Testimony: Genocide and Transmission

Régine Waintrater
Minneapolis March 28th 2011
Humphrey Center Forum
University of Minnesota

Sixty years after the Holocaust, testimony has become the preferred medium to convey an experience which, according to those who have tried, is impossible to transmit. The question of transmission, of what can be transmitted of such catastrophic events, thus raises the following issues: can such radical experiences of strangeness, as represented by genocide, be 'worked through'? How can giving and receiving a testimony help this process?

I will refer in this paper to my experience both as a psychoanalyst and family therapist, and as cofounder and supervisor of the two main programs for the collection of oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors in France – the Yale and Spielberg programs.

Genocide, a psychic and social catastrophe

The Holocaust is the paradigm of the genocidal catastrophe, a double catastrophe in the sense that it is both a psychic and a social catastrophe. It is a psychic catastrophe because it destroys the link between a person's internal reality and their environment; as a result, the traumatic experience cannot be mentalized. It is a social catastrophe, in the sense that it destroys the "intermediary function" governing relationships between the individual and the group; this function is usually fulfilled by the social context and by institutions. Genocide represents a denial of otherness, leading to the destruction of this "other" designated as "non-human," and as such excluded from the new "cultural" order defined by the self-appointed Masters of space and time. The radical foreignness of Armenians, Jews or Tutsis as decreed by genocide perpetrators is the result of a double and contradictory attempt: it is at once a denial of their unacceptable "otherness," and at the same time an obligation to remain forever foreign, even in one's way of dying. How can we establish a link between this forced designation and the function of bearing witness? Indeed, this function touches on one's relationship to the world as a subject in a fundamental way. "Telling the story of my life" is a basic human need, and life stories, whether autobiographies, diaries, or testimonies, help us give meaning and direction to our experience. The narration of past events helps us shed light on the present and the future: "The text is the mediation whereby we understand ourselves," writes Paul

Ricoeur[1]. Among such narratives, testimony occupies a specific place and fulfills several functions. I will attempt to describe them here.

First, and more so than any other type of autobiographical narrative, for the survivor, testimony represents an effort to organize events according to a causal sequence; narration acts as the organizing principle of experience.

The human psyche cannot tolerate total deprivation of meaning for long. Those who have experienced genocide ceaselessly endeavor to compensate for this by elaborating personal or collective versions of their experience. When witnesses finally speak, it is both to say that such an experience cannot be conveyed through words, and at the same time, it is an effort to restore the broken threads of a radically disrupted life. Somewhere between personal story and collective history, the testimonial narrative is caught between two contradictory requirements: on one hand, the need to restore historical narrative, and on the other, the painful process of "becoming a subject." To "survive one's past" one must be able to understand it, come to terms with it, at least in part. This is a particularly difficult task for survivors. Indeed, how can we expect self-understanding of them when the world they are talking about entirely lacks meaning? Years later, witnesses are still troubled by the incoherence of the genocide experience. Primo Levi expresses this through the German guard's: "Hier ist kein warum" (Here there is no why); or the victims' cry: "Why us?" echoed in the words of Janvier M, a Tutsi survivor, quoted by Jean Hatzfeld, journalist and writer: "When I try to find an answer to all these killings... my mind is troubled.... I don't understand why we are a cursed people."[2]

Why anyone would want to kill you is impossible to understand, unless you adopt the point of view of the killer, a phenomenon known in psychoanalysis as "identification with the aggressor." Self-understanding is impossible if one cannot construct an acceptable version of one's life. For survivors, the memories tied to certain episodes are filled with pain, guilt, and especially shame. The narrator must face a humiliated, belittled self-image; he must face the "gray area" of what he had to do to survive, which more often than not he would rather forget. For this reason, many survivors rightly fear that the narrative process could drive them to their

[1] Ricoeur P, (1990), *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.
[2] Hatzfeld J. (2000), *Into the Quick of Life: The Rwandan Genocide - The Survivors Speak*, London, Serpent's Tail, 2008.

mind's limits, those very boundaries that were trampled and abolished during the persecutions. It is a risky process, leaving none unscathed.

