next to the German one. As mentioned above, this indicates a breakdown in the author's mind between perpetrator and collaborator. The blurring of lines between Nazis and others persecuting the Jews supports the contention that it was mentally

necessary, and simplest, to reduce relationships between victims and "others" to binary categories.

Ringelblum's "chronicle" not only displays the tendency to blur the lines between collaborators and Nazis, but also between perpetrators, collaborators and victims as well. In an entry on 25 May 1942, Ringelblum referred to the Nazi roundup of their own Jewish agents – informers and policemen – for death or deportation. As events in the ghetto moved towards their climax, he wrote, "The Gestapo beast devours its progeny."[60] On its face this comment references the myth of Saturn consuming his children.[61] Not only that, but by the time Ringelblum uses the phrase, it had been co-opted for many purposes, but especially modified by intellectuals in the 19th and 20th century as "the Revolution devours its children," in reference to the excesses of the French and Russian Revolutions. More to the point, however, Ringelblum suggests that there is a patriarchal role being filled here.[62] The Jewish police and informers are now children of the "Gestapo beast," not children of the Covenant. Here Ringelblum not only explicitly labels the Gestapo "beasts" (a dehumanizing term), but also implicitly disowns those individuals who sold their brothers and sisters out to these "beasts." As far as Ringelblum is concerned, these informers and policemen are no longer Jews.

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[60] Ringelblum, p. 278.

[61] It was prophesied that one of Chronos/Saturn's children would supplant him. To prevent this, he devoured them. Only one, Zeus/Jove, was saved because he was hidden. In the end, he castrated his father and usurped his throne. This topic is the subject of one of the most horrifying pictures ever committed to canvas. *Saturn Devouring his Children* was painted between 1819 and 1823 by Francisco Goya. A painting from his "black period," the horror and darkness Goya conveyed has seldom been rivaled. Saturn was king of the titans, forces more elemental than the more rational gods who eventually supplanted them. Associating Nazis with primordial forces dehumanized them by contrasting them with humanistic enlightened powers. This implied two things: first, that Ringelblum believed the Jew, like Jove, would eventually triumph and second, that he needed to deny the human origins of the disaster the Holocaust represented.

[62]The imagery of the father sacrificing his children has a long history - one that owes as much to the Biblical story of Abraham offering to sacrifice his son Isaac to God as it does to Greek and Roman myth.

What is important here is the degree to which Ringelblum collapses the definition of perpetrators. Not only is the wall between perpetrators and non-Jewish collaborators broken – as in Hillesum's description of the Dutch Commandant – but between perpetrators and Jews as well. The two become indistinguishable – one is just a weaker version of the other. It seems that, for Ringelblum, the blackmailers, informers and Jewish policemen who herded thousands to their deaths are "progeny" of "beasts" – something definitely an insult and almost a curse. By giving up the "progeny" to the "beasts," the binary distinction between "us" and "them" is re-established in Ringelblum's mind and the world can continue to make sense.

If one tendency of these writers was to collapse collaborator-perpetrator distinctions, another was to reify perpetrator-victim boundaries. The text at hand is part of a letter written by Hillesum dated Tuesday 8 June 1943. She wrote, "Right across from me only a few meters away, a blue uniform with a helmet stands in the watchtower."[63] An incongruity is apparent here – this is not a perpetrator, a collaborator or even a person. It is only a "blue uniform." This remark is significant because throughout hundreds of pages of diary entries and letters to friends, this is one of the only discussions of perpetrators *at all*.

Hillesum and the "uniform" occupy the same space – they are in dangerously close proximity to each other. The "blue uniform" is only "a few meters away." However, there is a world of separation between them because they occupy different categories. Hillesum is a human being – she lives and she can communicate. The

[63] Hillesum, p. 598. The SS wore field grey or black uniforms and the Wehrmacht also wore grey. The *Ordnungspolizei* wore green. The chances are that this soldier in the watchtower was a Dutch collaborationist. But as mentioned above, the need to keep things in simple binary oppositions required the collapse of the distinction between German perpetrator and Dutch collaborator.

"uniform" however, has neither ears that can hear nor a heart that can feel compassion or mercy – and so it stands in metaphorically for everything Hillesum feels about Nazism and the atrocities it commits daily.

The "uniform" is in a watch tower above – an artificial perch, indicating usurpation of authority, not authority itself. Meanwhile, Hillesum herself is in a subordinate position on the ground below. A close reading of this letter indicates that Hillesum is not implying surrender by placing the "uniform" above her, but is maintaining the separation between "I" and "They" needed to continue to survive. Nothing in the sentence indicates that she is recoiling from or was awestruck by the "blue uniform." She is merely observing *it* there in the watchtower.

The removal of what is human in the perpetrator was an essential component of many Holocaust diaries. Perhaps this is because Hillesum and other writers could not allow themselves to admit that a real human would willingly participate in such horrible events. The purpose of dehumanizing a hostile "other" in favor of signs and symbols of fascist violence and panoptic authority is to establish the separation needed for survival. Interestingly, in some ways it also parallels the Nazi need to make killing easier by dehumanizing those they murdered. In this reading of Hillesum's letter, to remove the human element was to remove the tension resulting from the subconscious awareness that her incomprehensible position is the result of human agency. It was necessary for her to take this stance considering the importance she attached to meaning.

There are many instances in the *Notes* when Ringelblum removed or altered the human component in perpetrators and detoured around certain words or names associated with Nazi Germany. These swerves took several forms. The Germans themselves were

called "the Occupying Power" on no less than seven different occasions in Sloan's abridged edition. Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels was never mentioned by name, but simply referred to as an "important publicity man."[64] Although Hitler *was* mentioned by name in multiple instances, he was also referred to at various points in the text as "That One" (twice), "A.H.," "a famous villain," "Someone," a "modern Haman," and even as "Horowitz" on multiple occasions. This last reference to Hitler is interesting because it serves several functions. First, it hides the immediate subject of the entry, as Sloan noted. More importantly, it mocks and insults Hitler. Perhaps by giving him a Jewish name, Ringelblum was exhibiting aggression. He did this by calling attention to Hitler's long-rumored Jewish heritage – something known to infuriate the Führer. Finally, calling him "Horowitz" functioned as an equalizer. Ringelblum was a Jew. Hitler as "Horowitz" was a Jew too. By using a Jewish name, Ringelblum brought Hitler down to his level and linguistically evened out a disparity in power.

Another fascinating linguistic swerve taken by Ringelblum was his tendency to take a phrase Germans used to characterize themselves and write it in Hebrew, not Yiddish. As mentioned above, Yiddish is derived from German. Although it is written in Hebrew characters, it still owes its sound and structure to the German language. By rendering a phrase in Hebrew, Ringelblum removed it from the German language entirely – and took something that represented German identity (a German phrase) and inverted it by writing it backwards in the tongue of a "slave" creature "unworthy of life" in Nazi eyes.[65] This literal inversion was a clever way of mocking the Germans, exhibiting

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[64] Ringelblum, p. 45.

[65] The phrase "life unworthy of life" was another Nazi euphemism. Initially it was part of the title of the influential 1920 essay *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (Authorization for the extermination of life unworthy of life) by legal scholar Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche. It was

hostility and exercising power.[66] There are several examples of this technique. In four separate entries in the Sloan edition Ringelblum translated "lords and masters" into Hebrew. He also changed "men (or captains) of valor" into Hebrew on six occasions. Another time, Nazis were called "fine fellows" in Hebrew, as Ringelblum blended sarcasm and linguistic inversion into a doubly loaded attack.[67]

These swerves point in exactly the opposite direction from the literal meaning of the words. In another instance, a Nazi slogan was ridiculed and the *KdF* organization (*Kraft durch Freude* – "Strength through Joy") referred to as "Strength through Malicious Joy."[68]

It is not just well-known Nazi slogans or personalities that are singled out for this treatment. One Nazi soldier in the ghetto is referred to in two separate entries as "Frankenstein."[69] He is given this nickname because "he looks and acts like the monster in the film of that name. He's a bloodthirsty dog who kills one or two smugglers each day. He just can't eat his breakfast until he has spilled the blood of a Jew."[70] That this Nazi is compared to Frankenstein's monster is significant. Like the Golem of Jewish tradition, the monster was called into life by mysterious, occult means – an affront to

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used to describe those members of society whose utility was deemed minimal (the terminally ill and asylum patients for example) and whose deaths, according to the authors, would be economically beneficial to Germany. The phrase remained in circulation throughout the Nazi period and was eventually applied to Jews as well. See Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide,* p. 14.

[66] Hebrew is written right to left, whereas German, like English is written left to right.

[67] Ringelblum, p. 53.

[68] Ringelblum, p. 252. The *KdF* was the Nazi leisure and tourism agency. For more information see Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[69] Ringelblum, 30 May 1942 p. 283 and mid-June 1942, p. 293.

[70] Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes*, p. 283. Ringelblum is most likely referring to the 1931 version of the film *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale starring Boris Karloff. The sympathy one feels for the creature in Mary Shelley's book is still present in this version, but minimized, as is the intelligence. Karloff's creature is more horrifying than sympathetic.

nature.[71] This abomination was cobbled together from pieces of dead bodies. The ghetto Frankenstein is similarly dead. Like the "blue uniform" and the "Skulls," there is no humanity to be found, only the outward resemblance of a man. Even this meager resemblance is immediately called into question by yet another linguistic turn. The man became a "bloodthirsty dog" – indicating the descent of the Nazi to the level of the bestial and re-establishing the distinction between the living, human Jew and the dead, inhuman German. This verbal flip indicates a mechanism of defense that attempts to alter reality. At the time this entry was written, the ghetto was in its last stages of collapse. From Ringelblum's vantage point, nothing was more common in Warsaw than dead Jews and living Germans. He turned this dynamic on its head. Through the hostility of the sentence and the separate spheres it created, he indicated that the will to resist remained in spite of the carnage around him.

Etty Hillesum also used this kind of "horror show" imagery to indicate hostility and to reinforce the polar "us-them" opposition. In a letter dated Sunday, 8 August 1943, she described a visit from a Dutch collaborationist general and labeled him a "fat toad in a green uniform."[72] This depiction is interesting for several reasons. First, Hillesum, who was conversant in several languages, including English, would most likely have known that "toad" or "toady" was an expression for a sycophant.[73] It seems possible that she intended to imply that the Dutch General was not his own man, nor even any longer Dutch. He was one of "them" – an extension of the Nazis and a tool used to implement

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[71] Like Shelley's monster, Ringelblum's "Frankenstein" is an inhuman beast of technology, tied in many minds to the stereotype of the Germans as a technological people, cold and emotionless. To Jews of the Warsaw ghetto like Ringelblum, the Nazi and the monster are the living dead.

[72] Hillesum, p. 632.

[73] The term "toady" is a shortened version of "toad-eater" – a "fawning flatterer" – and dates back as early as 1629. It was first used as a verb in 1827. See Douglas Harper, "Online Etymology Dictionary," <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=toady>, November, 2001.

terror and atrocity. In the traumatic environment of Westerbork, multiple categories were not permissible. For Hillesum, writing this letter shortly before her deportation, a person was either with the Jews or against them – there was no middle ground. Second, a long European tradition exists linking the toad with evil – it was one of a witch's familiars, in service to the Devil. By casting the Dutch General in this light, she indicates her belief that the General was metaphorically in league with Hitler in the same way a "toad" was in league with Satan.[74] Finally, the toad is a cold-blooded creature, almost as far from human as anything with a heartbeat. Hillesum distances herself from the Commandant by removing him as far as she possibly can from the living without metaphorically killing him the way Ringelblum killed Hitler with a joke at the beginning of this chapter.[75]

As these passages show, writers during the Holocaust used unique linguistic methods to say a great deal more than the actual text indicates. However, metaphors were not the only way language was manipulated to convey an altered reality. On the surface, Holocaust diaries and chronicles would seem to be the last place to find jokes, especially jokes told by victims. This is not the case. It was precisely because the situation was so dire that some authors resorted to the use of jokes to fend off feelings of helplessness and to convey their anger and will to resist.

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[74] The images of witches and Satan are Christian to be sure, but are also something Hillesum would have been very familiar with simply by having been immersed in Western Christian culture and folklore in the Netherlands her whole life. In fact, her entire diary reveals that she was profoundly influenced by Christian thought.

[75] There is a final possibility that Hillesum might have foreseen. Although the Dutch word for "toad" is *pad*, the English word "toad," which Hillesum would have known, could be thought of as a play on the German word *Tod* or "death." The arrival of the Dutch General is as much a harbinger of doom as is Ringelblum's narration of the arrival of the "Skulls" with their *spitters*.

V: Linguistic Mechanisms of Defense – Jokes

The use of jokes has long been understood to indicate hostility or aggression and to establish distance. Humor is also considered by many psychoanalysts and behavior theorists to be a coping mechanism.[76] Martin Grotjahn, author of a psychological study of humor, wrote that "The Jewish joke constitutes victory by defeat." He also observed that there is a traditional form of Jewish joke that "contains devastating aggression, disguised by restrained, almost humble modesty."[77]

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* written in 1905, Sigmund Freud also discussed ways jokes were employed to demonstrate aggression and to distinguish between one group and another. He argued that

> …all moral rules for the restriction of active hatred give the clearest evidence to this day that they were originally framed for a small society of fellow clansmen. In so far as we are all able to feel that we are *members of one people* [my emphasis], we allow ourselves to disregard most of these restrictions in relation to a foreign people.[78]

He seems to say here that laughter traditionally brought groups together by placing them in opposition to other groups. Freud's comment refers to the long-term social uses of laughter. Culturally, however, laughter changed considerably throughout the course of European history. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, at the time Rabelais was writing *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in France in the mid–16th century, laughter was considered to

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[76] Michael Godkewitsch, "The Relationship between Arousal Potential and Funniness of Jokes," Jeffrey H., Goldstein, Paul E. McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 144.

[77] Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious*, (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 22-24. He gives an example of this kind of joke: a "Jew sits in his coffeehouse and dreams about the time to come after the war against Hitler is won: 'I will sit in my coffeehouse and will read the *Berliner Zeitung*, and under my arm I will hold the *Wiener Zeitung* which I may study later. Hitler will come. He will point at the *Wiener Zeitung* and will ask: 'Are you reading it or may I see it?' And I will look up and say: 'No, you may not.'"

[78] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960), p. 102.

be a truth in itself – an open, expansive, life-affirming gesture. Over time, however laughter became an aggressive, cynical tool for ostracism.[79] Patricia Keith-Spiegel reinforced Bakhtin's assessment, arguing that "Gradually laughter and humor became a substitute for actual assault…Laughter has also been viewed as the means of maintaining group standards in primitive times."[80] The sources demonstrate that this was the case for Jews victims during the Holocaust. Jokes made about Nazis served to consolidate their sense of community with other Jews and to further increase the psychic distance between "us" and "them." When humor was used in this manner to disparage others, it served two functions. The first was "to increase morale and solidify the in-group [in this case the Jewish inhabitants of the ghetto]." The second was "to introduce and foster a hostile disposition toward the out-group [the Nazi perpetrators]."[81] Not only did it intensify social distinctions, but as Freud continued, "By making the enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.…"[82] He appeared to mean by this that in certain situations, the making of "tendentious" jokes is not only a hostile and aggressive impulse (an act of resistance against a threatening "other"), but also an act relished and enjoyed by the one telling the joke – a reaffirmation of individual power.

During the Holocaust, it was most frequently the case that physical resistance was impossible – either because it was perceived as a futile waste of one's life, or because of

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[79] On of the most important studies of laughter is Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 59-144.

[80] Patricia Keith-Spiegel, "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues," Jeffrey H. Goldstein, Paul E. McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 6.

[81] Martineau, "The Psychology of Humor," Martineau continues, saying "Humor…acts as a safety valve for expressing grievance or controlled hostility against deviance. The result is that normative system is reinforced and social cohesion prevails," p. 121.

[82] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 103.

the threat of reprisals against family or community. In Holocaust diaries, direct confrontation with the perpetrator was avoided in one way through the unconscious method of making jokes at the expense of the Nazi perpetrator. However, simply because the aggression in this process was sometimes muffled or even unconscious did not make it any less a form of resistance.[83] Indeed, Freud argued that these kinds of jokes were

> especially favored in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure."[84]

Martin Grotjahn reinforced Freud's concept of the joke as a subconscious attempt to come to terms with an inadmissible hostility when he remarked

> Increasing demands for repression through the ages have changed aggression from assault into wit. Where we would have struck a person in earlier times, we restrict our hostility now and often repress it entirely. Aggressive wit gives us a new way of admitting dangerous aggression…[85]

Jokes in Holocaust diaries are significant because they indicated a linguistic "turn" away from one meaning and pointed toward another, more subtle, but also more aggressive understanding of the perpetrator. Although it initially seems as though the act of writing and the telling of jokes was passive, in the case of Holocaust diaries these forms represented a more hostile attitude towards perpetrators than at first might be expected.

Some of the best instances of this type of joke appear in the chronicles of Emmanuel Ringelblum. In fact, at least two dozen jokes can be found in the edition translated by Sloan. Two will be examined here. One joke, written 9 May 1940,

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[83] There are certainly different categories of resistance. As more obvious physical avenues of struggle were gradually rendered impossible by the Nazis, the remaining energy of the victim was channeled into lesser forms of resistance whose purpose was not to strike an actual blow to the enemy, but to maintain a sense of agency in the victim.

[84] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 105.

[85] Grotjahn, p. 11-12.

indicates repressed hostility and aggression. Ringelblum wrote, "Horowitz [Hitler] comes to the Other World. Sees Jesus in Paradise. 'Hey, what's a Jew doing without an armband?' 'Let him be,' answers Saint Peter, 'He's the boss's son.'"[86] Ringelblum was imaginatively killing Hitler, who must be dead in order to be in Heaven. Second, he was pointing out Hitler's arrogance and hubris. Even in Paradise, the *Führer* believes he can still call the shots. Third, Hitler is put in his place by Saint Peter. Here a space is created where Hitler's word is not law. By putting the words "let him be" in Saint Peter's mouth, Ringelblum was effectively de-fanging the viper. Fourth, Ringelblum was joking in the idiom of the "Christian" perpetrator himself, displaying his mastery of the "other's" culture. Finally, this is all in the context of a joke that can either be read as modest and self-deprecating (obviously if Jesus is the boss's son, Jews have been wrong all along and Christians correct), or a sort of comedy of the absurd (because it is not logical in any kind of moral universe for Hitler to be in Paradise). This is an excellent example of a joke being what William Martineau called a "social mechanism…for resolving hostility emerging from structural relationships…."[87]

Jokes took many forms, but most indicated aggression. Sometimes this hostility was expressed scatologically. In another entry from mid-September, 1941, Ringelblum wrote, "They say at the beginning of the Russian campaign Napoleon put on a red shirt to hide the blood if he should be wounded. H. put on a pair of brown drawers."[88] Not only is this funny but it indicates several sets of beliefs. First, it demonstrates the hope in the ghetto that "H," like Napoleon, had picked a fight with a Russian colossus that he could

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[86] Ringelblum, p. 40.

[87] William H. Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor," Jeffrey H. Goldstein, Paul E. McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 111.

[88] Ringelblum, p. 216.

not win. Second, it implies that Napoleon (who emancipated the Jews) was a brave, if foolhardy man. By contrast, "H." is a coward who will not venture out to fight with his men and whose bowels give out on him when things go wrong.[89] Third, the very notion of defilement also has a specific context in relation to the Holocaust. Terrence Des Pres wrote of a Nazi "excremental assault" on the Jews. This assault took place in the ghettos and concentration camps. The argument asserts that by debasing the victims through filth, feces and urine, the Germans created greater distance between the *Herrenmenschen* and the *Untermenschen*. This enabled them to minimize pangs of conscience because the victims, smeared in mud and excrement, *seemed* less human than their impeccably dressed "masters."[90] In fact, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur noted that from time immemorial, the three primary symbols of evil have been defilement, sin and guilt.[91] By making Hitler defile himself, Ringelblum sets up a situation in which that which is rotten or evil on the inside is now able to be seen on the outside. Although this is delivered as a joke, it nevertheless contains devastating aggression and linguistically points toward an alternate meaning. It was clear to the Jews of Warsaw that Hitler was evil. Creating this joke and wording it in this manner was a way of directing the attention of others toward the obvious – Hitler (and all he represented: Nazism, anti-Semitism and malignant aggression) are not only metaphorically, but physically evil for all to see.

Jokes served many functions in Holocaust diaries. They indicated aggression and hostility, they established distance between perpetrators and victims and they revealed a

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[89] Hitler has been called many things, coward among them – particularly after his suicide and the avoidance of responsibility it implied at the end of the war. But up until the very end, it was not a common accusation – as a corporal he had won the Iron Cross first class in the First World War when the medal was usually reserved for officers.

[90] Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 51-71.

[91] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, translated from the French by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) p. 25-46.

turn toward alternate meanings that could not be conveyed by ordinary language. In other words, the use of humor in these diaries encompasses the entire spectrum of laughter's cultural history by being both life-affirming and aggressive. These humorous linguistic turns represent a line of psychological defense that helped victims maintain the will to resist. As they resisted, they withdrew both into the community and into themselves. These two places represented havens from the brutal reality victims faced and worked together to provide a basis for continued struggle.

VI: Community, Individuality, and Defense Mechanisms

Michael Geyer argued in an essay on Jewish resistance during the Holocaust that:

> For Jews there were no rules of the game, no spaces of autonomy, no voices that mattered, no partial community with the persecutor. Hence, for Jews, every act of establishing ties among themselves was resistance…For it is the effort of constituting in transcripts, hidden from the persecutors, what is denied to them: community.[92]

In the diaries, notes, chronicles and transcripts that comprise Jewish writing during the Holocaust, creating community was indeed extraordinarily important. However, exactly because there "were no rules of the game," it would perhaps more correct to say that the acts which established ties *as well as* those which maintained individuality constituted resistance.

Maintaining community was an important form of resistance because it ensured the perpetuation of Jewish culture into a future which could mourn those who were lost and try to understand what had happened in the past. Holocaust diaries served this function. The passages above indicate that it was also important for diarists to maintain a

[92] Michael Geyer, "Resistance as Ongoing Project: Visions of Order, Obligations to Strangers, Struggles for Civil Society," *Journal of Modern History* 64, supplement. December 1992, p. S217-S241.

sense of individuality when, everywhere they turned, they were being lumped together by the Nazis – physically in ghettos and camps as well as categorically as "non-humans." The Jewish writer faced the dual problem of remaining an individual amid German attempts to eradicate differences amongst Jews and at the same time draw strength from the bonds of community.