The second important function of the testimony is the recovery of trust and dialogue with one's fellow humans, in order to restore the social contract broken by genocide. For the victims of extreme violence, the destruction of the social pact is a psychic catastrophe affecting their whole lives. Though the memory of the persecutions may gradually fade with time, the feeling of having been abandoned by the rest of the world never disappears. This abandonment, this tragic defection of humanity is a wound that never heals, a deep and irreversible wound, not only for the survivors, but for all of society, because such a crime was allowed to take place. Indeed, we must now all live with this common heritage, the collapse of a legitimate belief in an "identification pact," in other words the generational and narcissistic contract tying the individual to the group and giving him a sense of identity and belonging.

"Abandoned by all": a phrase often repeated by the victims of persecutions. The testimonies all insist on the sense of absolute solitude, added to physical pain, which becomes totally unbearable. A Tutsi witness, speaking of the White men who refused to "open both eyes" to the genocide, describes the feeling of moral solitude that fell upon them. Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor and a writer, wrote extensively about the disruption of the social pact: "With the first blow from a policeman's fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived."[3] At the core of the genocidal experience, there is a loss of trust in the moral values of protection represented by society, parents, or even God. Our basic assumptions about life are destroyed: for example the belief in our personal invulnerability, and our perception of the world as having meaning. What is destroyed is the idea that we relate to others through a sense of connection with our own self. This is what testimony can help reconstruct, at least in part.

Simone Lagrange was a witness at Klaus Barbie's trial. She was deported at thirteen. Her account of the moment when her trust in the world collapsed is particularly heartrending. In the following excerpt from her written testimony, she has just recognized her father among the crowd of prisoners evacuated from Auschwitz during the death march:

[3] Améry J. (1966) *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, Schoken Books, 1980,

> It was my father I saw smiling at me, a smile that remains so very painful to this day. (...) He only just managed to ask me where my mother was. An SS man came up, and he too was smiling. "Who is that? He asked, is that your father?" And I, breathing happily, overcome with emotion, I said, "yes, that's my Daddy." "Do you want to give him a hug?" he asks. I can't speak, so I nod. Still smiling, he told my father to walk up to me and pushed me in his direction. So I ran, I rushed up to him and Daddy held out his arms to me. Then the SS man, who had followed me, made my poor father go down on his knees and shot him in the head. He did that right there, before my eyes. My dear Daddy has just been murdered in cold blood (...) by a "man," a Nazi, maybe even a father himself. (...) I couldn't even cry, the pain was so intense, intolerable, inhuman.[4]

The young girl's trust in the world had already been seriously damaged by the months spent in the camp, since, as Primo Levi writes, in the camp, everyone was "desperately and brutally alone." But the SS's sadistic gesture to fool her triggered in her a sense of utter despair, to the point that she became dangerously indifferent to her own survival.

Another function of the testimony is tied to what has been called the "duty to remember" (*devoir de mémoire*). When witnesses are asked why they wish to testify, they tend to answer first that they are "indebted to the dead." Testimony becomes a sacred duty, a promise often explicitly made to those who did not survive. A collective debt, borne by each individually, often expressed in those terms: "I promised that if I survived, I would tell...." The mandate to testify concerns both protagonists, both the giver and the receiver of the testimony. They are bonded together through a "testimonial pact."[5]

A testimony is always implicitly or explicitly addressed to a person, a representative of the human community from which the testimony-giver was once banished. The witness was banished on behalf of an entire group and he thus speaks on behalf of this group, which is made up of all the victims of persecution; not only his family, but also his peers and companions, those who went through the same experience but did not survive.

---

[4] Lagrange S. (1997) *Coupable d'être née. Adolescente à Auschwitz,* Paris, L'Harmattan.
[5] On this concept, cf. R.Waintrater, (2003), *Sortir du génocide. Témoignage et survivance*, Paris, Payot, Petite Bibliothèque, 2011.