To the individual writer of a Holocaust diary, finding a way to stay alive in hostile and unforgiving environment was of paramount importance. For this reason, the full murderous reality of the situation was often avoided. Because resistance required something other than the self to struggle against, to think of the Nazis as people like themselves – or to focus on the humanity beneath the barbarity – would have blurred the lines which established the separation between perpetrator and victim required to continue the struggle. Community *and* individuality were both important. Bolstering a sense of Jewish community created a sense both of belonging and one of differentiation. The greater the contrast between "us" and "them" (which could also be perceived as one of "good" against "evil"), the greater the motivation to continue the battle. The more thoroughly the diarist understood his/her own individuality, the more importance was attached to preserving that identity. In other words, because composing diaries and writing in general was a profoundly personal act, this expression of individuality and autonomy reinforced the existence of a separate entity capable of resisting. To linger too long over perpetrators and their motivations for committing what so many diarists refer to as "incomprehensible" deeds would have had a detrimental effect in that the very inconceivability of the situation tended to reduce the capacity for resistance. Just as

staring at the sun for too long leads to blindness, so focusing excessively on the human element in the Nazi criminal would have detracted from the victim's ability to fight back.

The two goals of preservation of the community through the creation of a record and the preservation of the self by avoiding traumatic reality reinforced each other. The tension indicated in the passages cited above is between two things: the diarist's determination to leave a work behind documenting Nazi outrages and describing Jewish suffering that would form another chapter in their people's history, and their individual need to evade the implications any commonalities they might share with the perpetrators might have implied.

VII: Conclusion

Any effort to find a reason or meaning in the persecution, or to discover humanity in the perpetrators, detracted from the Jewish victim's ability to maintain the mental strength necessary to continue resistance. Nevertheless, Emmanuel Ringelblum and Etty Hillesum each attempted some kind of critique of the perpetrator, even if it came in the form of linguistic turnings and swerves. However, for some victims the trauma of daily life during the Holocaust was overwhelming. For these individuals the thought of perpetrators and their motivations was too painful to acknowledge, and their diaries reveal a lacuna where the historian senses a perpetrator should be found. The next chapter posits that the conspicuous absence of perpetrators in some diaries indicates a more profound withdrawal than Hillesum or Ringelblum present – a sort of mental "hunkering down." The absence of perpetrators can nevertheless be detected by careful examination of hints and intimations in the writer's use of language. By looking for these

clues, it is possible to see the disappearance of perpetrators from Holocaust diaries as a form of resistance as well.

Chapter 3: Absence

Negation, Identification, and Suicide as Resistance

"*Out of a mad soul we forge a sane deed*."
– Janusz Korczak, 30 March1937

I: Introduction

On 5 or 6 August 1942, an event took place in Poland that has since become the stuff of legend.[1] That morning, Nazi authorities ordered the deportation of all of the children residing in the Warsaw Ghetto's home for Jewish orphans. All accounts agree that it was with quiet dignity and resignation that the director of the orphanage, Dr. Janusz Korczak, organized his 192 charges into rows and, holding one child by the hand and clutching another to his breast, walked with the children two miles to the *Umschlagplatz*, from whence cattle cars departed daily.[2] Crowds of tearful people poured out onto the sidewalks as the children, carrying the green flag of "King Matt," Korczak's fictional monarch, and the blue flag with the Star of David went by. Once at the *Umschlagplatz*, an SS officer, aware of Dr. Korczak's prominence, offered him the option of staying behind, but Korczak brusquely waved the officer away.[3] And so, after clipping the yellow Stars of David from their sleeves and leaving them strewn about the

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[1] Eyewitnesses disagree about which day it was. Some contend the deportation took place on 5 August, some say it was the 6th. The last date in Korczak's diary is 4 August, but he did not always write everyday. The question remains problematic only to the extent that we cannot positively say when these events transpired. There is no doubt the events occurred on one of the two days.

[2] Betty Jean Lifton, *The King of Children: A Biography of Janusz Korczak* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), p. 338-345.

[3] Joseph Hyams, *A Field of Buttercups* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 251.

Umschlagplatz, the "Old Doctor," as he was known, and his children silently boarded the train bound for Treblinka to the strains of Mendelssohn's *Requiem*.[4] The transport departed on schedule at 12:55pm. Korczak and the children were never seen by Ghetto residents again. They most likely perished in the gas chambers within hours of their arrival at the camp.[5]

Korczak's legend has grown over the years to near mythic proportions. He is considered one of the greatest heroes of the Holocaust and in many quarters is practically regarded as a saint. The "hagiography" on Korczak is large, particularly in Europe, and the "last march of the children" has been depicted by many playwrights and authors.[6] What concerns us here is not the worshipful post-war literature that has developed in the years since that "last march," but what Korczak himself may have thought about what was going on around him during the final weeks and months of his life. By looking at Korczak's own writings and the way he treated perpetrators in his diary, it is possible both to clarify the historical and psychological portrait of a complicated man and to

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[4] Hyams discusses the clipping of the yellow stars, something one of the Jewish policemen described as being like "a field of buttercups, p. 250. Lifton describes a young musician being forced to play the Mendelssohn's *Requiem* on his violin as the children boarded the train. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 344.

[5] These dates coincide with the high point of Treblinka's killing capacity (Hyams claims that 135,120 people were murdered there in the month of August – *A Field of Buttercups*, p. 253). The *Kommandant* at the time, Dr. Irmfried Eberl had managed the project "poorly," and in early August, the process of burying the corpses could not keep pace with the capacity of the gas chambers. Many years later, Franz Stangl, the man who replaced Eberl on August 24th claimed Treblinka at this time was like "the end of the world" – with mountains of corpses that filled the air with a stench for miles all around. It is interesting that Stangl, who was not present during the murder of Korczak and the children, later became obsessed with them. He discussed Korczak in an interview only hours before he died, and a book of Korczak's fairy tales was found among his few personal effects. See Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 363-365.

[6] Examples include Adir Cohen's *Gate of Light: Janusz Korczak, the Educator and Writer who Overcame the Holocaust* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson Press, 1994), Edith Biewend's *Lieben ohne Illusion: Leben und Werke des Janusz Korczaks* (Heilbronn: E. Salzer Verlag, 1974), Rudolf Schridde's *Janusz Korczak: Leben und Wirken* (Dortmund: Kulturamt der Stadt Dortmund, 1980). In addition to these titles, the Library of Congress lists 68 others in Polish, Italian, Yiddish, Hebrew, German and English.

recognize that the "theatrical" nature of his last march tells us something about him and the means he chose to resist Nazi genocide.

As we have seen, resistance did not always mean an armed uprising. However, for some it could (and did) mean an internal struggle to preserve one's dignity, integrity and culture. Some resisted in and through their efforts to leave a record of atrocities behind. By closely examining Korczak's own writings it is possible to see inward defense mechanisms morph and become outward, actual resistance to Nazi atrocity.[7] Korczak's biographers explain his internal defenses used early in life, but his Ghetto diaries reveal how Korczak used suicide and drama as a final form of defiance. At different times, Korczak used every means at his disposal to protect himself and his children, and thereby defied the Nazis, even though, paradoxically, the final act of defiance did not actually save any lives.

Although, in the end, Korczak could not save any lives, he was able to salvage many things he valued. It is true that his propensity toward narcissism and self-aggrandizement (which we will see below) meant that he focused much of his energy on preserving his own personal dignity and reputation. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the spectacle he arranged was purely for his own benefit. In the long term, though he could not save the children's lives, Korczak was able to maintain the children's

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[7] Even though Korczak's final means of resistance was a form of suicide as well, there is a large literature that supports classifying suicide as a form of resistance. As Emil Fackenheim has said, "Jews committing suicide did so far less frequently out of self-loathing than out of despair or self-respect." In "The Spectrum of Resistance during the Holocaust: An Essay in Description and Definition," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 2, no. 2 (May 1982), p. 120. Yael Zerubavel also points out that, for Jews, suicide as resistance as well as martyrdom goes back at least as far as the events at Masada in 73 A.D. "The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors" in *Representations*, no. 45 (Winter 1994), p. 74-77. Individual and mass suicides were not uncommon in other cultures faced with a more powerful enemy and a lack of alternatives. See William D. Piersen's discussion of Olaudah Equiano's writings in "White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide among New Slaves," in *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 62, no. 2 (April 1977), p. 147-159.

memory and individuality as well as the idea of childhood innocence itself. By drawing attention to this innocence, he starkly accentuated the injustice of the Nazi's genocidal actions. It could be argued that these things Korczak salvaged were of no practical use to the children in their last hours, and that they might be incidental to Korczak's own goals of preserving his sense of importance. I do not believe this, however. In the short term, by staying with the children, Korczak (who manifestly did not care about his own life) was able to give the children something concrete to cling to – his own comfortable and familiar presence in their lives, right up to the very end.

II: The Use of Language to Describe Genocide

I argued in chapters I and II that writers used different techniques when attempting to communicate the reality of the Holocaust to their readers. Some felt no qualms about describing the actions of perpetrators in writing. Others tried to find a middle path between ignoring perpetrators and confronting them head on. Some of the diarists I have discussed resorted to using linguistic mechanisms like metaphor, synecdoche, and jokes to partially conceal their persecutors – and to express meanings that might not be readily apparent upon a cursory reading of the sources. Others, like Janusz Korczak, however, could not bear to allow the perpetrator into their writings – at least any more than was possible given the events transpiring around them.

It has been suggested that one reason Nazis might not appear in diaries is that, in everyday, practical terms, the victims did not have much actual contact with perpetrators and so might not have thought about them that much.[8] As discussed in the introduction, however, this argument seems unlikely. It is important to recognize that perpetrators,

[8] I would like to thank Professor Bernard Wasserstein of the University of Chicago for bringing this possibility to my attention again in a personal interview on 31 March 2006.

whether in full-view or as part of the background, were a part of diarists' lives at the time. Indeed, they were the one unavoidable fact of the victim's existence, and it seems inexplicable for them not to show up at least as a kind of antagonistic imaginary. In fact, for perpetrators *not* to appear (or to appear minimally) should give readers pause and make them wonder at this apparent aporia or paradox in Holocaust diaries: namely that the people who represented the most concrete fact in these writer's world fail to appear in writings which were created for the purpose of leaving a record of Nazi cruelty and atrocity behind. In Korczak's case, the record clearly establishes that he dealt with Germans personally and directly on at least several occasions. The relative absence of perpetrators in his diary is therefore not the result of his ignorance of perpetrators individually or as a group[9]. It must mean something else. Another reason for this omission might be that the diary was one final place of control and autonomy – a haven in which the elimination of the perpetrator represented a last stand against an implacable enemy. If this is the case, the exclusion of perpetrators in Holocaust diaries is another form of resistance, much like the use of metaphors and tropes seen in the previous chapter, and should be analyzed as such.

The type of language with which they chose to communicate is the only means by which we can understand writers of Holocaust diaries today. There were as many styles as there were diarists, but they shared one common aspect. They were all in some way trying to come to terms with what Charlotte Delbo called "*l'inconcevable*."[10] As we have seen so far, victims alternately described perpetrators in what I call "journalistic" or

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[9] In a diary that is, today in its published form, composed of roughly 111 typed pages, spanning, off and on, more than two years, Korczak only mentioned perpetrators four times.

[10] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (translated by Rosette C. Lamont, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. x.