Those who agree to receive a testimony also fulfill a task entrusted to them by a group: the group of all those who were not there. The task of the "testimony receiver" is to listen carefully and in this way repair the breach in the social fabric. Testimony-giving is a group process, both in its practical features and its symbolic implications, in the sense that it is an intermediary form enabling both groups to restore their links with their internal and external "psychic groupality"; thanks to the institutional setting, the witness and the rest of the social body can repair the break, the invisible and indelible dividing line separating those who "know" from the others. In the words of Francine N, a Tutsi survivor: "There will always be a difference of understanding between those who hid in the marshes and those who were never forced to do this (...), between you and me, for example."[6] Persecution sets the survivor apart, he has become a separate, different being, a person whose trials cannot be integrated by the group, nor can they give rise to a structuring representation. Yet the stronger the attacks on these social ties, the greater the need for the intermediary, restorative efforts provided by testimonies.

The words I have just quoted show us the limits of testimony-giving. We must be humble in our expectations: indeed, the positive aspects should not prevent us from acknowledging the difficulties of the task. A naïve belief in the virtues of reparation along with a naïve understanding of its "cathartic" virtues could lead us to forget that testifying is a difficult, subversive act, an act which can be violent in many ways. No person who has taken part in this experience, as testimony-giver or as "testimony-receiver," or even as a passive receiver of a written word or filmed image, no one is immune to its violence, even though it may not always be verbalized.

The difficulty of transmission

In a chapter of his book *The Flowers of Tarbes* entitled "The Speechless Man," Jean Paulhan speaks of what he calls the "silence of the soldier on leave."[7] The author is referring to soldiers who fought during the First World War and who upon their return were unable to speak, "as if each man found himself mysteriously ill with a disease affecting speech." This speech loss is often observed among the victims of extreme violence. How can we explain it?

---

[6] Hatzfeld J., *op. cit.*
[7] Paulhan J. (1941) *Les fleurs de Tarbes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973.

First of all, this silence may be due to the fear of not being believed. This fear is shared by all witnesses. It was frequent among soldiers returning from the First World War. In his collection of testimonies of World War I, the historian Jean-Norton Cru quotes a soldier: "If you are ever lucky enough to return to the country of your dreams, nobody will believe you when you tell them your adventures."[8]

Much later, Isaac Schipper, another historian who did not survive Maïdanek, posed this nagging question: "Who will believe our stories? No one will believe us... We will have the thankless task of proving to a world turning a deaf ear that we are Abel, the murdered brother."[9]

For the camp survivor, this question can develop into a nightmare, as in Primo Levi's famous dream expressing his fear of what will happen when he returns; this fear was common to many concentration camp prisoners. Here is the dream:

> This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbor whom I would like to move, but whom I am afraid to wake as he is stronger than me. I also speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. *It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home among friendly people and to have so many things to recount*: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I were not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. A desolating grief is now borne into me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. *It is pain in its pure state*, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, *a pain like that which makes children cry*.[10]

This passage describes the difficulty anticipated, and encountered, by survivors who try to describe their experience. Contrary to what is commonly believed, returning survivors felt an

---

[8] Cru J-N., (1930) *Du témoignage*, Paris, Gallimard.
[9] in Wardi C.(1986) *Le génocide dans la fiction romanesque*, Paris, PUF.
[10] Levi P. (1958) *If this is a man*, London, Abacus Books, 1987.

urgent compulsion to speak. But the world was deaf, and most decided to avoid speaking about something that made them forever "holders of a secret": they had seen something that no human should ever have to see.

In his book *Intact in the Eyes of the World*, Pierre Francès-Rousseau narrates a brief episode which cruelly illustrates this deafness. When he returned to Paris from the camps, where his mother had died, he was met by his sister at the Hotel Lutetia, the place where survivors were taken to await their relatives. After inspecting him and asking a few brief questions, she took his arm and said: "I'm so happy you're back. At last I will be able to talk to someone about my misfortunes."[11] The author decided then and there to remain silent; many like him were unable to speak to their families and friends of what they had endured. Instead, they retreated within themselves, or turned to writing.

The assaults of memory

Pierre Francès-Rousseau compares memory to "a tapestry kept in a box: its colors are preserved in some places and faded in others." Can it be said then that the aim of testimony is to give memory back its original colors?

Psychoanalysis is entirely based on a theory of memory. Repression, the operation whereby the subject tries to push back or maintain in the unconscious certain unpleasant or forbidden representations (thoughts, images, memories), reveals the relationship between remembering and forgetting. Consigning to memory is the result of successful repression and the ability to forget. Events can then be reactivated and remembered.

To what extent can massive trauma be successfully repressed? Charlotte Delbo writes: "Everything that happened to this other woman, the Auschwitz woman, no longer affects me now, no longer concerns me, because deep memory is completely separate from ordinary memory."[12] Her comment clearly shows how survivors, to protect themselves, manage to split off from the rest of their memories the traumatic memories from "over there." She adds: "So much time is needed to bring everything back to normal, to hide it all safely back in our memory and mend the skin of memory." Here is the image of a protective membrane, a skin protecting the survivor against the assaults of memory. But like the skin, this membrane can

[11] Francès-Rousseau P. (1987) *Intact aux yeux du monde*, Paris, Hachette.
[12] Delbo C. (1985) *Days and memory*, The Marlboro Press, Marlboro, 1992.

be broken by disturbing traumatic "flashes." The testimonies describe these memory flashes as images which are "more real than reality," casting the survivor back into the reality of "over there." These surges of memory replace structured memory and undermine the necessary process of forgetting.

All survivors speak of the impossibility of separating their traumatic experience from the rest of their lives, and of the lost innocence tied to a "knowing" memory. Memory is no longer a protective shield, but a toxic envelope, a Tunic of Nessus contaminating all previous and subsequent memories. All the events of normal life – marriage, birth, anniversaries, deaths – bring back a host of painful, even unbearable images.

Joseph Bialot thus describes the "occupied memory" of survivors: "I realized I had a string attached, a string that grew longer as I moved on towards normal life. But the string is always there, invisible, imperceptible, constantly pulling me back with uncontrollable flashes. (...) I've been carrying this chain with me, during all these years. It follows me wherever I go in Paris, on my trips, in all my encounters. (...) In my professional life, my emotional life, in all my relationships, the Lager was, is always present, everywhere, just for me."[13] Joseph Bialot is an author of detective novels, and it took him fifty years to be able to write about his experience in the camps.

Another example: in the Israeli film *Because of That War*, Jacko P. tells how after having lost his wife and baby in Auschwitz, he lost his ability to rejoice fully; during his son's Bar Mitzvah (his son was born after the war), he was overwhelmed by images from the past and broke into tears, spoiling the event.

As we can see, remembrance has an ambiguous status: remembering is both remembering life "before," and at the same time it means constantly reliving scenes of extreme trauma. For this reason, witnesses often go back and forth between two opposite positions: either forgetting, or remembering too well (hypermnesia). This is expressed in words such as "I can't remember anything" or "I remember as if it were yesterday"; these words reveal the conflict that underlies the very act of remembering. The survivor struggles with memory in many ways: against forgetting and against memory, "this wonderful and fallible instrument" as Primo Levi

[13] Bialot J. (2002) *C'est en hiver que les jours rallongent*, Paris, Seuil.

called it, but first and foremost, against himself. He must struggle to recall the positive memories stored out of reach through massive idealization, but also the painful ones hidden in the deeper layers of memory.

In normal circumstances, our memory is based on a certain balance between an awareness of the past, the present and the future, with a predominance of interest in the future, in the form of either fear or hope. For the victims of persecution who have experienced a profound disruption in their relationship to time, the balance is a shaky one. Esther Mujawayo, a survivor of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda says this with simple yet powerful words: "We lived, then we died, we survived, and now we must live."