"photographic" terms – eliminating an analytic component – or they transformed them through the use of tropic devices into metaphors symbolically representing something more than mere individuals. In some diaries, victims ignored perpetrators almost completely – negating them textually even as perpetrators were attempting to negate these authors physically. While the act of writing and documenting Nazi actions is viewed by most scholars as an act of resistance, the diarist's *excision* of perpetrators is highly significant and suggests an active and aggressive but not necessarily conscious form of mental resistance to Nazi genocide. Janusz Korczak's writings seem to be a case in which the victim struggled to shut the perpetrator out of his mind, only to have him reappear one last time, but only when the need for defense mechanisms was obviated.

In cases like Korczak's, it seems likely that the negation of the Nazi perpetrator was a form of psychological resistance to the trauma the victim endured. It is considered a truism among Holocaust historians that a multiplicity of psychological mechanisms existed whereby Nazis were able to dehumanize their victims, and therefore distance themselves from them. It does not seem far-fetched then, to look within gaps or absences in the diaries (where one would expect to find accusation, recrimination, hate, fear or other emotions directed at the perpetrator), for psychological mechanisms *used by victims* to dehumanize and negate *perpetrators*. In fact, it is possible to speculate that this dehumanization or negation of the hostile "Other" was helpful, if not necessary, to the continued functioning and mental health of those diarists as they struggled to survive. For example, in every diary examined in this thesis, the authors try to establish some kind of distance – whether through direct aggression, resort to dehumanizing metaphors, or by holding the perpetrators at arms length by sticking to a strictly factual style. The only

exception to this is Janusz Korczak's final entry, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

In Korczak's case, the collapse of these interior defense mechanisms, as indicated by his final diary entry, seems to have led to a final symbolic volley directed at the perpetrators once the possibility of survival was all but extinguished. When Korczak became aware that he had no way out, or that there were no choices left that were acceptable to him, interior defense mechanisms became obsolete, and freed him to act in a way that performed several important functions. First, his *actions* preserved his dignity, and that of his children, by interfering with the Nazi goal of transforming them from people into objects. Second, these actions prevented his children from becoming just another mass of anonymous victims, thereby preserving some of the individuality the Nazis were trying to take from them. It is precisely because of the decisions Korczak made during those last frantic hours that the obliteration, or negation, the Nazis envisioned for their victims was not entirely successful in the case of the orphans in his care.[11]

Korczak's diary is a valuable tool because it helps historians establish the logic of his actions that final morning – actions which followed, at least to some degree, from the thoughts he expressed in writing. For the Nazis, genocide meant more than just murder. It meant that victims were objectified and stripped of their individuality before they were subjected to the cold disgrace of an anonymous death. The "final march" of Korczak's

[11] Of course, in the most fundamental sense, the Nazis *were* successful – Korczak and the children died, naked and degraded, with hundreds of others in the gas chambers at Treblinka. However, it could be argued that from a more historical perspective that Korczak accomplished a great deal. In an environment in which death was not only familiar, but ubiquitous, the doctor succeeded in indelibly engraving the memory of these particular individuals into the minds of those who were present to the extent that today they remain both tragic exemplars of the Holocaust, as well as individuals whose singularity is preserved as well. Romcia, Szymonek, Giena, Eva, Halinka, Jakub, Leon, and so many others are not anonymous numbers because Korczak did what he did. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 340.

children, while it did not prevent death, prevented the complete success of Nazi intent – something Korczak foresaw - and this is why it was such a profound act of resistance.

III: Silence

What was left unwritten in Holocaust diaries can be as important as what was committed to the page. There are several reasons why diarists might have left perpetrators out of their writings: perhaps they wanted to create a record of Jewish life, not Jewish death. Or maybe the perpetrators' actions, presence, or even existence constituted a threat so dire that the writer found it necessary to avoid mentioning them at all costs. While historians can envision a broad spectrum of possibilities, the evidence indicates that on many occasions these reactions were protective and represented a type of psychological resistance to Nazi genocide.

Historians, theologians, philosophers, and others who study the destruction of the European Jews, have been divided about the nature of Holocaust testimony. It is generally contended that victims of the Holocaust experienced a reality so far outside the bounds of normal human experience that it exceeds the capacity for imagination or comprehension for those David Rousset called "normal men." In other words, some assert that language cannot convey the meaning of extreme situations like torture, atrocity and genocide. In this sense, Holocaust diaries are problematic because they are attempting to tell us something we cannot, and could never, understand. Some have even suggested that silence is the best response to the caesura represented by the reality of Auschwitz.[12] Lawrence Langer clearly recognized the paucity of language when he

[12] For example in Irving Greenberg's assertion, quoted in the essay "Where is God Now?", that "no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children," in John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Holocaust: Religious & Philosophical*

asserted that "the human need…to see the Holocaust as some kind of continuum in the spiritual history of man repeatedly stumbles over the limits of language, to say nothing of the limits of traditional moral theory."[13]

This approach has been critiqued for clouding what is essentially an historical occurrence which should be subject to the same rules and methodologies as other events. For instance, scholars like Christian Maier have pointed out that while the Holocaust may not be completely comprehensible, it is *explainable*.[14] This analysis of Janusz Korczak's diary acknowledges the problem of comprehension yet still attempts to interrogate, or probe, those boundaries of representation – or in the case of the absence of perpetrators, the boundaries and meanings of a strategy of representation through un-representation. In this way, it is possible to respond to Giorgio Agamben's assertion that philosophers and historians need to find a way out of the impasse in which the urge to understand meets the "incomprehensible" nature of genocidal reality.[15]

The events Korczak bore witness to were to some degree beyond comprehension, even to him. But looking carefully at his writings allows us to see that it is precisely in the gaps in the narrative, especially those gaps that seem as if they *should* contain perpetrators, that he is telling us something – both about incomprehensibility *and* about genocidal reality.

Implications (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 262. Theodor Adorno also famously remarked "after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric," although he recognized later that he may have phrased the sentiment incorrectly. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (translated by E.B. Ashton, New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

[13] Lawrence Langer in "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," in John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Holocaust: Religious & Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 228.

[14] Christian Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History*, translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 137-169.

[15] Giorgio Agamben comments in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (*translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 2002) that "some want to understand too much and too quickly; they have explanations for everything. Others refuse to understand; they offer only cheap mystifications. The only way forward lies in investigating the space between these two options." p. 13.

Although Lawrence Langer is skeptical about how much truth can be understood about the Holocaust through any medium, he has also remarked that

> When fantasies become literally true, the artist, the writer, must record a reality that has become the expression of the impossible, at the same time convincing his audience that whatever distortions he employs do not negate, but *clarify* [Langer's emphasis] reality and subject it to an illuminating metamorphosis.[16]

Korczak's negation of perpetrators only *seems* to be a distortion when in fact this strategy most accurately reflects the experience he was living. It is not that perpetrators were not on his mind, it is that their existence was being mediated or repressed in a way that allowed Korczak to function more easily.

Giorgio Agamben recognized that absence is a prominent, indeed unavoidable, element of the unthinkable nature of the Nazi genocide when he wrote,

> at a certain point, it became clear [to me] that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. As a consequence, commenting on survivors' testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna or, more precisely, attempting to listen to it.[17]

Interrogating these lacunae can prove a very difficult task for the historian, who must try to reconstruct an event or a mentality based upon hints and clues obtained through the study of the context in which the lacuna appears. The essence of Holocaust diaries is that they narrate portions of journeys (which were never identical) from life to death, and tell us something about the stages people pass through on the way.[18] It is therefore possible to see the relative absence of perpetrators in Korczak's diary in two distinct ways.[19] First,

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[16] Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 24.

[17] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 13.

[18] Obviously, by definition, there are no "*Muselmänner* diaries."

[19] Agamben reformulates Foucault's dictum that the nature of sovereignty is such that it has the power to "make die and let live." He argues that in the creation of the *Muselmann*, the Nazis exercised complete control by having the power to "make live and let die." Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 82-

the lacuna itself – the absence of perpetrators in these diaries – displays the victim's comprehension of the genocidal dynamic and even suggests a kind of reversal of roles. In Korczak's diary, the "Old Doctor" and his orphans are not nameless or numberless "non-humans." Rather, it is the Nazi perpetrator who is now subject to this effacement. This reversal represents a form of resistance in which the victim exercises a form of imaginary control, not only over his or her own life, but over that of his persecutors as well. Second, if it is correct to surmise that victims passed through stages on the path to becoming the nameless "drowned," then it is possible to see Holocaust diaries in general as the articulation of resistance to being placed in a position in which death or "drowning' was the pre-ordained outcome. Moreover, one would expect that as individuals passed through the various stages toward the silence the Nazis intended for them, there would be corresponding changes in the form their testimony takes. Clearly Korczak's testimony changes over time.

We can see, in the development of Korczak's treatment of perpetrators, a growing awareness of what we might call the "dynamics of genocide." When these suspicions became certainties, Korczak's inward mechanisms of defense were no longer necessary, and he took direct action against the Nazis in the form of a highly theatrical suicide. This "suicide" was clearly a kind of *outward* resistance to genocide – one which assured that Korczak (and the children) would not submit silently or anonymously to the fate their persecutors had decreed for them. In other words, Korczak was exercising his will, or volition, to halt the progression or downward spiral that Agamben discusses – though the price remained his life and the lives of those he loved.

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83. See also "Right of Death and Power of Life" in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol. I* by Michel Foucault (translated by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 135-159.

This is not to say that there is a direct correlation between the stage of dehumanization in which all victims found themselves and the kind of diary they wrote. While those on the verge of "drowning" may have been alike in their emptiness and degradation, the authors of diaries were not (yet); and they responded to their environment in different ways. However, I believe that the relative absence of perpetrators in Holocaust diaries like Korczak's is significant and that it is only by "listening to" this lacuna that the historian is better able to understand the context in which these documents of atrocity were written. The choices Korczak made about how to respond to the Nazi goal of reducing him to something less than human tells us a great deal about the limits of control and about the dynamics of genocide.

Primo Levi spoke of levels of understanding, and he knew that those who survived to write about Nazi genocide and what took place in the concentration camps had not "fathomed them to the bottom."[20] The diaries we have examined thus far are different, however. In almost every case except for that of Abel Herzberg – from that of Éva Heyman, Hannah Senesh and Dawid Sierakowiak who wrote explicitly of perpetrators, to that of Emmanuel Ringelblum and Etty Hillesum, who wrote of them both realistically and metaphorically – the authors ultimately *did* fathom Nazi genocide to the bottom, and were murdered in by starvation, firing squads or in the gas chambers. These diaries are all the writings of the "drowned," not the "saved." They were written in transit, as it were. The case of Janusz Korczak is no exception. And, although a message from the "bottom" is naturally impossible (dead men and women tell no tales), it seems important to get as close as we can to that moment-of-no-return if we are to move

[20] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (translated by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 17.

forward in our understanding of the structure and effects of genocide, and comprehend more of what these diaries tell us about resistance.

IV: Sources and Biographical Information

Scholarly sources of information about Korczak are somewhat scarce in English language translations. The primary source of our information about Korczak's thoughts and feelings during the period in question is his *Ghetto Diary*, which was begun briefly in January of 1940, but then set aside and taken up again from May to August, 1942.[21] This diary represents our closest glimpse into the mind of a man who was clearly aware of the dangers besetting him and the children he cared for. And, it is worth noting pursuant to our discussion of absence and silence that although Korczak had contact with Nazis and was even imprisoned at one point (at the end of November, 1941) by the Gestapo for not wearing his armband, he seemed to go out of his way to ignore those perpetrators who accounted for so much of the misery he saw around him during the period in which he was writing.