The damage done to the very foundation of one's existence, to one's belonging to a place in time and in the sequence of generations, does not cease with the killings. The transformation of time is felt long afterwards, and there are many consequences for both the individual and society as a whole. Time does not feel or mean the same to those who have experienced genocide and to those who haven't. For the survivors, time no longer moves forward; its movement is circular, death is more important than life and the past is more important than present and future. "Life is colonized by death." The work of mourning which helps us separate from the lost object cannot take place. For survivors, time has stopped: they are unable to reenter common time, because this also and necessarily implies forgetting. On the contrary, they defend themselves against forgetting by overinvesting the past which contains both the trauma and the memories of "before." The persecutors tried to "kill their memories," and the pain tied to the loss of the memory of dear faces is added to that of having lost the persons themselves. For example, Henri D., an Auschwitz survivor, voices his pain at not being able to remember his mother's face; or Marie-Louise K, a Tutsi survivor: "They wanted so much to eliminate us that they burned our photo albums during the lootings, as if to ensure that even the dead had never lived (...). Today, many survivors don't even have a small photograph of their mother, their children, their baptism or wedding day, a picture that could provide a little comfort."[14]

In this case the popular saying is wrong: time does not heal, and the more time passes, the more the pain pervades everything: even if, as a survivor put it, time "forces us to swallow

[14] Hatzfeld J., *op. cit.*

everything," passing time is like a poison that spreads through the psyche, leaving the person both surprised and disoriented. The further the genocide, the closer it is in the minds of those who were victims.

In Rwanda, a high-ranking military officer, who was part of a small talk group I attended, wondered about his increasing feeling of pain despite the fact that many years had passed since the genocide: "Things are simpler now, the atrocities are long past and so is the fighting, and yet my comrades and I feel increasingly sad," he said sorrowfully.

His words corroborate what other survivors have told me in the intimate setting of psychotherapy – when, unable to cope with a suffering they believed they had no right to feel, they finally consulted a therapist.

The dangers of "reuniting" with the past

What kind of memories can an adult whose world has been destroyed, whose values have been trampled, whose humanity has been questioned, what kind of memories can this adult hold on to?

How can a person rebuild a sense of identity with images of himself that are filled with shame and horror, and that he would rather forget? Unlike ordinary memories, memories of genocide do not reunite the subject with something that gives meaning to the past. They are a continuous source of pain. Remaining attached to such memories carries the risk of psychic collapse, a permanent threat for the fragile psychic balance of survivors.

When witnesses begin to remember moments that contain aspects of themselves and a reality they cannot relate to, they often experience a fear of fragmentation of the self. This fear can be observed, and is often overtly mentioned in some testimonies. It is reminiscent of what Winnicott called the "fear of breakdown."[15] According to Winnicott, in these cases the entire structure of the ego is threatened due to a breakdown that has already occurred but which has not been actually, psychically experienced by the person. It remains in the psyche, but the latter cannot find room for it or contain it. The person cannot integrate the event, cannot give

[15] Winnicott D.W. (1974) "Fear of Breakdown", International review of Psychoanalysis, n° 1.

it the status of memory, it cannot become part of a memorial flow linking together events of the past.

Bessie K.'s testimony illustrates this struggle with memory. She recalled how she attempted to hide her baby boy while German guards separated men, women, and children in preparation for boarding them into cattle trains:

> But the baby was short of breath, started to choke, and it started to cry, so the German called me back, he said in German, "What do you have there?" **Now**; I didn't know what to do, because everything was so fast and everything happened so suddenly. I wasn't prepared for it. **To look back, the experience was—I think I was numb, or something happened to me, I don't know. But I wasn't there.** And he stretched out his arms I should hand him over the bundle; and I hand him over the bundle. And this is the last time I had the bundle...[16]

In her narrative, she seems to have "forgotten" the moment when she gave him the baby; during this crucial moment, she was in a state of modified consciousness, a moment of fragmentation and depersonalization. The "Now" is the expression of the perpetual present she is locked in, forever, the moment she had to do this unthinkable thing. She is struggling to maintain her psychic continuity which was broken during that moment: indeed, during all these years, the young mother buried this horrible memory deep down in herself, so deeply that she came to doubt that it had ever happened, or that the baby had ever existed. For her, to remember this traumatic event was particularly dangerous, since reuniting the split off parts of oneself can potentially cause total psychic breakdown due to the unbearable pain. Thanks to the video-testimony, we can watch Bessie's incredible efforts to salvage from total amnesia this fragment of time which put a stamp on the rest of her life.

This testimony enables us to understand why memories of genocide escape for a large part the ordinary processing work of memory, and continue years later to haunt the deeper layers of the survivors' "occupied" memory.

---

[16] Mentioned in Langer L., (1991), *Holocaust testimonies, the ruins of memory*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

An unavoidable disappointment

"No one can bear witness for the witness," writes Paul Celan. No one can free him from his obligation to bear witness, because he was made a witness by the simple fact of being there. When the witness "opens out his images," he runs the risk of not being understood; he also realizes that it is impossible to tell everything. This impossibility is at the core of the experience of bearing witness. "What I see, you have to imagine", said a witness to the young person receiving his testimony.

This brings us to a complex aspect of the testimonial process that of the ambivalent feelings tied to the act of speaking. Indeed, this act triggers contradictory feelings of fear and hope: the fear of not being believed or understood; the fear of finding out that the distance and sense of strangeness experienced both in relation to yourself and to the other has not disappeared; but there is also the hope of being able to share something with someone who wasn't there, a person who can become the witness's witness.

Very often, witnesses point out their sense of dissatisfaction and partial failure: for instance Halina B., a Treblinka survivor, who devoted her life to bearing witness. Answering questions in a train on the way back from a conference with high-school students, she told: "When I'm talking to an audience, they identify, and I'm no longer alone (...) But when I'm at home, the ghetto takes over again, and I can measure the distance separating us... and I know that there is a part of me where no one can enter, and that I can't talk about."

This disappointment is an inherent part of every testimony; as Claude Simon writes: "the only person one might really be able to talk to is a person who doesn't have to be told: another survivor, or someone who died."[17]

Yet if witnesses continue to talk, it is because they secretly hope that their testimony will help educate the public, make people more receptive to their experience. The ultimate, and often unspoken goal of this education is to create a more understanding, less distant environment, to calm the overwhelming sense of strangeness, of what Freud called the "uncanny" ("unheimlich").

[17] Simon C. (1981), *Les Géorgiques*, Paris, Minuit.

The hidden children

I would like to speak now of a specific kind of witness, the "hidden child." The "hidden children" were children of all ages who were hidden under a false identity to escape the Nazis during the Holocaust. The term "hidden children" first appeared in the United States, then in France at the end of the 1980s. Several associations were created and the movement crystallized with the organization of the First International Gathering of Hidden Children in New York in 1991. The "hidden children" phenomenon was already well known, in particular thanks to the *Diary of Anne Frank*. But the emergence of this group and its new public visibility is in itself an interesting development, and there is a great deal to be learned from it.

These children – some were still infants who could not yet speak (*infans* means "who cannot speak") – are now at least sixty years old or more, since their ages at the time ranged from newborn to adolescent. These persons are now senior citizens and have begun to reflect upon their lives, and on the legacy they wish to leave to future generations. Like many other witnesses, it is often their grandchildren's questions that led them to tell their story, and tell about themselves.

For many, it was years before they were able to think of themselves as hidden children. In France and elsewhere, talk groups were created where experiences could be shared; this exchange remained private, however. With the publication of bulletins, people gradually began to speak out through testimonies, films, missing persons appeals, etc. Indeed, in some way their words could only gain legitimacy by being included in the greater picture of History, with a capital H: like the group, History fulfills the function of a "third" person, this "other" that I have been speaking of all along, because words must be addressed to someone in order to exist.

Very often, after a full and active life, these persons, whom we still call "hidden children" although they are no longer children, find themselves abruptly facing this period of their lives, which they have either buried or tried to work through thanks to various strategies. Some may have preserved their family and group traditions, others on the contrary broke away from them, but all recognize the towering presence of their past. The past is at the same time ever-present and experienced as a figure of absence: the absence of loved ones, the absence to oneself, because of the splitting imposed by circumstances. This forced splitting of identity – the break with one's environment, name, belonging, way of speaking, memories – is shaken

by the testimonial narrative, because it is an attempt to link together the separate parts of a life entirely governed by this irreparable split.