In addition to the *Ghetto Diary*, Korczak's beloved children's book, *King Matt the First*, published in Poland in 1923, is a kind of primary source as well. The title character, King Matt, is clearly a stand-in for Korczak in the same way Peter Pan is a stand-in for the writer J.M. Barrie. Korczak admits this much himself in the introduction to the book when he discusses the use of his own photograph as a young boy of about ten on the frontispiece of the novel. He directs his remarks to the children he hopes will read the book and says to them,

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[21] See Igor Newerly's "Preface" to Janusz Korczak's *Ghetto Diary* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1978), p. 67.

> When I was the little boy you see in the photograph, I wanted to do all the things that are in this book. But I forgot to, and now I'm old. I no longer have the time or the strength to go to war or travel to the land of the cannibals. I have included this photograph because it's important what I looked like when I truly wanted to be a king, and not when I was writing about King Matt.[22]

Although the novel was written long before the events of the Holocaust, it still contains many of the same images and sentiments apparent in Korczak's wartime diary. This means that through a comparison of these two very disparate sources we can to trace some of the themes of Korczak's life that were independent of the trauma caused by Nazi genocide and aggression – particularly Korczak's emphasis on a "good death."

Two final sources of information, Joseph Hyams 1968 biography, *A Field of Buttercups,* which focuses on those last few months in the ghetto, and Betty Jean Lifton's 1988 full-length biography, *The King of Children*, though not primary, supplement *King Matt*, and allow us to understand some of the basic threads and common themes of Korczak's life. They therefore help us make some critical conclusions about the more enigmatic points in the *Ghetto Diary,* especially about how Korczak could, at the very end, set aside internal defense mechanisms and seize upon a much more direct, though suicidal, assault upon his Nazi persecutors in the form of his final, dramatic "march" through the streets of the ghetto and his insistence upon dying with his children.

Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in 1878 or 1879 – he did not know which year – to an assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw. The first concrete fact of young Henryk's existence was his father's wild, unpredictable, and sometimes violent behavior. Over time it became increasingly clear that the elder Goldszmit suffered from serious mental illness which was perhaps related to syphilis. Henryk's mother was actually

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[22] Janusz Korczak, *King Matt the First* (translated by Richard Lourie, Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004), p. 1.

afraid to leave her son alone with his father.[23] As a result, Henryk was raised by his overprotective mother and grandmother – that "stern regiment of women," as he would later call it.[24]

Henryk studied medicine in Warsaw and became a pediatrician. During his years in school, he wrote for several Polish language newspapers.[25] It was at this time that he adopted the sobriquet "Janusz Korczak' – the name he continued to use throughout the remainder of his life. During the Russo-Japanese War he served as a military doctor – a role he was to reprise in 1914 during the Great War. From 1911 onward, he also served as the director of an orphanage for Jewish children on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. It was during this time that Korczak became well known in his home country and even throughout Eastern Europe for his creative work as a pedagogue and his books of humorous and humane advice for raising children. He even had his own talk radio program called "Ask the Old Doctor" in Warsaw. His fame was not limited, however, to his homeland and his works on education made him something of a celebrity during his visits to Palestine in the mid-30s.

Korczak's father's erratic behavior and propensity toward violence instilled a lifelong fear of both madness and sex in his son. Korczak never married and never had a sexual relationship to the best of anyone's knowledge, because he regarded sex as "dangerous, unhealthy and undignified."[26] In addition to his fear of madness and sexuality, he was also obsessed with death and suicide throughout his life. This too may have been rooted in his relationship with his father, who died, most likely by his own

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[23] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 27.

[24] Lifton, *The King of Children,* p. 14.

[25] He continued writing in Polish for the remainder of his life, occasionally garnering the ire of the Jewish community, some of whom thought it would be more appropriate if he wrote in Yiddish.

[26] These are Korczak's own words, quoted by Lifton in *The King of Children*, p. 27.

hand, in 1896.[27] When Korczak's mother passed away in late 1919 or early 1920 during a typhus epidemic, he was even prompted to suggest a suicide pact to his sister. His early writings contain poems like "Ah, let me die / Ah, don't let me live / Ah, let me descend into my dark grave!" Lifton suggests that the frequency of writings of this type indicates that he may have suffered from severe depression throughout his life.[28] Following his mother's death, Korczak also began keeping mercuric chloride and morphine in his drawer at all times. He is known to have visited her grave with these pills and may have even attempted suicide at one point around 1920.[29] Although it is not certain that he attempted suicide, the possibility is suggested by the experiential tone of comments in his diary that "nothing is more loathsome than an unsuccessful attempt at suicide…this sort of plan should be worked out so as to insure certainty of success."[30] Korczak seems to have been repeatedly tempted to end his life over a period of many years, although he protested later that "having once tried the delights and joys of committing suicide, a man lives to an advanced old age without the temptation to try again."[31]

An obsession not just with death, but with a "good death" also seems to have preoccupied Korczak. At a funeral for his good friend and mentor, Waclaw Nalkoski, Korczak delivered the eulogy. In a speech that seems to have echoed his own hopes for the type of "good death" for which he longed, he said

> A happy man died – a man who lived the way he wanted, and died the way he wanted, in a hospital bed. He was not killed by those who today, like cowards sing his praise. He was not killed by those who lived and got fat

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[27] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 29.

[28] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 30.

[29] It cannot be determined with any degree of certainty when this might have happened, but from accounts of Korczak's depression at the time of his mother's death, it seems possible it occurred sometime in early 1920 (if it occurred at all) while the grief was fresh in his mind. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 103.

[30] From an entry of 15 May, 1942. *Ghetto Diary*, p. 111.

[31] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 103.

> eating the crumbs of his thought. He was not killed by those who could not see his greatness. He did not fight any of them. He merely dismissed them with a toss of his head.[32]

This passage is even echoed in his books for children and points to some of the things Korczak valued or wished for: happiness, freedom, acclaim and recognition, and greatness.[33] All accounts of Korczak's last march demonstrate that he followed this formula very closely. In the end, that final, quixotic act seems very much to be the symbolic equivalent of the "dismissal" with the "toss of his head." In a diary entry dated 21 July 1942, as life rapidly disintegrated around him, he wrote again about his wish for a good, or beautiful death, though he clearly does not envision his death (or his children's) as a collective experience at this time. He wrote:

> It is a difficult thing to be born and to learn to live. Ahead of me is a much easier task: to die. After death, it may be difficult again, but I am not bothered about that. The last year, month or hour. I should like to die consciously, in possession of my faculties. I don't know what I should say to the children by way of farewell. I should want to make clear to them only this – that the road is theirs to choose, freely.[34]

A final important trait of Korczak's is his apparent sense of mission or self-importance. As with the other aspects of his psychology, this too seems as if it can be traced back partially to his father, who, though he often treated his son very poorly, was extremely proud of a letter of blessing he received from the Chief Rabbi of Paris on the occasion of Henryk's birth. This letter told the elder Goldszmit "your son will be a great man of Israel."[35] This may have just been a kindly sentiment on the part of the Rabbi, but

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[32] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 64.

[33] Korczak has King Matt say to a friend at the end of the novel, "'Don't cry, Klu Klu, we'll die a beautiful death. And then people will stop saying that kings only declare wars but don't die fighting like soldiers.' To die a hero's death was Matt's only desire. Then suddenly he wondered: What kind of funeral will my enemies give me?" As mentioned above, the character of King Matt seems to speak directly for Korczak. Korczak, *King Matt the First*, p. 317.

[34] Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*, p. 175.

[35] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 14.

the fact that the younger Goldszmit/Korczak kept the letter his entire life suggests that he attached considerable importance to it. This tendency to view himself as important, combined with his lifelong role not only as a physician, but as a public personality and a symbol of "children's rights" throughout Poland, Palestine and Eastern Europe, point to his embrace of and identification with a style of living that was at least as much performative as it was genuine.[36]

As we will see, the life-long importance he attached to fame (he acknowledges wishing to be a king in *King Matt*) was exacerbated by the genocidal situation in which he wrote the *Ghetto Diary.* There is also no doubt that Korczak relied heavily on his authoritative public persona to mitigate the myriad disasters that befell the orphaned children of the Warsaw Ghetto on a nearly daily basis. But he did so at a cost. When his prestige and prominence were no longer enough to earn him the respect he felt was his due, the old depression and suicidal thoughts came flooding back in.[37] It is certain, then, that Korczak brought a considerable amount of psychological baggage, as well as personal history with him into the traumatic environment of the ghetto – where traumatic conditions no doubt accentuated both good and bad characteristics. Korczak was an individual devoted to children (often to the exclusion of adults). He was also someone who fought for children's rights and for their safety. However, at the same time, he was chronically depressed, perhaps frequently suicidal, not to mention someone whose personality contained narcissistic and self-important elements.

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[36] Lifton describes Korczak as "a utopian and yet pragmatic figure," one who "behaved as if he had a divine calling." Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 4-5.

[37] Frequent self-deprecating remarks by Korczak seem to indicate his wry sense of humor as well as a kind of false humility. Korczak remained confident in the power of his own name to ward off harm until almost the very end.

When the Nazis invaded Poland and formed the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940, Korczak's orphanage was moved inside the ghetto walls. As a prominent personality, he was well-known to other diarists and chroniclers of life in the ghetto like Michael Zylberberg, Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Ringelblum, and Adam Czerniakow, head of the Warsaw *Judenrat*.[38] Korczak maintained a high profile throughout the duration of the ghetto's existence, and he lobbied ceaselessly on behalf of his orphans. As mentioned above, he and the children were sent to Treblinka on 5 or 6 August 1942.

Fortunately for historians, the doctor left his diary lying next to his bed that morning. Interestingly enough, he left his cracked glasses behind as well. Perhaps it is reading too much into the historical record, but one wonders if Korczak perhaps left them behind because he wanted to indicate he had finally seen the way before him clearly, or conversely, that he felt there was nothing more to see.[39] The diary was salvaged and taken to safety by Korczak's friend Igor Newerly, and was first published in Polish in 1956. Over the years, Korczak's legacy grew and he came to be regarded as one of the great heroes of the Holocaust – especially in Europe and Israel. Today, his memory is revered by people all around the world.

V: Suicide and Daydreams

By analyzing Korczak's depictions of perpetrators, we are able to get an impression of the way he felt about the Germans who invaded his country and threatened

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[38] Korczak is mentioned no less than six times in Czerniakow's diary – always in favorable terms. *Adam Czerniakow, The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (translated by Stanislaw Staron, edited by Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz, New York, Stein and Day, 1979), p. 102, 149, 197, 203, 208, 231. In fact, Czerniakow and Korczak both shared an extraordinarily concern with the well-being of the ghetto's children. Lifton even suggests that the final provocation that led to Czerniakow's suicide was the German order to deport Korczak's children to Treblinka. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 328-29.

[39] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 347.

to take away his beloved children. We are also able to surmise what kind of defense mechanisms he used to cope with life in the Ghetto and how they helped him cope with the everyday terror that threatened to break down his carefully composed public persona. Most importantly, we can see how his depictions of perpetrators changed over time as his situation became increasingly impossible.

Korczak only spoke of Germans directly or indirectly on four occasions in his diary, and never before May 1942, a year and a half after the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto.[40] The first entry, dated 15 May 1942, does not discuss perpetrators explicitly but alludes to them in the description of a "daydream." Analysis of this passage requires the historian to follow Agamben's advice to "listen" to the lacuna where the perpetrator should appear. This passage is the most concrete example of an "absence" that indicates a kind of "representation through non-representation." It also reinforces the idea that Korczak was obsessed with suicide yet avoided the prospect of his own negation or absence by resorting to fantasy. Therefore, Korczak's first entry in his diary pertaining to perpetrators stands apart from all the others and goes directly to our discussion of absence and silence. Not only does the passage recapitulate the themes of Korczak's life in many ways (fear of madness, narcissism, and preoccupation with suicide), but it also demonstrates a way in which he was able to confront his enemies in a grand manner in keeping with his sense of self-importance.

We know that in real life Korczak was unafraid of standing up for himself or those he loved.[41] In *King Matt*, the protagonist (Korczak's stand-in) repeatedly takes on

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[40] The Ghetto was established on 16 October 1940 by order of Hans Frank, the Governor-General of the Nazi *Generalgouvernement*.

[41] When confronted with a situation that threatened his orphans, Korczak could be quite aggressive. On one occasion when the supply of potatoes to the orphanage was confiscated, Korczak

the world in an attempt to realize positive changes. This fictional stance as well as l actions we know he took in real life seems to indicate that Korczak *wished* to confront his enemies and did so both physically and through his writing. At the same time, he had learned from the incident with the potatoes (see fn. 43) that an outright physical or verbal assault against the Nazis would most likely leave his children alone in a hostile world with very bleak prospects. This passage provides an outlet for his hostility, while it also masks the extent of his rage. Although I have quoted part of this passage before, I am repeating it in its entirety for the sake of clarity. In this entry, written 15 May 1942, the doctor wrote

> There were years when I kept mercuric chloride and morphine pills hidden in the far corner of a drawer. I would take them out only when I went to my mother's grave at the cemetery. But since the start of the war, I have kept them in my pocket, and it's interesting that they were not confiscated when I was searched in jail..
>
> There can be nothing (no experience) more loathsome than an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. This sort of plan should be fully matured so as to ensure absolute certainty of success.
>
> If I kept on postponing my otherwise fully thought-out plan, it was because always at the very last moment some new daydream would sweep me away and could not be abandoned before I worked it out in detail. These were something like themes for short stories. I put them under a common heading of: "Oddities."
>
> Thus:
>
> I have invented a machine (I made a detailed design of the whole mechanism). Something in the nature of a microscope. The scale – one hundred. If I should turn the micrometer screw to ninety-nine, everything would die that did not contain at least one percent of humanity. The amount of work was unbelievable. I had to determine how many people (living beings) would go out of circulation each time, who would take their place, and what would be the outcome of such a purged tentative new life. After a year's deliberations (at night, of course) I came half way with the distillation. Now the only people left were half-beasts, all others have perished. How minutely, to the last detail I planned everything – the best proof that my own person was completely excluded from this peculiar

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personally went to Gestapo headquarters to protest – an action which luckily only cost him a month in prison.

> system. By a mere turn of the micrometer screw of my 'microscope' I could have taken my own life. What then?
>
> I confess with some embarrassment that I return to this theme today, too, on the more difficult nights. Nights in prison have produced the most interesting chapters of my tale.
>
> There were about a dozen of these daydreams in the workshop to choose from.
>
> Thus…I have found the magic word. I am the ruler of the light.[42]

The first paragraph of this passage reconfirms Korczak's long-term obsession with suicide. It also gives us some additional information about his state of mind. Initially, the doctor kept the pills in a separate location apart from his person, except during visits to his mother's grave. Before the war, the suicide tablets seem symbolic – a sign of his loss and grief indeed, but a loss and grief that was manageable. This state of affairs changed once the war began, and Korczak prepared to end his life at any moment.

In his diary, he expressed surprise that the pills were not taken from him in jail, but he did not immediately address the more perplexing question of why he did not take him then. Perhaps this is because, as he stated in the second paragraph, he found unsuccessful suicide attempts "loathsome" – and one made in jail would allow for too many factors beyond his control. For Korczak, at this point in his life, suicide was no longer about emotion, as it was when he proposed the suicide pact to his sister; it was about rationality – a sane response to the insane world he saw around him. This is why in the third paragraph he explicitly stated that his suicide plan was fully worked-out. Why then did he not go through with it? The answer was contained in the power of "daydreams" that occupied Korczak's troubled mind.

As a physician and an intellectual familiar with the writing of Sigmund Freud, Korczak recognized and acknowledged that "daydreams" represented repressed wishes.

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[42] Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*, p. 111-112.

In fact, Lifton quotes the doctor as saying "Feelings that have no other outlet become daydreams. And daydreams become the internal script of life. If we knew how to interpret them, we would find they come true, but not always in the way we expect."[43] It appears that Korczak's daydreams performed several functions with respect to his mental condition. First, they expressed a wish. Secondly, and more importantly, they performed the function of keeping him alive precisely because the daydream "sweeps [him] away" from imminent thoughts of suicide.[44]

What then is the nature of this particular daydream and what does it tell us about Korczak's feelings about perpetrators? The daydream itself is somewhat ambiguous. Korczak obviously did not *really* invent a machine, and it is doubtful that he actually drew designs. This is our first clue that he is narrating the episode as it occurred over and over only *in his mind*. The killing machine he "invents" is based upon a microscope. It is not surprising that a doctor would envision a scientific instrument, but it is illustrative to point out that rationalization of mass-murder through an appeal to and use of science is exactly the approach taken by Nazis in the development of the "Final Solution"[45] How does Korczak determine who he is going to kill? It is again through a "rational" resort to

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[43] Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 15.

[44] Paragraph 3, block quote immediately above.

[45] The German word for "Final Solution" (*Endlösung*) itself expresses a technological point of view – the "Jewish Question" is a "problem" to be "solved." Also, there can be no doubt that technological innovations inspired by the Nazi medical community contributed to the German capability to commit genocide – whether the development of gas vans and gas chambers or the "thanatological" experiments performed by Nazi doctors. See Götz Aly, Peter Chroust and Christian Pross, *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: 'Euthanasia' in Germany 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Michael Burleigh, *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); James M. Glass, *"Life Unworthy of Life": Racial Phobia and Mass Murder in Hitler's Germany* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); John J. Michalczyk (ed.), *Medicine, Ethics and the Third Reich: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994) and Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

numbers and percentages. He begins by making the sweeping, though egalitarian, assumption that everyone is made up of certain parts "human" and certain parts "beast" – and more importantly that these differences can be differentiated and measured. This enables him to construct a "machine" that can be set to kill anyone composed of more than a certain percentage "beast." Korczak is the one who gets to determine this percentage – something which confers upon him all the power in the world, and which indicates profound narcissism. In his daydream he proceeds about this task rationally, as a scientist and a physician. Just like a scientist, he clearly has to take into consideration many factors – such as what human life will look like with so much "beast" expunged from it and how much "beast" he should allow to remain.

Even as Korczak proceeds scientifically about his experiment, he is also profoundly aware of the irrationality at the heart of his project. It is obvious that he originally comes up with this "daydream" in jail ("Nights in prison have produced the most interesting chapters of my tale"). The dream also causes him "embarrassment." If it made sense, then it would not shame him. This passage clearly expresses rage, but the target of this anger is carefully concealed. This is an obvious example of one of the lacunae Agamben discussed. By listening carefully to it, we can infer that the rage that drove him to these wishful daydreams was directed at the people who put him in a powerless position – the Nazis. This "daydream," which Korczak himself understood as a repressed wish, clearly indicates aggression and hostility toward perpetrators (without whom there would be no need for his "machine"). The doctor is clearly aware of the faulty logic of his proposition. He knows that if he takes it upon himself to decide who is

human and who is "beast," he is no better than those he murders, and hence he is as much "beast" as they are (and so it is important that he remain outside of the system).

What we have here then, in at least some sense, is Korczak appropriating Nazi methods (the scientific rationalization of mass-murder), their "logic" (minus the racial overtones), their language ("out of circulation" is as much a euphemism as "special treatment"), and their goals (the elimination of those who are not "human"). Korczak's fantasy is one of domination and control and an attempt psychologically to make up for his feelings of powerlessness. This can also be ascertained from the enigmatic last paragraph ("I have found the magic word. I am the ruler of the light"). What exactly he meant by this is uncertain, but Korczak himself had claimed in the past to have looked to Germany "for light and knowledge."[46] If we read the passage this way ("I am the ruler of Germany/Germans") it makes perfect sense. Locked in a jail cell in Warsaw on the orders of the Gestapo, Korczak fantasizes about turning the tables and reorienting the positions of victim and perpetrator.

The ironic thing about this passage, however, is that it is only by adopting the sort of logic of murder and genocide employed by perpetrators that Korczak is able to refrain from committing suicide. It was with catastrophic results that Nazi fantasies about Jews came true. Korczak's fantasy is remarkably similar to Nazi fantasies, yet it served the positive purpose of keeping him alive.[47] Without daydreams of this sort, he readily

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[46] Lifton, *The King of the Children*, p. 54 – a quote from a 1907 essay by Korczak "Impressions of Berlin."

[47] One could say that Nazi fantasies served the same function: to distance perpetrators from their own actions and the humanity of their victims enough so that the "self" could be preserved intact even as genocide was committed. That this dynamic was understood by the Nazi hierarchy is clear from Himmler's famous Posen Speech of 4 October 1943.

admitted that he would have committed suicide. Paradoxically then, murderous fantasy itself becomes a form of resistance to Nazi genocide.

Fantasies of this type are apparently not rare. In a chapter on necrophilia in his book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, psychologist Erich Fromm recorded the dream of one of his patients – one that is extraordinarily similar to Korczak's. Fromm's patient says:

> I have made a great invention, the 'superdestroyer.' It is a machine which, if one secret button is pushed that I alone know, can destroy all life in North America within the first hour, and within the next hour all life on earth. I alone, knowing the formula of the chemical substance, can protect myself." (Next scene) "I have pushed the button; I notice no more life, I am alone, I feel exuberant.[48]

Fromm's analysis of this case is short, almost curt. He says

> This dream is an expression of pure destructiveness in an extremely narcissistic person, unrelated to others and with no need of anyone. This was a recurrent dream with this person, together with other necrophilous dreams. He was suffering from severe mental sickness.[49]

Ostensibly, this patient was not under duress when he described this dream, nor was he subject to any genocidal pressures. It is interesting and illustrative, however, to compare this "extremely narcissistic" person's dream with a daydream that Korczak described. Was Korczak "suffering from severe mental illness?" This does not seem to be the case. As he mentioned himself, the daydream was protective and it was precisely by resorting to fantasies – "necrophilous" or otherwise – that he was able to cope with the traumatic environment of the Warsaw Ghetto. It seems in Korczak's case that an "expression of pure destructiveness" enabled him to continue to live and resist. In this May entry, Korczak's attitude toward perpetrators is hostile and aggressive, although

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[48] Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1973), p. 372.

[49] Fromm, p. 372.

suppressed (no individuals or nations are named). His approach changes considerably by the next time he mentions them.

VI: Identification and Denial

The second passage, written 27 July 1942, only eleven days before the doctor and his children were sent to their deaths, represents Korczak's only discussion of perpetrators specifically as Germans or Nazis. It is striking because, in it, he adopts the voice and persona of a perpetrator. It is also notable because both its (seemingly defensive) naïveté, as well as the way it laid out the possibilities Korczak saw before him, including suicide and heroism.