Looking back upon his childhood, the witness takes a risk that of experiencing once again the emotions felt at the time: first and foremost, the hidden pain of abandonment, and for those whose parents never returned, pure loss. The pain of a child is a paradigm of extreme pain in the sense that it is a feeling of total helplessness and incomprehension. This is the pain Primo Levi talks about in his famous dream, quoted earlier.

The pain of a child is what we perceive when witnesses speak about the world of darkness into which they were suddenly thrown, at the same time as they were being saved from mortal danger. Despite the variety of situations, all speak of the brutal experience of being torn away from their families, the silence, the absence of their parents, how difficult it was to be in an unfamiliar environment where they felt isolated and had to obey new rules which they could not understand.

At every moment of their lives, these former hidden children have had to cope with this past; any event of daily life, important or unimportant, can trigger memory and its trail of emotion, anger, joy or sadness. They have had to face the extent of their loss, but they also have shown their ability to adapt and transform this painful legacy: like others, they went through their formative years, some studied, others didn't, they loved, had children, fought for causes, and their narratives all bear this evidence.

On the surface, no big difference.

Yet, there is one specific task that hidden children who have grown up and become adults must perform: they must cease to be children and cease to be hidden. In other words, they must cease to be imprisoned in this one and only identity, so as to be able to recover their freedom as a subject.

When I say that they must cease to be children and cease to be hidden, I am not saying that they must give up their childhood and their right to bear a secret.

We all carry in ourselves something of the child we once were, and this is a precious resource for the mature adult. Hidden children also need these resources of childhood, a deep well of shared secrets and intimacy. But for these resources to be accessible, hidden children must be free of the burden of loyalty cast on them ever since they were hidden.

Each of us is born to the world both as an autonomous subject and as a member of a chain of generations. Thus, each person, as member of a family group, is born with a task, a duty to fulfill for the group. He or she will have to come to terms with this duty in order to become a subject in the full sense of the word. However, hidden children have not always been able to work through this process of becoming a subject. For these children, growing up without a family, or with a weakened, incomplete family, meant that they were unable to measure up to the adults who preceded them into this world. Thus they often remained locked in their loyalty to idealized parent figures, frozen in the ice of absence.

How could they possibly measure up to parents who had either disappeared, or returned but remained psychically absent, both to themselves and their loved ones?

How can they construct their own selves with a narrative full of blank spots, when nothing was told or explained to them, when it was completely impossible to ask questions, to question anything of the few elements they can piece together?

For many years, circumstances did not allow them to do so. During adolescence, the age when one builds a personal history, they were recovering from the war. These children found themselves alone, or with a diminished family, reconstructed on the sole basis of chance survival. For this reason, they waited many years. In order to speak up in their own words, these former children, now adults, needed the legitimacy that could be given to them by a group, a legitimacy that had long been denied them, thus blocking their ability to speak, their efforts to learn more.

In conclusion

Bearing witness is an act of sharing, in the double sense of communication and separation. For the hidden child, communication was forbidden, since it could mean death. And separation was unthinkable, because it meant abandonment.

When a former hidden child chooses to bear witness, he or she chooses to come out of a clandestine emotional life and open up to a world of creativity and freedom. This enables both speaker and listener, real or potential, to break together the circle of never-ending transmission.

In the Jewish tradition, memory belongs to both the individual and the group. This is what is meant in the Haggadah of Pessah: it is said “We left Egypt” and not “They left Egypt.” This commandment to remember is usually interpreted as the expression of an obligation towards the group. From the perspective of those who bear witness to horrific events, I also see it as an attempt for individuals who witnessed events against their will to refer to the group as a protection. A witness did not choose to be a witness: he was forced to experience and see things he should never have been made to see.

For this reason, the work of memory can be dangerous, and should not be carried out on one’s own: on the journey to Hades, a companion is needed, a companion who can become “his neighbor’s fellow human being” by receiving his testimony.