The doctor was obviously trying to find some kind of logic or sense in his situation, and so, as if to clarify things to himself, he wrote about the meaning of the war from what he imagined to be the German point of view. The passage displays an attempt at identification with the perpetrator which is clearly hampered by Korczak's failure to comprehend the nature of Nazi intentions for Jews. He wrote:

> We are running a giant enterprise. Its name is war. We work in a planned, disciplined manner, methodically. Your [you Jews] petty interests, ambitions, sentiments, whims, claims, resentments, cravings do not concern us.
> Meanwhile, in order not to prolong the matter, things must get a bit rough and painful, and if I many put it that way, without particular precision, elegance or even scrupulousness. Just roughly cut for current expediency.
> You yourself [the Jews] are longing to see all this over. So are we. Therefore, don't interfere.
> Jews go East. No bargaining. It is no longer the question of a Jewish grandmother but of where you are needed most – your hands, your brain, your time, your life. Grandmother. This was necessary only to hook you on to something, a key, a slogan.
> You say you cannot go East – you will die there. So, choose something else. You are on your own, you must take the risk. For clearly we, to keep up appearances, are obliged to bar the way, to threaten, prosecute and reluctantly to punish.

> And you butt in, uninvited, with a fresh wad of bank notes. We have neither time nor desire for that sort of thing. We are not playing at war, we were told to wage it with the greatest possible expedition, efficiently, as honestly as possible.
>
> The job is not clean, or pleasant, or sweet smelling. So for the present we must be indulgent to the workers we need…
>
> We are Germans. It is not a question of the trademark, but of the cost, the destination of the products.
>
> We are the steel roller, the plow, the sickle. So long as it bears fruit. And it will, provided you don't interfere, don't whine, get all upset, poison the air. We may feel sorry for you at times, but we must use the whip, the big stick or the pencil, because there must be order.
>
> A poster.
>
> "Whoever does this or that – will be shot."
>
> "Whoever does not do this or that – we will shoot."
>
> Someone seems to be asking for it. A suicide? Too bad.
>
> Someone else is not afraid. Hail! A hero?
>
> Let his name shine in letters of gold but – now, out of the way since there is no alternative.
>
> A third is afraid – livid with fear, constantly runs to the toilet, dulls himself with tobacco, liquor, women, and obstinately wants his own way. What would you do with him?[50]

This entry is quite remarkable, but like the "daydream" passage is also indirect. No individual is named. Even the nation issuing the imaginary directive or statement of purpose is only mentioned once. The passage indicates many beliefs about what was going on, but in the end, Korczak, though attempting to "grapple with the incomprehensible," could still not understand it.

It is first important to discuss what Korczak imagined the Germans to be like. Nazis, according to his scenario are "disciplined" and "methodical," interested only in the success of their war at the end of the day. Korczak believes he understands the means Germans use to achieve their goals; while perhaps amoral and Machiavellian, they can still be comprehended. Korczak the doctor, the rationalist, mitigates the irrational aspects of Nazi policy (murdering people who could be working for the war effort, for example)

[50] Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*, p. 177-179.

by implying there must be some "reason" behind it. Like the "rational" German, the doctor temporarily appropriates and lays out the stereotype of the Jew – a group of people of "petty interests, ambitions, sentiments, whims, claims, resentments [and] cravings" with "wads of banknotes"– as if that stereotype is true – thereby staying in character. As a "German" who makes these assumptions, Korczak asserts that brutality is sometimes necessary when dealing with these reluctant workers. It makes a kind of sense from this "logical" perspective that the Nazis must "reluctantly" punish them on occasion. Again, this "reluctance" reinforces the proposition that German behavior is logical and not based on irrational or emotional arguments. Korczak does not seem to be overly sarcastic or cynical here. He genuinely seems either to be trying to come to terms with the Nazi rationale for persecution, or simply spouting out in anger what he has heard so many times. Although there is a distinction made between German and Jew in the entry, it is not on its own based upon the visceral appeal of racism – something the doctor does not seem to understand. Korczak believes the nature of German war (genocide is not a term he would allow himself to apply to this situation, even if it had been coined at the time) – is only to achieve a military victory at all costs.[51] He does not comprehend the idea of a racial war.

Victory, not hatred, demands that protestations, bribes or appeals to sympathy not reach the German heart. Efficiency is the watchword. "We are the Germans," he says, "We are the steel roller the plow, the sickle."[52] As we saw in the previous chapter, during

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[51] This is not necessarily true. It has been mentioned many times by many scholars that to Hitler, the important war was not the one against Bolshevism, but against the Jews.

[52] These metaphors are interesting in that Korczak takes the image of how the Soviet Union sought to join the industrial to the agricultural—the hammer and sickle—and applies the imagery to the Germans. Perhaps this indicates that the doctor understood the goals of communist totalitarianism better than those of National Socialism.

particularly stressful moments, the metaphors frequently take over in Holocaust diaries, and in this instance, like so many others, the perpetrator is reduced to a non-living object (like Hillesum's "blue uniform") or a machine. The words Korczak chooses are metaphors for tools – for useful appliances that *both* destroy and create. However, a change is taking place here. The perpetrator is fragmenting and losing his humanity. One senses that Korczak is having a hard time keeping this exercise in identification going. Germans have now been conflated with their products. At this point in the entry, perpetrators are machines, human only insofar as those they have conquered aid them in their project. As long as these subjugated folk are pacified and "bear fruit," the "whips," "big sticks," and the "pencils" will remain quiescent.

It never occurs to Korczak throughout this entire passage that the murder and the horror he saw around him were the twisted culmination and zenith of that systematic, rational and efficient character that he was trying to come to terms with. It was not within the scope of this limited exercise in identification for Korczak to be able to imagine that it was precisely the harnessing of bureaucracies and the power of the modern state *to a profoundly illogical purpose* that was the defining characteristic of the totalizing system he was attempting to describe. The logic of the Third Reich was not the logic of the world Korczak knew.

By the time Korczak reaches the line "*A poster*," his ability to identify with his persecutors has completely fractured. He begins to comprehend the no-win position he and the other Jews of Warsaw find themselves in ("Whoever does this or that – will be shot. Whoever does not do this or that – we will shoot"). It is at this point that he lays out the options available as he sees them. It is important to note that the first thing that

comes to his mind is suicide. Throughout his life, this was Korczak's fallback position, and it remains so during the last fortnight of his life. The second option is also in keeping with Korczak's narcissistic and self-important nature – to go out in a blaze of glory as a hero, someone whose "name shine[s] in letters of gold." The third is to dull the pain or to continue to retreat from the real problem by resorting to pain killing measures Korczak considers distasteful, like "tobacco, liquor [and] women." In the end, we will see that the "Old Doctor" chose a combination of the first two options as his final method of resistance against genocide.

The passage analyzed above is similar to the "daydream" entry, but different in significant ways, showing that Korczak's view of the world, the war, and his place in both were coming under intense psychological pressure. Both represent attempts to come to terms with an impossible situation by mobilizing coping mechanisms which increased his sense of power. The first entry expresses rage and hatred toward (apparently non-existent) perpetrators, yet adopts the tactics of the enemy in order to prevent despair and suicide. The second completes the process of identification with the enemy, yet still breaks down in the end when Korczak realizes he is not one of them and that he therefore has only limited options left to choose from.

VII: The End of Defense Mechanisms

The final two passages are the most amazing.[53] In them, Korczak first appears to repeat some of the same motifs that are present in the earlier entries, then, apparently

[53] The original copy of Korczak's ghetto diary has been lost. It was found the morning of Korczak's transport to Treblinka and, shortly thereafter, several copies were made by typewriter. After the war, Korczak fell into disfavor with the communist regime, who considered him a "bourgeois" educator. When his work was finally published in 1956, the originals had disappeared, making it impossible to examine the handwriting to see if it appeared rushed or changed from previous entries, or to know if it had been edited as copies were made.

recognizing that the end had come, switches tactics. In the last seven paragraphs, he eschews all stylistic pretense, all naïveté, and all forms of literary defense. In those last moments, he both saw the perpetrators for what they really were, and at the same time moved toward one final direct assault against those who were taking his life from him. Taken together, these passages depict a progression that allows us to follow Korczak's reactions to perpetrators during his last 24-48 hours in the Ghetto, as well as to trace changes in the ways he defended himself and his children amid genocidal surroundings.

These last entries of Korczak's life were most likely written on the morning of 5 August 1942, though it may have been the next day.[54] Early in the entry labeled "4 August," Korczak, clearly despairing, addresses "gentlemen officers." Exactly which officers he is speaking to is unclear. It could be SS officers or *Wehrmacht* officers, but, more likely than not, he was still distancing himself from the actual perpetrators and the men he describes are hypothetical representations or abstractions of military leaders, not real people. It is important to note, however, that he includes himself among these military men. He writes to them in an intensely sarcastic tone,

> (7) You drank, and plenty, gentleman officers, you relished your drinking – here's to the blood you've shed – and dancing you jingled your medals to cheer the infamy which you were too blind to see, or rather pretended not to see.
> (8) My share in the Japanese war. Defeat – disaster.
> In the European War – defeat – disaster.
> In the World War…
> I don't know how and what a soldier of a victorious army feels like.[55]

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[54] The last date inserted by Korczak is 4 August., though he did not always date his entries It begins with the line "I have watered the flowers." *Ghetto Diary*, p. 187. The final section begins again "I am watering the flowers." (p. 189). This makes it seem most likely that Korczak is at least writing as late as 5 August. Lifton dates this entry to the early morning of 6 August. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 338. Hyams places it on the morning of the 5th. p. 237.

[55] Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*, p. 188. The "sections" in this entry are numbered, more likely by those who transcribed the document than by Korczak himself.

In this portion of the diary, it seems as if Korczak is repeating some of the themes from earlier entries. The target of his anger is nebulous and not specifically defined, as in the "daydream" passage. And, like in the "identification" passage, the doctor is apparently lumping himself in with these men with the jingling medals. In this version of himself, he is not Korczak the subjected Jew; he is Korczak the army doctor – the officer. In this way, he retains some sense of privilege and power. However, the bitterness of defeat and weariness are present in Korczak's tone of voice as well, as is the narcissism that was always present. He resents *not winning,* or not being on the side of the powerful – as if he still believed this were an ordinary kind of war. He still does not seem to comprehend what is happening. Genocide (as a concept, not as a word) has not entered his mind.

At the same time, as always, the doctor is astute enough to know that there are things these officers/people have "pretended not to see." Since Korczak has included himself in his conversation of "gentlemen officers" this implies that Korczak knows he is hiding something from himself. If it is not "the blood," (and we are not aware that Korczak ever shed any – and it is obvious that he believes he sees that aspect clearly) what could it be? It seems things were beginning to break down in his mind and that protective mechanisms were no longer functioning as they had in the past. In place of denials, Korczak is beginning to comprehend that the time for real action, which is necessitated when genuine awareness combines with the complete loss of freedom, has almost come.

The next two sections (parts 8 and 9) express a deep sadness, but have nothing to do with perpetrators. It is the final section (10) that is the most poignant and expresses a

profound change that comes over the Korczak on what may very well have been the last morning of his life. He wrote.

> I am watering the flowers. My bald head in the window. What a splendid target.
> He has a rifle. Why is he standing and looking on so calmly?
> He has no orders to shoot.
> And perhaps he was a village teacher in civilian life, or a notary, a street sweeper in Leipzig, a waiter in Cologne?
> What would he do if I nodded to him? Waved my hand in a friendly gesture?
> Perhaps he doesn't even know that things are – as they are?
> He may have arrived only yesterday, from far away….[56]

This passage is striking because, although the suicide/death wish theme is still present ("My bald head in the window. What a splendid target."), the understanding of the perpetrator shifts drastically. Korczak drops the defensive rage present in the "daydream" sequence, and he does not feel compelled to use metaphors to describe the Nazi he sees outside his window. There is no wordplay, no sense of alternate meanings or subterfuge, whether conscious or unconscious. Korczak simply sees a man with a rifle "looking on so calmly." The distance he places between them indicates that he has given up identifying with the perpetrator – though at the same time he does not dehumanize him or label him a "beast." Here the diary depicts two men looking at each other through a window, and Korczak suddenly sees the commonality inherent in their situations. This is very much like Hillesum's "blue uniform" passage, which we examined in chapter II: the perpetrator could be anyone. There is an emptiness here that Korczak attempts to fill in at the last minute with positive content. The man he sees might be a soldier now, but perhaps only in the way Korczak was incidentally a medical officer in the Polish Army.

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[56] Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*, p. 189.

He could be anything at all…a teacher, a notary, a street sweeper, a waiter.[57] Korczak finally sees this soldier as a man and a human being in a new light – as someone who is complicated and who has his own thoughts and reasons for doing things – not as someone controlled by impersonal forces like war. There is the hint of contact ("What would he do if I nodded to him? Waved my hand in a friendly gesture?") that implies Korczak's recognition of the man's individual agency. The doctor is stepping out, momentarily at least, from his accustomed self- absorbed reflection and narcissism. Now, finally, there is no "crisis of imagination." Korczak *sees* the perpetrator. And, in doing so, frees himself from the need for internal defense mechanisms.

VIII: Conclusion

Why this change in the very last entry of the diary? It would be very interesting to know exactly when Korczak wrote this last passage. It was written either the morning before he and the children were sent to their deaths, or the morning the deportation was ordered. Based on the radical change in perspective, the historian is tempted to place the timing of this event as late as possible. The theory that he scribbled this entry during the short period of time he was given to gather the children and their belongings together is appealing, but not necessary.[58] The existence of the orphanage had been threatened for months, and Korczak was plainly aware that the noose was tightening. It was no longer a

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[57] Korczak was right. Many of the men involved in the Nazi genocide were not professional soldiers. As Christopher Browning tells us in his examination of Reserve Battalion 101 of the *Ordnungspolizei*, who took part in massacres in Poland, many soldiers had jobs in civilian life as dock workers, truck drivers, warehouse and construction workers, machine operators, seamen and waiters, as well as other jobs. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. 47.

[58] Both Hyams, who dates the passage from 5 August. and Lifton, who dates if from 6 August, assert that this entry was written within less than an hour of the time the order for deportation was given, though they do not explain how they made that determination. See, Hyams, p. 237-238, and Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 338-339.

matter of *if*, but of *when* Korczak's carefully constructed world would collapse around them. The question really is one of the relationship between this final entry and his subsequent actions that morning rather than of the exact moment the passage was written.

We know beyond any doubt that Korczak cared more for his children than anything else in the world. We also know that he had a great deal of experience with the public through the fame he won for his writing, his advocacy for children's rights, as well as for his radio show. It is speculative, but a distinct possibility exists that sometime after he had written parts eight and nine of his final entry he was made aware of the order for the children's deportation. It is at this point, I believe, that Korczak penned this final paragraph. Now, internal mechanisms of defense were rendered obsolete. In view of the impending deportation and death of the children, it no longer mattered what the doctor did or did not think of perpetrators. The time for keeping them at bay had passed. This is why the guard in the last paragraph seems so real compared to other examples we have seen.

With the move away from internal defense mechanisms of resistance, Korczak was free to exercise the "options" he had discussed the week before, in the entry written on 27 July. He could commit suicide, or he could be a hero. With his history of depressive episodes and melancholy, the first would have been appealing (and he always kept the poison pills on his body). However, as a figure accustomed to authority, prestige, and as a man not immune to narcissistic tendencies, the second option might have been attractive. My contention is that he tried, and succeeded, in accomplishing both.

Hyams claims that Korczak specifically asked for and received permission from an SS *Obersturmführer* named Klosterman to lead his children to the *Umschlagplatz* in place of the regular band of soldiers.[59] All witnesses agree that the children were lined up – as for a parade – complete with flags and banners. Korczak's familiarity with both military spectacle and theatrics paid off. The word went out and people began to line the sidewalks to see the children go by, with the famous "Old Doctor" at their head.[60] At the *Umschlagplatz*, Korczak knew that the second part of his plan (to become a hero, not just a suicide) required that he stay with the children – hence his rejection of the possibility of remaining behind when given the chance. The symbolic cutting of the yellow stars from the children's sleeves also seems designed to make the most dramatic impact possible on eyewitnesses. In the end, by removing those hated stars, the doctor was able to signal that these were 192 individuals, not 192 Jews. In doing so, he reinforced the concept of their individual integrity.

What did Korczak believe he was accomplishing by turning his death, and the children's death, into a kind of spectacle? I believe his final entry allows us to see that he had reached a point where he knew internal mechanisms of resistance were futile. He also knew that he could no longer save the lives of his children. He therefore understood that another form of resistance was required if anything were to be salvaged of the children's memory and innocence. Korczak's actions are a remarkable kind of resistance because he halted a downward trajectory towards anonymity and negation – not figuratively, but literally. He did not allow the Nazis to completely control the way his

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[59] Hyams, p. 239.

[60] This was shocking to many Ghetto residents. Lifton quotes one, a young man named Josef Balcerak, as saying "My God, they've got Korczak!" I am contending that it was precisely this shock that the doctor intended to provoke. Lifton, *The King of Children*, p. 341.

life ended. Korczak was able to make a decision. He was not devoid of any freedom or volition, and he did not allow his children to disappear anonymously into the genocidal blackness waiting to receive them. Suicide and theatrics became an act of freedom and a statement of individuality.

Korczak also achieved his wish of becoming a hero. While it could be argued that by turning the "last march" of the children into a kind of parade of the doomed bespeaks a kind of cynicism and manipulation, I believe this was not Korczak's intent. Just as he did not want to be deprived of all control and all choice, Korczak did not want his children to be reduced in death to the kind of anonymity that was the fate of the thousands of other Warsaw Jews who died before (and after) them. Because of his fame, Korczak knew that *he* would be remembered. But for the "Old Doctor," now seeing quite clearly what lay before him, staging the "final march" was a heartrending necessity. By doing so, he engraved the memory of those children in the minds of everyone who saw them go by.

In a very real way, through Korczak's efforts, his children did not lose their humanity or individuality, even though they died together with so many others and their bodies were obliterated from the face of the earth. The fact that so many books, plays and accounts of that "last march" have been written is proof that his plan worked. As we have seen, the nature of genocide is both to completely objectify its victims – to turn them into numbers or aggregates and so something less than human – as well as to completely negate victims by submitting them to a completely impersonal and anonymous death. In the case of Janusz Korczak and his children, the Nazis failed at both. Even though these victims lost their lives, they remained humans – people whose

faces and even photographs are still present, and still mean something today. In this sense, the doctor succeeded, because Hella and Hanna and Zygmus and Sami and so many others are alive today in the memories and imagination of people around the world. This is why Korczak's story is so appealing and why he is a hero to so many.

By maintaining the ability to analyze the situation clearly – by knowing when to set aside the private defense mechanisms that preserved only his individual life and peace of mind, Korczak was able to salvage the dignity and memory of 192 other lives. Paradoxically, through sacrifice and death, Korczak saved himself and his children from the anonymous fate planned for them by the Nazis. This sacrifice is commemorated today at the memorial at Treblinka, where 17,000 stones, each engraved with the name of a town or village decimated by Nazi genocide, have been erected surrounding the site where the gas chambers once stood. Only one stone has the name of a person on it. This stone reads "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the Children."

Conclusion

Directions for Further Thought and Research

"Anyone who has worn a star is marked for ever. He becomes different from the person who saw a star being worn."
Abel J. Herzberg, 3 September 1944.

Holocaust diaries represent a large and relatively untapped pool of resources for the professional historian. The diarists examined here clearly experienced a tension between the need to testify and the need to avoid written confrontation with their persecutors. The evidence I have analyzed demonstrates that this tension can be found in diaries, and that close scrutiny of these points of tension provides unique and valuable ways for historians to think about how resistance to trauma and the need to testify come together to tell us something about genocide. This thesis provides a place for scholars to begin looking at relationships between perpetrators and victims in genocidal context, but it also points the way to new territory – something important in fields as well-developed as Holocaust Studies and Comparative Genocide.

Identifying "Presence," "Dissolution," and "Absence" in Holocaust diaries provides a useful framework for classifying victims' responses to perpetrators. By discussing ways perpetrators appear in Holocaust diaries, I have developed a novel means of looking at the problem of psychological resistance to genocide. As I look forward, I see at least three possibilities further research might profitably consider.

First, in this thesis, I have worked only with published sources. In the future, an intense engagement with a greater number of unpublished works will enrich the body of

source material, and offer a means to refute potential methodological critiques suggesting that the diaries may have been edited or reformulated to some degree after the war, especially through translation. It is easy to say perpetrators must either be present, absent or somewhere in-between. It remains to be seen where the majority of these depictions fall. A more comprehensive examination of both published and unpublished sources would clarify this point.

Secondly, much more work could be done on the general demographic distribution of Holocaust diarists. For instance, it also remains to be seen if certain patterns of dealing with perpetrators were more typical among certain groups than others. Did assimilated Jews choose forms of representation differently than unassimilated ones? Did Jews from western and eastern Europe have similar concerns? Again, more comprehensive research and analysis would both address these questions, and raise new ones. An approach focusing on class and gender differences in depictions of perpetrators, or on generational or age disparities in the ways victims psychologically deal with the trauma represented by Nazis would also be interesting and elucidating. I have tried to indicate, where possible, reasons why certain diarists may have written as they did – whether because of environmental or personal factors. A more systematic study of these differences could prove extremely valuable.

Finally, genocide is not strictly the province of Jewish diarists who wrote during the Holocaust. Without doubt, diaries have been written during other genocidal moments as well. One thinks immediately of letters and diaries that surely must have been written from Soviet gulags, from Cambodian prisons and killing fields, from rape camps in the former Yugoslavia or during the Rwandan genocide. A more thorough and comparative

discussion of ways victims react to perpetrators and to genocide could prove useful in the broader field of Comparative Genocide, as well as for students of the Holocaust.

The diarists examined here were only a small portion of those who experienced the Holocaust. The criticisms of Abel Herzberg, the jokes of Emmanuel Ringelblum and the metaphors of Etty Hillesum are a good place to begin a deeper level of historical analysis. Although fascinating aspects of Holocaust history are still being uncovered, it seems to me that the general outlines of the event are well-known. "Events" are much different from "mentalities." What concerns me, and the direction I in which I would like to see the field move, is toward the study, not of events, but of the perceptions and mentalities created during this incredibly traumatic time. By combining our detailed knowledge of political, military, cultural and social history with a new focus on diaries and other primary sources as both literary *and* historical texts, a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the Holocaust, and genocide in general, can emerge.

For the time being, I believe it is sufficient to have considered the importance of Holocaust diaries, both as literary artifacts, as historical documents, and as a means of psychological resistance. Further study of this topic is not only warranted, but important. Only future research will tell how valuable this approach will turn out to be, but I am convinced that increased scrutiny of the most marked points of tension in Holocaust diaries will tell us important things about victims, about perpetrators, and especially about ways the two groups thought about each other during moments of trauma and genocide.

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